

AN INTERPRETATION OF MATTHEW 24—25

Part XIV

by Thomas Ice

“then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains; let him who is on the housetop not go down to get the things out that are in his house; and let him who is in the field not turn back to get his cloak. But woe to those who are with child and to those who nurse babes in those days! But pray that your flight may not be in the winter, or on a Sabbath;”

—Matthew 24:16–20

Previously, we saw that verse 15 describes an event that fixes the chronological mid-point of the seven-year tribulation. Verses 16–20 describe the recommended response of the faithful who see the abomination of desolation in Jerusalem. They are to get out of Dodge as fast as they can. Why? It is because the second-half of the tribulation will be a time of persecution and great tribulation for the Jewish remnant.

THE COMMAND TO FLEE

This passage is saying that the moment the Jewish Remnant (the elect in verses 22, 24 and 31) sees the watershed event of the abomination of desolation then they are to flee to the Judean hills. Why are they to flee instantly? It is because with the instantaneous event of the Beast (antichrist) setting up the abomination of desolation in the rebuilt Jewish Temple, he goes from protecting Israel to persecuting her. Therefore, the sooner that the Remnant can get out of town, then the less likely it will be that antichrist will be able to persecute the Jews. Another reason why they will be able to flee instantly is because they will be miraculously provided for and protected as they make their way to Petra for three and a half years of safekeeping.

Matthew 24:16–20 provides a set of instructions for the Remnant. Christ tells them where to go: the Judean mountains. Jesus says to flee instantly. Don't even take a few minutes to collect a few personal belongings like your cloak in the field or a few items from your house for the journey. He warns that it will be difficult to navigate the mountainous terrain if pregnant or nursing a newborn. Jesus does not say that it will be impossible, but it will be difficult. Difficulty will be compounded if this event occurs in winter or on a Sabbath, because of the added restrictions that these times pose. The winter in Israel is the rainy season which increases the hazards of travel in the Judean hills because the creeks and rivers provide an obstacle not there during other seasons. The Sabbath imposes a travel restriction that is not in force on the other six days of the week that poses a real problem to the observant Jew. So why are the Jewish Remnant supposed to be aware of a special event which triggers their escape into the Judea wilderness, yet they are not told to make any preparations for that day?

MIRACULOUS PROVISION

While Matthew 24:16–20 focuses upon the divinely suggested response to the abomination of desolation by the Jewish Remnant, other passages provide a more complete picture of this three and a half year wilderness sojourn. The parallel passage of Revelation 12 provides further details of this mid-tribulational escape. Revelation 12:6 says, “And the woman [Israel] fled into the wilderness where she had a place prepared by God, so that there she might be nourished for one thousand two hundred and sixty days.” The key word in this verse is “nourished.” This explains why the Jewish Remnant is told to flee without consideration for any provisions, because God has prepared a place where Israel will be nourished and taken care of for three and a half years (the second-half of the tribulation).

Notice some of the Old Testament passages that describe God's provision for His people during this three and a half year period:

The afflicted and needy are seeking water, but there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst; I, the LORD, will answer them Myself, as the God of Israel I will not forsake them. I will open rivers on the bare heights, and springs in the midst of the valleys; I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land fountains of water. I will put the cedar in the wilderness, the acacia, and the myrtle, and the olive tree; I will place the juniper in the desert, together with the box tree and the cypress, that they may see and recognize, and consider and gain insight as well, that the hand of the LORD has done this, and the Holy One of Israel has created it.

—Isaiah 41:17–20

"I will surely assemble all of you, Jacob, I will surely gather the remnant of Israel. I will put them together like *sheep in the fold* [Hebrew word is *basrah*]; like a flock in the midst of its pasture they will be noisy with men."

—Micah 2:12

The drama is further explained in Revelation 12:12–13, which reads as follows:

For this reason, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them. Woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, knowing that he has only a short time. And when the dragon saw that he was thrown down to the earth, he persecuted the woman who gave birth to the male child.

Satan's wrath is directed toward the Jewish Remnant at the middle of the tribulation. This requires Divine protection. There is cause and effect relationship between the heavenly (the casting of Satan from heaven to earth) and earthly (the abomination of desolation) events. At the mid-point of the tribulation, Satan now indwells the human antichrist and commences his campaign of anti-Semitism against the Jews with all haste. Thus, the need for a hasty retreat by Israel as advocated by Jesus.

Next, Revelation 12:14 says, "And the two wings of the great eagle were given to the woman, in order that she might fly into the wilderness to her place, where she was nourished for a time and times and half a time, from the presence of the serpent." The "two wings of the great eagle," do not refer to the Israeli or American Air Forces. Instead, it is a figure of speech denoting Divine assistance, like that which was given to Israel during the Exodus and for her forty-year wanderings. That very same language was used in Exodus 19:4 of God's miraculous provision for the nation: "You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you to Myself." Deuteronomy 32:10–12 speaks of a similar miraculous provision at the Exodus in relationship to eagles' wings.

Putting the pieces of the puzzle together, it appears that the Jewish Remnant can flee Jerusalem without concern for provisions, since God will nurture and care for them as He did the Exodus generation through miraculous means. Very likely the Lord will provide food (perhaps manna), water, and clothing for His Remnant that will be on the run and in hiding so as to escape the persecution of the dragon during the final half of the tribulation.

PRETERIST OBJECTIONS

Regular readers of this commentary will not be surprised to learn that preterists do not agree with this interpretation. Predictably, they believe Matthew 24:16–20 was fulfilled in the first century. Gary DeMar says, "Matthew 24:16–20 clearly presents first-century-Israel living conditions."¹ This presents no problem at all for a future fulfillment. In fact, I have

been to Jerusalem a number of times over the years. In the old city, many of the houses are very old and have retained many of the features of “first-century-Israel,” including the fact that the top of one’s roof is still part of modern living in Jerusalem. In fact, one of the best ways to navigate across the old city is to walk on the roofs. I have done it many times. DeMar needs a good tour of “modern” Jerusalem. The points he makes in his attempt to argue that this passage requires a first-century setting have no traction and does not at all render a modern fulfillment unlikely.

Dr. Kenneth Gentry speaks of “Christ’s dire warning to flee without turning back (Matt. 24:16–18). Once Titus begins encircling the city, it will not take him long to seal it off from the outer world (Matt. 24:16–20).”² There are a number of problems with trying to make Dr. Gentry’s position fit the A.D. 70 event. Dr. Randall Price provides the following objections to Dr. Gentry’s misguided assertion:

According to the fourth-century Church historian Eusebius, Christians fled to Pella in A.D. 61–62, many years before the beginning of the Jewish Revolt in A.D. 66, and many more years before the “abomination of desolation” (according to the preterist’s interpretation) occurred with the Roman army surrounding Jerusalem or entering the Temple precincts in A.D. 70. To this problem should be added the fact that the Romans controlled the Judean countryside (to which Jerusalem belongs) as well as its immediate environs for some time prior to their siege of the city, which would have made it practically impossible for either Jerusalemites or those in fields outside the city, to make an escape. Neither Jesus could have meant that a flight should take place once the siege began, for any escaping at this time would have run into the hands of the enemy! Moreover, as many commentators have observed, the biblical command to “flee to the *mountains*” (Matt. 24:16; Mk. 13:14; cf. Lk. 21:21) hardly agrees with the geographical setting of Pella in the low-lying foothills of the Transjordan valley on the other side of the River Jordan. Since Jerusalem is called “the Holy Mountain” (Psa. 48:1; cf. 87:1-2), “Mount Zion” (Psa. 74:2; 78:68-69), and is situated and surrounded by “mountains” (Psa. 125:1-2; cf. 48:2) “fleeing to the mountains” could not be interpreted as descending to a lower elevation and it is far more reasonable that “the mountains” of Jesus’ reference would be those that immediately surrounded the city (i.e., the Judean hills, cf. Ezek. 7:15-16), since Jesus’ command was not to flee *from* Judea but *within* it.³

CONCLUSION

It is clear that the Jewish Remnant will be fleeing to the Judean wilderness where Old Testament passages teach (along with Revelation 12) that she will be miraculously protected for the later half of the tribulation. The place of her protection is said in the Old Testament to be Bozrah. “For I have sworn by Myself,” declares the LORD, “that Bozrah will become an object of horror, a reproach, a ruin and a curse; and all its cities will become perpetual ruins. I have heard a message from the LORD, and an envoy is sent among the nations, saying, ‘Gather yourselves together and come against her, and rise up for battle!’” (Jeremiah 49:13–14) Bozrah is a region in southwest Jordan, where the ancient fortress city of Petra is located. Isaiah 63:1–3 asks, “Who is this who comes from Edom, with garments of glowing colors from Bozrah, this One who is majestic in His apparel, marching in the greatness of His strength? It is I who speak in righteousness, mighty to save. Why is Your apparel red, and Your garments like the one who treads in the wine press? I have trodden the wine trough alone, and from the peoples there was no man with Me. I also trod them in My anger, and trampled them in My wrath; and their lifeblood is sprinkled on My garments, and I stained all My raiment.” Bozrah (Petra) is the place where up to a couple million Jews have been hidden away since the middle of the tribulation when they fled from Judea. The Lord has nourished them for those three and a half years and now He defends this Jewish Remnant that by the time of the second coming has converted in mass to Jesus

as their Messiah. Christ has blood on His garments from defending the Jews against the army of the antichrist, who have gathered themselves to attack the Jews at Armageddon. Such a force arrayed against the Lord's people requires His personal intervention. This He does first at Petra. Maranatha!

(To Be Continued . . .)

ENDNOTES

¹ Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness: Obsession of the Modern Church* (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 1999), p. 111.

² Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *Perilous Times: A Study in Eschatological Evil* (Texarkana, AR: Covenant Media Press, 1999), p. 61.

³ J. Randall Price, "Historical Problems with a First-Century Fulfillment of the Olivet Discourse," in Tim LaHaye and Thomas Ice, editors, *The End Times Controversy: The Second Coming Under Attack* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2003), p. 394.