Apocalyptic Eschatology and the Parables of the Mount of Olives Discourse

Ben Chenoweth

Abstract

The parables found in the Mount of Olives discourse should only be interpreted in the context of the apocalyptic eschatology that informs the discourse as a whole. After a brief history of the ways in which 'apocalyptic' as a genre has been defined, H. D. Hanson's definitions are presented and clarified. The imminence of apocalyptic eschatology and its use of end-of-history language (cosmic chaos imagery) are discussed; specifically, following G. B. Caird, the referent of apocalyptic eschatology is not necessarily the end of history but the end of a particular period of history or even a particular moment in history, the use of end-of-the-world imagery notwithstanding. The prophet Jeremiah is given as a case study. The Mount of Olives discourse displays a similar mix of imminence (the destruction of the Temple within a generation) and end of history (the coming of the Son of Man as Judge) with accompanying end-of-the-world imagery. In particular, the parables are found in the context of the coming of the Son of Man. The parables are then briefly examined in the light of the apocalyptic eschatology of the discourse as a whole.

Introduction

The Mount of Olives discourse is the last of five major blocks of teaching in Matthew's gospel. It contains a number of parables each with quite a varied history of interpretation. One of the factors that complicates the interpretation of these parables is the apocalyptic nature of the discourse as a whole. So any attempt to examine the parables more closely must begin with a wider discussion of apocalyptic eschatology.

Apocalyptic Eschatology

There have been a number of attempts over the years to define what is meant by 'apocalyptic.' The earliest scholarly research concentrated mainly on apocalyptic as a *genre* identified by means of a list of characteristics. Friedrich Lücke (1832), basing his generalisations mostly on the biblical books of Daniel and Revelation, identified the following characteristics: a universal perspective as the scope of revelation, a particular reckoning of time, pseudonymity, an artistic presentation, a combination of visions and images, and the interpretive mediation of angels.[1] He was also interested in what he called the conceptual basis of apocalyptic (that is, the *theology* of apocalyptic), but this was treated in such a way that it did not greatly

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[1] Richard E. Sturm, "Defining the Word 'Apocalyptic': A Problem in Biblical Criticism" *in Apocalyptic and the New Testament: Essays in Honour of J. Louis Martyn* (ed. Joel Marcus and Marion Soards, Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), 18.

influence his discussion of the characteristics.[2]

Lücke's presentation was to prove formative for subsequent scholarship: character (genre) and concept (theology) were usually treated separately. For example, P. Vielhauer states: "By means of the word 'Apocalyptic' we designate first of all the literary genre of the Apocalypses, i.e., revelatory writings which disclose the secrets of the beyond and especially of the end of time, and then secondly, the realm of ideas from which this literature originates."[3] He then goes on to list the following characteristics: pseudonymity, the recounting of a vision, surveys of history in future-form, and combinations of various other forms (such as prayers, farewell discourses, and exhortation). In terms of the 'realm of ideas' he lists the doctrine of the two ages, pessimism with regard to the present and hope for the future, concern for the fate of the individual within a universal scope, determinism, and imminent expectation. On this last point, Vielhauer says:

> Since everything has its time precisely determined, the end of this Age can be calculated, either by reckoning its entire duration from the creation… or by reckoning from a point within history (in which case information is provided by the apocalyptic writers from Daniel on in complex and obscure tricks with numbers…), or by observing the *signs of the times*. But these calculations are always determined by the conviction that the End is very near at hand.[4]

Similarly, James D. G. Dunn lists the literary characteristics of apocalyptic (pseudonymity, visions and symbolism, survey of history from a past perspective, esotericism, ethical exhortation), and then the theological characteristics (the two ages, pessimism in the present and hope in the future, eschatological climax, imminent end, supernatural / cosmic dimensions, divine sovereignty and control).[5]

P. D. Hanson takes the definition of apocalyptic one step further by identifying three distinct levels. First, 'apocalypse' is "a literary genre which is one of the favoured media used by apocalyptic writers to communicate their messages."[6] Second, 'apocalyptic eschatology' is "a religious perspective, a way of viewing divine plans in relation to mundane realities"[7]. The content of this perspective can be summarised as follows:

> God's final saving acts came to be conceived of not as the fulfillment of promises within political structures and historical events, but as deliverance out of the present order into a new transformed order…[8]

Third, 'apocalypticism' which is "the symbolic universe in which an apocalyptic movement codifies its identity and interpretation of reality. This symbolic universe crystallizes around the perspective of apocalyptic eschatology which the movement adopts."[9] He also notes that apocalyptic movements share two

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[2] For example, Lücke's conceptual basis for Daniel is "that God alone has, knows, and reveals the secrets of God." (Ibid., 19.) But the link between revelation and apocalyptic does not enter into the discussion of the characteristics of apocalyptic.

[3] P. Vielhauer "Introduction" in Hennecke, E. *New Testament Apocrypha* Vol. 2 (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1965), 582.

[4] Ibid., 590-1 (italics original).

[5] James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 1977), 310-15.

[6] P. D. Hanson, "Apocalypticism" *in The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible (Supplementary Volume)* (ed. Keith Crim, Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), 29.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid., 30.

[9] Ibid.

characteristics: (1) a particular type of social setting, namely, alienation. "This is the disintegration of the life-sustaining socio-religious structures and their supporting myths."[10] And (2) a related group response:

> If the life of a community is to be sustained, a new symbolic universe must replace that which was dominant in the social system responsible for the experience of alienation… Apocalyptic eschatology allows a community to maintain a sense of identity and a vision of its ultimate vindication in the face of social structures and historical events which deny both that identity and the plausibility of the vision.11

This three-level definition of 'apocalyptic' appears to have been well received by the scholarly community as a helpful way forward.[12] However, David C. Sim has noted that this classification assumes that the phenomena are all quite strictly related to one another: that apocalypticism *always* involved the adoption of apocalyptic eschatology and its expression via the apocalyptic genre; and that the apocalyptic genre *always* involved apocalyptic eschatology and was always the result of apocalypticism.[13] Sim questions the correctness of this assumption. He claims that the only necessary relationship exists between 'apocalypticism' and 'apocalyptic eschatology' (essentially by definition), and that "[w]e must accept that there is apocalyptic eschatology and apocalypticism outside the apocalyptic genre, apocalypses which have little or no apocalyptic eschatology [e.g., 3 Baruch and 2 Enoch], and apocalyptic groups which did not produce apocalypses [e.g., Qumran]."[14]

> The reason for this clarification quickly becomes clear when we examine the gospels:

> If apocalyptic eschatology and apocalypticism are viewed as enjoying a necessary relationship with the apocalyptic literature, then it becomes difficult to relate them to the *gospel* of Matthew which obviously belongs to a completely different genre. On the other hand, if it is accepted that these phenomena can be found both within and without the apocalyptic genre, then there is no impediment to examining the gospel of Matthew in terms of this eschatological scheme and its associated social movement.[15]

In other words, despite the fact that the gospels are not 'apocalypses', it is true that 'apocalyptic eschatology' can be found in them. Many of the points listed above by Koch can be found, at least in a modified form, in the gospels. Of central importance, for example, is Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God, which has a present aspect able to be experienced by those who respond to Jesus' teaching, but which also has a future aspect involving the resurrection of the dead (Matt. 22:23-32), the final judgment (especially for those who reject Jesus in the present – Matt. 11:20-24; see also Matt. 25:31-46), and the messianic banquet (Matt. 26:29). There is thus a contrast between the present evil age (perhaps softened somewhat by the presence of the kingdom) and the blessed age to come: in other words, the apocalypticists' dualism of epochs. The

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10   Ibid.
11   Ibid.
12   See Sturm, 35; Donald A. Hagner, "Apocalyptic Motifs in the Gospel of Matthew: Continuity and Discontinuity" *Horizons in Biblical Theology* Vol. 7 No. 2 (1985), 55; David C. Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology in the Gospel of Matthew*. Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 88. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 24.
13   Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology in the Gospel of Matthew,* 24-5.
14   Ibid., 26.
15   Ibid., 31, italics original.

future aspect is, however, complicated by the fact that perhaps more than one judgment is in view: the preaching of John the Baptist is full of apocalyptic images of imminent judgment; Jesus also refers to imminent judgment, most notably in the Mount of Olives discourse. Given the proliferation of apocalyptic eschatology in the gospels the characteristics that define the *genre* of 'apocalypse' become much less relevant to their interpretation; but the understanding of the *theology* of apocalyptic arguably becomes the interpretive crux from which the rest of Jesus' teaching hangs.

It may have been noticed throughout the above presentation that those defining apocalyptic did not on the whole question the assumption that what apocalyptic eschatology has in view is the end of the world. It may have been phrased in different ways, such as 'the end of the present order' or 'the remaking of the natural world', but it still means essentially the end of the space-time universe as we know it expressed by means of the language of cosmic chaos, which in this context is usually interpreted literally. Furthermore, this end is usually expected imminently.[16] The whole concept, it is said, has its inception with the Old Testament prophets and their warnings about 'the Day of Lord', which was understood to refer to the end of world (similarly deduced from the images of cosmic chaos that they prophesied would occur at that time), when God would come in judgment upon the world. The later apocalypticists, presumably, picked this idea up and attempted to encourage their readers who were undergoing intense persecution even to the point of martyrdom by claiming that the end of the world, signalled again by the accompanying comic chaos, would be imminent.[17]

It would certainly be unwise to question the *imminence* of apocalyptic eschatology. In view of the social setting that gives rise to apocalypticism, imminence is a *necessary* characteristic: those suffering persecution and even death for their faith in the present evil age can only be encouraged to endure if they are reassured by the fact that the end of that age, and thus the end of their sufferings, is coming very soon.[18] Imminence, then, is intrinsic to apocalyptic eschatology.

However, some biblical scholars have questioned the *referent* of apocalyptic eschatology. Put simply, they argue that the end in view is not the end of the space-time universe but simply the end of the current historical period of suffering. This 'end' will involve the destruction of one's enemies and will be followed by another historical period of celebration, which will (usually) include world domination on the part of the faithful. The cosmic language that is used to describe this transition is therefore not to be interpreted literally but is intentionally metaphorical, illustrating the significance of the events in question, underlining the fact that the process will only come about by means of the divine intervention of the creator God.

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[16] How this is applied to Jesus' teaching in Mark 13 in particular can be seen clearly in the following extended quotation from Marcus J. Borg: "This association of the coming of the son of man with cosmic catastrophe, presumably in that generation, is the basis for affirming that Jesus expected the imminent end of history as we know it, all accomplished by an unmediated act of God. Though the basis is very narrow, it becomes very broad by a series of extensions. First, the theme of cosmic catastrophe is extended to other passages which speak of the coming of the son of man. Second, the theme of imminence is extended to those passages which do speak of a last judgment, so that it becomes imminent. And finally, the combined elements of imminence and universal world collapse and renovation are extended to that large category of threats of unidentifiable content. The crisis of which Jesus spoke is thus affirmed to be the final crisis of history." (Marcus J. Borg, *Conflict, Holiness, and Politics in the Teaching of Jesus.* new ed. (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1998), 224-5.)

[17] See, for example, 4 Ezra 5:4-5; 7:39; 2 Bar. 10:12; *T. Mos.* 10:5.

[18] However, this end is not so very imminent that it isn't worth writing down the encouragement in literary form. The

> This viewpoint was first expressed in full by G. B. Caird:

> 1. The biblical writers believed literally that the world had had a beginning in the past and would have an end in the future. 2. They regularly used end-of-the-world language metaphorically to refer to that which they well knew was not the end of the world. 3. As with all other uses of metaphor, we have to allow for the likelihood of some literalist misinterpretation on the part of the hearer, and for the possibility of some blurring of the edges between vehicle and tenor on the part of the speaker.[19]

Proposition 1, he notes, is easily established for the Old Testament, for it is implied in Ps. 72:7 and Gen. 8:22, and explicitly stated in Ps. 102:25-26; Is. 51:6; 54:10.

The first problem, however, arises with the phrases 'the latter end of the days'[20] and 'the day of the Lord'[21]. According to Caird, the first of these is "the equivalent of the English expression 'in the end' or 'ultimately' when we use them to mean 'sooner or later' or 'in the future'; and it has precisely that vagueness which makes for the blurring of the edges mentioned in Proposition 3."[22] The origins of the phrase 'the day of the Lord', on the other hand, are obscure:

> When it is first used in the eighth century B.C. by Amos, it clearly has a long history behind it. His contemporaries who long for it regard it as a day of Yahweh's victory in which they will share, and Amos warns them that it will be Yahweh's victory over them. What is not in doubt is that the day came to be described in terms of cosmic disaster, as the return of primaeval chaos, and so by imaginative elision to be seen as the end of the world.[23]

The unmaking of creation can be seen quite clearly in the fact that the day of the Lord is explicitly said to be 'as darkness, not light' (Amos 5:18)[24]. This is then illustrated more specifically by the darkening of the sun and the moon, and the falling from the sky of the stars.[25] As such, the language of cosmic chaos is *subordinate* in some way to the day of the Lord.

Furthermore, in 13 of the 18 occurrences, the day of the Lord is said to be imminent or present.

> It is here that Proposition 2 comes to our aid. For when we examine the contexts, we find that in one case the referent is the overthrow of Babylon, in another the annihilation of Edom, in another the ravaging of Judah by a plague of locusts. Now these prophets were not claiming that the contemporary crisis *was* the day of the Lord… None of them would have argued that, because he himself was right, the others must be wrong. Yet neither did they believe in a succession of days of the Lord. The day was his victory, when he would come decisively for salvation and judgment, and they were inviting their hearers to see that day in the current crisis. In other words they were using the term as metaphor.[26]

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fact that we have apocalypses at all seems to indicate that *immediate* imminence is being needlessly emphasised.

[19] G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), 256.

[20] Gen. 49:1; Num. 24:14; Deut. 4:30; 31:29; Hos. 3:5; Is. 2:2; Jer. 23:20; 30:24; 48:47; 49:39; Ezek. 38:16; Dan. 2:28; 10:14.

[21] Amos 5:18, 20; Is. 2:12; 13:6, 9; Zeph. 1:7, 14; Jer. 46:10; Ezek. 13:5; 30:3; Obad. 15; Zech. 14:1; Mal. 4:5; Joel 1:15; 2:1, 11, 31; 3:14.

[22] Caird, 258.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Similarly in Joel, the day of the Lord will be 'a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness' (2:2).

[25] See Amos 8:9; Is. 13:10; 14:12-15; 34:4; Zeph. 1:15; Jer. 4:23-8; Ezek. 32:7-8; Joel 2:10, 30-31; 3:15.

[26] Caird, 258.

Thus Caird distinguishes between a 'long-range' vision of the final Day of the Lord, and a 'short-range' vision in which the current or imminent crisis can be described as being *like* that final Day of the Lord in some way, most often because this crisis is also to be viewed as God's judgment. As such, the role of the language of cosmic chaos is clear: it *evokes* the final Day of the Lord thus bringing out the theological significance of the current or imminent crisis (namely, that the creator God is involved, bringing judgment on the people of Israel – in the case of Amos, Jeremiah, and Joel; on Babylon – in the case of Isaiah; or on Egypt – in the case of Ezekiel), without necessarily implying that the current or imminent crisis *is* the final Day of the Lord involving the end of the world.

Caird provides a 'case-study' concerning Jeremiah to prove this position:

At the outset of his ministry (626 B.C.) Jeremiah predicted the destruction of Jerusalem by an enemy from the north (Jer. 1:14-15; 4:6; 6:1, 22; 10:22), and in synthetic vision he saw this as God's judgment, depicting it as the return of chaos and even using the words *tohu wabohu* (waste and void), which occur elsewhere only in the account of creation in Gen. 1:2.[27]

However, the attack did not come immediately, leading Jeremiah to fear that either he was a false prophet or that God had duped him (Jer. 20:7). However, in 605 BC he reissued his earlier prophecies dictating them to Baruch. "This time his prediction came true, for Jerusalem was captured in 598 B.C. and reduced to ruins in a further siege eleven years later. But it never occurred to Jeremiah or anybody else that he might still be regarded as a false prophet because the world had not come to an end."[28] In other words, the historical events that Jeremiah had predicted *had* come true, but the accompanying 'un-creation' of the world had *not*. But since this was not seen as an indication that Jeremiah had prophesied incorrectly (and there were certainly those who were looking for just such a thing as Jer. 20:10 makes clear), it is strong evidence that the language of cosmic chaos that Jeremiah uses in passages such as 4:23, 28 was never intended to be taken literally as referring to the end of the world. Instead, it showed the seriousness of the judgment upon Israel; the only thing that the coming destruction of Jerusalem could be compared to was the unmaking of creation.

Caird then applies his propositions to the corpus of apocalyptic books.

When an author writes a book consisting wholly or mainly of symbols, there is a prima facie case for not supposing him to be a literalist… But this generalisation does not decisively settle the more particular question whether the apocalyptists intended their eschatology to be taken literally. This can be determined only by reading the books.[29]

He then examines in turn Daniel and the Ezra Apocalypse, bringing out the two opposing concepts of the end of history and the continuation of history that are held together without apparent tension in these works indicating the presence of metaphor. In other words, the apocalypticists too had a 'short-range' and a 'long-range' aspect in their message.

Given the fact that Caird's interpretation of apocalyptic goes against many centuries of tradition it is not surprising that his propositions have been criticised. Dale C. Allison, for example, questions whether eschatological language can be demonstrated to be metaphorically applied to things other than the last:

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27   Ibid., 259.
28   Ibid.

When a document depicts the present or immediate past in apparently eschatological terms, talk of metaphor is appropriate only if the redemption remains distant; for as we shall see straightaway, if it is thought to be proximate, the present becomes the time immediately before the redemption and hence naturally draws to itself the language of eschatology. This has nothing to do with metaphor.[30]

Allison's critique seems to be that if Caird is correct about the presence of metaphor then there is no imminent expectation in the various apocalyptic books, and this is unacceptable, especially for a book like Daniel.[31]

Alternatively, if there *is* an imminent expectation then it cannot be meant metaphorically. However, this is both a misunderstanding of Caird's argument and a misunderstanding of metaphor. Firstly, as Caird himself quite clearly points out, there *is* an imminent expectation: in Daniel the promise of deliverance from suffering and persecution (Allison's 'redemption') *is* imminent; the final judgment glimpsed in Daniel 12:1-3, however, is still a long way off.[32] Allison has thus ignored Caird's distinction between the 'long-range' and 'short-range' aspects to be found in the apocalypticists' vision and in the preaching of the Old Testament prophets before them. This greatly diminishes the credibility of Allison's critique.

Secondly, Allison seems to be under the impression that if something is meant metaphorically then it cannot refer to something concrete such as an actual event in history; rather, it can only have an abstract referent such as an idea or a state of mind. This can be seen in the above quotation where Allison says that metaphor is present when eschatological language (that is, language about the end of history) is used to describe the present when the *actual* end is still well in the future; that is, the end is *said* to be near when in fact it is not. Thus, because in Allison's understanding eschatological language and the end of history are inextricably linked, Caird's metaphorical use of end-of-the-world language *cannot possibly* be referring to an imminent concrete event of history. If, on the other hand, the end *is* near then by definition it cannot be metaphor.

However, as N. T. Wright points out in his response to those who have critiqued his own position, the words 'metaphor' and its antonym 'literal' refer to the way words refer to things; the words 'abstract' and 'concrete' refer to the sort of things words refer to.[33] These two pairs of words, Wright asserts, should not be confused. Just because the language is being used metaphorically doesn't mean it cannot have a concrete referent. Instead, the Old Testament prophets and the intertestamental apocalypticists used the *metaphor* of cosmic chaos to refer to the *concrete* judgment or redemption that was, in their minds, imminent. Thus, they were certainly not claiming that the end of the world was imminent; rather, they were using language that *evoked* the end of the world so as to underline the theological importance of what they were discussing,

29   Ibid., 262.

30   Dale C. Allison, *The End of the Ages Has Come: An Early Interpretation of the Passion and Resurrection of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 88.

31   Dale C. Allison, Jr. "A Plea for Thoroughgoing Eschatology" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 113 (1994), 664, n7: "I shall ignore another objection to my thesis, namely, that a literal reading of eschatological language fails to understand its metaphorical functions… I observe, however, that Caird's hermeneutical program even eliminates a near expectation from Daniel and Mark 13. I can no more accept this result than I can suppose that Montanism and Sabbateanism were devoid of eschatological enthusiasm."

32   Caird, 263.

33   N. T. Wright, "In Grateful Dialogue: A Response" *in Jesus & The Restoration of Israel: A Critical Assessment of N. T. Wright's Jesus and the Victory of God* (ed. Carey C. Newman, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 261.

applying it to an actual event in history which they claimed was imminent. As such, we can say that the language of cosmic chaos was being used metaphorically.

The Parables of the Mount of Olives Discourse

When we come to the Mount of Olives discourse, it is arguable that we find precisely the mix of imminence and end-of-history that Caird identified in the apocalyptic theology of the Old Testament prophets. Jesus predicts the imminent destruction of Jerusalem within a generation, but at the same time he also speaks about the return of the Son of Man as Judge, an event that certainly implies the end of history or at least the end of the present age and life as we know it.

These two aspects split both Mark and Matthew's presentation of Jesus' Mount of Olives discourse into two separate events.[34] Mark, after speaking about certain 'days of distress' in 13:14-23 goes on in verse 24 to say 'in those days, *following* that distress' and then proceeds with cosmic chaos language and the coming of the Son of Man which will occur 'at that time' (13:26).[35] Ben Witherington III discerns a distinct pattern in Mark's presentation: A: v1-23, B: v24-27, A': v28-31, B': v32-37, where A stands for preliminary events and B stands for final events, and the emphasis of the text in terms of number of verses devoted is clearly on preliminary events.[36]

Similarly, there are two events in Matthew's presentation: in 24:29 the coming of the Son of Man occurs 'immediately *after* the distress of those days'. Matthew's close temporal association between the two events has been seen as potentially problematic, especially if he is referring to the fall of Jerusalem specifically. However, scholars have argued that Matthew is referring to the general period of the church as described in 24:4-14 in which the fall of Jerusalem will occur as the 'highlight' at some point.[37]

However, the temporal problem is exacerbated by Mark 13:30 and Matt. 24:34. Was Jesus predicting his own return within a generation? Not necessarily. The text, as Witherington points out, deliberately distinguishes between preliminary events ('all these things') and final events ('in those days'): "As the so-called Markan apocalypse is presently structured, there is a contrast between 'these *things*' which are expected to happen soon and 'those *days* after that tribulation' which are supposed to begin at some unspecified time later than the distress caused by 'these things.'"[38] There is thus a deliberate tension between *inevitability* and *unknowability* seen in the juxtaposition of *imminent* and *final* events.

There is one further piece of evidence for this. Most scholars acknowledge that Matthew had access to Mark's gospel. While the looking for significance in every little difference in wording between Mark's

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34   Luke's presentation, interestingly enough, *does* appear to treat the fall of Jerusalem and the coming of the Son of Man as one event since Luke does not use any temporal connectives such as 'after' or 'following'. The only possible 'delay' is to be found in the cryptic 'until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled' (Luke 21:24) which immediately precedes the language of cosmic chaos and the coming of the Son of Man.

35   The phrase 'in those days' has clear eschatological associations: see Jer. 3:16, 18; 31:33; Joel 2:28; Zech. 8:23, for example.

36   Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 340.

37   See D. A. Carson, "Matthew" *in The Expositor's Bible Commentary (Vol. 8)* (ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 495, for this latter interpretation.

38   Ben Witherington III, *Jesus, Paul and the End of the World: A Comparative Study in New Testament Eschatology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 42. See also Ben Witherington III, *Jesus the Seer: The Progress of Prophecy* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1999), 287, n152.

version and Matthew's is problematic, *significant* differences in wording may yield insight into Matthew's understanding of the material. Such a significant difference can be found in the disciples' question that is answered by Jesus in the Mount of Olives discourse. In Mark, the question is phrased as follows: "Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?" (Mark 13:4) In other words, their question appears to presuppose one event. However, as was argued above, Jesus' answer involves two events. The question in Matthew, however, is as follows: "Tell us… when will [the destruction of the temple] happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and the end of the age?"

In other words, Matthew's question involves *two* events. This suggests, therefore, that Matthew has recorded the disciples' question so as to make it more explicit that Jesus' answer splits into two distinct parts: the imminent destruction of the temple and the (slightly) more distant end of history ushered in by the coming of the Son of Man. The importance of this distinction will be realised once one begins to examine the parables that are found in Matthew's version of the Mount of Olives discourse, for they are explicitly linked to the *second* aspect of the discourse, that is, the coming of the Son of Man. As Carson argues, 24:36 belongs properly with what follows[39], standing as an introduction to the entire section. In other words, the various exhortations to vigilance and stewardship that follow are predicated upon the fact of the unknown time of the return of the Son of Man.[40] This unexpectedness is then illustrated by means of a comparison with life before the flood (24:37-41). This illustration also introduces an element of judgment, already hinted at in 24:31: just as the flood took those not in the ark, when the Son of Man comes there will also be those who will be taken. The point of the illustration is clear: the coming of the Son of Man at the final judgment will be unexpected and will therefore take many people by surprise.

However, v42 makes explicit the implication of this: vigilance.[41] Since Jesus has warned his disciples ahead of time, the coming of the Son of Man should not take *them* unawares: "Given ignorance of the *parousia*'s date, leisurely repentance is foolish. Fear of being caught off guard should motivate one to watch."[42]

The second illustration concerning the owner and the thief further develops this motif of vigilance (24:43-44). The 'thief in the night' motif crops up in a number of places in the New Testament[43] suggesting that it does indeed go back to Jesus in some form.[44] Perhaps this parable is the locus of origin.[45] What is certain is that it fits very neatly into the Mount of Olives discourse emphasising as it does the two concepts

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[39]   Carson, "Matthew", 507. See also W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*. The International Critical Commentary Vol. 3. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 374.

[40]   As Witherington says, "Since no one knows the timing, one must be watchful or, more to the point, always doing the job God gave one to do, for blessed are those found doing such a task when the Lord returns." (Witherington, *Mark*, 349-350).

[41]   Blomberg correctly notes that v42 rounds out the preceding paragraph rather than starting the next paragraph as the NIV has it (Blomberg, *Matthew*, 366).

[42]   Davies & Allison, *Matthew*, 383.

[43]   See also 1 Thess. 5:2,4; 2 Pet. 3:10; Rev. 3:3; 16:15.

[44]   Davies & Allison, *Matthew*, 385.

[45]   Witherington thinks as much: "I would suggest that the origin of this motif goes back to the Q saying found in Luke 12:39 / Matthew 24:43. This metaphorical utterance, at an early date in the transmission of the tradition, seems to have been clearly understood to refer to the coming of the Son of Man at an unexpected hour." (Witherington, *Jesus, Paul and the End of the World*, 45-6.)

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central to this section of the discourse: unexpectedness and the consequent need for vigilance.[46] But what does vigilance entail for Matthew? A literal meaning is unlikely. As such, commentators usually opt for a figurative meaning: "one must be spiritually and morally alert."[47]

The third illustration helps to clarify Matthew's intentions. The Master and his Servants (24:45-51) continues looking at the implications of the unexpectedness of the Son of Man's return; this time, however, vigilance (waiting expectantly for the return) is replaced by stewardship (doing something constructive whilst waiting expectantly for the return) as the main point of the parable, lending support to the figurative meaning behind 'vigilance' as mentioned above. More specifically, stewardship here is pictured as service to others (v45).

Matt. 24:45 asks the question 'Who then is the faithful and wise servant…?' This question appears to be somewhat programmatic for Matthew. The parable that follows the third illustration is the parable of the Ten Virgins (25:1-13), which more closely examines what it means to be 'wise' (as opposed to 'foolish'). It teaches that the unexpected time of the coming of the Son of Man requires constant vigilance on the part of Christians. As Hagner says, "[t]he difference between the foolish and the wise is that the latter do all within their power to be ready for the *parousia*. They will join the Son of Man in the eschatological reward of the messianic banquet while the foolish will find themselves excluded and without recourse."[48]

The parable of the Talents (25:14-30) then goes on to more closely examine what it means to be 'faithful' (as opposed to 'wicked').[49] When the Son of Man returns to usher in the final judgment Christians will be called to account for their stewardship of what has been entrusted to them for that interim period. Just as a rapacious master wants a return on his investment so the Son of Man wants a return from what he has entrusted to his disciples. Just as that master will reward those servants who make increase so the Son of Man will reward those disciples who take what has been entrusted to them and make increase. Just as the master punishes a servant who fails to use what has been given to him so the Son of Man will punish disciples who fail to make increase.[50]

But what specifically has been entrusted to the disciples? It is so hard to get away from the equating of 'talents' with gifts and abilities because of the meaning of the word 'talent' in English. But that equation was not in Matthew's mind. A talent for him was a weight measurement used to apportion out amounts of money. As a result, we need to ask how Matthew would have interpreted the talents, and the wider context would suggest that the talents, like the treasure in the field and the pearl of great price, stand for the kingdom of heaven in the sense of the fuller understanding given to the disciples as opposed to the crowds who merely heard the parables.[51] This knowledge has been given to the disciples (Matt. 13:11), and the parable

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[46] Interestingly, in one of his earliest letters, 1 Thessalonians, Paul uses the motif of the 'thief in the night' to make precisely the same points: because the return of Jesus is unknown (1 Thess. 5:1-2), Christians are to stay awake and be sober (1 Thess. 5:6-8). Paul even refers this teaching back to Jesus' own words (1 Thess. 4:15).

[47] Ibid., 383.

[48] Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, 730.

[49] Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary Vol. 22. (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 371.

[50] As Blomberg puts it, "(1) Like the master, God entrusts all people with a portion of his resources, expecting them to act as good stewards of it. (2) Like the two good servants, God's people will be commended and rewarded when they have faithfully discharged that commission. (3) Like the wicked servant, those who fail to use the gifts God has given them for His service will be punished by separation from God and all things good." (Blomberg, *Parables*, 214.)

[51] Ben Chenoweth "Identifying the Talents: Contextual Clues for the Interpretation of the Parable of the Talents

of the Talents teaches that they will be judged according to what they do with that knowledge: to whom much is given, much is expected.[52]

Finally, the Mount of Olives discourse concludes with the parable of the Sheep and the Goats (25:31-46). This passage is not strictly a parable at all; it merely contains the simile of a shepherd separating sheep from goats (v32-33). Instead, the passage consists of a judgment scene that is explicitly linked to the coming of the Son of Man with his angels (v31) in which the Son of Man (as the King) will judge the nations. However, there are two ways of interpreting this passage. The universalist interpretation holds that individuals will be judged according to how they have responded to the poor and needy; the particularist interpretation, on the other hand, is that individuals will be judged according to how they have responded to poor and needy *Christians*. It all rests on who are 'the least of these my brothers' (v40, 45). It can be argued that Matthew holds to the particularist interpretation if one notes the similarity of this phrase to 'one of these little ones' in Matt. 10:42 and 18:6, 10, 14 where it is clear that the disciples are being referred to. In particular, in Matt. 10:40 Jesus identifies himself closely with his disciples: 'he who receives you, receives me.' Consequently, as Richard T. France says,

> There is, then, a strong case to be made for understanding the kindness of the righteous and the hardness of the unrighteous as specifically directed toward Jesus in the person of his insignificant followers, rather than toward human needs in general. On that basis, it is possible to argue that the criterion of judgment is not so much good works *per se* as it is one's response to Jesus...[53]

In the context of the discourse as a whole, which is explicitly directed to the disciples (24:3), "the pericope has the same general purpose as many apocalyptic writings: to offer consolation and encouragement to minority communities who are hard-pressed by the dominant society which surrounds them and which is perceived to be threatening."[54] In other words, the disciples should take courage from the fact that as they go out to the ends of the earth, not only will Jesus be with them (Matt. 28:20), but they will in fact *be* Jesus to the nations; and how they are treated will determine the eternal fate of those to whom they go.

Conclusion

Any interpretation of the parables of the Mount of Olives discourse that does not do justice to the apocalyptic eschatology of the context must be questioned since these parables have been located in this context deliberately. Consequently, a clear understanding of what is meant by apocalyptic eschatology is required before more specific interpretation of the parables can be attempted. While this article has not dealt with the parables in much detail it is hoped that the wider discussion of apocalyptic eschatology and more specifically how apocalyptic eschatology informs the Mount of Olives discourse as a whole will aid a more detailed

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(Matthew 25:14-30)," *Tyndale Bulletin* 56.1 (2005), 61-72.

[52] As Luke 12:47-48, coming at the end of Luke's account of Jesus' teaching on watchfulness, says: "That servant who knows his master's will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked."

[53] Richard T. France, "On Being Ready (Matthew 25:1-46)" *in The Challenge of Jesus' Parables* (ed. Richard N. Longenecker, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 193.

[54] Graham N. Stanton, *A Gospel For A New People: Studies In Matthew* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992), 208.

interpretation.

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