

Dispensationalism: A Case Study of Matthew 24 and Its Reception in Brazil

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ABSTRACT

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Dispensationalism is a well-known and widely held eschatological framework among contemporary evangelicals. It has, however, been little explored in academia, possibly due to the wide range of interpretations it provides for understanding eschatological events. Texts such as the “eschatological discourse” of Matthew 24 give rise to the belief in a particularly grim future. In this work, research was conducted on the history of the interpretation of Matthew 24 as well as its reception in the social and political life of Brazil. It is possible to observe a relationship of cause and effect concerning the lack of knowledge about eschatology and popular imagination about the meaning of Matthew 24. The conclusion that is reached is that a “theology of fear” results from adopting a dispensationalist perspective which finds itself in opposition the Christian message of hope.

Table of Contents

List of Figures	v
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1	8
Shaping Eschatology.....	8
1.2. The History of Eschatological Thinking	9
1.3. The Rise of Dispensationalism.....	13
1.4. Dispensationalism and Interpretations of the “Millennium”.....	18
1.5. Dispensationalism in the Public Square.....	24
Chapter 2:.....	28
Matthew 24: An Eschatological Discourse?.....	28
2.1. Introduction	28
2.2. What is Matthew’s Theological Perspective?	29
2.3. A Violent Eschatology?	32
2.4. Seeking to understand Matthew 24	36
2.5. Interpreting Matthew 24.....	39
2.6 Conclusion.....	57
Chapter 3	60
Brazilian Eschatology and the Upcoming End	60
3.1. Introduction	60
3.2. The Characterisation of the Brazilian Theology	62
3.3. Eschatology and Theology in Brazil	64
3.4. (Neo)-Pentecostals and the “End Times”	69
3.5. A New Role in the Public Square	71
3.6. Informal Survey on Brazilian Church Leaders and Eschatology.....	74
Conclusion	83
Appendix.....	92
Bibliography	94

List of Figures

Figure 1: Description of Local Church.....	76
Figure 2: Church Responsibilities.....	77
Figure 3: Academic Training in Theology.....	78
Figure 4: Reading About Theology and Eschatology.....	79
Figure 5: The Influence of Eschatology.....	80
Figure 6: Various Eschatological Perspectives.....	81
Figure 7: The Eschatological Jesus.....	82

Introduction

The term “eschatology” originates from two Greek words, ἔσχατος and λόγος. Generally, it refers to events that are yet to happen to both the individual and the world. Concerning the individual, eschatology refers to issues such as physical death, immortality, and the so-called “intermediate state” - the state between death and the general resurrection. Regarding the world, eschatology relates to the return of Christ, the general resurrection, the final judgment, and the final state of the world.

The history of Christian eschatology, in general, reflects this contrast between the past, the present, and the future. Several Protestant evangelical theologians have written on the subject. The history of the church reveals that during the first five centuries, Christians did not much care about developing an eschatological doctrine. It is important to note however, that the absence of a systematically formulated dogma never meant to result in the absence of eschatological beliefs and hopes.

During the first five centuries, Christians believed in the afterlife, in the second coming of the Lord Jesus, in the resurrection of the dead, in the final judgment, in tribulations and the creation of a new heaven and a new earth. However, eschatology as a systematized doctrine as it is known presently, was not developed during that period. The apostolic creed asserts these beliefs but does so in the absence of historical or systematic development of the doctrine.

From the Middle Ages to the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, Christians continued to believe in these teachings, but there was little reflection on how the related doctrine would develop, especially concerning the chronological aspect of biblical eschatology. Protestant reformers undoubtedly were more reflective upon this eschatological issue. The theological dispute with the Catholic Church, which taught the existence of purgatory, was the motivation for the dispute, for example. Reformed theologians, therefore, made many connections between eschatology, soteriology (the glorification of the saved), and ecclesiology (i.e. the triumphant church).

Today, rationalism, evolutionism, existentialism, together with theological liberalism, have provoked a deeper reflection on the part of Orthodox Protestants, since all these “isms” attack many types of teaching regarding the certainty of some future reality. Berkhof and other reformed

Protestants acknowledged that theological liberalism ignored the eschatological teachings of Jesus Christ himself, placing all the emphasis directly on the Lord's ethical precepts.

Evangelical Protestants, however, based on their interpretation of the teaching of the Word of God, believe in the afterlife, in the second coming of the Lord Jesus, in the resurrection of the dead, in the final judgment, and the creation of a new heaven and a new earth. In other words, Evangelical Protestants retain the same beliefs as other Christians who accept the Holy Scriptures as the only and last infallible rule of faith and practice. Nevertheless, believing in these doctrines does not mean that all Protestants accept them in the same way, especially in regards to how they will have their fulfillment. There is thus a varied hermeneutic divergence in the Protestant environment, with at least three schools of interpretation: amillennialism, post-millennialism, and pre-millennialism.

Amillennialists such as L. Berkhof, O. T. Allis, G. C. Berkhouwer, and others believe that the Holy Scriptures make no chronological distinction between Christ's Second Coming, the "Rapture" of the church, and the participation of the believer in the new heaven and the new earth. For amillennialists, there will be only one general resurrection of believers and unbelievers, which will take place during Christ's Second Coming. The final judgment will be for all peoples. Tribulation is something we experience in the present era. The millennium referred to in Scripture (Revelation 20) does not connote a literal millennium, as the kingdom of God which was inaugurated visibly with the first coming of the Lord Jesus, remains spiritually present, though invisible; (invisibility is not synonymous with non-existence) and shall be consummated with the second visible coming of the King of Glory. We enter this kingdom by faith (John 3). For amillennialists, the Scriptures make no distinction between the Church in the Hebrew Bible (Israel) and the Church of the New Testament ("the new Israel," composed of the circumcised and uncircumcised).

Post-millennialists, such as Charles Hodge, B. B. Warfield, W. G. T. Shedd, and A. H. Strong, believe that Christ's Second Coming will take place after the millennium (not literal). The present age will blend with the millennium according to the progress of the gospel in the world. Largely, post-millennialists assume the same amillennialist stance towards the teaching of the resurrection, the final judgment, tribulation, and position on Israel and the church.

Pre-millennials are divided into two main groups: historical pre-millennials (such as G. E. Ladd, A. Reese, and M. J. Erickson) and dispensational pre-millennialists (such as L. S. Chafer, J. D. Pentecost, C. C. Ryrie, J. F. Walvoord, and Scofield).

Historical pre-millennialists believe that Christ's Second Coming to reign upon the earth and the "Rapture" of the church will take place simultaneously: the resurrection of the saved will occur at the beginning of the millennium (the first resurrection) and the resurrection of the unbelievers at the end of the millennium. The millennium, however, in the historical pre-millennial position, is both present and future. In the present, Christ reigns in heaven. In the future, Christ will reign on earth, although historical pre-millennials generally do not consider the period of Tribulation and make a particular distinction between Israel and the church (spiritual Israel).

Dispensational pre-millennialists teach that the Lord Jesus' Second Coming will take place in two phases: In the first, the Lord Jesus will meet with the church in the air, take the saved to participate in the marriage of the Lamb in the heavenly regions; and after seven years of tribulation on earth without the presence of the church, he will return to reign in this world for a thousand years. Dispensational pre-millennialists make a distinction between the resurrection of the church on the occasion of the "Rapture," the resurrection of those who will come to believe during the seven-year tribulation, (a resurrection that will take place at the Lord's Second Coming at the end of the tribulation), and the resurrection of the unbelievers at the end of the millennium.

Dispensational pre-millennialists also make a distinction between the judgment of believers after the "Rapture" - the judgment of Jews and Gentiles converted at the end of the seven-year tribulation and the judgment of the unbelievers at the end of the millennium. For the members of this school of interpretation, the seven years of tribulation will be literal, but the New Testament church will be taken away before this tribulation occurs. The millennium will be inaugurated and established with the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus, after the tribulation, and will literally last 1,000 years. This position ultimately distinguishes Israel and the Church.

In this thesis, we will examine one of the most interesting sections of the Gospel according to Matthew: Jesus' Eschatological Sermon (Matthew 24). In this episode, Jesus answers the disciples' question about his prophetic declaration of the impending destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem. His answer was likely not something they expected.

Augustus Lopes says that the Eschatological Sermon appears in the three synoptic gospels and has the same functions in each. Here, Jesus has some general and apparent purposes, such as correcting his disciples' vision of the Temple's destruction, warning them not to be deceived by the false prophets and "Christs" who would come, or by the signs and wonders they would be able to produce.¹ He also establishes a broad and general view of history and warns the disciples to be prepared for the unknown day and time of his Second Coming.

Some parts of this discourse seem to reflect Jesus' teachings as they would have been disseminated throughout his ministry, undoubtedly repeated countless times with the purpose of memorization, a common technique among rabbis. However, in the Eschatological Sermon, these teachings are powerfully mixed into an exhortative-eschatological sermon. The Eschatological Sermon of Jesus, as recorded in the Synoptics, has been considered in some circles of biblical erudition as a typically Jewish apocalyptic work. However, beneath the external similarity of images, language, and topics, there are profound differences in underlying themes, such as the vision of the present world, the messianic conception, and the place of Israel and the Gentiles in history and the eschaton.

Similarities can be satisfactorily explained in terms of the use of a common source, which is the Hebrew Bible - especially the book of Daniel - as well as the cultural and natural assimilation of the apocalyptic atmosphere that saturated some environments of the first century.

Differences are due primarily to the way Jesus and the disciples interpreted the Scriptures of the Hebrew Bible. Jesus' hermeneutics, was dictated primarily by his markedly Christological approach. In the Eschatological Sermon this Christological approach to history, the eschaton and Scripture appears in the spotlight.

In Brazil, eschatological elements are part of a culture where emotional and supernatural elements permeate popular imagination. Moreover, eschatology, as a prominent element of theology, is prevalent mainly in the Pentecostal context.

During the last century an enormous transition happened in Pentecostalism: formerly a sectarian religious movement which was apolitical and represented by a quantitatively derisory slice of the population, it became the fastest growing and most dynamic and diverse segment of the Brazilian religious world. Its influence is no longer relegated to the "spiritual sphere" of social

¹ Augustus Nicodemus Lopes, "O Sermão Escatológico De Jesus: Análise Da Influência Da Apocalíptica Judaica Nos Escritos do Novo Testamento," *Fides Reformata* 5, no. 2 (2000), 1-19.

life, but also became engaged at the electoral level. Influence has replaced its characteristic apocalypticism in order to elect representatives of Pentecostal denominations to the spheres of political power.

Studies on Protestantism and Brazilian Pentecostalism mostly emphasize the pre-millennial eschatological perspective, according to which the Kingdom of righteousness and happiness would occur only after Christ's visible return to reign with his saints. In this view, there is, therefore, no great hope about the future of society. The lower the hope, the lower the expectation of the possibility of building a better future through human action.

Pentecostalism embraced pre-millennialism for which the justifiable struggle would be one of converting souls for Jesus in a battle against the temptations of the world and satanic spiritual forces. The weapons for such a battle would be spiritual, especially prayers and exorcisms, and the practice of a righteous life, free of vices and the "world." Social and political problems would be reflections of this struggle, because those in a position of power in Brazil were on the side of "evil," on the side of Catholicism, Brazilian culture, satanic hosts, and secularization.

The Pentecostal movement was chiefly embraced by people of both lower social and lower educational class. Together with temporal and minority power in the composition of Brazilian society, pre-millennial and apocalyptic belief was adapted to the conjunctures of Brazilian Pentecostalism roots.

The question that is repeatedly raised is that if one expects the impending end, and that social structures, corrupted by sin, were irremediable and would be condemned by the imminent Eternal Judgment, what reason would there be to engage politically in the quest to build a fairer and freer society?

However, those who considered Pentecostals as being "out of the picture" of Brazilian political life watched, astonished, at the mobilization and effectiveness they demonstrated in the election of candidates linked to their churches. Since the mid-1980s, one has had to rethink the validity of the idea: "believers do not get into politics."

Pentecostalism came to play a prominent role in Brazilian political and social life, passing from a reluctant and unrelated actor, to one now at the center of nation's politics. The discourse once asserted that believers should not engage with politics, but seek to sanctify themselves in order to be prepared for the Lord's impending return.

An ostentatious self-importance arose in Pentecostal environments regarding the potential transformation of the country “from top to bottom.” An ideology began to emerge that whoever could say what crime was and was not, what was legal and what was not, was the one who held political power. Therefore, the attempt to make Brazil a more Christian country would succeed through the presence of true believers in the structures of power.

If Pentecostals once complained about the intimate relations between Catholicism and the State, today they seek similar or higher privileges. The proximity of power became more interesting for Pentecostal leaders than any sectarian discourse. The condemnation of the world continues, but instead of such condemnation leading the believers into the isolation against secularism, they have come to defend the discourse that they should “make a difference” in the world.

When the feeling of absence that marks pre-millennialism begins to be filled by the possibility of realization, through the glimpse of the possibility of an earthly kingdom there, in reality, arises a post-millennial expectation. The tendency is that the more the perspective of the implementation of the values of the kingdom through the “conquest of Brazil for Jesus” becomes feasible, the more the pre-millennial discourse will lose political and religious space. It cannot yet be said that this is the case for Brazil.

Such transformations of religious beliefs occur over the long term. What essentially seems to happen are smaller changes at the practical level. Whether this will lead to future theological reformulations in Pentecostal churches in the name of the adoption of post-millennial theology is an open possibility.

It would be premature to affirm the victory of post-millennials preemptorily due to the emergence of a post-Pentecostal religiosity, focused on earthly life, electoral success, and the ambitious plans of Pentecostals in politics. Election setbacks and unexpected crises (whatever they may be) can cool optimistic expectations and make the balance positive again for pre-millennials and pessimism concerning the consummation of the Kingdom in history.

For the first phase of this work, a review of the literature is required. It is an examination of works that mainly represent a more critical and academic analysis of one of the most adopted and best-known lines in Brazil for eschatological hermeneutics, dispensationalism.

For such a work, in-depth research into the history of ideas behind concepts such as “dispensationalism” and “eschatology,” as well as their development from the mid-nineteenth

century, is necessary. This section is vital in order to uncover the philosophical debates around dispensationalism and its historical development. The historical review will predominantly come from the mid-nineteenth century, where the dispensational movement emerged. The ways of interpreting texts regarding the “end times” and the main points of debate from each perspective will also be explored. The challenges of this literature are great, since most of the writing within the field of theology concerning the “end times” is, for the most part, more apologetic and contains less of a scholarly, scientific perspective. This challenge is not meant to suggest that those in theological circles are not engaged in some form of hermeneutics, but their work primarily serves as a way to confirm their pre-conditioned eschatological perspectives.

The second part of the thesis will be dedicated to the interpretation of Matthew 24. This chapter will compare the “dispensational” interpretation of Matthew 24 with the work of scholars in historical-criticism, such as textual, source, and form and genre criticism, as well as redaction criticism. Redaction criticism will particularly help uncover some of the characteristics of Matthew’s theology. Form and genre will also provide a better understanding of the *Sitz im Leben* that gave rise to Matthean eschatological discourse.

The third chapter will focus on the reception history of “eschatological” ideas in Brazil, as read in Matthew 24. In this section, the influence and impact of the 19th century cultural domination of Roman Catholic and Protestant theologies from the southern United States on Brazilian theology will be examined. This work will also provide answers from an informal online survey where Brazilian religious leaders anonymously replied to questions about their “eschatological” beliefs. This survey will partially answer whether or not academic research and its production in the various fields of theology, especially eschatology, has reached the practical working life of these leaders.

Chapter 1

Shaping Eschatology

1.1.1. Introduction

The Christian church has always given importance to the “last things.” Hope is fundamental in the Christian faith. At times Christians were, however, more focused on future and heavenly things than on their current temporal reality, especially during periods of political and economic oppression.

In recent times, eschatology has generated interest in certain Christians circles, where in some cases, almost every world event is interpreted as a sign of the end. Other Christian groups, however, have shown little to no interest in eschatology.

The term eschatology is traditionally defined as the study of the last things.² In the Bible, one reads expressions such as “the day of the Lord” (2 Thess 2:2; Mal 4:1), the “last times” (1 Pe 1:20) and “the last hour” (1 Jn 2:18), and based on these expressions, eschatology was taken to designate the study of the final events of God’s plan for this world.

The “last things” are not only events related to the end of the history of humankind, but also those at the end of an individual’s existence, such as physical death, the state between death and resurrection. Eschatology is, therefore, related to soteriology. Salvation is also understood in eschatological terms, as the outcome of one’s redemption being closely tied to the events of the end. The “last things” are also events that are beyond history, such as one’s existence in eternity. Eschatology “may denote the consummation of God’s purpose, whether it coincides with the end of the world whether not, wants to mark a step in unfolding the pattern of God's purpose.”³

Eschatology can be, therefore, individual or general. Individual eschatology has to do with physical death and the condition of individuals between death and the general resurrection. General eschatology concerns matter such as the coming of Christ, the millennium, the final resurrection, the last judgment, and eternal destiny.

² Leandro Lima, "O Pensamento Escatológico De Canvino," CPAJ, <https://cpaj.mackenzie.br/o-pensamento-escatologico-de-calvino/> (accessed October 1st, 2019, 2019).

³ Frederick F. Bruce, "Escatologia", in *Enciclopédia Histórico-Teológica Da Igreja Cristã.*, ed. Walter A. Elwell, Vol. 2 (São Paulo, Brasil: Vida Nova, 1990), 1-145.

1.2. The History of Eschatological Thinking

Early Church

The word, ‘eschatology’ is mostly used after the year 1844.⁴ The term is formed from two Greek words: ἔσχατος - last; and λόγος - treatise, study. It means the science of the previous things or the doctrine of the final things. Technically, it is the area of theology that studies themes related to death, the state of the soul after death, the “Great Tribulation,” the second coming of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, the Last Judgment, heaven and hell, and all matters related to the ultimate destiny of humanity. Eschatology appears as an attempt to provide an option of hope for the whole of existence, not about the “last realities,” but about the “last of all realities.” It is not the future events that matter, but the “Absolute Future” event.

From what one can read in early Christian literature, Christians in the first century C.E. expectantly waited for the return of their Lord. An eschatological fervor was also part of the Jewish tradition. It is possible to notice this in the literature of the Second Temple period, as well as in the beliefs and practices of Jesus of Nazareth as depicted in the gospel. Many of the words and deeds attributed to Jesus could be understood as eschatological: the eucharist is seen as an eschatological meal, the presence of miracles, the forgiveness of sinners, etc. These actions also expressed the eschatological hope of early Christians.

Given its impotence within the Christian tradition, one must understand how eschatological thought has been present in the various phases of history. Throughout Jewish tradition and early Christianity, the relationship between creation and the end was mainly sustained by the observation of nature. Rudolf Bultmann argued that the Greek word ἀποκατάστασις (restoration) was used in the Greek world to represent an astrological understanding of the return to the starting point in literature, and in the case of Stoic philosophy, the return to the Cosmos.⁵ It is possible to find this language in early Christian literature. The first example that Bultmann cites is the use of the term in Acts 3:21. Origen will also use this technical term to speak of eschatology.

⁴ Rudolf Karl Bultmann, "History and Eschatology," Harper Torchbooks, <https://www.giffordlectures.org/books/history-and-eschatology/iii-understanding-history-standpoint-eschatology> (accessed August 10th, 2019, 1).

⁵ Rudolf Karl Bultmann, "History and Eschatology," Harper Torchbooks, <https://www.giffordlectures.org/books/history-and-eschatology/iii-understanding-history-standpoint-eschatology> (accessed August 10th, 2019, 1).

The concept of restoration is interpreted in eschatological terms when Jesus is declared the Messiah or the mythologized Savior. Bultmann's argument is that this messianic figure represented the Davidic kingdom. This King would come in the clouds as the Son of God, and after that, there would be a judgment of humankind. This judgment was part of Jewish cosmology and eschatology. This eschatology is now part of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

The first-century Christian community appropriated this message of the eminent end from Jesus' preaching by deconstructing the Jewish apocalyptic narrative. Bultmann argues that an example of this transition is found in the narrative of Mark 13. This chapter defends the Christian position on the end times, and the first-century church understood it as the ultimate purpose of a new cause. Looking back at the history of Israel, the church sees itself as representing the establishment of the New Covenant. Some texts in the New Testament are helpful to support this position:

And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So, let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.

Romans 13:11-12

Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it because the time is near.

Revelation 1:3

Then he told me, "Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this scroll, because the time is near."

Revelation 22:10

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Hebrews 10:24-25

Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near.

James 5:7-8

Bultmann concludes that those texts represented a religious context. The new community understood itself as an eschatological phenomenon. As the Second Coming had not come in that generation, it brought a great sense of doubt and uncertainty to the church. Despite this, the great merit of this community, according to Bultmann, was the persistent belief in the Second Coming throughout time. Bultmann wondered, however, how long this would last.

1.2.1. *The Medieval Church*

The first valuable reference to eschatology during the medieval period is that of Augustine in *The City of God*. According to Valentin and Linden, *The City of God* demonstrates the contrast between two cities: The Earthly City and the City of God. Christians are in the world, but they are not of the world.⁶ They, like pilgrims, are here and live here, but in fact, their homeland is in heaven. At times they experience suffering and deprivation that may lead them to question their circumstances. Augustine, however, shows that God always has a purpose in allowing Christians to go through difficulties. In their homeland, Christians will go through perfection, and their sufferings and problems will end. Furthermore, this will happen only when Christ, the Lord of the Church, finally returns. The subject is directly linked to the establishment of the Kingdom of God in the world and has generated different perspectives throughout the history of the Christian Church.

Valentin and Linden understand that Augustine's vision of the world was neutral, and believed that history does not happen in vacuum; that God writes it according to his designs. In Section 20 of his book, Augustine interprets the "thousand years" in Revelation 20 in a non-literal way and disputes attempts that stipulate the specific dates of the end of times.

Concerning eschatology in the Middle Ages, Brett Edward Whalen recalls how Jesus' predictions in the New Testament were used in the medieval context.⁷ Whalen points out that during the Middle Ages, Christians took on the mission of spreading Christianity through the world to establish the Kingdom of God on Earth before the appearance of the Antichrist. The Roman Catholic Church's objective was to evangelize non-Christians and to establish Christendom.

⁶ Gilson Souza Valentin, Gerson Luis Linden. "Hermenêutica aplicada ao estudo da escatologia bíblica: a contribuição de Santo Agostinho no debate a respeito do milênio." *Revista de Iniciação Científica da ULBRA* 3 (2004), 197-205.

⁷ Brett Edward Whalen, *Dominion of God*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2010), 336.

Whalen states that as with any community, defining Christendom and its sovereignty is not an easy task. The members of this community declared themselves to be people who enjoyed a common faith, used Latin as a sacred language, obeyed and observed the rites and traditions of the Church, and were obedient to the Pope. Whalen says, “they have labeled that union of Christian kingdoms and churches as (among other things) ‘a’ cultural community, ‘a’ religious community, ‘a’ socio-religious unity, ‘and an’ international culture.”⁸ It soon became possible, then, to observe the vital role of the Church as one of the foundations of Western civilization.

This Medieval eschatological outlook was not only concerned with the affairs of the future, but it was also focused on the past, to comprehend how and when the Second Coming of Christ would occur.

One of the goals of the Crusades was not only to defend Jerusalem against Muslims, but also to expand the Kingdom of God, with the purpose of converting Jews and pagans before the end of time. Whalen comments that “the pursuit of Christendom, by contrast, engaged the historical and apocalyptic sensibilities of medieval Europe’s ecclesiastical elite, sometimes including popes themselves, who anticipated the ultimate triumph of their sacerdotal authority on the grandest of scales.”⁹

Despite the efforts of the Church of Rome to increase its influence and its power over the Western world, many still questioned the temporal aspect. The uncertainties concerning how many of the prophecies would be fulfilled generated some instability in the church, where it would itself be called “Babylon” due to its corruption, greed, and hypocrisy. Although the papal figure was somewhat weakened in the 14th and 15th centuries, partly as a result of the formation of the national states, the impulse of Christians to convert the world did not diminish.

1.2.2. Reformation Period

The Reformers, in general, denied the literal earthly reign proposed by the Church of Rome, recalling the teachings of the Fathers of the Church and especially Augustine. According to Lindberg, in Luther's theology, eschatology serves as a tool for preaching the gospel from a new

⁸ Whalen, *Dominion of God*, 2.

⁹ Whalen, *Dominion of God*, 6.

perspective, in the sense of strengthening the faith for the so-called “Day of Salvation.”¹⁰ Lindberg quotes Hamm and shares his eschatological understanding:

“Since in Reformation thinking justification is the unconditional acceptance of the sinner, for Christ’s sake and not because of any previous, present or future quality in his life and morals, and is always founded outside of us in God himself. Since that is the case, justification acquires an eschatological meaning in the Reformation that is foreign to it in Catholic theology.”¹¹

Luther, therefore, needed eschatology in order for his message to become widespread. Leandro Lima warns of the error of those who argue that eschatology was not a priority for the Reformers.¹² He agrees with the fact that the discussion in the present day has been reduced to the “Rapture,” the millennium, and the Battle of Armageddon. Lima remarks that for the Reformers, salvation was “from” something “to” something. In this case, it is salvation from one’s sins and condemnation, to that of future divine blessings. The central aspect of eschatology for Calvin was the resurrection, the high expectation of believers. Therefore, eschatology for the Reformer focuses on studying and understanding the resurrection. Calvin seems to have a certain preference for brevity in writing about future events. He did not see the practical advantages of simply satisfying people’s curiosity. He understands that the knowledge and certainty of the future resurrection is the goal for meaningful life in the present, given the terrible disturbances of the present time.

The reinterpretation of Augustinian theology by the Reformers, as well as their concern for personal salvation and future life, meant that within the Reformation movement, there was a confident expectation for the Second Coming of Jesus.

1.3. The Rise of Dispensationalism

1.3.1. What is Dispensationalism?

Dispensationalism emerged as an interpretative theory in the late nineteenth century through a group known as the Plymouth Brothers. Led by John Nelson Darby, the Plymouth

¹⁰ Carter Lindberg, "Eschatology and Fanaticism in the Reformation Era: Luther and the Anabaptist," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 64/ 4 (2000): 259-278.

¹¹ Berndt Hamm, "What Was the Reformation Doctrine of Justification?" In C. Scott Dixon, editor, *The German Reformation: The Essential Readings* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 73.

¹² Leandro Lima, "O Pensamento Escatológico De Canvino," *Centro Presbiteriano Andrew Jumper Blog*, April 2019, <https://cpaj.mackenzie.br/o-pensamento-escatologico-de-calvino/>

Brothers conducted weekly Bible study meetings and were critical of any forms of congregational organization. According to Santos, this group “rejected any clerical or ministerial class system, insisting that they were returning to the simple form of worship and ecclesiastical rule of the apostles.”¹³

As the group progressed, discussions unfolded concerning the literal interpretation of prophecy, especially as it related to eschatology. This new mode of biblical interpretation has gained popularity in many evangelical circles, due to the work done by Darby and his followers, as well as the large volume of books, pamphlets, and articles written on the subject. Movements like the Dwight L. Moody's Evangelistic Conferences were virtually infused with dispensationalists.¹⁴

A second historical factor that also contributed towards the spread of dispensational thinking was the publication of the Scofield Study Bible, a version of the King James Bible with study notes by Cyrus Ingerson Scofield. This Study Bible became widespread among Protestants in the United States during the twentieth century. William Cox commented on the success of this publication among American Protestants, noting two aspects: one positive and one negative.¹⁵ Cox understood the consolidation of American Protestant values, such as the inerrancy and inspiration of scripture – in an environment virtually wholly dominated at the time by theological liberalism – as something positive. The negative aspect, according to Cox, is that the Scofield Bible popularized its form of interpretation of the scriptures as dogma.

Cox points out the attitude of superiority on the part of dispensationalist enthusiasts, which has undoubtedly been witnessed by most who have tried to share their divergent perspective. Cox says, “no Bible doctrine presents the slightest problem to these experts. Nor do they need to do a deeper study; all of what needed is contained in the footnotes of the Scofield Reference Bible.”¹⁶

Dispensationalism is not restricted to a particular denomination. There are dispensationalists today in practically all branches of Protestantism and even in those where their presence represents a denial of certain distinctive doctrinal principles.

¹³ João Alves Dos Santos, "O Dispensacionalismo E Suas Implicações Doutrinárias," http://www.monergismo.com/textos/escatologia_reformada/imp-dispensacionalismo_joao-alves.pdf (accessed August 3rd, 2019).

¹⁴ Cf. Harvie M. Conn, *Teologia Contemporanea en El Mundo* (Grand Rapids: Subcomisión Literatura Cristiana de la Iglesia Cristiana Reformada, s.d.), 115.

¹⁵ W. E. Cox. *An Examination of Dispensationalism* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1963), 60.

¹⁶ Cox, *An Examination of Dispensationalism*, 65.

To better understand how this particular line of thought was disseminated, it is necessary to reflect on the assumptions of the theory.

According to Harvie Coon, the new movement of biblical interpretation that emerged with John Nelson Darby refused to recognize the current clergy system but defended a New Testament model of church government and worship.¹⁷ Darby also traveled to the United States to promote his dispensational method of interpretation in various prophetic meetings. The doctrine gained strength with Dwight L. Moody and also gained popularity among conservatively-minded Presbyterians.

Coon also identifies some characteristics of dispensationalism. The first is related to the form of interpretation. Dispensationalists do not believe and do not interpret the Bible allegorically. The literal interpretation is superior. In one example, the “New Jerusalem” (Revelation 22) will be the geographically located, but transformed, city of today. The second characteristic of dispensationalism is the separation between Old Testament Israel and the New Testament Church. In the dispensational view, prophecy must be fulfilled literally for the earthly nation of Israel. The third characteristic, according to Coon, is the division of history into periods of linear time called dispensations.

For each phase of human history, God gives humankind different responsibilities. For example, the fourth dispensation is related to the revelation of God’s grace. This grace was not revealed in the Law of Moses as historical premillennialism believes. The last feature focuses on God’s complete plan of redemption. According to such a dispensationalist interpretation, there will be a “Rapture” of the church that will take place before the so-called Great Tribulation period.

Where Covenant Theology is not for one specific people, the understanding is that God’s promise to Abraham in Genesis 15 has its fulfillment in Christ. Those who are “in Christ” are the New Israel and can also enjoy the fulfillment of future promises.

According to Mitchel, the major problem with dispensationalism’s union between Israel and the church is its non-literal reading of the Bible, thus creating room for allegorical interpretations of specific biblical passages.¹⁸ The dispensational understanding of the Abrahamic covenant in Genesis divides three categories in God’s promises to the patriarch. The first of these

¹⁷ Coon, Harvie M. *Contemporary World Theology: A Layman's Guidebook*. (Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co; 2nd edition, 1974), 65.

¹⁸ Daniel Mitchell, *First Corinthians: Christianity in a Hostile Culture*, eds. Ed Hinson and Mal Couch, Vol. 7 (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 2004), 288.

refers to the land. Thus, God specifies the geographical location of his people's land from the Euphrates to the so-called river of Egypt. The second promise concerns the inheritance of not only one nation but of several others so that their heirs would multiply. The third promise relates to a blessing. Not only would Abraham's name be blessed, but also all those who would be close to him.

1.3.2. Darby and his influence on the eschatological movement

According to Sweetnam and Gribben, John Nelson Darby's eschatological interpretation of the Bible can be understood in light of his theology.¹⁹ His vision informs his ecclesiology of the primitive church, and this gradually influenced people close to him.

There is also a particular difficulty in understanding Darby's works on the part of the academic community. Sweetnam and Gribben cite two main reasons for this: the first of these is related to the way Darby's work was written, which many see as a form of unorganized theology and contributes to the difficulty of fully understanding his arguments. The second factor is that Darby is not considered to be a theologian, rather merely the leader of a religious movement.

What is the historical context that gave rise to Darby's way of thinking? One possible answer can be related to the growing pessimism that existed between England and Ireland in the 19th century. Darby's father provided him with the opportunity of studying law and theology, but his career as a lawyer was short-lived. In 1825, Darby was ordained as a leader in the Church of Ireland. According to Sweetnam and Gribben, his initial theological inclination could not be called evangelical, for he emphasized the importance of the sacraments as God's form of communication with the church.

His theological perspective changed in 1827 after a horse-riding accident, while he was going through a long period of recovery. With time, Darby became disenchanted with the Church of England and began to develop a new understanding of ecclesiology. Sweetnam and Gribben argue that Darby's prophetic view of the world and the emergence of a certain proto-dispensationalism are the results of his experience with the state of the church at that time. The experience and the impeded growth of the church and gospel contributed to Darby's pessimistic

¹⁹ Mark Sweetnam and Crawford Gribben, "J. N. Darby and the Irish Origins of Dispensationalism," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 52, no. 3 (September, 2009): 569-577.

view of the world. Dispensationalism's emergence as well as what led Darby to develop the idea of a secret "Rapture" of the Church came from this context.

1.3.3. *Exporting Dispensationalism*

Darby's challenge was now to export his idea to Western Europe and North America, where theology flourished to the utmost at the time. The dissemination of Darby's eschatological perspective and his new understanding of ecclesiology was due to the Scofield Bible. Used in many seminars for its teaching of dispensationalism, the *Scofield Reference Bible* was also adopted by many churches to elucidate many controversies regarding the Bible. C. I. Scofield was converted in 1879 and became pastor of a small congregation in Dallas three years later. LeAnn Snow Flesher argues that despite having no professional academic background, Scofield published *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth*, where one encounters the dispensationalist brand of hermeneutics found in his theology and preaching. As for the *Scofield Reference Bible*, it was published in 1902, and Flesher explains that it "became one of the most influential religious works in the U.S. for the twentieth century."²⁰

Scofield's editorial comments were incorporated into the pages of the Bible itself, which led many to believe that his commentary was a whole, as sacred as Scripture. As Flesher notes, "given that the Bible was understood as the inerrant and infallible word of God, Scofield's interpretive comments, found on every page of the biblical text, gained the same reputation."²¹

The second reason for its success is how Scofield's comments were written. Flesher contends that at no point did he argue, correct, or defend his written arguments. Those factors influenced the growth and the use of the Scofield Bible²² even more after World War I, as people sought ways to understand this tragic event.

According to Scofield, God's relationship with humanity unfolded progressively throughout time:

"The Scofield Bible distinguishes dispensations, which further exhibit the progressive nature of God's dealings with humanity. They are associated with periods when people

²⁰ LeAnn Snow Flesher, "The Historical Development of Premillennial Dispensationalism," *Review and Expositor* 106 (Winter, 2009): 35-45.

²¹ LeAnn Snow Flesher, "The Historical Development of Premillennial Dispensationalism," 37.

²² C. I. Scofield, *The Scofield Reference Bible KJV*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 2018.

have been responsible for specific and varying tests of their obedience of God, from the beginning of human history to its end.”²³

Ironically, publishers advocate impartiality on the part of the comments: “They objectively present facts without such tendentious remarks as the best manuscripts omit” or “the most reliable manuscripts read.”²⁴ Such notes are value judgments that differ according to varying viewpoints on the text.

1.4. Dispensationalism and Interpretations of the “Millennium”

1.4.1. The Doctrine of the Rapture and Bible Prophecy

Dispensationalism is vital towards the comprehension of the idea of a collective “Rapture” and the distinction between Israel and the Church. Israel, as ethnicity, nation, and political unity should therefore never be confused with the Church. The promises made to Israel are not to be applied to the Church, nor will they be fulfilled by it. It is understood that God interrupted the special treatment given to Israel when it rejected Jesus, the Messiah, but would resume his dealings with Israel when it recognized his messiahship.

According to this belief system, there is a separation between the “Rapture” and the Second Coming of Christ. As distinct and chronologically separate events, the “Rapture” is for the Church, and the Second Coming is mainly for Israel. This point of view justifies the reason Israel goes through the great tribulation: it is because of its rejection of the Messiah.

The prophetic passage of Daniel’s Seventy Weeks (Daniel 9:24-27) is used as a chronological framework for the establishment of the Messianic Kingdom on earth. It has become the chronological basis for the events of the end-times. According to Scofield, the Seventy Weeks of prophecy are “weeks of years,” an essential measure of sabbatical time in the Jewish calendar.²⁵ The interval between the sixty-ninth to the seventieth week is considered as the Church period or dispensation, a historical gap marked by beginning of Israel’s rejection of the Messiah (Jesus) and his acceptance by Gentiles, up to time of the “Rapture.” When the Church period is over, the last week (the seventieth) will begin to seal the fulfillment of the prophecy.

²³ C.I. Scofield, *The Scofield Reference Bible*, 16.

²⁴ C.I. Scofield, *The Scofield Reference Bible*, 17.

²⁵ *Bíblia de Referências Scofield*. (São Paulo: Sociedade Bíblica do Brasil, 1986), 863-864.

For Mitchel, this hermeneutic is fundamental to understanding biblical prophecies.²⁶ For the author, this hermeneutical paradigm insists on the (re)birth of the modern State of Israel, and the specific fulfillment of the promises made to its people, as well as its geographical location and purpose. As long as the nation of Israel is on earth, it does not own or control the territory independently.

1.4.2. Types of Dispensationalism

The traditional dispensational belief is that the “Church Age is an interruption in God’s plan for Israel. In this period, between Jesus’ ministry and the “Rapture,” the dispensation is called the “dispensation of grace” or the “age of the Church.” In this model, the promises contained in Jeremiah 31:31-34, which refer to a new covenant with Israel, are restricted to the moment immediately after Jesus’ return when he will establish his earthly kingdom during the Millennium and will refer exclusively to the nation of Israel. In the traditional dispensational model, those who believe in Jesus constitute a different group, apart from Israel and believers from other dispensations, both in terms of their purpose and their fate. The expression “bride of Christ” is applied only to those who believe in Jesus in the “age of the Church,” leaving out other believers, like those of the Hebrew Bible and of the end-time Great Tribulation.²⁷

Progressive dispensationalism understands the “age of the Church” as the fulfillment of specific promises of the Hebrew Bible. For example, the new covenant prophesied in Jeremiah 31:31-34 would apply to the salvation of the Gentiles. In this progressive dispensational model, the “Church age” is not an interruption in God’s treatment of the nation of Israel, rather an integral part of this plan, providing that the Gentiles who believe can participate in the blessings concerning the new covenant. It is common ground among progressive dispensationalists to affirm that Jesus inaugurated this new covenant through his blood (Luke 22:20; Hebrews 8:6; 9:15).

The difference between progressive and traditional dispensationalism is that, unlike the traditional perspective, progressive dispensationalism sees the Church as a complete fulfillment of the prophecies of the Hebrew Bible – without denying a literal future concerning the Millennial

²⁶ Mitchell, Daniel. *First Corinthians: Christianity in a Hostile Culture*, edited by Ed Hinson and Mal Couch. Vol. 7 (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 2004).

²⁷ Ligon Duncan, *Covenant Theology: The Unfolding Revelation of God's Plan of Salvation* (Jackson, Mississippi: Reformed Theological Seminary, 2015).

Kingdom of Jesus upon nations in Jerusalem. It sees the believers of all ages as belonging to the same Body: The Israel of God.

While traditional dispensationalism understands the “Church age” as a temporary parenthesis in God’s plan with Israel, progressive dispensationalism sees the Church as a progression of the God’s plan for the redemption of humanity, with salvation being offered by grace to all those who believe and obey the gospel.²⁸

1.4.3. *Darby’s Perspective on the Second Coming of Christ*

Darby’s reflection on the Second Coming of Jesus and the “Rapture” of the Church began during his recovery period between December 1827 and January 1827. Darby concluded that Christians are to patiently and faithfully wait for the return of Christ before the Millennium. The Church must be snatched away before the Great Tribulation, because it is distinct and unique from Israel.²⁹ Concerning the “Rapture” of the Church, Darby relates it directly to the identity and characteristic of the Church:

“The true character of the church of God will appear, and the nature of its connection with Christ, on the one hand, and the ways of God in the government of the world on the other—the two great topics of which the Scriptures treat; besides that first of all concerns, the reconciling of the soul with God.”³⁰

On the other hand, Darby criticizes those who did not believe in a Jewish remnant:

“The denial of the existence of a Jewish remnant, such as is above spoken of, involves the most grave and, indeed, fatal consequences; because it connects, especially through the contents of the Psalms, the Spirit of Christ, which speaks in them, with the ungodly and unconverted Jews, and makes the declarations of integrity and uprightness, not the breathings of a righteous soul pleading with God—yea, its pleadings furnished to it by the Spirit of Christ—but the pride of self-righteousness presenting itself to God. It is hard to suppose that any could allege that the Lord should give all this self-righteousness by revelation in connection with—yea, identified with—the breathings of Christ’s Spirit and the piety flowing from it; but such is the theory of those who deny the rapture of the saints

²⁸ Ligon Duncan, *Covenant Theology: The Unfolding Revelation of God’s Plan of Salvation*, 15.

²⁹ J. N. Darby, *Letters of J. N. Darby, Volume Two 1868—1879* (Oak Park, IL: Bible Truth Publishers, 1971), 499.

³⁰ William Kelly, “The Collected Writings of J. N. Darby,” H. L. Heijkoop, <http://www.plymouthbrethren.org/article/11534> (accessed August 1st, 2018).

before Christ's appearing, and, consequently, the existence of a Jewish remnant, in which the Spirit of Christ is at work in connection with the hopes proper to Israel."³¹

For Darby, biblical interpretation that does not involve a Jewish remnant after the "Rapture" brings terrible consequences. In the author's view, those who do not understand the Bible from this perspective did not understand the Justice of God.

1.4.4. Postmillennialism

A change in the idea of the "Millennium" occurred between the 19th and 20th century. The shift from post-millennialism to pre-millennialism can be explained by the constant global conflicts and wars of the last two centuries. Postmillennialism was the dominant form in church history, as well as during the Protestant Reformation, and has gained renewed popularity since the 1960s.

The central theme of postmillennialism, according to Ericson, is related to the Kingdom of God³². In this line of interpretation, the Kingdom is not the physical reign of a spiritual leader, instead, the spiritual government or reign of Jesus over men. This government of Jesus is manifested through the conversion of nations before the return of the Messiah. This does not entail the regeneration of every individual on earth, but holds that people from all walks of life and nations will come to believe in the Messiah. As more people go through a conversion experience, they will live out their lives according to Jesus' commands, which will result in a long period of peace and serve as the basis for the establishment of the Millennium. Postmillennialism, therefore, does not envision a sudden growth of the Church but a rather gradual one.

According to Kennedy L Gentry, the millennium is already being experienced³³. The thousand years mentioned in Revelation 20 are to be understood symbolically, not literally, and are to be read in the context of the experience of first-century Christians, as a message of comfort

³¹ William Kelly, "The Collected Writings of J. N. Darby," H. L. Heijkoop, <http://www.plymouthbrethren.org/article/11534> (accessed August 1st, 2019).

³² Millard J. Ericson, *A Basic Guide to Eschatology: Making Sense of the Millenium*, 1st ed., Vol. 1 (Ada, Michigan: Baker Books, 1998), 200.

³³ Gentry, Kenneth L. 2013. "The Postmillennial Vision of Christian Eschatology." *Criswell Theological Review* 11 (1): 89–101.

in times of persecution (see Revelation 6:9-10³⁴ and 20:4).³⁵ For Gentry, postmillennialism speaks of the progress of the gospel message in history, through the Church's involvement in the world and its contribution to social stability, economic development, and international peace. Gentry understands the establishment of Christ's Kingdom in the early years of the Christian movement. Jesus' death on the cross resulted in Satan's defeat, consequently enabling the preaching of the gospel throughout the world. This is how, through the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20), the proclamation of the gospel will contribute to the growth of the Kingdom of God on earth. The emergence of a Christianized world will finally bring about the victory of the gospel message and lead to the final judgment.

1.4.5. Amillennialism

According to Ericson, amillennialism is understood as a more pessimist view of the world.³⁶ The first authors who advocated this position were mostly postmillennialists; basing their ideas on Augustine of Hippo and John Calvin.

The first characteristic of this interpretation is the belief in the so-called "two resurrections" found in Revelation 20:4-5. For the amillennialists, the first resurrection is spiritual, where the victory of the martyrs of Revelation 6:9-11 takes place, and the second resurrection refers to the physical and bodily resurrection. For the defenders of this theory, it is necessary to undertake a broader analysis of the book of Revelation, beyond chapter 20, in order to understand this theme.

The second characteristic of this doctrine concerns the interpretation of the "Millennium." It is important to emphasize that the interpreter's view here is that the book of Revelation is usually divided into stages, that recall events from successive periods. For these interpreters, Revelation 20 does not refer to the future, but to a time between the past and the present. The amillennialist view understands the book of Revelation as one mainly comprised of symbolism. The number

³⁴ When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given; 10 they cried out with a loud voice, "Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?"

³⁵ Then I saw thrones, and those seated on them were given authority to judge. I also saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus[a] and for the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years.

³⁶ Gentry, Kenneth L. 2013. "The Postmillennial Vision of Christian Eschatology." *Criswell Theological Review* 11 (1): 89–101.

“one thousand” (Millennium) is also symbolic and could be interpreted as a period of fullness or perfection.

The prophecies of the Hebrew Bible are less literal for amillennialists than for the premillennialists. However, according to Ericson, it is possible to recognize some common characteristics to both strands.³⁷ The first of these is the pessimistic view of human experience and that humankind is moving towards a catastrophic end. Moreover, both groups believe in Christ’s second coming, although the temporal issue is not something relevant to this idea. Despite these similarities, amillennialism still embraces a more figurative and symbolic interpretation of Scripture compared to premillennialism.

1.4.6. Premillennialism

For Ericson, premillennialism envisions a physical and real establishment of the Kingdom of Christ, during a literal period of a thousand years of peace on earth³⁸. He argues that premillennialism seriously addresses eschatology. Unlike postmillennialism, where the Kingdom is being established without the presence of Christ, here, the Kingdom reign is brought about by the Messiah himself. In this case, the millennium would be inaugurated only after the παρουσία. For Ericson, the text of Matthew 24:12 describes a time before the Second Coming of Christ.³⁹

Concerning the two resurrections, premillennialists understand the first resurrection as that of believers only. The rest of humankind will only be resurrected at the end of the Millennium. It is important to note that the two resurrections are physical in nature.

Within premillennialism, there are two central perspectives concerning the “Rapture.” Some believe that Christ’s spiritual Church will be “raptured” before a period called the Great Tribulation.⁴⁰ The other perspective is that the Church will experience this so-called Great Tribulation period, which will last seven years. The “Rapture” would, therefore, happen after this period of time.

³⁷ Millard J. Erickson, *Basic Guide to Eschatology: Making Sense of the Millennium*, 90.

³⁸ Millard J. Erickson, *Basic Guide to Eschatology: Making Sense of the Millennium*, 92.

³⁹ Millard J. Erickson, *Basic Guide to Eschatology: Making Sense of the Millennium*, 93.

⁴⁰ As for the moment of rapture in relation to the tribulation, there are three different positions. Some understand that the rapture will be before the tribulation (pretribulationists), others, which will be in the midst of it (mesotribulationists), and others argue that the rapture will take place after the tribulation (posttribulationists). They believe that the time of tribulation on earth will be seven years. Then the rapturous Church will be out of the earth seven years, or three and a half years, or still no time, according to the time of rapture.

According to Ericson, premillennialism finds its roots in the works of Justin Martyr. Justin also had a known characteristic of interpreting the prophecies of the Hebrew Bible even for the future people of God in a literal way. For Ericson, there are two groups of Christians. The first group is one that expects a literal kingdom of Christ, while the other group does not assume any Millennium.⁴¹

1.5. Dispensationalism in the Public Square

Dispensational theology is most commonly associated with evangelical churches in the United States. In the last two decades, dispensationalism has influenced certain aspects of international policy in the United States and England. Robert L. Thomas wrote an article about the developments and use of dispensational ideas outside Christian circles.⁴²

In his analysis, Thomas refers to two non-dispensational authors who comment on the impact of this theology on the politics of the United States. The first is Timothy P. Weber, who focused on the impact of a literal interpretation of prophecy. He noted that events like the establishment of the modern state of Israel and the Six-Day War helped dispensationalists to expand their propaganda and political influence in the interests of Israel. For dispensationalists, Israel had a special place in the restoration of the Kingdom of the Messiah.

Weber also explains how dispensationalism provided answers for conservative evangelicals concerning the state of the world in the 1980's:

As the 1984 presidential election approached, political reporters hotly pursued the connection between premillennialism and right-wing politics, especially after Reagan's own dispensationalist beliefs began to surface. Then 175 public radio stations carried a documentary titled "Ronald Reagan and the Politics of Armageddon," which explored similar themes. In October, the Christie Institute of Washington, D.C., presented evidence in a news conference that American foreign policy was being unduly influenced by dispensationalists.⁴³

⁴¹ Millard J. Ericson, *A Basic Guide to Eschatology: Making Sense of the Millennium, 1st ed., Vol. 1* (Ada, Michigan: Baker Books, 1998), 20.

⁴² Robert L. Thomas, "Dispensationalism's Role in the Public Square," *The Master Seminary Journal* 20, no. 1 (Spring, 2009): 19-40.

⁴³ Timothy P. Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon: How Evangelicals Became Israel's Best Friend* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 204.

With the influence of pastors and leaders, it soon became apparent that many business people and lobbyists knew how to use theology to get the support of various institutions. Public opinion could adapt to this indirect influence of dispensationalist theology.

Stephen Sizer is the other author mentioned by Thomas. Sizer studied the influence of dispensationalism in the public sphere and noted that during the Reformation period, Theodore Beza and Martin Bucer interpreted Romans 11:25 as a reference to Israel's unbelief in Jesus the Messiah. This idea was also integrated into the popular Geneva Bible, which led people to believe that the Jews would convert to the Christian message before the Second Coming of Jesus. They would also return to Palestine, where they would cohabit with other nations. According to Sizer, "the former view became the driving force behind the restorationist movement and British Christian Zionism, while the latter view came to dominate in the United States."⁴⁴

The impact that dispensationalism had on U.S. foreign policy is undeniable, according to Thomas. The dispensationalist interpretation of God's relationship with Israel is understood in light of the book of Genesis, where God promised Abraham a specific territory. This dispensational interpretation of the Bible accounts for the special relationship and treatment the U.S. Government has granted to the modern State of Israel.

1.5.1. The Political and Social Engagement of Christians

The theological position of a Christian directly influences his political and social behavior. The impact of eschatology upon social and political issues become more apparent in the 19th century. Heber Campos argues that premillennialism and postmillennialism are the eschatological perspectives that are most concerning with government and law. These are quite different from amillennialism, which focuses on a spiritualized interpretation of the Kingdom of God.⁴⁵

For Campos, there are three basic positions concerning the involvement of Christians in politics: accommodation, separation and transformation. Amillennialists and some historical premillennialists are in favor of accommodation and the pluralism of ideas. Dispensationalists adopt the second position, one of separation. They are willing to refrain from participating in politics. Postmillennialists embrace the third position. They desire to transformation society

⁴⁴ Stephen Sizer, *Christian Zionism: Road-Map to Armageddon?*, Vol. 1 (Westmont, IL: IVP Academics, 2006).

⁴⁵ Heber Carlos de Campos, "A Posição Escatológica Como Fator Determinantes do Envolvimento Político E Social," *Fides Reformata* 3, no. 1 (1998), 12-32.

through politics, following Scripture in the way the state should exercise power. They are closer to the Puritans than the amillennialists themselves. Such thinking can potentially reach the point of theocracy.

In general, premillennialists believe that Christians should not get involved in politics. There are some exceptions to this, but for many dispensational premillennialists, Christians, it is believed, cannot really change the political and social systems of this world, because, after all, these will all end in chaos. The goal is rather to evangelize of the world. This defeatist attitude results from their otherworldly understanding of the Kingdom of God.

Influenced by Geiser, Campos argues that when it comes to evangelization, some believers become extremists and are only concerned with the conversion of sinners.⁴⁶ They focus strictly on the glorious future, and consider the present world to be lost and hopeless, often alienating themselves from social and political problems.

For the most part, premillennialists generally do not place an emphasis on civil government because Christ's kingdom will not be established through any kind of political process, which leads to a rather pessimistic concept view of world politics. They insist that the Millennial Kingdom is a supernatural work that will be inaugurated with the advent of Christ to earth. The duty of Christians is simply to be light and salt of the earth, doing good to all men. This perspective is quite different from postmillennialism which advocates for the social implementation of theonomy.

In this chapter, it was possible to observe that eschatology is a complex branch of biblical theology. It refers mainly to issues related to the end times. Hermeneutics is critical when it comes to studying the rules of biblical interpretation; It would not be possible to leave it out when it comes to the study of eschatology. The two main methods of interpretation in this subject are allegorical and literal.

Allegorism is a method of interpretation in which, instead of recognizing the text as it naturally presents itself, a secondary meaning is recognized that nullifies the writer's primary intention. In contrast, literalism directly interprets the words and phrases as they present themselves. Within literalism lies dispensationalism, which divides the history of humanity into seven significant historical periods and is probably the most common understanding in the current evangelical environment.

⁴⁶ Norman L. Geisler, ed. J. I. Packer., "*A Premillennial View of Law and Government*," vol. 1 (1985), 253.

This work aims to understand the differences between these two main methods of interpretation and dispensationalist doctrine, and in the next chapter, a hermeneutic comparison of chapter 24 of the Gospel of Matthew, in order to elucidate the different doctrines of interpretation.

Chapter 2: **Matthew 24: An Eschatological Discourse?**

2.1. Introduction

It is customary for preachers and believers in general, to appeal to Matthew chapter 24 when it comes to an understanding of the chronology of events regarding the end of the world and the Second Coming of Christ. In this text, various “signs” such as wars, rumors of wars, and earthquakes are interpreted as indicators of the end of the world and the return of Christ. Nonetheless, contrary to popular belief, the early church understood the text of Matthew 24 as a reference to Christ’s “coming” in judgment against the city of Jerusalem, (which took place in 70 C.E.) and not as an indicator of the end of the world and the Second Coming of Christ.

Matthew 24 is also known as the “Eschatological Discourse” or “Olivet Discourse.” The parallel texts to this passage are Mark 13 and Luke 21. In the study of Matthew 24, it is vital to compare these parallel texts, since they may help clarify more obscure points within this chapter. Matthew 24 contains one of Jesus’ five main discourses that comprises and structure the Matthean gospel.

In Jesus’ day, the Jewish people focused on their present condition and did not seem to share our current modern-day concerns with the future. When the disciples inquired about the “time” the destruction of the Temple would take place, they most likely expected to be witnesses of such an event. They likely did not understand the destruction of the Temple and the “Second Coming” of Christ; Jesus had not yet died and risen. The idea of a suffering and crucified Messiah was imperceptible for them; rather, they most likely saw Jesus as a political Messiah who would, at that time, release them from the power of Rome.

In terms of the “end of the world,” the disciples understood the destruction of Temple as the end of their religious society. In no sense were they referring to the physical world, or planet Earth. They were thinking of the “end of the Jewish age.”

Concerning Matthew 24, there are two primary frameworks of interpreting the events mentioned in the passage. The first interpretive paradigm is called preterism. This hermeneutic reads the events found chapters 24 and 25 of Matthew’s gospel as having been fulfilled with the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in the year 70 C.E. There are two preterist perspectives possible: full preterism and partial preterism. The most common of these are the partial preterists

who affirm that all of the Hebrew Bible’s prophecies were fulfilled in the year of the fall in the Temple. Partial preterism understands the “coming of Christ” as his spiritual visitation in the judgment of Israel.

The other interpretive paradigm is that of futurism. For the futurists, the entire content of Matthew 24 and 25, along with their parallel texts in Mark and Luke, are understood in terms of a future fulfillment. Futurism has a somewhat more pessimistic worldview. It divulges that this world’s restoration will happen through the earthly, physical reign of Jesus, who will return as the King and Messiah of Israel and the Church. Modern futurism is predominantly dispensationalist. In this sense, God’s covenant with Israel is still valid and his relationship with them will also be re-established.

This chapter will present the preterist and futurist interpretations of Matthew 24. We will begin by exploring the gospel’s theological, social, and cultural context, and illustrate how these align to the purpose of the writer’s message. As we will see, Matthew presents Jesus as the Messiah of Israel and this will impact the events described in chapter 24 of the gospel.

2.2. What is Matthew’s Theological Perspective?

2.2.1. Features

Named by Ernest Renan as “the most important book ever written,”⁴⁷ Matthew’s gospel is considered to be an authoritative narrative of the life of Jesus Christ and one of the most significant documents of the Christian religion. Critical scholarship dates the *Gospel According to Matthew* around 80-85 C.E. Russell Champlin argues that it was probably the most widely attested gospel in the mid-second century C.E., using examples from Irenaeus’s writings *Against Heresies*, which cites this gospel more than others.⁴⁸ Fritz Rienecker provides an early quote from Papias of Hierapolis regarding the origins of Matthew’s gospel: “Matthew compiled the discourses of Jesus in the Hebrew (Aramaic) language, but Matthew and Mark each translated them to the best of his

⁴⁷ Champlin, R.N. “Evangelho de Mateus”, in *Enciclopédia de Bíblia, Teologia e Filosofia – Vol. 4*. (Hagnos: São Paulo, 2000), 266.

⁴⁸ Champlin, R.N. “Evangelho de Mateus”, in *Enciclopédia de Bíblia, Teologia e Filosofia – Vol. 4*. (Hagnos: São Paulo, 2000), 267.

knowledge.” According to Rienecker, Matthew’s gospel aimed at instructing a young Christian community in Palestine.⁴⁹

In terms of Matthew’s theological outlook, Benedict T. Viviano argues that the first gospel focuses on two main issues: (1) the proclamation that Jesus is the Christ expected by the Jewish people; and (2) the proclamation by Jesus of the Kingdom of God.⁵⁰ For Viviano, Matthew’s theology is expressed at the beginning of the gospel: it is seen in the Immanuel, the relationship of God with humankind. Another important feature of Matthew’s gospel is that Jesus is presented as a new Moses (Matthew 1-2), promulgating a new Law (Matthew 5-7) for a new Israel, which is now the Church (Matthew 16 and 18). The Messiah was not only destined to the Jews but also to the Gentiles.

2.2.2. *A Dispensationalist View of the Gospel of Matthew*

The primary purpose of this section is to comprehend Matthew’s gospel from a dispensational perspective. Although there are variations within dispensationalism, the goal here is to provide a general look at this perspective from three different authors.

For David Turner, there are several characteristics associated to a dispensational interpretation of the *Gospel According to Matthew*.⁵¹ Turner’s first observation is that the Kingdom of God proclaimed by John the Baptist and Jesus concerns both a present and future Kingdom, to be experienced, anticipated, and inaugurated by Jesus himself. For Turner, Jesus prescribed the laws of this new Kingdom in the Sermon on the Mount. Dispensationalists believe that the Sermon has little to do with Matthew’s contemporary community; rather it is a set of recommendations that will serve only the future Kingdom. This was also C. I. Scofield’s⁵² perspective: “In this sermon, our Lord reaffirms the Mosaic law of the OT theocratic kingdom as the governing code in His coming kingdom on earth (5:17),⁵³ and declares that the attitude of men

⁴⁹ Rienecker, Fritz. “Mateus”, in *Evangelho de Mateus – Comentário Esperança*. (Curitiba: Editora Evangélica Esperança, 1998), 100.

⁵⁰ Viviano T. Benedict. “Mateus”. in *Novo Comentário Bíblico São Jerônimo: Novo Testamento e artigos sistemáticos / São Jerônimo*. tradução: Celso Eronides Fernandes. (Santo André [SP]: Academia Cristã; São Paulo: Paulus, 2011), 36.

⁵¹ Turner, David. “Matthew among dispensationalists” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (2010): 697-716.

⁵² *The Scofield Study Bible*, (Oxford University Press, 2002), 15.

⁵³ *The Scofield Study Bible*, 16.

toward this law will determine their place in the kingdom (5:19).”⁵⁴ For J.N. Darby, the first prominent proponent of classical dispensationalism, the Sermon on the Mount has a unique characteristic, for it would establish the covenant relationship with the faithful in a kingdom.⁵⁵

According to Turner, Matthew’s parables on the Kingdom of heaven also come under a dispensational paradigm. Parables are an excellent “teaching method” that would represent new truths regarding the future Millennium.

Another element in the dispensational interpretation of the *Gospel According to Matthew* is Jesus’ eschatological discourse in Matthew 24. Many dispensationalists understand the discourse as referring to two things: (1) the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E.; and (2) the Second Coming of Christ who will return to judge the world. In Darby’s interpretation, this chapter “announces the great tribulation through which Jerusalem will pass in the last times, the tribulation that has no parallel in the history of the world.”⁵⁶ Darby made no distinction between Matthew 24 and the events mentioned in Daniel 12:

“The Lord comes now, in the course of His prophecy, to the moment predicted by Daniel, when the abomination which makes desolate would be set up in the place that the throne of God ought to occupy. There would then be, as we have seen, a time of testimony in Israel, which would reach to the ends of the world to all nations; the servants of the Lord were to possess their souls in patience, and, although hated of all, to persevere unto the end. But for those who should be in Judea, the moment would come when an idol ‘abomination’ would be set up in the holy place. This idol is called the desolating idol; because the confidence placed in it, and the public affront given to God, would bring about the desolation of the people and the holy place. When it should be placed there, the faithful ones in Judea were to flee unto the mountains. The Lord uses many figures to shew the urgency of the case. He who might be upon the housetop was not to come down to take anything out of his house; he who might be in the fields was not to return to fetch his garments; the moment would be so terrible, that it would only be a question of flight. But God ever thinks of His own. They were to pray, the Lord said, that their flight might not take place in winter, nor on the sabbath-day. When their time of tribulation - unparalleled in the history of the world - has come, God will consider the temperature most suitable for the flight, and also the conscientious spirit that would stop the faithful soul on a sabbath-day.”⁵⁷

⁵⁴ *The Scofield Study Bible*, 17.

⁵⁵ Darby, J.N. “Notes on the Gospel of Matthew.”

“<https://www.stempublishing.com/authors/darby/EXPOSIT/30029E.html>”. Accessed in Aug 10th, 2019

⁵⁶ Darby, J.N. “Notes on the Gospel of Matthew.”

“<https://www.stempublishing.com/authors/darby/EXPOSIT/30029E.html>”. Accessed in Aug 10th, 2019

⁵⁷ Darby, J.N. “Notes on the Gospel of Matthew.”

“<https://www.stempublishing.com/authors/darby/EXPOSIT/30029E.html>”. Accessed in Aug 10th, 2019

What is clear from reading Darby's comment is the emphasis on a futuristic interpretation of Matthew 24, as it relates to the end times. For some interpreters, the Jewish nation will fall under judgment because they did not recognize Jesus as the Messiah, and the great miracle of the end times will be the conversion of Israel.

A final point regarding a dispensationalist perspective of the first gospel is that of Matthew 28:18-20. Turner argues that there is a variety of interpretations concerning this passage among dispensationalists. While some understand this as being a global mandate addressed to the church, others think differently. Darby, for example, understands that the commandment is an order for the conversion of the Gentiles to obey the Mosaic law.

2.3. A Violent Eschatology?

The key factor as to whether or not Matthew 24 can be characterized as a violent eschatological discourse rests on how these two things are to be understood: (1) the prophecy of the "Second Coming" of the Messiah fulfilled according to Matthew's narrative, and (2) the language used by Jesus regarding those who are not his disciples.

David C. Sim attempts to clarify two points above. Sim states that as much as this phenomenon may surprise some people, it is possible to observe two different perspectives concerning the figure of Jesus in Matthew's gospel.⁵⁸ While in one perspective Jesus is seen as a pacifist preaching compassion, loving one's neighbor, and forgiving sinners; in another, he is also presented as a warrior who leads an indestructible army which has no mercy upon his enemies, and is willing to take revenge against them.

Jesus the pacifist can be found in many teachings of Matthew. Sim uses, as an example, the teachings of chapters 5-7, where the focus becomes pacifism in certain circumstances, and in others, the particular focus is within the action of not revisiting violence. The prayer of Jesus to the Father in Matthew 6 provides attitudes of forgiveness required to reach the Kingdom of heaven. In addition to forgiveness, the focus of chapter 22 is love, which is responsible for replacing the whole law and thus considered the great commandment. Matthew depicts a Jesus who practices what he preaches, and whose mission involves love and charity. The arrest of Jesus is a great

⁵⁸ David C. Sim "The Pacifist Jesus and the Violent Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew." *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 67.1, (2011): 860.

example one showing no sign of resistance, even repudiating one of his disciples' vindictive action. This perspective of a loving, peaceful, and pacifist Jesus contrasts with that given at the end of the gospel.

On the other hand, for Sim, the eschatological Jesus is violent and vengeful. The narrative of Matthew 24 is the most unequivocal evidence of a Jesus who will return from heaven and perform a final judgment. Jesus, the seemingly meek man who preached love and compassion becomes one who sees the need for judgment towards those who are not committed to a specific purpose. Judgment, destruction, and eternal punishment are examples used by Jesus for what will happen to those condemned and cursed. The main subject of the final narrative of the chapter ceases to be that of a message of love and redemption, and becomes a message of which the main subject is the condemnation of many. There is an identified place for punishment. Jesus calls this place Gehenna, in Greek "Hades." The eternal fire marks the punishment. Sim emphasizes that the "fate of the wicked will involve torment and torture."⁵⁹ Spiritual beings are responsible for this torture of the cursed. In Sim's interpretation, these beings are fully aware of what happens. The damned will be far from the Divine Light in Hades. The punishment will be eternal. The sentence given at the trial is eternal. There is no appeal, there is no way to establish peace, no more possibility of repentance. Furthermore, the possibility of welfare and redemption of the soul no longer exist for the condemned.

David J. Neville also observes this same dual characterization of Jesus.⁶⁰ There are two completely different worldviews in the *Gospel of Matthew*. The first relates to the similarities of this gospel with others in the teachings and presentation of the life of Jesus, and the second is a "perplexed and disturbing" teaching.

Neville draws attention to a whole context of violence on the part of God in the Bible. The violence observed is not only committed by human beings. Murders within the same nation of Israel and its elected people show violence on the part of God. Neville refers to "genocidal" violence when the mandates of God have generated the destruction of cities and the murders of thousands of people.

⁵⁹ David C. Sim "The Pacifist Jesus and the Violent Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew," 860.

⁶⁰ David J. Neville, "Toward a Teleology of Peace: Contesting Matthew's Violent Eschatology," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 30, no. 2 (2007): 131-161.

The New Testament narrative is more peaceful when compared to the Hebrew Bible. It does not transparently support violence on the part of the followers of Jesus. The understanding of violence in the New Testament makes moral judgement easier when compared to the Hebrew Bible.

In the *Gospel According to Matthew*, it is possible to identify Jesus as a man who will, in the future, effectuate God's divine judgement. Neville understands Matthew's gospel as highlighting this aspect of violence more prominently than the other gospels. More than the other gospels, Matthew presents Jesus ministry as emphasizing the Kingdom, and the establishment of the God's realm is related to judgment. For the author, "Jesus is recalled as presaging end-time events in the more prosaic language, however, as in the non-parabolic sections of the so-called eschatological discourse found in Matt 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21, the future arrival of the Son of humanity is described largely in positive or non-retributive terms."⁶¹ Jesus' teachings about the end are less symbolic than, for example, any of the other parables. The main difference is the genre of the discourse: While one is violent, the other is not. Thus, the discourse of Matthew 24 is a discourse of an eschatological vengeance on the part of Jesus, as well as the historical message of his mission and teachings about love. From the perspective of seeking a peaceful eschatology, Neville affirms that the cultural and geographic realities of the Roman Empire are based on the gospels.⁶² This empire was marked by the structural and violent physical domination of several regions, including Palestine, so this violent social context was a standard feature for the contemporaries of Jesus.

Neville says that one of the emphases of Matthew's gospel is the anticipation of impending eschatology. This anticipation expressed in the *παρουσία* is a form of judgment and retribution. The discourse of the Final Judgment emphasizes the idea of separation: the righteous from the unjust. Those who have deserved eternal condemnation will be separated from those who have succeeded in being good Christians. Carter, quoted by Neville, understands that the exhortations of violence represent violence as an activity of God and not of his disciples. Carter says, "disciples can 'afford' this nonviolent stance because the apocalyptic worldview affirms the coming triumph of God and believers. Disciples can endure non-violently in the meantime because, in the end, God

⁶¹ David J. Neville, "Toward a Teleology of Peace: Contesting Matthew's Violent Eschatology," 133.

⁶² David J. Neville, "Toward a Teleology of Peace: Contesting Matthew's Violent Eschatology," 140.

will punish the opponents.”⁶³ The doubt remains as to how this can be reconciled with ethics. If the eschatology of Matthew has retribution as its foundation, conciliation with the discourse of Matthew 5 becomes incongruent to those who are not considered worthy. For Neville, however, the acts of Jesus according to the narratives of the different gospels correspond to what Matthew teaches. The vindictive eschatology proposed in Matthew raises a moral and anthropological question for Christians. A misconception of God can incite violence towards other people. Neville concludes his article by noting that much of what the tradition of the gospels represents and portrays as a violent eschatology is a type of response to the social, economic, and religious context of the time.

Michel Desjardins also noted the language and actions of violence in the New Testament.⁶⁴ Desjardins counted more than one-hundred terms that refer to violence, 46 of which are found in the gospels. The terms are used, according to the author, in three ways. First, the expressions depict physical violence practiced by Christians, as well as violence inflicted on Christians. Second, some terms describe violence between the forces of good and the forces of evil, such as for example, the battle between God and “The Beast” in the book of Revelation (Revelation 13). Third, way Desjardins identifies the metaphorical uses such as references to military force given to believers for strength in their spiritual journey to resist against the “forces of the enemy.” The author also highlights that some expressions of violence used do not necessarily imply or signify limits of practical realities. An example given is a sword, which is not physical but is rather a metaphorical strategy that is used against evil.

The New Testament reveals the possibility of achieving God’s favor by doing things in the manner of God himself. This view of interpreting the Scriptures corresponds to an “insider-outsider mentality.” Those “within” act according to the will of God, and those “without” do not follow God’s will. The anti-Judaic tone in some of the gospels is a clear example of this. Jews are considered to be “outsiders” because they refuse to acknowledge Jesus as Messiah or follow his teachings. This explains what one reads in the gospels about Jesus’ relationship to the Jewish leaders. He characterizes them as ignorant and villainous for the nation of Israel. Judas’ betrayal of Jesus would be a response to frustration and anger on the part of the Jewish leaders and their

⁶³ Carter, W. “Constructions of Violence and Identities in Matthew's Gospel,” in S. Matthews and E.L. Gibson (eds.), *Violence in the New Testament* (London: T&T Clark International, 2005), 81-108.

⁶⁴ Michel Desjardins. *Peace, Violence and The New Testament*. (Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield, 1997).

disciples. followed by their followers. According to Desjardins, the *Gospel According to Matthew* was written as response to this conflict with Judaism. This is clearly seen in Jesus' strong condemnation of the Jewish leaders in Matthew 23. In the end, Desjardins admits that some New Testament texts characterize the Messiah as using violent means to justify the expansion and the establishment of the Kingdom of God.

2.4. Seeking to understand Matthew 24

2.4.1. Six different Views

Matthew 24 is one of the more perplexing passages of the New Testament. The different ways in which Jesus speaks to his disciples, the variety of possible interpretations, and the futuristic predictions that are not otherwise familiar to the discourses of Jesus, make this passage especially intriguing when considering the different possibilities regarding the so called "end times."

Brian Schwertley analyzes this passage in his article on the Great Tribulation. For the author, there are at least six different possibilities of interpretation of this text.⁶⁵ *Firstly*, the passage is not about the destruction of the Jewish Temple in 70 C.E., but of events that will occur at the second advent of the Messiah. Thus, the well-known Olivet discourse has a target audience: the Jews converted from Israel in the last days. By examination of the textual similarities with Mark 13 and Luke 21, this group of interpreters argues that only in Luke 21, it is possible to conclude that the discourse is really about the destruction of the Temple. *Secondly*, some argue that in this discourse Jesus reports two events together: while the first event is the destruction of the Temple, the second event refers to the Second Coming in human form of the Son of God. This interpretation is considered a standard one for most biblical commentators, according to Schwertley. A *third* possible interpretation is it speaks of a time of tribulation that will happen moments before the end of human history. This event will precede the Second Coming of Jesus. The two events would be close to each other chronologically. The destruction of the Temple would be the factor that would reveal the Second Coming of Jesus. The words of Jesus would apply both to the generation who physically listened to his discourse, but also, by faith, to those who later would come to understand that these events would announce the end of times. A *fourth* means of

⁶⁵ Brian Schwertley, "Matthew 24 and the Great Tribulation," Reformed Online, http://www.reformedonline.com/uploads/1/5/0/3/15030584/matthew_24_and_the_great_tribulation.pdf (accessed 05/05/2019, 2019).

interpretation is that Matthew 24 is about the end of all things within the same generation. Jesus would have foretold the end of the world as well as the destruction of Jerusalem and the Second Coming. All things would happen even before that generation passed. The *fifth* perspective is that of preterists. Jesus, in his speech, predicted his Second Coming in human form and that the end of the world would occur while that generation lived. Salvation would be effectuated through the “Rapture.” Those who favor such an approach understand the “end times” as an unfolding process.⁶⁶ The *sixth* and last perspective is that of partial preterism, a framework characteristic of the Reformed movement. The “generation who will not pass away until all these things have happened” (Matthew 24:34), are those who will witness the destruction of the Temple and the end of the Jewish age.

2.4.2. *Striving for a Better Interpretation*

After having reviewed Schwertley’s list of various interpretations, we will compare the dispensational view to the grammatical and historical-critical approach. It is necessary to understand the context in which the eschatological discourse was delivered. The gospels present the relationship between Jesus and the Jewish leadership as breaking down near the end of Jesus’ ministry. During Jesus’ trip to the Temple, he denounces the terrible practices occurring in “God’s house” (Matthew 21:13). These events and the numerous parables that Jesus narrates in chapters 21 and 22 of Matthew’s gospel speak of the breakdown he had with the Jewish authorities. According to Schwertley, the scribes and Pharisees at that time were misrepresenting the Law and the Prophets, the very foundation of the Jewish nation. These leaders would, therefore, be destroyed and excluded from the Kingdom of God. Matthew focuses on “the extent of the Jewish leadership's covenant-breaking and lawlessness in the fashion of a prophetic covenant lawsuit.”⁶⁷ Jesus, in a particular way, cursed the behavior of the Jewish leadership of the time whom he

⁶⁶ Those who adhere to such a view often label themselves full or consistent preterists. However, since this view involves a different view of the timing and nature of such crucial doctrines as the Second Coming, the general resurrection, the last judgment, the glorified bodies of believers and the final state, it has been designated as “heretical and dangerous.” Orthodox theologians and exegetes describe this as “hyper-preterism” (Kenneth L. Gentry), “Hymenaenism” (Andrew Sandlin) or “pantelism” (Jonathan Seraiah). Hyper-preterists must redefine several very clear, confessional, established doctrines for them to fit into their paradigm.

⁶⁷ Brian Schwertley, “Matthew 24 and the Great Tribulation,” Reformed Online, http://www.reformedonline.com/uploads/1/5/0/3/15030584/matthew_24_and_the_great_tribulation.pdf (accessed 05/05/2019, 2019).

referred to as hypocrites; they perverted the doctrine of salvation. This rupture with the Jewish doctrine taught by its leaders is in the verses below (Matthew 23:29-36):

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous. And you say, ‘If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’ So, you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. Go ahead, then, and complete what your ancestors started! “You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell? Therefore, I am sending you prophets and sages and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. And so, upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. Truly I tell you, all this will come on this generation.

What can be concluded from Schwertley’s analysis is that the prediction for the destruction of the Temple, which would come to pass a few years later, is a form of retaliation on the part of God to what the leaders of the nation of Israel were doing. According to Morison:

“[T]he Savior’s reference is to His own leaving or departure, a leaving that involved the penal departure of His Father as the Head of the theocracy. The Jewish theocracy was to be a theocracy no longer. ‘Ichabod’ was to be its name. Judaism henceforth would be mere Judaism, not Jehovahism or Jahveism. The Jews henceforth, instead of being the people and kingdom of God, would be a mere Semitic nationality under the dynasty of the Herods or no dynasty at all. Their temple would just be like any other temple of any other contemporaneous people, an empty edifice dedicated to the empty celebration of an empty ritual.”⁶⁸

Therefore, it is essential to understand the chronology and context of chapter 24. The words of Jesus at the beginning of this passage leave no room for an ambiguous interpretation. Jesus, in context, is referring to his generation. The Greek word used here is γενεά, and in this specific context, the noun refers to a specific generation, the one during Jesus’ day.

⁶⁸ Morison, James. *A Practical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Minneapolis: Klock and Klock, 1981 [1884]), 451.

2.5. Interpreting Matthew 24

2.5.1. *The Foretelling of the Destruction of the Temple (v.1-2)*

¹ As Jesus came out of the temple and was going away, his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. ² Then he asked them, “You see all these, do you not? Truly I tell you, not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”⁶⁹

A) The Dispensational Perspective

In Darby’s introduction to Matthew 24, the author already frames the interpretation as that of a separation between Israel and the Church⁷⁰. The Jewish nation had missed the opportunity to recognize Jesus as the Messiah. For Darby, these verses announce a coming ruin. The destruction of the Temple would inaugurate a new era for the world that would end in the phenomena narrated up to Matthew 24:13. In both Luke 21 and Mark 13, the disciples point out to Jesus the beauty of the Temple.

Thomas Ice understands that Jesus’ response was most likely worrisome to his disciples. In verse 2, it is possible to observe a narrative break. This form of narrative is not uncommon in the gospels. In Matthew 13:3, the same type of narrative break occurs. In the speech, Jesus will provide the necessary explanation for his affirmation.⁷¹ There are two questions initiated with this passage. The disciples also believed that certain events were to unfold and were related: the king’s departure, the destruction of Jerusalem, and afterwards, the devastation brought about by Messiah’s appearing. This interpretation aligns with what is narrated in Zechariah 12–14. But according to Ice, Jesus did connect all these events in a single historical moment. While Luke’s gospel refers more to the days of the “Tribulation” up until the return of Christ, the gospels of Matthew and Mark were more concerned with the signs that would highlight the Second Coming.

Likewise, John MacArthur interprets the text as an introduction to the “signs” that will precede the reign of Jesus on earth. For MacArthur, chapters 24 and 25 answer the disciples’ question of the disciples in the first verses of Matthew 24. The disciples were taken by surprise by Jesus’ answer, but that they also understood what he was teaching them.⁷²

⁶⁹ All verses are from the NRSV.

⁷⁰ Darby, J.N. “Notes on the Gospel of Matthew.”

“<https://www.stempublishing.com/authors/darby/EXPOSIT/30029E.html>”. Accessed in Aug 10th, 2019

⁷¹ Thomas Ice, "Pre-Tribulation Research Center," <https://pre-trib.org/an-interpretation-of-matthew-24-25/message/an-interpretation-of-matthew-24-25-part-30/read> (accessed August 15th, 2019).

⁷² MacArthur, *Mateus - Série De Estudos Bíblicos John MacArthur* (São Paulo, Brazil: Cultura Cristã, 2012).

The historical and geographical context of the question is also relevant. For MacArthur, the Jewish were oppressed by the Romans in their own land. They believed in the promise of a Messiah king and liberator. His disciples accepted Jesus' messiahship, but did not always understand it. Jesus' words regarding the fall of the Temple must have frightened his disciples. MacArthur denotes the importance and grandeur of the Temple, which at the time was a significant structure built and dedicated to the glory of God. However, Jesus' evaluation of the Temple operations was not always positive. He was quite aware of how the Jewish leaders used the Temple for their own personal gain.

Lastly, for Homer A. Kent Jr., Jesus provided a surprising response to his disciples, contrary to Jesus' usual nationalism⁷³. It is a severe rebuke of the Temple, predicting its impending destruction; the year is 70 C.E.

B) The Historical-Critical View

Willoughby C. Allen, in his critical and exegetic commentary on chapters 24 and 25 of Matthew's gospel, relates chapter 24 to Mark 13⁷⁴. In particular, the insertion made in Mark 13:9b, 10a, 11–13 in Matthew 10:17–22. Allen argues, however, that parts of Mark 13 are synthesized in Matthew 24:9b, 11 and 12. The writer of Matthew's gospel understands Mark 13 as an eschatological discourse. With this in mind, Allen suggests that Matthew constructs a narrative of a final judgment. There are no elements for a futuristic interpretation involved.

The division of the chapter with the two initial verses follows the classic form of many commentaries. R. T. France, in his work on the *Gospel According to Matthew*, notes the difference in the form of speech.⁷⁵ For France, Matthew 24 is understood as a unified single speech up to verse 34, where a second chronology of events emerges. The thrust of chapter 24, is Jesus' abandonment of the Temple in a way similar to how that the glory of God had left the Temple in Ezekiel 10 and 11. Compared to Luke's version of the discourse which focuses on Jerusalem as a whole, Matthew seems to emphasize the Temple and Jesus' prediction of its destruction.

⁷³ Homer A. Kent Jr. "Evangelho de Mateus" In *Comentário Bíblico Moody*, vol.4, ed. Charles F. Pfeifer e Everett F. Harrison (São Paulo: Imprensa Batista Regular, 2001), 57.

⁷⁴ Willoughby C. Allen. *A critical and exegetical commentary on the gospel according to S. Matthew*. International Critical Commentary. New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1907

⁷⁵ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA: Eedermans, 2007).

Hagner delimits the structure of Matthew 24-25 and identifies two main sections: (1) Matthew 24:4-36 and (2) Matthew 24:37 to 25:46.⁷⁶ Hagner suggests that the first fourteen verses refer to a time of suffering and proclamation of the gospel before the destruction of the city of Jerusalem. The second part refers to verses 15-28, which chronicles the fall of Jerusalem. The third part of this section is comprised of verses 29-36, describing the appearing of the Son of Man and is connected to the fall of Jerusalem. In this section, Hagner provide this textual-critical note in his commentary: “Many MSS (D W f13 TR) insert the definite article τῆς, thereby suggesting a clear distinction between the coming of Jesus and the end of the age.”⁷⁷ It is possible to see small changes in Matthew’s narrative compared to the first two verses of Mark 13. In Matthew, the author needs to emphasize the authority of Jesus’ speech to his apostles: “Matthew’s insertion of ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, “truly I tell you,” brings a note of authority as well as a gravity to the following logion.”⁷⁸

Nolland also notes the change of language in Matthew 24:2, where there is the addition of οὐ⁷⁹. This addition is an indication of waiting for a positive response. Another change in writing refers to amplitude. Mark’s gospel is more specific, referring mainly to “these great buildings,” whereas Matthew’s reference to “all these” is much broader, offering more interpretive possibilities. According to Nolland, Jesus’ speech in Matthew is more fatalistic toward the Temple, where its fate is the result of judgment for “the blood of all righteous,” something that had been previously mentioned in Matthew 23.

Craig Keener divides the introduction into two main questions: the first in v. 1-2 concerning the time of destruction and the second in v. 3 regarding the signs of Jesus’ Second Coming and the end of that era.⁸⁰ The destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem and its absence has caused disillusionment and Christians to engage in eschatological speculation about the “end-times.”

2.5.2. *Signs of the End of the Age (v.3-8)*

³ When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and the end of the age?”

⁷⁶ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28, vol. 33B*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 685.

⁷⁷ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28, vol. 33B*, 686.

⁷⁸ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28, vol. 33B*, 686.

⁷⁹ John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 2005), 987.

⁸⁰ Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Edermans Publishing, 2009).

⁴ Jesus answered them, “Beware that no one leads you astray. ⁵ For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am the Messiah!’ and they will lead many astray. ⁶ And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars; see that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but the end is not yet. ⁷ For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places: ⁸ all this is but the beginning of the birth pangs.

A) A Dispensational Perspective

Darby interprets these events as “signs of the end times” as Christians wait for their Lord’s return.⁸¹ Christians need to have the intelligence to discern the facts. For Darby, Jesus understands his disciples as remnants of the Jews, who would be hated because of Christ’s name. Hope is for the ones who perseveres to the end. Darby believed that the gospel would be preached effectively throughout the world to all nations and the end would come.

According to Thomas Ice, however, the first part of the seven-year “Tribulation” begins in Matthew 24:4, and Daniel 9:24:27 is used as the framework to interpret the entire section until verse 41. The “abomination of desolation” (Matthew 24:15) is the most distinctive factor that divides this seven year period. The events narrated up to verse 8 refer to a time of anguish, but Ice does not believe that the natural disaster points to the proximity of the end. For the author, the manifestations of nature narrated in the verses above concern only the “Tribulation” period, thus adopting a futuristic perspective of the events. The apostles’ concern must be with the arrival of the so-called “Antichrist.” The emphasis in Matthew 24:5 is on the word “many,” so for Ice, numerous people will claim to still be the Messiah. Concerning wars, he makes a parallel with Revelation 6:4, where the famous “red horse” brings destruction and takes away the peace in the world. The Antichrist is a character that is believed to come with a proposal for peace. After the self-proclamation of Antichrist as Messiah, new wars will emerge. Ice interprets Jesus words are being addressed not only to his disciples but also to Jews in the future.

John MacArthur argues that the disciples were not initially waiting for Jesus’ eschatological return, but rather for the accomplishment of what the Hebrew Scriptures had foretold.⁸² But in Matthew 24, there is different perspective; MacArthur attributes a futuristic interpretation to the events described. The disciples are concerned with the end of the age of suffering for the Jewish people. It is Jesus that provides an answer different from their

⁸¹ William Kelly, "The Collected Writings of J. N. Darby," H. L. Heijkoop, <http://www.plymouthbrethren.org/article/11534> (accessed August 1st, 2018).

⁸² MacArthur, *Mateus - Série De Estudos Bíblicos John MacArthur* (São Paulo, Brazil: Cultura Cristã, 2012), 1230.

expectations; he proposes a future Kingdom of peace where the nation of Israel will be blessed. The pains of childbirth (Matthew 24:8) represent the process leading to establishment of the Kingdom; it is not a brief occurrence, but one which progress. The fact that the pain is said to endure until the end (Matthew 24:13) serves as a basis for this futuristic interpretation. The disciples saw no final end, nor did they see an established Kingdom. For MacArthur, the futurist interpretation of a coming Kingdom comes from his understanding of what Jesus meant concerning that the proclamation of the gospel throughout the world (Matthew 24:14). The signs that would precede the “Second Coming” for MacArthur are the pains of childbirth. The first of these is the emergence of false teachers. Although it was a common phenomenon, the number will increase exponentially in the end times. There will be a more suffering, depression, sickness, anguish and pain; political and economic collapse should also be expected.

Finally, Kent Jr. argues that these verses refer to the first three and a half years of the Tribulation, after the church's rapture⁸³. The author makes a relationship between the phenomena narrated by Jesus and the opening of stamps in the book of Revelation. The first seal is the appearance of the Antichrist in verse 5. The second seal is presented in verse 6 with the emergence of wars, and the various famines of the world make up the third seal. Earthquakes and natural disasters in verse 7 represent the fourth seal.

B) A Historical-Critical View

Contrary to the abovementioned perspective, Ulrich Luz sees a chronological sequence of events. The focus of Luz's work here is on delimiting the structure of this section of Matthew's gospel. Chapter 24 is understood one of the five discourses of Matthew. The first chronological sequence of events is that of Matthew 24:3-31 and the second is Matthew 25:31-46. The author justifies this through a textual structure analysis. Luz then explains that this entire section is also divided into two main sections: Matthew 24:1-42 and Matthew 24:43-25:46).⁸⁴

Willoughby C. Allen similarly argues that Matthew's author transformed the story of the fall of Jerusalem in Mark 13:24-27 to that of a “Second Coming” and the end of an era. According

⁸³ Homer A. Kent Jr. “Evangelho de Mateus” In *Comentário Bíblico Moody*, vol.4, ed. Charles F. Pfeifer e Everett F. Harrison (São Paulo: Imprensa Batista Regular, 2001), 57.

⁸⁴ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21-28: A Commentary* (Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible; Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2005), 178.

to Allen, Matthew “overlooks the fact that the disciples, according to the Gospel narrative, had not the requisite understanding of the future for a question about Christ’s coming.”⁸⁵

Also, from a source-critical perspective, R. T. France explains the differences between Matthew and Mark’s narratives concerning the disciples’ question.⁸⁶ In Mark, the disciples ask Jesus only about the Temple. They are not curious about Jesus’ “coming” or the end of time. Matthew deliberately expands on this discussion. The author also explains that the term παρουσία was a familiar idea which meant “presence” or “arrival,” and that the idea of the “end of this era” was also common. According to France, the “end of an era” was something known in Jewish apocalyptic literature, and it meant the “completion or fulfillment” associated to the start of a new era or a new natural order.

Donald Hagner identifies structural parallelism between verses 4, 6, and 7 in Matthew 24.⁸⁷ The emphasis and specificity of the verses would indicate a separation between the destruction of the Temple and the experience of the end-times. Apocalyptic literature prior to the writing of the New Testament specifies that “signs” such as human suffering point to the end and beginning of a new era. For Hagner, the “signs” provided by Jesus are not to be confused with the urgency of the end.

According to Nolland, Matthew’s discourse is different from Mark’s regarding the audience. In Matthew, the discourse was addressed to all, whereas in Mark, it was addressed only to four of the disciples. In Matthew, there is also a temporal issue:

“In the NT only, Matthew uses the phrase ‘completion of the age’ (συντελεία τοῦ αἰῶνος)—see at 13:39. This will be the time when the Son of Man arranges the final separation of the wicked from the righteous. In the Greek text ‘your coming’ and ‘the completion of the age’ are marked as belonging together by sharing a single definite article. In the general part of their question the disciples ask about when: ‘When will these things be?’ But in relation to the ‘coming’ and the ‘completion of the age’ they ask, ‘what will be the sign’ of these things? The Markan text has the difficulty that nothing later in the text is identified as this sign. Matthew will make good this deficiency with his very clear reference to ‘the sign of the Son of Man’ in 24:30.”⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Willoughby C. Allen, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Matthew*, (International Critical Commentary; New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1907), 254.

⁸⁶ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA: Eerdmans, 2007).

⁸⁷ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28, vol. 33B*, 690.

⁸⁸ John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (New International Greek Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 2005), 961.

The genre of discourse up to verse 14 is undoubtedly close to that of a Jewish Palestinian will; however, it is not an apocalyptic revelation, according to Craig Keener.⁸⁹ Matthew 24 includes sources from Mark, “Q,” and special Matthean material. Pre-synoptic sources of the text underpin an argument of non-apocalyptic language. Mark may have combined scattered elements from the Jewish tradition to give the impression that Jesus’ message was an apocalyptic discourse. Be that as it may, Mark’s final text emphasizes the suffering of Christians in an impending time of persecution. In the end, Keener adds that Matthew and Paul still do not present many elements from Jewish apocalyptic literature.⁹⁰

2.5.3. *Warnings of Persecutions (v.9-14)*

⁹ “Then they will hand you over to be tortured and will put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of my name. ¹⁰ Then many will fall away, and they will betray one another and hate one another. ¹¹ And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. ¹² And because of the increase of lawlessness, the love of many will grow cold. ¹³ But the one who endures to the end will be saved. ¹⁴ And this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all the nations; and then the end will come.

A) A Dispensational Perspective

For J. N. Darby, the last verse of this section is of particular importance: something needs to occur before the end to come. For the author, what will happen on earth and is according to God’s plan; and the witness of the gospel will still progress in the midst of all this.⁹¹

According to Thomas Ice, verse 9 is to be understood as being of Jewish origin.⁹² The primary justification for this is the use of the Greek adverbial temporal marker τότε, which would represent of a specific time. The fact that Jesus also gave his speech in Jerusalem, means for Ice, that his primary concern would be Jewish persecution. All events narrated up to verse 14 are seen as being part of the “Tribulation” period and should be connected to the opening of the seals in Revelation 6. Ice also links the persecution of the Jews in Matthew 24:9 to Revelation 12, the vision of the woman and the dragon. When this Jewish persecution happens, three things will differentiate

⁸⁹ Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Edermans Publishing, 2009).

⁹⁰ Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 566.

⁹¹ William Kelly, "The Collected Writings of J. N. Darby," H. L. Heijkoop, <http://www.plymouthbrethren.org/article/11534> (accessed August 1st, 2019).

⁹² Thomas Ice, "Pre-Tribulation Research Center," <https://pre-trib.org/an-interpretation-of-matthew-24-25/message/an-interpretation-of-matthew-24-25-part-30/read> (accessed August 15th, 2019).

believers from the unelected: apostasy, betrayal of one another, and hatred among themselves (Matthew 24:10). Apostasy refers to the falling away from faith on the part of believers. Betrayal among believers will result, according to Ice, from the pressure the Antichrist will exert on them; even family members will turn against each other. There will also be a hatred of nations against believers, and which will reflect within the community itself. For Ice, the only place the Jews will find refuge is among the Gentile believers; so this is how the parable of the sheep and goats (Matthew 25:31-46) makes sense to him.

Equally important is Kent Jr.'s comment on this excerpt:⁹³ the beginning of Matthew 24:9 describes the inauguration of Daniel's 70th week (Daniel 9:24-27). He believes that the severity of the calamities narrated will lead the majority of Jews to abandon their faith.

As a final note on the dispensational perspective, John MacArthur understands that since people will not be able to attack God directly, they will attack his people (Matthew 24:9). Believers will be arrested, hated, and martyred, and many will abandon the faith.⁹⁴ MacArthur ties the end of this section with the figure of the prostitute depicted in Revelation 17 who will deceive people who seek salvation.

B) A Historical-Critical View

From a source-critical perspective. Luz see the sources of Matthew 24:9-13 and explores that from Matthew's 24:3-36 session, only verses 9-13 are reproduced from the gospel of Mark.⁹⁵ He divides Matthew 24: 3-31 into two sections: (1) verses 3-14 are understood as being more general in nature, whereas (2) verses 15-31 focus strictly on Judea. Here is how he delimits this portion of Matthew 24:

- v. 3: situation and introductory question from the disciples
- vv. 4–5: main point anticipated: first warning against false prophets
- vv. 6–14: end-time events with regard to the world
 - (a) general (vv. 6–8)
 - (b) in the church among the nations (vv. 9–14),

⁹³Homer A. Kent Jr. "Evangelho de Mateus" In *Comentário Bíblico Moody*, vol.4, ed. Charles F. Pfeifer e Everett F. Harrison (São Paulo: Imprensa Batista Regular, 2001), 57.

⁹⁴ MacArthur, *Mateus - Série De Estudos Bíblicos John MacArthur*, 1231.

⁹⁵ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21–28: A Commentary*, 181.

with a second warning against false prophets (v. 11)

vv. 15–28: end-time events with regard to Judea

(a) Judea in general (vv. 15–22)

(b) in the church (vv. 23–28),

with a third warning against false prophets (vv. 23–26)

vv. 29–31: conclusion: the end: the coming of the Son of Man⁹⁶

In his commentary on this section, R.T. France emphasizes how the disciples encounter persecution and discouragement and how Jesus encouraged them to remain faithful to the end.⁹⁷ According to France, the “end” is the destruction of Jerusalem. From a source-critical perspective, France argues that Matthew 24:9-14 is paralleled to Mark 13:9-13 and is modified in Luke 21:12-19. There is also a connection with Matthew 10, where the disciples are also told that they will face persecution. France argues that Matthew’s narrative is concerned with a community that existed at the time of the writing.

Additionally, Nolland explains the use of the adverb “then” in verses 9 and 10.⁹⁸ While in verse 9 “τότε” can express simultaneity in the sense of “meanwhile this happens,” in verse 10 the expression is “καὶ τότε” understood more in terms of a logical sequence or the result of prior events.

Concerning source criticism, Hagner also sees Matthew 24 as dependent of Mark 13.⁹⁹ Like France, Hagner also notices the similarity between this section of Matthew 24 with that of chapter 10. In Chapter 10, the narrative is about the proclamation of the kingdom, but the emphasis in chapter 24 is the gospel being preached until the end.

2.5.4. *The Desolating Sacrilege (v.15-28)*

¹⁵ “So when you see the desolating sacrilege standing in the holy place, as was spoken of by the prophet Daniel (let the reader understand), ¹⁶ then those in Judea must flee to the mountains; ¹⁷ the one on the housetop must not go down to take what is in the house; ¹⁸ the one in the field must not turn back to get a coat. ¹⁹ Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days! ²⁰ Pray that your flight may not be in winter or

⁹⁶ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21–28: A Commentary*, 182.

⁹⁷ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA: Eerdmans, 2007).

⁹⁸ John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 2005), 988.

⁹⁹ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28, vol. 33B*, 695.

on a sabbath. ²¹ For at that time there will be great suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be. ²² And if those days had not been cut short, no one would be saved; but for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short. ²³ Then if anyone says to you, 'Look! Here is the Messiah!' or 'There he is!'—do not believe it. ²⁴ For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce great signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. ²⁵ Take note, I have told you beforehand. ²⁶ So, if they say to you, 'Look! He is in the wilderness,' do not go out. If they say, 'Look! He is in the inner rooms,' do not believe it. ²⁷ For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ²⁸ Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.

A) Dispensational Perspective

Matthew 24:15 describes a specific event for Darby;¹⁰⁰ it is linked to the book of Daniel. From a futurist framework of interpretation, Darby believed that the moment the Antichrist sits in the rebuilt Temple in Jerusalem, Jews will have to flee. The prophesied conversion of the Jews will then happen at this moment and there will be the desecration of the Temple. This event is paralleled to that of Daniel 11:31, which describes a time under Antiochus Epiphanes IV where the Jews were hated and persecuted.

In a similar manner, Thomas Ice establishes a sequence of events for this unfold. First, there will be the desecration of the Temple in Jerusalem, where the Antichrist will erect an idol in the Holy of Holies. The desolator will, therefore, place himself at the center of worship in the house of God. This will be when a remnant of believers will have to flee (Matthew 24:16-20). Ice connects the flight of the remnant to that of the woman in Revelation 12. According to Ice, the idea of the "Tribulation" is not something only found in the New Testament, but is also present in the Hebrew Bible. Ice understands certain texts (Deuteronomy 4:30, Jeremiah 30:7, and Daniel 12:1) as referring to Israel's persecution, repentance and restoration in the last days.¹⁰¹

Now concerning what is called the "Great Tribulation," this period is understood to be three and a half years before the coming of Christ; it is at mid-point of the seven years we discussed previously. John MacArthur states:

"No moment or event in Israel's history fits the holocaust description that Jesus is speaking here. The horrible weather is described in more detail in Revelation 6-16,

¹⁰⁰ Darby, J.N. "Notes on the Gospel of Matthew.

"<https://www.stempublishing.com/authors/darby/EXPOSIT/30029E.html>", (accessed in August 10th, 2019).

¹⁰¹ Thomas Ice, "Pre Tribulation Research Center," <https://pre-trib.org/an-interpretation-of-matthew-24-25/message/an-interpretation-of-matthew-24-25-part-30/read>." (accessed August 15th, 2019).

where judgments of stamps, trumpets and bowls exhibit the growing intensity of God's wrath over rebellious and sinful humanity. Both the books of Revelation and Daniel make it clear that the Antichrist will tyrannize the world for 'a time, time and time' (Dan. 7:25 ; 12:7 ; Rev. 12:14), that is, a year, two and a half years or three and a half years (Rev 11:2 ; 13:5) Clearly, the events described by our Lord, Daniel and John must refer to the same great holocaust at the end of time, just before the millennial kingdom is established."¹⁰²

The mid-point of the seven-year "Tribulation" also begins in Matthew 24:15 according to Kent Jr.¹⁰³ For the abomination of desolation to be enacted by the Antichrist, the Jewish Temple must be restored. The justification for such an interpretation is found in Matthew 24:21 which speaks of a "great suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now." For those here, the escape should be immediate in order to protect themselves without preparations. The days will be shortened and Jesus will appear to destroy the Antichrist (Matthew 24:21). Kent Jr. connects Matthew 24 with other texts interpreted from a futurist perspective such as Daniel 7 and 12, as well as Revelation 19 and 2 Thessalonians 2.

For John MacArthur, Matthew 24:15-28 focuses on the dangers the Jews will face in the "Great Tribulation."¹⁰⁴ In the Judea region, many Jews will be killed as the result of a severe persecution. MacArthur also identifies three major signs after the Antichrist ascends to power in Jerusalem. First, there will be a severe calamity (Matthew 24:16-22). MacArthur interprets this to be the most significant persecution the Jewish people will suffer in all their history. The "elect" are the Jews that will have converted to Christianity during the "Tribulation." Second, MacArthur notes the rise of false teachers and false prophets during the "Tribulation" period to deceive Jews and Christians converted at that time. These false teachers and prophets will be emissaries of Satan. As for the last sign, MacArthur says sinful corruption is that will cause many to fall away.

B) A Historical-Critical View

For Ulrich Luz, Matthew 24:15-28 depicts the *παρουσία* as something that goes beyond the underlying conditions of knowledge of time and space. When the phenomena described here takes place, there will hardly be any life on the planet. For Luz, Jesus narrates this tragic scenario

¹⁰² John MacArthur, Jr., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Mateus 24-28* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989), 44.

¹⁰³ Homer A. Kent Jr. "Evangelho de Mateus" In *Comentário Bíblico Moody*, vol.4, ed. Charles F. Pfeifer e Everett F. Harrison (São Paulo: Imprensa Batista Regular, 2001), 59.

¹⁰⁴ John MacArthur, Jr., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary*, 45.

because he no longer sees a future for the world; it is an apocalyptic vision about the future, as the present is seen as dark and hopeless.¹⁰⁵

France clearly notes the imperative third-person form of writing in verses 16-18 of Matthew 24. Was this to include people other than the disciples? This same feature is visible in Mark's gospel. Jesus answers the disciples' question so that they can recognize what will happen before the fall of the Temple. France also contends that the disciples' questions were answered at different moments of the narrative. Jesus' answer to their first question is found in Matthew 24:3-35, whereas their second question is answered from Matthew 24:36 onwards.¹⁰⁶ France also interprets this entire as describing the imminent destruction of Jerusalem. The expression "those days" in verses 27 and 28 should not be confused with the *παρουσία*. There is a continuous sequence of clear events translated as "then" (v.16, 21 and 23) and "those days" (v. 19 and 22). In conclusion, this is how France understands the events narrated in Matthew 24:15-28. Jewish uprisings begin in the year 66 C.E. In the following years, Vespasian conquers almost the entire region of Palestine. However, in 67 and 68 C.E., operations in the East occur due to the Roman civil war. Jerusalem also goes through its civil war. Control of power means that in the year 69 C.E., Jerusalem finds itself weak in terms of Roman protection. Surrounded, Jerusalem resists until its fall in the year 70 C.E. This siege will lead to the "end" the *telos*. In the future, there will be the end of the time *συντελεια*.

For Hagner, Matthew uses the reference to the "abomination of desolation" as a signal of the imminent destruction of Jerusalem. This passage provides instructions for those who will be in town when the event happens:

"The larger section of Matthew that begins here and runs through v. 28 has been interpreted in a variety of ways. There appear to be several reasons for the difficulty of interpreting this material, the most important being the need to prepare for Matthew's "immediately after the tribulation of those days" in v. 29, which, according to the majority of commentators, introduces the *parousia*. Therefore, it would seem that what is referred to in the verses preceding v. 29 must concern an end-time tribulation that yet lies in the future just prior to the *parousia*."¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21–28: A Commentary*, 185.

¹⁰⁶ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA: Eerdmans, 2007).

¹⁰⁷ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28, vol. 33B*, 698–699.

Hagner also understands how commentators see a double reference in this passage, but it is still not justifiable on grammatical and textual grounds. This use of apocalyptic language is like that of Daniel for the desolation of Jerusalem. In the verses 22-28, Matthew's changes to his Markan source are few. Hagner thinks that Matthew might have inserted the *παρουσία* rather than "in his day," and contends that it could have emerged from the Q source.

2.5.5. *The Coming of the Son of Man (v.29-31)*

²⁹ "Immediately after the suffering of those days
the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light;
the stars will fall from heaven,
and the powers of heaven will be shaken.

³⁰ Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see 'the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven' with power and great glory. ³¹ And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other."

A) A Dispensational Perspective

For Darby, this section also concerns events related to the "Great Tribulation."¹⁰⁸ There will be a disturbance of the cosmic powers that will mark the end of this period, and it will also be a time when God will call his followers across the world, as understood in Isaiah 65:22. For Darby, Jesus expresses concern for believers converted during the "Great Tribulation" but have remained faithful to God despite the hardships; they will finally be rewarded.

Within the historicist framework, Ice places the events narrated in Matthew 24:29-31 as happening immediately at the end of a series of judgments described in Revelation 16:17-21.¹⁰⁹ For dispensationalists, the return of Jesus will be accompanied by significant natural and cosmic disturbances. The nation of Israel will also go through a time called the "Tribulation," which according to Ice, will serve to lead them to accept Jesus as the Messiah. The conversion of the Jewish nation will announce the return of Jesus for the final battle against the forces of evil.

¹⁰⁸ William Kelly, "The Collected Writings of J. N. Darby," H. L. Heijkoop, <http://www.plymouthbrethren.org/article/11534> (accessed August 1st, 2018).

¹⁰⁹ Thomas Ice, "Pre Tribulation Research Center," <https://pre-trib.org/an-interpretation-of-matthew-24-25/message/an-interpretation-of-matthew-24-25-part-30/read> (accessed August 15th, 2019).

John MacArthur's commentary on this section focuses on what he understands to be five "fundamental truths" about Jesus' παρουσία.¹¹⁰ The *first* truth is about the specific sequence of events which need to occur. In the interpretation of the expression when Jesus mentions "in those days," he is, according to MacArthur, speaking of the "Tribulation." So, Jesus will reign after that time. The *second* truth concerns the heavenly appearance scene described in this section. For MacArthur, Jesus depicts a series of atmospheric phenomena that will compel humanity to feel absolute terror; it will be the manifestation of God's judgement against those who do not believe. This series of catastrophes will take place all over the world, affecting all nations and all peoples. The *third* truth is a sign in heaven (Matthew 24:30). Jesus will appear in heaven, and will be the signal himself. People who have rejected the Messiah will want to hide in fear. This then leads to the *fourth* truth which MacArthur sees as the glory of Jesus' Second Coming, and connect this event to Zechariah 14:8 and Isaiah 11:6-9. The *fifth* and last truth concerning the Second Coming of Jesus is the worship that he will receive from God's angelic beings.

A final note about the dispensationalist view of this passage is that Kent Jr. relates it to Daniel 7:13-14 and 2 Thessalonians 1:7-9 and 31. The author interprets this as a manifestation of God's glory, when all will recognize Jesus as the Messiah.

B) A Historical-Critical View

R.T. France explains that the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem corroborates the allusions from the Hebrew Bible.¹¹¹ In the previous verses found Matthew 24:4-14, Jesus was speaking of events during the destruction of Jerusalem. The intertextual reference to Daniel 7:13-14 in Matthew 24:30 also needs to be understood contextually; it is quite removed from the dispensational reading about the "Second Coming" of Jesus.

According to Hagner, Matthew 24:29 echoes Isaiah 13:10 and 34:4, and is the immediate (εὐθέως) fulfillment of prophecy at that present time.¹¹² This has some believe that Matthew's text could have been before the destruction of Jerusalem year 70 C.E.¹¹³ The addition of the prepositional phrase "of heaven" indicates that the LXX might be the version used.

¹¹⁰ MacArthur, *Mateus - Série De Estudos Bíblicos John MacArthur*, 1231.

¹¹¹ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 230.

¹¹² Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28, vol. 33B*, 685.

¹¹³ Most critical scholars are rather of the opinion that this was written prophecy "after the fact;" Matthew could have well written his gospel after the destruction of Jerusalem. This would explain the accuracy of the narrative in describing the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple.

2.5.6. *The Parable of the Fig Tree (v.32-35)*

³² “From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. ³³ So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁴ Truly I tell you; this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. ³⁵ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away”.

A) A Dispensational Perspective

According to Darby, the first parable speaks of Christ’s relationship with his followers (Matthew 24:32-33), which he strangely compares to the parable of the pounds in Luke 19:11-27.¹¹⁴ In Luke, the central theme is man’s responsibility, whereas in Matthew, Darby emphasizes the master’s sovereignty and wisdom. Darby stresses on the importance that the Church has responsibility of spreading the gospel of Christ.

Thomas Ice claims that through his parables, Jesus teaches his disciples about the imminent end:

“A parable is a lesson of comparisons, moving from the known in order to explain the unknown. In this instance the leaves before summer would refer to the events of the tribulation as outlined by Christ in verses 4–31. Thus, when one sees these events then they are to know that Christ’s return is near, ‘right at the door’ (24:33). How is it that they know that Christ’s advent is near? They will know because ‘this generation will not pass away until all these things take place’ (24:34). In other words, that time period of events culminating in Christ’s return will not exceed seven years. One day ‘heaven and earth will pass away, but My words shall not pass away’ (24:35). Christ’s words will be fulfilled; they will not just pass away and not be fulfilled.”¹¹⁵

The argument used by Homer A. Kent Jr. regarding this narrative is that the fig tree is a symbol that represents the nation of Israel.¹¹⁶ The author understands that the expression “this generation” used by Jesus in the narrative can also mean “race” or “family.” The author argues that despite terrible persecution, the Jewish nation will not suffer from extermination, but will continue to exist in order to participate in the blessings of the coming Kingdom.

¹¹⁴ Darby, J.N. “Notes on the Gospel of Matthew.

“<https://www.stempublishing.com/authors/darby/EXPOSIT/30029E.html>” (accessed in August 10th, 2019).

¹¹⁵ Thomas Ice, "Pre Tribulation Research Center," <https://pre-trib.org/an-interpretation-of-matthew-24-25/message/an-interpretation-of-matthew-24-25-part-30/read> (accessed August 15th, 2019).

¹¹⁶ Homer A. Kent Jr. “Evangelho de Mateus” In *Comentário Bíblico Moody*, vol.4, ed. Charles F. Pfeifer e Everett F. Harrison (São Paulo: Imprensa Batista Regular, 2001), 57.

John MacArthur disagrees with Kent Jr.:¹¹⁷ the fig tree does not represent the nation of Israel. Rather, the parable of the fig tree was used by Jesus to teach the disciples on how to recognize the “signs of the times.” When the signs that Jesus had just been describing begin to take place, his return will be very close. As for the term “generation,” MacArthur it refers to the people who will live near the end of time and who will witness the signs of the Second Coming of Jesus.

B) A Historical-Critical View

Ulrich Luz recognizes a type of teaching sequence in Matthew 24:32-35. First, there is the parable itself (v. 32) and it is followed by its application (v. 33). The same model is adopted in verses 34 and 35. However, Luz identifies Matthean redactional traits in this narrative. In v. 33, Matthew inserts a πάντα; in v. 34, he changes the order of the Markan ταῦτα πάντα, writes ἕως ἄν instead of μέχρις οὗ (v. 34), and in v. 35, he inserts μή (as in 5:18 and Luke 21:33).¹¹⁸ Concerning the history of the interpretation of this passage, Luz explains how the understanding of γενεά changed over time. The traditional interpretation of γενεά as a “generation” was that it referred to the generation alive during the destruction of Jerusalem. Luz suggests that the first to change this interpretation was Reimarus who believed that “all these things” referred to the παρουσία and not to “this generation.” Jesus would have expected a near end; however, he was incorrect in his expectation.

For R.T. France, Jesus basically says that the “signs” mentioned in his discourse will happen sequentially, just as the seasons change.¹¹⁹ The events will be taking place before the end of that specific generation, the one to whom Jesus is speaking.

According to Hagner, the purpose is to indicate that the “signs” were to take place soon. For Hagner, “πάντα ταῦτα, “all these things,” cannot include the παρουσία itself; they merely signify that all is in preparation. The coming of the Son of Man may occur at any time.”¹²⁰ Concerning “this generation” (Matthew 24:34), Hagner agrees that it refers to the contemporary generation of Jesus. While the generation of the first century will see God’s judgment on the city of Jerusalem, Jesus’ words, for Hagner, will last forever – a reference to Isaiah 40:8.

¹¹⁷ John MacArthur, Jr., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Mateus 24-28*, 44.

¹¹⁸ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21–28: A Commentary*, Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2005).

¹¹⁹ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA: Eerdmans, 2007).

¹²⁰ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, vol. 33B, 715.

In this section, John Nolland claims that Matthew reproduced Mark without significant language changes.¹²¹ Nolland also comments on the difficulty of reading this passage with a future perspective. The word used by Matthew γενεά consistently refers to a single generation:

“As the prophets before him had regularly done, the Gospel Jesus presents as part of a single development things that belong together in principle but turn out to be separated chronologically in a manner that he did not anticipate. (Caird [Language and Imagery, 243–71] has argued forcefully that, at least in part, this involved a deliberate use in a metaphorical manner of end-of-the-world language in connection with what the prophets well knew was not the end of the world. The present and immediately future events were to be seen in the light of and somehow as participating in the reality of what would one day be fully true eschatologically. His insights are pertinent to the present discussion [and have been widely followed] but are not capable in themselves of eliminating the difficulty over timing.) The fundamental driving force for the sentiment expressed ... is the conviction that Jesus’ Jewish contemporaries in Palestine (‘this generation’) were to find themselves at a climax point in the purposes of God in judgment (cf. esp. [Luke] 11:49–51), just as they had been experiencing a climax point of God’s saving purposes in the ministry of Jesus. As with the earlier prophets, the anticipation of the future was first and foremost an interpretation, in the light of a knowledge of God, of the significance of the present and of the nature of its development out of the past.”¹²²

2.5.7. Lesson on Watchfulness (v.36-44)

³⁶ “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³⁷ For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, ³⁹ and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰ Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴² Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. ⁴³ But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁴ Therefore, you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour”.

¹²¹ John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 2005), 988.

¹²² John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 989.

A) A Dispensational Perspective

Thomas Ice believes there is here an emphasis on Jesus' humanity. No one will know when the Son of Man will return, but Ice nonetheless argues that it is possible to interpret the signs of Jesus' Second Coming.¹²³ The separation of individuals in Matthew 24:40-41 is understood as supporting the teaching on the "Rapture." According to Ice, only one of the individuals is Christian and believers must always be alert. Where two people are together, one will be taken and the other will be left behind. Of course, for Thomas Ice, the idea of the "Rapture" is more developed in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

There are observable and unmistakable indications, but no one knows the exact moment, states John MacArthur.¹²⁴ The generation that is passing through the "Tribulation" will not precisely know the time. For MacArthur, the text focuses on the importance of being spiritually prepared to find Christ as Lord and King, and not as a judge.

B) A Historical-Critical View

Concerning source criticism, Luz sees a connection between Matthew 24:37-51 with some common material in Mark and Q. Concerning parallels with Q 17:20-37 and Q 12:35-59, Luz identifies the following commonalities: Matt 24:37-41 = Q 17:26-27, 30, 34-35; and Matt 24:43-51 = Q 12:39-46).¹²⁵ As for Matthew 24:36, for example, it would correspond to Mark 13:32 and was probably a later addition.

There are three things which R. T. France notices concerning the *παρουσία* in this section.¹²⁶ *First*, there is an uncertainty concerning the time of the appearing. *Second*, people will not be waiting for Jesus' return; there will be no expectation. *Third*, the disciples are called to alertness.

Regarding form and genre criticism, Matthew adds three parables that serve to illustrate Jesus' teaching. For Donald Hagner, the parable teaches about the dangers of unexpectedness. In terms of source criticism, Hagner comments the relationship between Matthew and Q as follows:

¹²³ Thomas Ice, "Pre-Tribulation Research Center," <https://pre-trib.org/an-interpretation-of-matthew-24-25/message/an-interpretation-of-matthew-24-25-part-30/read> (accessed August 15th, 2019).

¹²⁴ MacArthur, *Mateus - Série De Estudos Bíblicos John MacArthur*, 1231

¹²⁵ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21-28: A Commentary*, 179.

¹²⁶ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA: Eerdmans, 2007).

“Matthew’s reference at the beginning of v. 38 to ‘as they were in [those] days before the flood,’ which with the following present participles forms a periphrastic construction, may well be a Matthean addition to Q (rather than reflecting a Lukan deletion of the material), perhaps to emphasize the continuing action and thus the unexpected catastrophe of the flood, the mention of which reflects Matthew’s special emphasis on the eschatological judgment.”¹²⁷

Hagner suggests that Jesus is alerting his followers, warning them that there will be no time for preparation at the Second Coming. Hagner points out that the purpose of New Testament eschatology is to motivate believers to an ethical way of life, and being prepared for the return of Jesus.

2.6 Conclusion

After the analyses, it is vital to establish some points of conclusion and coherence concerning the interpretation of this passage. The first remark concerns a warning about the *παρουσία*. The exact time of the *παρουσία* is unpredictable (Matthew 24:34-36). The early Church believed Christ’s Second Coming was very close. Undoubtedly, this gave rise to many speculations regarding when it would actually happen. Therefore, Jesus’ prediction of his Second Coming, considered to be a valid prophecy, is used by Matthew to warn Christians against attempting to establish specific dates.

David Turner claims that there are generally two interpretations concerning Matthew 24.¹²⁸ Beginning with the first part of the text, that is Matthew 24:4-14, the futurist view sees the events narrated as unfolding chronologically in the future. According to dispensationalists, these will take place in the “Tribulation” period. By contrast, the preterist view understands these “signs” as having already occurred before the Temple’s destruction. Turner contends that the events of Matthew 24:4-14 have been accomplished in the past, but are also to be applied to the future, waiting to be “prophetically” accomplished in the end times. I disagree with Turner’s view here there is clearly no grammatical, critical, and historical evidence to support such a double accomplishment of Matthew 24:4-14.

¹²⁷ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28, vol. 33B*, 718.

¹²⁸ Turner, David. “The Structure and Sequence of Matthew 24:1-41: Interaction with Evangelical Treatments.” *Grace Theological Journal* 10.1 (1989): 2-27.

The second part of Matthew 24 are verses 15-28. The “abomination of desolation” (v. 15) is interpreted differently by preterists and futurists. While preterists understand this action as having been instigated by the Roman Empire, leading to the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 C.E., futurists see the “Antichrist” as responsible for this “end time” event, when a third Jewish will be rebuilt. Here, Turner argues once more for a double reference, past and future. I disagree with this double reference framework and adopt the preterist position. It seems more coherent with the first century context that the events in Matthew 24:15-28 were experienced by the immediate generation, who witnessed the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman armies in 70 C.E.

According to Turner, the only interpretive framework which does not understand Matthew 24:29-31 as referring to the Second Coming of Jesus is the preterist view. In fact, preterism understands the destruction of the Temple and the end of the Jewish era as being symbolically represented through the use of apocalyptic language in verses 29-31. According to France, this passage is “a highly symbolic description of the theological significance of the coming destruction of the temple and its consequences.”¹²⁹

For the preterists, Matthew 24:32-41 also concerns Jesus’ immediate audience contemporaries, those who will witness the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple. This interpretation is strengthened by the idea that γενεά refers to the present generation of Jesus and has nothing to do with a future “end-times” generation.

An honest reading of the text clearly establishes the fact that Jesus is not speaking of events that are to happen thousands of years after his discourse. On the contrary, Jesus’ words can only be framed in the context of the first century, in the days of the early church. The idea of pregnant women having to avoid fleeing in winter or on Saturday, people fleeing to the mountains of Israel to avoid entering Jerusalem, and disciples persecuted in the synagogues, can only fit within the first century C.E. It is quite a stretch to read Matthew 24 into our present day and age.

Now, an important idea comes from the meaning of the word αἰῶνος (from αἰών) in Matthew 24:3 and is best translated as “age.” Some versions like the King James translate the term as “world”, but in reality αἰών refers to a period of time, not to the physical world (see 1 Corinthians 10:11; Hebrews 9:26). If the disciples had spoken about the “physical world,” the

¹²⁹ David L. Turner, "The Structure and Sequence of Matthew 24:1-41: Interaction with Evangelical Treatments," 2-27.

word κόσμος would be expected. Therefore, the end of the age refers to the end of the age of the old covenant, the Temple, and its sacrifices. All this now gives way to a new age in Christ in which God no longer speaks in types and shadows (Hebrews 1:2). The early disciples understood this very well.

The frightening and horrific eschatological discourse has already been accomplished. There is no need to fear future wrath, as Jesus' message to his disciples involved events that have historically taken place during the first Jewish revolt (66-70- C.E.). Jesus spoke to his disciples as witnesses of what was expected during their lifetime.

In this chapter, we explored the reasons for the eschatological discourse (v. 1–3), as well as the discourse itself. The writer of Matthew has Jesus pronouncing a “prophecy after the fact,” where he details the persecutions of early Christians and the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple. The literary genre of the discourse is that of Jewish apocalyptic literature, and fits perfectly well with the apocalyptic fervor of the first century C.E.

Understanding Matthew 24 contextually is crucial in today's world. People, unfortunately, do not always carefully research what the Bible says; this often generates fundamentalist interpretations of Scriptures. With this in mind, how has eschatology been understood in Brazil? What have Christian pastors and leaders been teaching, and how are we to characterize contemporary Brazilian eschatological thinking? This is the purpose of the next chapter.

Chapter 3

Brazilian Eschatology and the Upcoming End

3.1. Introduction

As an independent nation, Brazil is still young in a historical sense. After almost two hundred years, it is still possible to observe the evolution of the institutions, laws, and modes of operation of this economically emerging country. Brazil already has one of the largest populations on the planet. The country is recognized for its natural beauty, football, and mineral resources. Unfortunately, Brazil is not known for its academic output nor advances in the high-tech industry. Concerning education, the country still needs to make much progress. Just over 10% of the population has university training, and illiteracy is still prevalent in the more impoverished regions of the country. This results in all kinds of social problems. High rates of violence, corruption, and crime are outcomes which do not make Brazilians proud, to say the least.

As the country is still socially and economically growing, the majority of the population clings to faith in hopes for a better tomorrow. Brazil was colonized by Catholic explorers, at a time when the search for natural resources was used as an excuse for maritime exploration and the expansion of the Catholic faith. Most Brazilians retained their Catholic faith until the beginning of the second century.

With the arrival of Protestant missionaries at the end of the 19th century, this movement began to create a new identity. From the middle of the 20th century onwards, there has been an explosion of the Pentecostal movement. Currently, there is approximately 26 percent of Protestants in Brazil, and numbers continue to increase. Another unique phenomenon for some –and an unsettling one for others – is the adoption of the Pentecostal worldview in historical churches, both Catholic and Protestant, through the so-called Charismatic movement in the 1960s and the third Wave in the 1980s.

Certain essential elements define the Brazilian Pentecostal movement.¹³⁰ The first of these is related to Scripture, where the Bible is used as a method to emphasize the spiritual experience of its members. There is also a particular understanding of spirituality. Members of the group

¹³⁰ Maureen Dean, "The Growth of Pentecostalism in Brazil," *Department of History Seminar Paper 1* (2012): 1-41.

develop a kind of transactional relationship with God, where traditional elements of the faith are at a minimum, and salvation is essentially seen as a gift from God. Leadership also plays a significant role in Brazilian Pentecostalism. Charismatic individuals exercise a more centralized leadership, giving them access to the financial resources of the group. Pentecostals exhibit a certain understanding of ethics as well. Brazilian Pentecostalism, to be concise, is based upon the idea that the Holy Spirit grants Christians supernatural power to live a triumphant life. The goal of ethics is sometimes far-removed from pressing social concerns; rather, an ethical life serves the purpose of guaranteeing one's personal salvation from eternal damnation. A final characteristic of this movement is related to the context of worship. The interests are pragmatic: human life is the center of the entire liturgy. Audiovisual resources make the church more attractive and technological tools help to spread the gospel.

In terms of eschatology, Brazilian evangelicals are divided between two types of interpretation: the consummation of the millennium, or the belief that it has already been established. Christ did not return in the first or second generation as expected. The idea of the end, however, was not forgotten. That is why there are many speculations as to when the *παρουσία* will take place. Brazilian evangelicals still find it difficult to ascertain the scope of eschatology; whether it should be classified as individual or collective. Their eschatological outlook often produces a feeling of anxiety in light of the imminent return of Jesus. The millennial doctrine adopted by Brazilian evangelicals is, in practical terms, what was brought by American missionaries. The need for political engagement concerning evangelicals, is to maintain Christian values and promote the social transformation of the nation.

The expansion of the Brazilian Pentecostal movement is part of a larger scenario, the movement that occurred in Latin America. Martin Lindhardt writes that this movement has unique characteristics.¹³¹ The growth of Brazilian Pentecostalism has directly promoted substantial consequences in the Latin American landscape.

The growth of the Pentecostal movement in a field dominated by Catholicism generates a scenario of pluralism and religious competition. Pluralism caused by the expansion of Pentecostalism promoted not only a structural change but also in the internal scenario of the

¹³¹ Martin Lindhardt, ed., *New Ways of Being Pentecostal in Latin America* (Lanham, MD, USA: Lexington Books, 2016), 284.

evangelical environment. A new diversification and proliferation of the Pentecostal movement itself was derived from this.

Lindhardt observes that in order to overcome his hostile social environment, the conversion to the Pentecostal movement allows him to find support in his community of faith. The Pentecostal movement also helps in the process of formation of a sociable character and personality. From new habits of consumption to new family, patterns are introduced to those initiated so that he can be socially recognized as an evangelical.

A second element used by Pentecostal churches is work on the human ego. These churches have identified specifically in promoting a new sense of dignity and self-esteem. This is because in these environments, people with little or almost no schooling can receive authoritative roles and occupy a leading role within that community. Thus, it is considered better to attain such privilege from God than to be a renegade in society.

The advance of Brazilian Pentecostalism in recent decades makes it the object of a new wave of study by researchers. Lindhardt observes certain phenomena that contribute to this. The first observation is related to religious renewal movements. New charismatic movements and the constant pluralization of groups make the movement increasingly diverse. The second observation pertains to the deinstitutionalization of Pentecostal life; the public gradually attend multiple churches with various ecclesiastical identifications. The third observation by Lindhardt relates to the emergence of the second generation of Pentecostals, the children who now have a more advanced literacy and added income. The growth of political engagement epitomizes the last of Lindhardt's observations: it is possible to perceive the added participation of Politicians defending the religious flag.

3.2. The Characterisation of the Brazilian Theology

The main center of population studies in Brazil is the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics. This institute researches and quantifies the living conditions of the Brazilian population in order to contribute to the formation of public policies for the different areas of the country, and to understand the general characteristics of the Brazilian population.¹³²

¹³² All data about Brazilian population can be found at the website from IBGE. Brazilian Institute of Geography and statistics. <https://censo2010.ibge.gov.br/noticias-censo?id=3&idnoticia=2170&view=noticia>

Among the research parameters studied is the criterion of self-declared religion. There are several groups represented in this criterion, but to illustrate this work, only two will be presented. The analytical data for this work will be from the censuses of 2000 and 2010, since the Brazilian census is taken every ten years.

The first group of people is classified as those who declare themselves Mission Orientated Evangelicals. Classified within this group are people who belong to the following churches: Adventist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist and Congregational. This group represented approximately 6.9 million inhabitants in 2000, which corresponded to 4.09% of the country's total population that year. In the last official census, the number of "traditional evangelicals" or "historical evangelicals" rose to approximately 7.6 million people. However, this increase in number did not necessarily present an increase in representativeness for this group, since it represented only 4.03% of the total population in 2010.

The second group of people is classified as "Evangelicals of Pentecostal origin." The largest churches of this group are the Assembly of God, Christian Congregation of Brazil, Brazil for Christ, Foursquare church, and the Universal of the Kingdom of God, among others. All self-declared members of these churches represented approximately 17.9 million people in 2000, representing 10% of the population that year. In 2010, this group of people increased to 13% of the total population, with approximately 25.3 million people.

From the analysis of the data above, it becomes possible to perceive a significant increase in recent years in the Christian evangelical population, especially the Pentecostal branch in Brazil. The total percentage of this population, including other branches, accounted for approximately 2% of Brazil's population, representing more than 42 million people. Unofficial data also continues to point towards the significant growth of this portion of the population.

In an article concerning the process of transformation and quantification of traditional religions in Brazil, Antonio Pierucci asserts that the beginning of the twentieth century presents a moment of inflection. The author made a comparison between three major religious groups in Brazil: Roman Catholicism, Lutheranism, and Umbanda (a religion of African matrix).¹³³ He points out that while Catholics still represent the majority of the population at more than 70% at

¹³³ Antônio Flávio Pierucci, "'Bye Bye, Brasil' – O Declínio Das Religiões Tradicionais no Censo 2000." *Estudos Avançados* 18, no. 52 (2004): 17-28.

the beginning of the 21st century, there has been an important decrease of this religious group in recent decades.

Pierucci wonders if this process of decline is not part of a regular cycle. In the evolution of societies, there is a decline in a majority cultural concept resulting from a natural modernization process. The author argues that in post-traditional societies, for example, it is common to have a process of disaffiliation and a breakdown of ties with the old bonds, and that in the religious context, traditional faith communities are the most affected.

Pierucci notes that the religious rivalry between Protestants and Catholics in Brazil lasted more than 70 years. After five centuries of Catholic dominance in Brazil, there has been a gradual Protestant expansion, which is on the rise. According to the author, this growth of Protestantism in Brazil is mainly that of Pentecostal and Neo-Pentecostal branches.

The change in the Brazilian religious landscape involved not only the faith of the population but also the use and transformation of urban space. A study conducted by Lamia Oualalou, identified the human occupation of the territory, based on the increase of evangelical churches in the poorest parts of Brazil.¹³⁴ As an example, the author focuses on the occupation of urban space by churches in the city of Rio de Janeiro. In the most central and oldest region of the city, 75% of the population was Roman Catholic, while this was the case for only 30% in the suburbs.¹³⁵ Churches in the most impoverished communities in Brazil do not only have a religious role, but also a broader social one. Religious communities often offer encouragement for many to return to school and support the rehabilitation of people suffering from substance abuse. Churches can also be spaces that foster mystical experiences and contact with the divine. They provide a message of resilience and hope in times of difficulty.

3.3. Eschatology and Theology in Brazil

In this section, the history of Protestant religious movements in Brazil is analyzed. The emphasis here will be mostly on evangelicals of the Pentecostal tradition. For the most part, this group embraces dispensational hermeneutics which often results in fearing the impending end-times.

¹³⁴ Lamia Oualalou, "Evangelicals Conquer Brazil," *Le Monde Diplomatique – English Edition*, 2014.

¹³⁵ The design of suburbs varies between countries. While developed countries consider the suburbs to be residential areas where there is dominance of the middle and upper middle classes, in some underdeveloped countries such as Brazil, the suburb refers to the most socially and economically marginalized population.

The characteristics of Pentecostal growth in Brazil are also analyzed by Andrew Chesnut. In his book, he engages in two distinct analyses. The first is a characterization of Brazilian Pentecostalism and the second is dedicated to its historical evolution.¹³⁶

Religious freedom resulting from the 1891 secularization of the Brazilian State, created the conditions for the expansion of a pluralistic religious market. In academia, Pentecostal growth is associated to socioeconomic modernization as it is responsible for the rural exodus of millions of people. Many lost their fortunes, lost their identity, their references of behavior, and suffered severe social deprivation.

Pentecostal churches, according to this thesis, grew by adjusting to the demands of the masses of poor migrants in search of a fraternal refuge that offers nets of security and solidarity, helps to reorganize life, and deal with poverty. Until economic modernization is over, Pentecostalism will continue to grow and with it, social cultural changes. It is as though at the limit; social transformation anomy and social exclusion are the truly responsible for Pentecostal expansion.

Outdoor preach campaigns with strong emotional appeals, a new style of music, physical and exuberant manifestations of raised hands, clapping, cries of “glory,” “hallelujah”, etc., all make up the heritage of the Pentecostal movement. Neo-Pentecostalism differed with its new theology which embraced prosperity; different in some sense to traditional Pentecostalism. This tremendous growth is represented by mega-churches such as the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, who are now transmitting a set of new values and practices which Pentecostals and other Protestants groups had not known until then.

Chesnut also comments on the relationship of church theology and financial prosperity. Wealth and success are seen as evidence of God’s fidelity and blessings in people’s lives, creating an individualistic, self-centered spirituality, where one seeks only to realize his personal projects and objectives, leaving the interests of the community aside.

3.3.1 The History of Brazilian Pentecostalism

The history of Pentecostalism in Brazil is mainly tied to the strong influence of the American churches of the 19th century.

¹³⁶ Andrew R. Chesnut, *Born again in Brazil: The Pentecostal Boom and the Pathogens of Poverty* (New Brunswick, NJ, USA: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

According to Paul Freston, waves in Brazilian Pentecostalism are divided into three historical moments. First, there was the establishment of an Assembly of God church in 1911.¹³⁷ The church was founded by two Swedish Baptist missionaries who evangelized northern Brazil. Initially, they were working with a local Baptist church, but after divergences with the denomination concerning their preaching style and interpretation of scripture, the two missionaries partnered with the Assemblies of God.

A second historical moment observed by Freston began in São Paulo, characterized by the emergence of the following churches: The Church of the Four-Square Gospel (1951), Brazil for Christ (1955), and God Is Love (1962). A third and fastest-growing phase in Brazil is represented by the emerging universal church of the Kingdom of God (1977) and the International Church of the Grace of God (1980).

From this last phase, countless other churches have emerged, too numerous to list here. Most of them were founded by people who were from churches that were considered more conservative and traditional, and had contact with Pentecostalism in the United States.

The author argues that the emergence of these Pentecostal phases in Brazil is directly related to the country's history. The first phase is tied to the origins of American Pentecostalism. Its expansion was limited by the fact that at the time it occurred, social, economic, and geographical limitations did not favor any accelerated expansion. The second phases occurred during the process of the country's urbanization which began during the 1950's. The intense process of industrialization involved urban centers such as São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. At that time, the movement was already using the media, albeit modestly, to expand its ideas and attract more of the faithful. The third Pentecostal phase began in Rio de Janeiro. Freston reports that with the city's economic decay, in addition to the loss of political centrality, it was no longer the nation's capital. This phenomenon caused a new, more urbanized leadership to emerge in Rio, led by a white middle class with a certain higher level of education.

Karl Westmeier notes that Pentecostalism in Brazil and Latin American countries generally emphasizes the emotional experience tied to what is called the "move" of the Spirit¹³⁸. In his article, Westmeier also stresses the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the poor. Aid provided

¹³⁷ Paul Freston, "Pentecostalism in Brazil: A Brief History," *Religion* 25 (1995): 119-133.

¹³⁸ Karl-Wilhelm Westmeier, "Themes of Pentecostal Expansion in Latin America," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (1993): 72-78

to the less fortunate classes has helped many of these Pentecostal churches to attract needy communities. Westmeier notes that, “In the midst of a society that relegates the poor to inner-city slums and shantytowns, the Pentecostals endow their followers with a sense of identity and dignity and give them hope for tomorrow.”¹³⁹

Westmeier also remarks the relationship between religion and political power. The Catholic Church in Brazil was directly related to the colonization of Brazil and the government, until the constitutional secularization of the country. In this setting, as Pentecostals arrived in Brazil, their perspective was that this was a form of spiritual geopolitical domination on the part of the Roman Catholic Church. As a result, Catholics were not keen to see the arrival of Pentecostals in Brazil. This conflict incited many Pentecostal churches to seek political support, either by having their own candidates or supporting candidates who shared common interests and who would promote public policies that favored their interests. Westmeier argues that the priority for this group was not a matter of right or left-wing politics. It was a matter of supporting a government that did not prevent or hinder the establishment of Pentecostals in Brazil.

Another important remark made by Westmeier is the place given to the Holy Spirit within the institutional Church. Pentecostal churches have become such an integral part of the Brazilian religious landscape, that people share their everyday experiences with others, making allies and ever expanding their influence and membership.

3.3.2. Dispensationalism in the Brazilian Pentecostal Environment

The emergence of Brazilian dispensationalism is linked to the missionary activity of Nels Lawrence Olson during 1938 in Brazil. With his training at Central Bible College in Springfield, Missouri, he became responsible for the creation of many Assembly of God churches in Brazil. His most significant contribution to the growing Assemblies of God in Brazil was his numerous publications used in different churches around the country. These publications were not only used for theological training, but also as literacy aids for people who had no schooling.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ Westmeier, “Themes of Pentecostal Expansion in Latin America,” 72.

¹⁴⁰ Maycon Sanches Ferreira and others, "O Dispensacionalismo no Pentecostalismo Brasileiro: Introdução Ao Estudo De Recepção Da Obra do Plano Divino Através Dos Séculos," *Revista Eletrônica De Teologia E Ciências Das Religiões* 4, no. 2 (Julho-Dezembro, 2016): 155-172.

Olsen's leading publication was the book called *The Divine Plan Through the Centuries*.¹⁴¹ It contained a chart of the history of humanity, similar to the ones found in other publications on dispensationalism, dividing the history of humankind into specific time periods called "dispensations." In his book, Olsen essentially presents a dispensational interpretation of events found in the Bible, and proposes what he deems to be the correct way of interpreting scripture.

Like every dispensationalist, he argues that idea on "dispensations" is derived from the Greek word οἰκονομία (1 Co 9:17; Eph 1:10; Eph 3.2; and Col 1:25). According to Olsen, it is necessary to understand the periods of human history where God revealed the various ways he led his people. Olsen also alerts his readers about the mistake of spiritualizing scripture. The Bible is to be literally construed, which is characteristic of dispensationalism.

Both MAP¹⁴² and the book PDAS¹⁴³ contributed to the advancement of the Pentecostal movement in Brazil. These tools helped to cement an accessible and simplified eschatology which could be easily replicated in Bible studies and though apocalyptic preaching, without the need to go through intensive theological training in seminaries. The PDAS contains the entire history of the world in a single drawing. Many faithful kept it on the walls of their homes to allow for quick access to the systematic teaching of dispensationalism, from the creation of humankind to the final judgement.

The most distinctive element by which people characterize the Pentecostal movement is the practice of glossolalia, however, Pentecostal beliefs and practices are much more than this. Rooted in the traditions of pietism and the Holiness movement, Pentecostalism is also a confluence of theological ideas typical of the late nineteenth century, such as divine healing, apocalypticism and eschatology. Pentecostalism inspired numerous indigenous religious movements, including endogenous millennialists that blend enthusiastic Christian tradition. It has, in its foundations, apocalyptic characteristics, amalgamated with a dynamic liturgy with messianic perspectives - the result of popular beliefs that give it its characteristics.

¹⁴¹ Nels Lawrence Olson, *OS Plano Divino Através Dos Séculos : Estudo Das Dispensações*, Vol. 6 (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: Casa Publicadora das Assembléias de Deus, 1981).

¹⁴² Chart on the History of Humankind in a Dispensational Perspective.

¹⁴³ Publication of the Assembly of God.

3.4. (Neo)-Pentecostals and the “End Times”

Academic research has been done on various aspects of Pentecostal worship, hermeneutics, and spirituality. In Brazil, Roberto Franco Guimarães and Daniel Rocha wrote about Pentecostals and their understanding about the end times.¹⁴⁴ Their research focuses on biblical hermeneutics in the interpretation of current events and the central role of eschatology in building a Pentecostal identity, setting it apart from other forms of Christian faith. In traditional Pentecostal eschatology, it is believed that the implantation of the Kingdom of heaven is established by God’s work in Christ, with no human participation required for its realization. From this perspective, the sudden expectation of the *παρουσία* practically prevents Christians from engaging in social transformation; instead, their hope for a new society will be materialized during the Millennium, an era of peace wrought only by God, without human participation.

According to Fernando Albano, the way one looks to the future directly impacts how one understands and lives in the present.¹⁴⁵ He notes that for Pentecostal eschatology four essential characteristics are necessary: a) Division of human history into different dispensations previously known to God and under his control; b) Momentary suffering and apparent mastery by evil as an ordeal for the children of God; c) Expectation of God’s judgment in the near future, as well as the coming of Jesus in glory to seize faithful believers into heaven; d) Dualistic separation between this world and the coming eternal life, between good and evil angels, and between God and Satan. From Albano’s perspective, there is minimal human action that could be taken to produce improvement or transformation in preparation for the inauguration of a Divine Kingdom, because its worldview is completely futuristic and is influenced by a certain Jewish interpretation of the “end-times.” Believers will only be spectators in the final epic battle between God and Satan. Albano quotes Majewski when referencing Jewish messianism and its rapport to the “end-times,”:

“Messianism aims to change the reality of the world, bringing the Kingdom into human history; a good example is the proposal of Liberation Theology. The apocalypticism embraced by Pentecostalism presents a proposal of denial of history, escape from reality and abandonment of the world. The world is no good and must be destroyed.

¹⁴⁴ Robson Franco Guimarães, "Últimos Dias: Os Pentecostais E O Imaginário do Fim Dos Tempos," *Revista De Estudos Da Religião* 1 (2005), 31-53 and Daniel Rocha, "Escatologia E Práxis Fundamentalista Frente Aos Desafios Dos Apocalipses Contemporâneos," *Interações: Cultura E Comunidade* 4, no. 6 (2009): 29-46.

¹⁴⁵ Fernando Albano, "Escatologia Pentecostal: Aspectos Íntimos E Implicações Públicas," *Caminhos* 12, no. 2 (Julho - Dezembro, 2014): 407-415.

Indeed, it is common to hear from certain believers that the ‘future is determined’ so that it is no way to act to try to improve the world.’¹⁴⁶

Pentecostal eschatology can lead to the denial of human freedom, negating responsible intervention in the public sphere. There are aspects of Pentecostal and evangelical hermeneutics that seek to promote the spiritual liberation from the blindness of the sin of people, which conflict with their eschatological perspective. For many Pentecostals, however, features connected to this world are either regarded with suspicion or simply rejected.

For the most part, evangelicals in Brazil do place emphasis on future time. The *παρουσία* is a future moment that is eagerly awaited as a final response to humanity’s problems; it is the hope of those in search of transcendence.¹⁴⁷ Not finding a resolution to Pentecostalism’s problems on a global level, there is an appeal to the vertical (or celestial) dimension, putting all hope in moments of spiritual ecstasy and the patient awaiting for the *παρουσία*; in beliefs and practices that procure a sense of comfort and safety. Brazilian Dispensational-Pentecostal eschatology is therefore understood in a binary manner, as a form of Manicheism that will be eliminated when the Messiah returns to earth to separate good from evil. Similarly, this “earthly life,” which is seen as evil and fleeting, will be replaced by a “heavenly life” of peace and joy. Finally, at the time of the “Rapture,” the “good” - those who now live in “corruptible bodies” - will receive “incorruptible bodies,” which will no longer suffer evil or any other restrictions of life on earth.

As justification for this belief, Ferreira credits the point of view of Brazilian Pentecostals to the idea that those outside the circle of faith are “sinful” and are already without hope. The only alternative is to be part of the faithful who will be “raptured” away, leaving this world at the mercy of their sinfulness. Ferreira argues that evangelical media pushed the idea that people today live sinful lives as “in the days of Noah.” It is worth remembering that the biblical character of Noah was saved with his family from divine wrath for being righteous and God-fearing. Thus, as in the days of Noah where people generally did not fear God and were judged for their sins, the “Rapture”

¹⁴⁶ “O messianismo tem por objetivo a mudança da realidade do mundo, trazendo o Reino para dentro da história humana, um bom exemplo é a proposta da Teologia da Libertação. Já o apocalipsismo abraçado pelo pentecostalismo apresenta uma proposta de negação da história, de fuga da realidade e abandono do mundo. O mundo não presta e deve ser destruído. Com efeito, é comum ouvir de certos crentes que o ‘futuro está determinado’, logo, de nada adiante agir para tentar melhorar o mundo.” (Rodrigo Gonçalves Majewski. *Teologia pentecostal e espaço público*. In Fernando Albano, "Escatologia Pentecostal: Aspectos Íntimos E Implicações Públicas," Caminhos 12, no. 2 [Julho - Dezembro, 2014]: 407-415). Translation provided by ?????

¹⁴⁷ For what follows, see Ismael de Vasconcelos Ferreira, "A Parusia E a Valorização do Tempo Futuro no Pentecostalismo," Paralellus 7, no. 15 (Janeiro - Abril, 2016), 323-339.

– which is comparable to Noah and his family’s protection from the flood – will trigger God’s judgment on this unbelieving world.

Given what has been seen so far, the idea of the *παρουσία* tends to lead many Pentecostal believers to focus on their heavenly future to the detriment of the present.

3.5. A New Role in the Public Square

3.5.1. Adopting Judaic Ideas

The social involvement of evangelicals in Brazil and their religious practices have affected the country. For example, Marta Topel identified elements of syncretism with evangelicals adopting certain Jewish ideas. She argues that the return of Protestants to new and more frequent interpretations of the Hebrew Bible explains the appropriation of Judaic tropes.¹⁴⁸ The use of Jewish symbols is understood as a form of identification, to create a sense of community. Topel also points out that Christian eschatology has similarities with post-exilic messianic hope. In line with the dispensational framework, Evangelicals insist that God has a special relationship with Israel, and the promises towards them from the Hebrew Bible will be fulfilled.

Regarding the incorporation of dispensationalist ideas in Brazilian evangelical circles, Candido Maynard argues that this is the result of the cultural and theological dominance of the United States, and how it has always had an impact on evangelicals in Brazil.¹⁴⁹ Included in Maynard’s study is an important section on a particular messianic movement comprised of Jews who recognize Jesus as the Messiah, but who still believe that the promises made to the nation of Israel have not yet been fulfilled. In many Jewish circles, such people are not believed to be truly Jewish. According to some informal estimates, there may be between 15,000 and 20,000 “messianic Jews” in Brazil alone.

In Brazilian evangelical circles, one of the initial proponents of this trend was Valnice Millhomes, a missionary of Baptist origin. After returning from many years in the mission field, Millhomes began a project using media to teach others about what she believed God had taught her during her time as a missionary. There are, nonetheless, websites and articles that are quite

¹⁴⁸ Marta Francisca Topel, "A Inusitada Incorporação do Judaísmo Em Vertentes Cristãs Brasileiras: Algumas Reflexões," *Revista Brasileira De História Das Religiões* 10 (Maio, 2011): 1-16

¹⁴⁹ Cândido Luiz Santos Maynard, "O Dispensacionalismo E a Utilização De Símbolos Judaicos Nos Cultos Evangélicos" (Master Thesis, Universidade Federal do Sergipe).

critical of incorporating Jewish elements into Brazilian evangelicalism. Topel mentions the Baptist website *Sola Scriptura TT*, which provides harsh criticism of such a practice.

3.5.2. (Neo)-Pentecostals and Geographical Space

With the growth of the evangelical movement in Brazil, especially the (Neo)-Pentecostal movement, there has also been a transformative change in the occupation of geographic space. In his research, Diego da Cruz sought to understand the spatial expansion in Brazilian territory. His work explores the various forms of faith and how the new sacred spaces such as temples, meeting halls, and prayer centers have impacted the transformation of Brazilian cities.¹⁵⁰

Cruz emphasizes the importance of churches for the Pentecostal movement, as they are seen as places built by God, through his people, in order to fight the devil. This is reflective of the spiritual battle which Pentecostals believed to be waged between divine and demonic forces, and which reverberates in the material world. Human beings, whether aware of this battle or not, are indirectly involved through the exercise of their free will, resisting the “works of evil.” From the point of view of these believers, the devil and his minions act in the material world through what they consider to be false religions and other worldly temptations. This is why they engage in a battle against the forces of evil. According to this theological worldview, war is waged against specific demons. They often associate territorial and hereditary spirits in Brazil to specific Catholic saints, because their names are linked to cities and other spiritual entities. Considered to be “high-ranking” demons under Satan’s rule, territorial spirits are assigned to control specific geographical regions (neighborhoods, cities, countries), institutions, as well as ethnic, tribal, cultural, and religious groups. In order to break free from the control of these territorial spirits, believers must engage in “spiritual warfare” activities, such as worship, prayer walks, spiritual mapping, identification repentance, etc., so they can freely evangelize and take possession of the territory for God.¹⁵¹

For Neo-Pentecostals, the physical space of a church building, for example, does not necessarily represent God’s abode. The idea of sacred space is tied to the community of faith and

¹⁵⁰ Diego Martins Da Cruz, "Geography of Religion, Evangelical Faith and Space," *Revista Geosaberes*, (Maio-Agosto, 2019), 1.

¹⁵¹ For more on territorial spirits and the practice of “spiritual warfare,” one must read the primary sources of its practitioners; for example, C. Peter Wagner, *Territorial Spirits. Practical Strategies for How to Crush the Enemy Through Spiritual Warfare* (Shippensburg: PA, Destiny Image Publishers, 2012).

not the physical representation of a church building. This is why these faith communities can simply meet in sheds, workshops, restaurants, garages, cinemas, theaters, sports gyms, etc.; places where the usual physical features of spirituality or Christian faith are not required. These Neo-Pentecostal houses of worship or community meeting places tend to become increasingly unrecognizable in the urban landscape, camouflaged within all the other buildings. The strategy that informs the choice of a worship place is the same as any entrepreneur would use to open a commercial site: space for a large influx of people, ease of access, abundant transportation, and availability of parking. Cruz argues that the significant evangelical presence in large urban centers indicates that these groups have reconciled themselves with modernity, with the help of the sacralization of consumption, the widespread presence of media, and a loosening of strict ethical codes of conduct, inherited from the Puritan tradition.

3.5.3. Evangelicals and Politics

As the evangelical population grows in Brazil, many believe they should be represented in the political sphere, regionally and locally. The outcome is the growing presence of politicians raising conservative issues and seeking to create conditions that will benefit this segment of the population. In the Brazilian National Congress, one can now find deputies who are informally part of a so-called “evangelical bench” and who share a common socio-conservative agenda.

Alba Zaluar and Rafael Gonçalves research the role of the evangelical parliamentary front in their quest for conservative policies in morals, customs, and economic liberalism.¹⁵² The authors understand that political discussions regarding morality emerge from two competing forces: the first is the charismatic Catholic movement which has gained strength in recent decades; the second is Neo-Pentecostalism. One must also note the increase of suburban life, which means an increase of workers without necessary legal work registration.

The primary political goal of this group is to establish legislation that is consistent with the teachings of the Bible. Zaluar and Gonçalves give two examples of this: the first is Bill PL7382/2010, which establishes that any offense carried out against a heterosexual because of sexual orientation, is a crime. This project is a response to legislations protecting homosexuals from acts of violence. The second is PEC 164/2012 which recognizes the beginning of human life

¹⁵² Alba Zaluar and Rafael Bruno Gonçalves, "Religion and Politics in Brazil: The Conservative Evangelical Parliamentary Front," *Instituto De Estudos Sociais E Políticos* 1 (2017): 1-17

at conception, therefore making abortion illegal, except in cases such as rape or when a mother's health or life is at risk.

Evangelicals justify their political agenda in defense of traditional family values. Issues such as abortion, policy in favor of ethnic minorities, and same-sex marriage policies are established as priority to the discussion. The passing of laws against the values of traditional family are disputable for the movement.

Zaluar and Gonçalves argue that, in fact, the parliamentary activities of this group, are much broader than simply promoting family values and peace. They note that some of these parliamentarians are in favor of issues such as Israel's sovereignty in the Middle East, gun ownership, and age reduction for adult majority.

The action of religious leaders is not only seen outside ecclesiastical environments. Within churches, leaders are those responsible for the spread of the Brazilian evangelical perspective of how believers observe and interact with society. This perception about society is also seen in the eschatological perspective of its leaders and how they teach it. The next section of this work is dedicated to this.

3.6. Informal Survey on Brazilian Church Leaders and Eschatology

For a better understanding of the eschatological beliefs of evangelicals in a Brazilian context, I have conducted an informal online survey research. This section will be dedicated to the methodology and the interpretation of its results.

3.6.1. Methodology

The research was carried out online, through an informal and non-scientific Facebook survey of leaders in different evangelical denominations.¹⁵³ The survey was conducted from August to December of 2019 and was answered anonymously by 120 respondents. My Facebook survey contained 20 questions divided into three groups. The first group focused on the personal identification and the denominational affiliation of the respondents. The second group related mainly to the theological training of the respondents and their overall familiarity with eschatology.

¹⁵³ https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScdth1qGTB4EVtonizQFFlPnaDRo2EA15_TvCcrAm2vZMxttQ/viewform?usp=sf_link

The last group of questions concerned the respondents' personal perception of eschatology and their interpretation of biblical texts, as well as their understanding of current events in relation to the "end-times."

3.6.2. Goals and Hypothesis

The main objective of the survey was to take a general measurement of the familiarity of Brazilian evangelical leaders with eschatology. Other objectives were to uncover the preferred eschatological currents of these evangelical leaders, as well as their understanding of so-called "end-time" events.

3.6.3. Analysis of Results

The first question refers to the respondents' characterization of their local church. Here, four options were available: Traditional, Historical Pentecostal and Contemporary. Traditional Churches are ones that are closest to the Protestant Reformation, such as the Lutheran Church, Presbyterian and Calvinist. Other churches were then founded, such as the Baptist and Methodist, which follow the Line of the Armenians; they had their awakening during the eighteenth century in English-speaking countries. The ramifications happened until they arrived at Adventist, Mormon, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Jehovah's Witnesses, however, differ in the item of the divinity of Jesus Christ.

Pentecostal churches believe in the continuity of spiritual gifts, which are given from the Holy Spirit, such as speaking in tongues and healing through prayers. Churches that have these characteristics emerged in the early twentieth century. The best-known exponent in Brazil of this segment is the Assembly of God, which today is divided between several ministries and has its own idiosyncrasies.

Neo-Pentecostal churches usually have a showman, that is, a face that is always associated with the name of the church and is the one who directs the services. Messages are customarily geared towards material goods and healings, so that followers may have a life that flourishes on earth. By way of example, we can cite the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God and also the International Church of Grace. The new churches continue to be developed and their differences can range from their practices and customs to how Bible teachings are referenced.

Contemporary Churches are known for using ample technological resources during their services. There is a strong emphasis on attracting young people and music. Sermons are usually a message of self-help and seek to encourage followers during the coming week. Services do not necessarily obey a specific liturgy. Contemporary churches may have a distinct origin and so a distinct theological perspective.

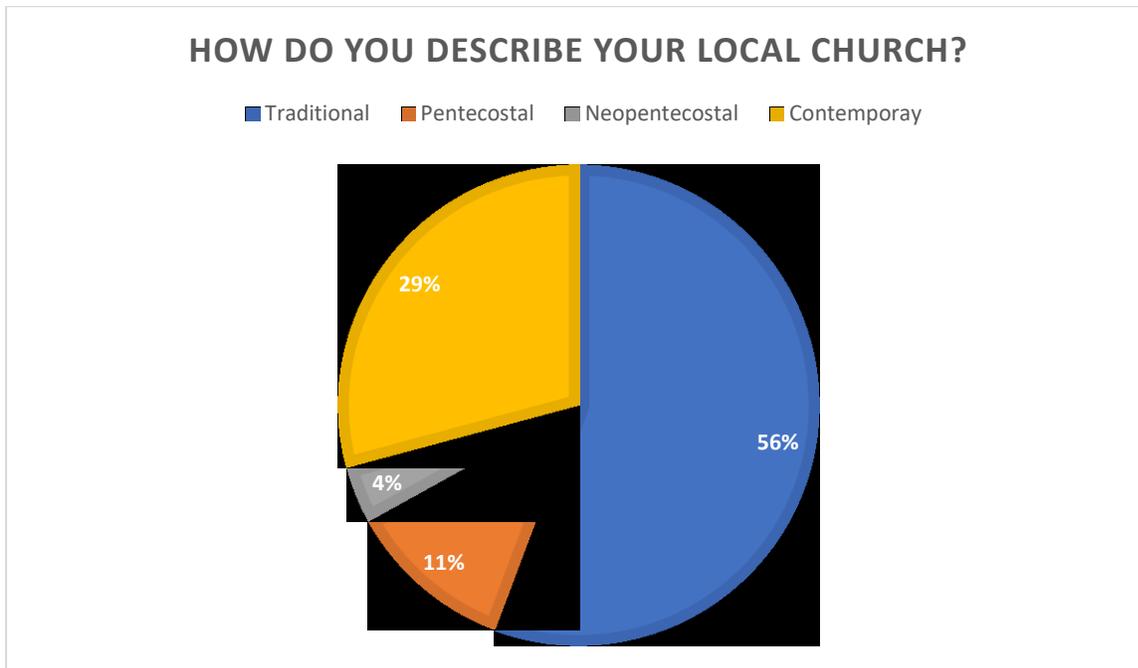


Figure 1: Description of Local Church

The question regarding the characteristics of the local church was related to the primary responsibility that the same respondents exercised in their churches. The three choices were: pastor, leader, and teacher. Pastors are considered as those who are responsible for the congregation or who preach and counsel frequently. Leaders are those who perform an ecclesiastical function such as deacons, elders or those responsible for a specific ministry in the church. Teachers are those who perform the function of instructing different classes and courses of the church. Much of what is believed in terms of eschatology and other theological issues in Brazil is directly related to the influence of church leaders. There is respect and admiration of religious leaders in Brazil who are often referred to as “Men of God,” granting them significant social status.

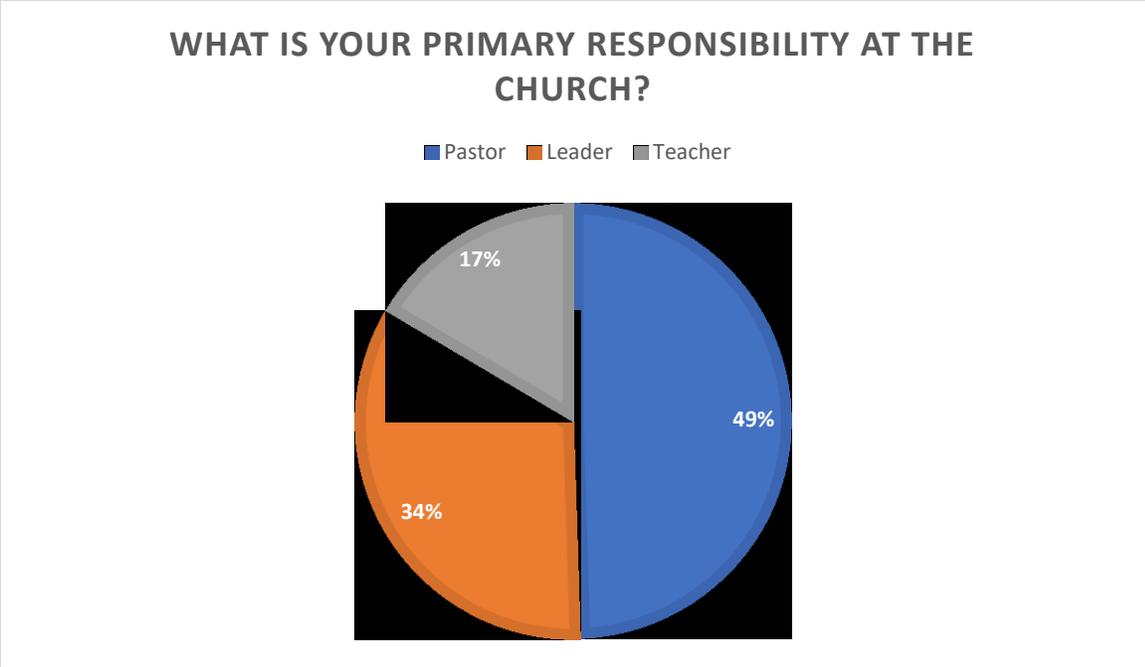


Figure 2: Church Responsibilities

The next question was related to theological training. In this section, two questions were asked in order to identify the academic level the interviewed religious leaders had attained. This data is essential because it reveals the depth of knowledge acquired, concerning not only eschatology, but regarding theology in general as well.

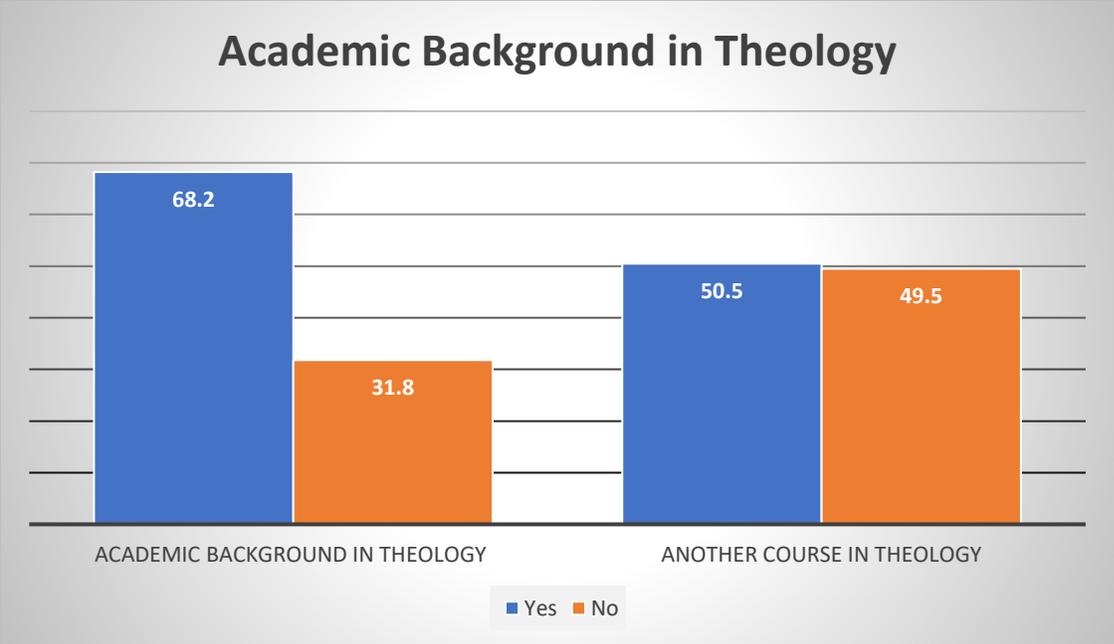


Figure 3: Academic Training in Theology

The above results can be interpreted in two different ways. The first is somewhat positive because most of the respondents had taken various courses in theology. The quality level of the training was not addressed in this survey, only how much, if any, had been acquired. On the other hand, the results could also be worrisome. It appears that half of the same respondents may not have updated their training, and that the other half did not receive additional theological training at all. This means that these respondents have been teaching outdated theological ideas.

The following group of questions concerned the number of theological and eschatological books the respondents read on average in the past year.

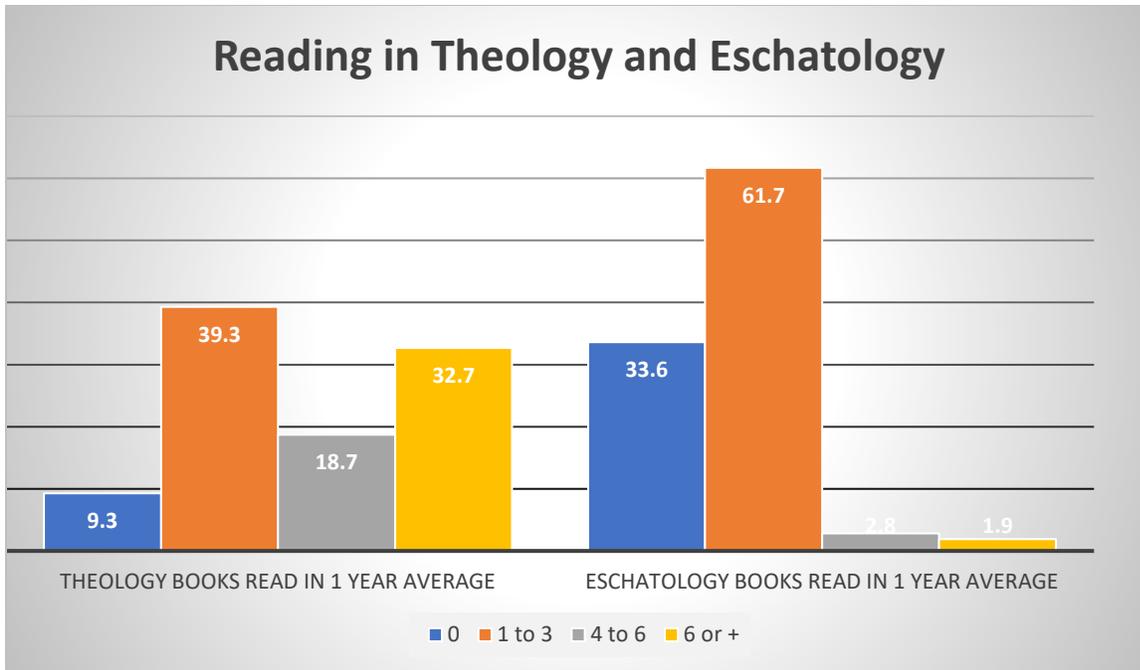


Figure 4: Reading About Theology and Eschatology

These results suggest a limited level of knowledge, especially in terms of eschatology. Perhaps this result can be explained by the low production of academic books in this subject in Portuguese. However, one may still come across a number of publications on the topic in evangelical circles, but these studies are aimed at church members and are mostly apologetic in nature. When it comes to reading theology in general, the situation is more worrisome since most of the respondents read less than five books on average per year. It would be expected that people in leadership positions would read more than this since for many church members, these leaders are points of reference in terms of theological knowledge and spiritual growth.

The next survey questions are related to the respondents' knowledge of eschatology and their ability to teach this subject. Respondents also respond to the question of how their personal eschatological perspective influences other aspects of their own theology.

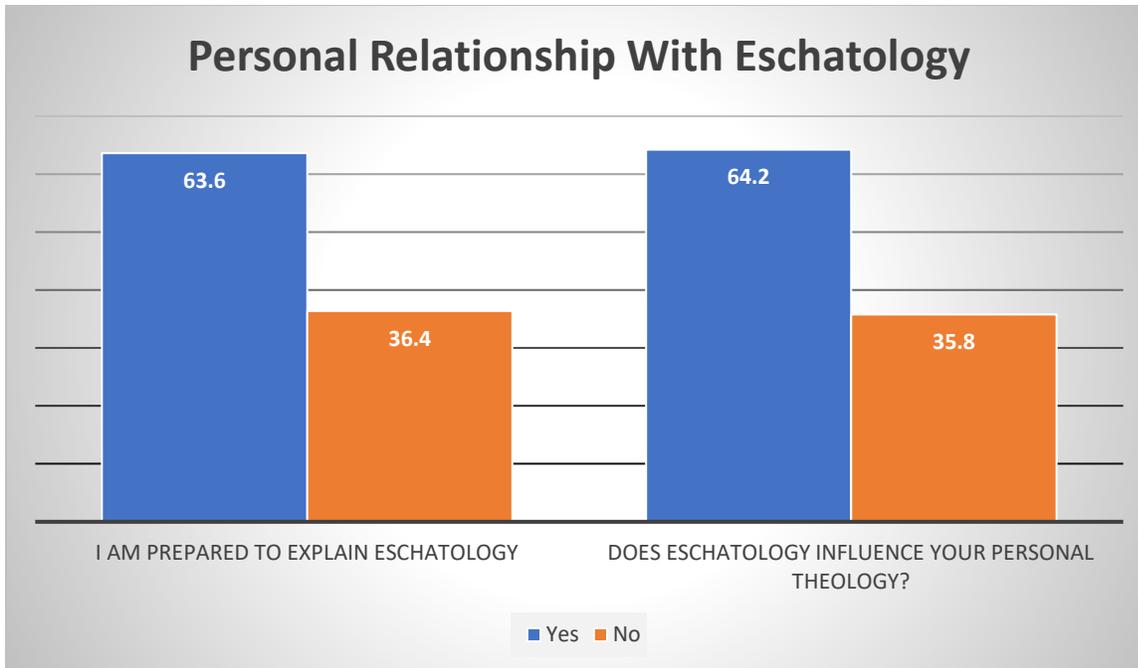


Figure 5: The Influence of Eschatology

These answers give rise to two observations: the first is that a large percentage of respondents are not prepared to teach on eschatology. This is a direct result from the previous set of questions indicating the poor literacy rate on eschatology. The second observation is that there is a distinction between eschatology and theology for some 35% of respondents. It appears as though eschatology in the Bible is not interpreted utilizing the tools of biblical hermeneutics, since evangelicals supposedly base their theology strictly on the Bible.

The next survey question is related to the nature of eschatological hermeneutics adopted by the respondents. These results are based on the replies to another question. 83.2% of respondents were able to distinguish the various kinds of eschatological perspectives. 16.8% of respondents were unable to understand these different eschatological frameworks.

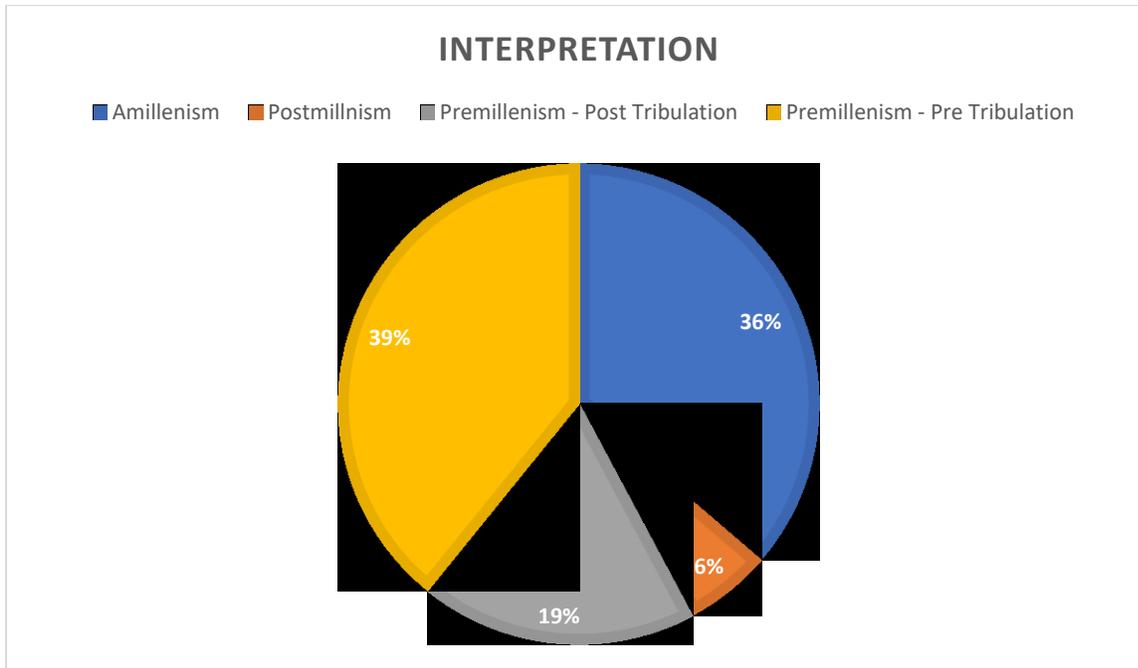


Figure 6: Various Eschatological Perspectives

Whether it be the pre-tribulational or post-tribulational stance, Premillennialism is clearly the dominant perspective. This can be explained by the strong influence of (Neo)-Pentecostal churches in Brazil and the growing presence in the media. The high percentage of Amillennialists is due to the continued presence of Catholicism in Brazil, as well as that of seminaries of theological formation stemming from traditional Protestant churches.

The last two research questions are related to the respondents' interpretation of Jesus' discourse in Matthew 24, and their understanding of "end-time" events. These questions were intended to see whether or not respondents related Jesus' discourse in the first gospel to their interpretation of current events.

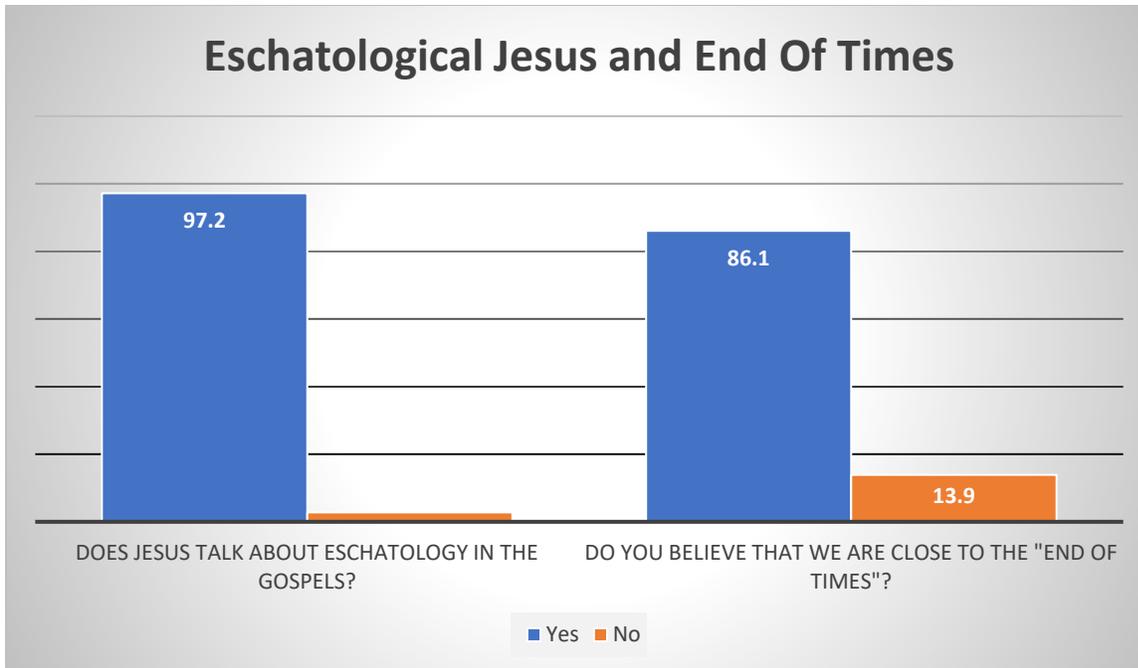


Figure 7: The Eschatological Jesus

The results show that most evangelical leaders in Brazil believe they are living in “end times,” and have a futuristic eschatological interpretation of Jesus’ discourse found in Matthew 24.

One interesting conclusion of this survey is that there is little or no basis for church leaders to teach Christians that “this generation” is living in the last days. Religious leaders who participated in this survey exhibit poor literacy in theology and eschatology, and have very little theological training. What can be concluded is that very little information feeds a theology and a hermeneutic about Bible eschatology in the Brazilian scenario. This only further devalues the role of religious movements that embrace media elements and global events in order to perpetuate their theology of the fear of tomorrow.

In this study, the proposed premise is that the combination of the theological and cultural dominance of the United States in Brazil is a fact. Limited availability of relevant literature and the rarity of academic exploration of Christian eschatology in the country has resulted in the promotion, among Brazilian religious leaders, of a climate of “spiritual domination,” and a theology that cares a great deal about tomorrow and little about the present.

Conclusion

This research has helped me understand how eschatology is still important for evangelical Christians in Brazil, despite the limit of academic material on the topic. There is, therefore, a lack of information about the different interpretations of eschatology, as well as a fear of studying the subject.

In the first chapter of this thesis, we explored the theme of eschatology with emphasis on dispensationalism—a prevalent current in many Protestant denominations. The so-called dispensationalist pre-millennialist view emerged in England around 1830. Due to its intense dissemination by its creator, John Nelson Darby (1800–1882), this eschatological system arrived in the United States and later in Brazil. Dispensationalism understands the relationship God developed with humankind through various stages of revelation, which delimit different dispensations or time periods. Each dispensation is a test of humankind’s faithfulness to the particular revelation given at that time. Generally, seven dispensations are distinguished: innocence (before the fall), consciousness (Adam to Noah), promise (Abraham to Moses), Law (Moses to Christ), grace (Pentecost to the “Rapture”), and the millennium. Dispensationalism clearly sustains, for the most part, a literal interpretation of Scripture. This interpretation does not deny the existence of non-literal language figures and language in the Bible; rather, it sees a literal meaning behind the figurative passages.

Dispensationalism also advocates for a clear distinction between Israel (even messianic Jews) and the Church. The promises made to Israel in the Hebrew Scriptures would be fulfilled by Israel itself, and this more specifically during the millennium. Thus, in many ways, it is right to say that dispensationalists believe in “two peoples of God.” Although both Jews and Gentiles are saved by Christ through faith, believing Israel will be the recipient of additional “earthly” promises – such as prosperity in the specific land of Palestine, to be fully realized in the millennium – which do not apply to the Gentile believers, whose primary heritage, in this way, is “heavenly.” The problem with the consistent literalism of dispensationalists is that no one is a strict literalist when it comes to the interpretation of the Bible.

Dispensational churches have often engaged in “current events exegesis,” which sometimes treats eschatological themes in a sensationalist way, with bizarre, speculative and terrifying interpretations. Such interpretations focused on the dangers of using computers or on

interpreting the alignment of planets, magnetic cards, barcodes, and spy chips implanted under the skin as the “Mark of the Beast” in the Book of Revelation. This unmeasured speculation makes most believers become uninterested in the study of eschatology, which can be regrettable.

When it comes to “current new exegesis,” dispensationalists are avid readers of news about Israel, seeking to see the fulfillment of their predictions but always incurring failures. Dispensationalists read the prophetic texts through the lens of their preconceived system. Their basis for such ideas comes from prophetic texts which speak of redemptive promises; the highly figurative language of the Hebrew Bible is interpreted with rigid literalism.

The second chapter engaged in a comparison between a dispensationalist and historical-critical reading of Matthew 24:1-44. The goal was to present the two different hermeneutical paradigms. Matthew 24 is understood as Jesus’ “eschatological discourse” and is often interpreted as referring to the “end times.” It was possible, however, to seriously question this assumption through an examination of a few historical-critical commentaries. The textual and grammatical evidence does not support a dispensational interpretation of Matthew 24.

The problem with understanding Matthew 24 prophecies is that modern readers often take the words and predictions (“signs”) of this first-century book and apply them directly to modern-day events and situation. This thesis identifies first-century Judea as the historical context of Jesus’ prophecies, and these were “accomplished” at that time period, during the destruction of Jerusalem and its Holy Temple in 70 C.E. That these events concern “this generation” (of Judea) is also made clear in Matthew 23:36-37: “All these things will come upon this generation. Jerusalem.” Some 40 years after the death of Jesus, the Jewish Temple was surrounded by the Roman armies of Titus and was looted.

As for the dispensational reading of Matthew 24, nothing in verses 4–31 refer to the Second Coming of Jesus or the events that would immediately precede his return. The “Great Tribulation” (v. 21) concerns the suffering of the Jews at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem, not any end-time seven years of tribulation. The false Christs and prophets in Matthew 24:24 speak of false messiahs and false teachers among the Jews and early Christians at that time; it has nothing to do with “signs” of the last days.

The cosmic “signs” in the heavens in Matthew 24:29 are not to be interpreted literally. This is not about a literal darkening of the sun and moon before the Second Coming of Jesus; rather, this apocalyptic language which illustrates the fall of the authorities and rulers of the Jews and

the tumbling of the Jewish nation in 70 C.E. What was stated in Matthew 24:4–31 has been fulfilled in the life of the generation alive at the time of Jesus; all of it had to do with the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple.

The third chapter of this thesis analyzed the role of eschatology among Brazilian evangelicals. First, we observed that many believers adhered to an eschatology of fear, as they understood various social and geographical events as “signs” of the end of the world. Subsequently, we also explored the growth of Pentecostalism in Brazil, as a result of the impact of the movement in the United States.

We have also seen how an eschatology of fear is often fueled by conspiracy theories, sometimes leaving Christians somewhat paranoid. The kind of eschatology one embraces will also affect one’s stance on social issues. Thus, it was found that Brazilian eschatological thinking is sometimes in tension with the idea of social transformation. There is on the part of certain groups an indifference towards society. But some Pentecostal communities are finding ways to engage socially, here and now, transforming of the lives of many people, especially in a state of social anomy. Pentecostals are also becoming more and more interested in the country’s social, cultural, and political life.

Now, not all evangelical churches in Brazil, be they Pentecostal or from other Protestant denominations, get involved socially. Some still embrace a form of escapist eschatology, waiting for the “Rapture” to come and take them out of what they see as a corrupt and unredeemable world. It is, however, possible to notice some changes in how the “end times” are understood. People are becoming more concerned with the present realities and issues of this world, aiming at making positive political and social changes for them and others. There is still much to study, but for now, we have discerned more hope than fear.

Appendix

Survey Questions

- 1) How do you describe your local Church?
 - a) Traditional
 - b) Pentecostal
 - c) Neopentecostal
 - d) Contemporary

- 2) What is your primary responsibility at the Church?
 - a) Pastor
 - b) Leader
 - c) Teacher

- 3) Do you hold an academic background in Theology?
 - a) Yes
 - b) No

- 4) Do you hold any other course in Theology?
 - a) Yes
 - b) No

- 5) How many Theology books do you average read within one year?
 - a) 0
 - b) 1 to 3
 - c) 4 to 6
 - d) 6 or more

- 6) How many Eschatology books do you average read within one year?
 - a) 0
 - b) 1 to 3
 - c) 4 to 6
 - d) 6 or more

- 7) Do you feel prepared to explain about Eschatology?
 - a) Yes
 - b) No

- 8) Does your eschatological perspective influence your theology?
 - a) Yes
 - b) No

9) How would you define your eschatological perspective?

- a) Amillennialism
- b) Postmillennialism
- c) Premillennialism Pre Tribulationist
- d) Premillennialism Post Tribulationist

10) On your interpretation, does Jesus talk about eschatology?

- a) Yes
- b) No

11) Do you believe that we are close to the “End of Times”?

- a) Yes
- b) No

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