

Where Eagles Are

A cryptic statement spoken by Jesus may allude to the rapture of the church and present a caution to students not to take Bible study for granted with assumptions.

ASSUMPTIVE STUDY

In most of my private study, I have often gotten myself into trouble by glancing at particular scriptures and making rash assumptions concerning their application. Nothing indicts me more in this area than an odd statement made by Jesus in Matt. 24:28^É

For wherever the carcass is, there the eagles will be gathered together.

This cryptic utterance, that seems to have Bible students puzzled, is also recorded in Luke 17:37^É

Wherever the body is, there the eagles will be gathered together.

To my misfortune, I had always presupposed the above two passages as being the same or a repetition within the two manuscripts; but they are not. In fact, these two scriptures are *totally* different. It is my hope, within this study, to illustrate the folly of our presumptive study habits and encourage us to dig within the pages of scripture with a bit more care.

CHRONOLOGY

The first assumption that we must eliminate is that Jesus voiced these two statements at the same point in time— He did not. In fact, they were not even spoken in the same location or to the same audience. In Matthew, Jesus was talking with His disciples alone on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. It was here that they asked Him three specific questions.

1. When will Herod's temple be destroyed?
2. What will be the sign of Your return?
3. What will be the sign of the end of this present world age?

In between the answers to each of these questions, Jesus inserts the phrase that we are studying. Their location on the Mount of Olives is important; for it is here that Jesus will set His foot¹ when He returns as the Lion of the tribe of Judah.

In Luke, however, the audience consisted of both the disciples *and* the Pharisees. This phrase was spoken *before* they reached Jerusalem and may be cryptically pointing to an event that takes place *before* the great tribulation.

¹ Ref. Zech. 14:4

THE BODY DEAD OR ALIVE?

Because these two statements sound the same, we tend to assume that they both hold the same meaning. However, there is a word in each phrase that translates differently from each other and thereby affecting the overall message.

In Matthew, the word "body" is rightly translated as *carcass*. The word in the Greek is *ptoma* meaning "lifeless body". If you trace this word in the New Testament, you will find all the references point to a "lifeless carcass".

The word for "bird" in the Greek is *aetos*, which is also accurately translated as *eagle*. However, its root meaning is "that which is sustained in flight". So the phrase Jesus uses in Matthew denotes a gathering of birds over a lifeless body.

In Luke's record, these same birds are, again, gathered in the air. It is apparent that Jesus is allowing the disciples to see a contrast of events. The "eagle gathering" in Matthew was preparing to consume carrion. In the Luke passage, Jesus uses a different word to create an extreme contrast.. Instead of *ptoma* or a "lifeless body"; Jesus uses the word *soma* or a "living body". Literally, this phrase could read: *where the "flying eagles" are gathered, there the "living body" will be*. Jesus had stated that upon His return, He would come in the clouds.² Coming with Jesus on that day will be the saints³ that make up the *body* of Christ.⁴—A living body in the clouds.

EVENTS ADDRESSED

Readers of the Bible must also guard against taking scripture out of context. Since the answers have proven to be different, the questions must have been different as well.

In Matthew, the disciples were asking questions that revolved around the destruction of the temple, the second coming of the messiah and the end of the pre-millennial age. The answers that Jesus gave then centered on the events surrounding the soon coming destruction of Jerusalem and the distant great tribulation period. At that time He will return as the Lion of the tribe of Judah to tear and devour all those who come up against vulnerable Israel. What is left unconsumed by the Lion will then be given over to the birds to pick clean.

Then I saw an angel standing in the sun; and he cried with a loud voice, saying to all the birds that fly in the midst of heaven, "Come and gather together for the supper of the great God, that you may eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and of those who sit on them, and the flesh of all people, free and slave, both small and great." Revelation 19:17-18

So the Matthew phrase of "flying eagles" gathered around a "lifeless body" is accurate for this point in the prophetic scenario.

² Ref. Matt. 24:30, 26:64, Mark 13:26, 14:62

³ Jude: 14, Rev. 19:14

⁴ Ref. 1Cor. 12:12-13 & 27, Rom. 12:5

In the Luke passage, the question was in regard to when the kingdom of God would come to pass. Now the appellation "kingdom of God" was a messianic term to the Pharisees. It concerned the rule of the coming messiah over the world as the Torah had promised.⁵ But to Jesus, the phrase the kingdom of God pointed to Him personally. In this context, His answers deal more with what is a part of His essence on a personal level. Because of this, Jesus keeps His answers centered around the rapture of His church-body.

I tell you, in that night there will be two in one bed: the one will be taken and the other will be left. Two will be grinding together: the one will be taken and the other left. Two will be in the field: the one will be taken and the other left. And [the disciples] answered and said to Him, "Where, Lord?" So [Jesus] said to them, "Wherever the body is, there the eagles will be gathered together."

The question "Where, Lord?" posed to Jesus by the disciples, can be more specifically rendered "Where will those who are taken go?" His answer was simply "where the eagles are gathered". In other words, where their living bodies will be taken is up in the air.

The word *taken* repeated in this scripture is the Greek word *paralambano*. The word is a dual-compound of *para* and *lambano*. The first half, *para*, is the modifier "to have alongside". The second half, *lambano*, is the verb "to receive". So *paralambano* accurately translates, *to receive near in an intimate fashion* as a bridegroom would *take* a bride. Those who appreciate the relationship between a Jewish wedding and the rapture of the church will understand the scope of using such a tender word.

THE READER

One must also consider who the reader of the manuscript was to be. The gospel of Matthew was written to the Jews of that day and describes Jesus as the Lion of the Tribe of Judah. This is interesting seeing how the "eagle gathering" was to take place at the time of Jacob's trouble or the great tribulation period. The eagles will gather around the carcasses of the enemies who come up against Israel.

Luke, on the other hand, was written to the gentiles and portrays Jesus' human attributes. Again we see the parallel with the gentile church-body assembled in the air with their Lord among the soaring eagles.

⁵ Ref. Deut. 18:15-19

CONCLUSION

When those who believe in Jesus are placed in the grave, they are not described as being dead— only asleep.⁶ This is because Jesus said, "É whoever believes in Me will *never* die."⁷ So those in the body of Jesus will remain a *soma* or "living body" and will gather with Him in the air before the tribulation period begins.

He who does *not* find life in Jesus is counted as a *ptoma* or carcass,⁸ condemned to death and consumed by way of the second eagle gathering.

Because of assumptive reasoning, I missed the important distinction between these two verses. Perhaps the Scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' day were guilty of the same error. They focused so much on the coming king, that they missed the suffering servant and thereby were taken by surprise at Messiah's first coming.

As for the two eagle gatherings, which would you like to be part of my friend? Would you like the eagles to gather around you as carrion, or would you like to gather around them as the living body of Christ? For it is through the event known as the *rapture of the church* that we who believe in Jesus will one day find ourselves assembled where eagles are.

But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus.

For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.

Therefore comfort one another with these words.

I Thessalonians 4:13-18

⁶ John 11:11-14, Acts 7:60, 1Cor. 15:6-18, 1Thess. 4:13, 2 Peter 3:4

⁷ John 11:25-26

⁸ Ref. Revelation 20:12-13