A. SETTING THE CONTEXT

The background to this discourse is Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem as a Davidic king who goes straight to the Temple to pronounce judgment. The turning of the tables in 21:12 is best not seen as a ‘cleansing’ but as a prophetic sign act, signifying judgment and foretelling the end of temple sacrifices. Jesus defends his authority to do this in a series of disputations which culminate in the formal declaration of woes against the scribes and Pharisees (chapter 23). Then, 24:1-2, Jesus leaves the Temple and when his disciples point out the buildings declares, ‘Truly, I say to you, there will be not left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.’

At the other end of the section, most commentators are agreed that the parables in chapter 25 are about being ready for God’s end-time judgment. That is, constantly prepared, unlike the five foolish virgins, faithful in service, unlike the wicked and worthless servant, caring practically for God’s people, unlike the ‘goats’ in the final scene. That final scene (this is chapter 25, from verse 31) presents us with a picture of the separation before the throne when the Son of Man comes in glory.

So we begin with the Temple and its forthcoming end, and finish with the end-time judgment of the world. It is in the intermediate material, especially 24:3-35, where we run into all sorts of disagreements and find a number of alternative readings.

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1 This is more commonly known as the ‘Apocalyptic Discourse’, the ‘Eschatological Discourse’ or ‘(Matthew’s) Olivet Discourse’. The title ‘The Discourse on Undiverted Faithfulness’ is my choice, based on what seems to be Matthew’s purpose for the discourse (see below).
B. THE STRUCTURE OF MATTHEW 24-25

The basic structure is a sentence of destruction on the temple (24:1-2), followed by a
question-answer session on the Mount of Olives about its timing and significance
(24:3-25:46).

This further breaks down into: some disciples ask a question (24:3), and Jesus
answers. Jesus’ answer is long and complex. The first part is bracketed by warnings
about false messiahs and prophets (24:4-28). This is followed by a description of the
Son of Man coming in judgment and salvation (24:29-31), and an explanatory parable
(24:32-35).

A statement about the unknown timing of a certain ‘day’ (24:36) then introduces a
sequence of parables which exhort to wakefulness and readiness: Three parables of
vigilance (24:37-44), a parable about a servant (24:45-51), the parable of the wise
and foolish virgins (25:1-13), the parable of the talents (25:14-30) and a final scene (not a
parable) of final judgment (25:31-46).

The disciples’ question in 24:3 therefore sets the stage for what follows. Matthew has
expanded the question in Mark 13:4 which was simply ‘Tell us, when will these
things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are about to happen?’
Matthew has, ‘Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your
coming and of the close of the age?’ If Matthew is redacting Mark, then he may have
done this to tease out the components in the question put by the disciples. The explicit
question is: ‘When will the temple be destroyed?’ (given what Jesus has said in verse
2). But the Temple is so essential to the world as they know it that when they ask
about its end they are also asking about the end of all things. We can expect Jesus’
answer to separate these two components out.

The explanatory parable 24:32-34 is also a potential guide to the structure of Jesus’
answer. When you see the leaves, then comes the summer. So we can expect Jesus’
answer in 24:4-31 to have something of the form: when you see the signs, A, then will
come the thing signified, B.

C. MAKING SENSE OF JESUS’ ANSWER

Unfortunately, there is no consensus amongst interpreters on what the signs are in
24:4-31 and what they signify. A list of disputed phrases would have to include:

- What is the referent of ‘the end’ in verses 6 and 14?
- What is the referent of ‘the abomination of desolation… standing in the holy
  place’ (verse 15)?
- What is the referent of ‘the coming of the Son of Man’ in verse 27?
- What are the referents of ‘the sign of the Son of Man’ and ‘the Son of Man
  coming on the clouds of heaven …’ (verse 30)?
- What is the referent of ‘the coming of the Son of Man’ in verse 39 (and
  likewise in verse 44 and the similar phrase in 25:31)?

The main options are (in chronological order): the cross (and subsequent resurrection /
exaltation); the destruction of the temple in AD 70; and the final end-time judgment
of the world (the Second Advent or Parousia).
We can chart the main suggestions like this:

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>v.15 ('the abomination of desolation')</td>
<td>Final sign of end time judgment</td>
<td>AD70</td>
<td>AD70</td>
<td>Cross</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vv.27, 30 ('the coming of the Son of Man')</td>
<td>End-time judgment</td>
<td>End-time judgment</td>
<td>AD70</td>
<td>Exultation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After v.35 ('the coming of the Son of Man')</td>
<td>End-time judgment</td>
<td>End-time judgment</td>
<td>End-time judgment</td>
<td>End-time judgment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Commentators then take different lines on the logic of how Jesus’ answer addresses the disciples’ question:

1. In Davies and Allison (pp.326-391), the logic of the question and answer is reconstructed like this:

   (1-2) The temple will be destroyed.

   (3) The disciples’ question ‘...puts the emphasis of what follows not upon the destruction of the temple but upon the last things’ (p.337).

   Jesus doesn’t directly answer the question if the disciples want to know about the end of the temple; but regarding the end of the age: a period of tribulation (4-28) will be followed by the Parousia (29-35).

   The period of tribulation further breaks down:

   (4-8) The beginning of the woes.

   (9-14) The intensification of the woes.

   (15-28) The climax of the woes. Davies and Allison are not sure whether this includes a reference to AD70. If it does, then AD70 does not exhaust the significance of these verses ‘which plainly envisage eschatological events to come’ (p.331).

   The Parousia further breaks down:

   (29-31) The coming of the Son of Man.

   (32-33) A parable. When ‘all these things’ (the signs of verse 5ff or verse 15ff) are seen, then the end (verses 29ff) must be near.

   (34-35) Concluding statements. Davies and Allison take ‘all these things’ in verse 34, which will happen in ‘this generation’, to include the whole ‘eschatological scenario as outlined in vv.4-31’ (p.367). This is consistent with their interpretation of 10:23 as the Parousia coming within a generation. (However, they also concede that ‘all these things’ in verse 35 cannot include the Parousia. This would make their reading much more in line with that of Carson – see below.)

   (36ff) But the timing of the Parousia is uncertain, so keep watch etc.

2. In Carson (pp.448-511), the logic of the question and answer is reconstructed like this:

   (1-2) The temple will be destroyed.

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2 The history of interpretation of this passage and its parallels in Mark and Luke is enormously complex. Carson, *Matthew*, 2:488-495, has a brief survey. See also Davies and Allison, *Matthew* 19-28, 328-333. Here we shall consider a small cross-section of the more plausible interpretations.
(3) The disciples ask about what is in their mind ‘a single complex web of events’ (p.495): when will the temple be destroyed and thereby the eschatological end arrive?

(4-28) Answer part A: There will be a delay before the end, and in this time do not be deceived by things (or false Messiahs) which seem to mark the end of all things but are merely the birth pains – signs of the end. (Notice how the warning against deception brackets this material: 4-6 and 23-28.) Within this, one key and particularly destructive period of tribulation will lie in the events surrounding the destruction of the temple in AD70 (15-22).

(29-31) Answer part B: Carson takes this material to refer to the Second Advent. In verse 29, ‘the tribulation of those days’ then refers to all the tribulation referred to in 4-28, not just that specifically in verse 21. The Son of Man comes with his angels at the end-time judgment, and the elect are gathered, as at the end of chapter 25.

(32-35) These verses then describe the relation between the signs of the end, A, and the end itself, B. When you see the leaves, then comes the summer. When you see the signs, then you now the end is imminent, very near – Jesus is at the gates. That is the next thing on the divine agenda. We read verse 34 like this: this generation will not pass away until all these signs – all the kinds of things described in 4-28 – have been seen.

(36-44) But the exact timing of the end remains open, so keep watch. Jesus then continues to develop this theme to the end of chapter 25: Keep watch, be ready, be faithful, and look after each other.

3. In France (pp.885-946, esp. p.900), the logic of the question and answer is reconstructed like this:

(1-2) Jesus leaves the Temple and predicts its destruction.

(3) The disciples then ask a double question: (i) ‘When will the Temple be destroyed?’ and (ii) ‘What will be the sign of your coming in end-time judgment and the end of the age?’

The first question is answered in 4-35, which concerns the immediate future and breaks down like this:

(4-14) There will be preliminary events, not to be taken as signs of the end of the Temple, and persecution and discouragement. But stand firm, and then the end of the Temple will come.

(15-28) The beginning of the end of the Temple. (With a parenthesis in 27-28: do not confuse the events of those days with the end-time judgment.)

(29-31) The actual end of the Temple, expressed in terms of OT prophetic imagery, inaugurating the new age of ingathering.

(32-35) The preliminary events (15-28) will surely lead to the final end of the Temple (29-31); it will all be over in a generation, and you can be sure of this.

The second question is answered in 24:36-25:46. The end-time judgment will be unexpected and unpredictable, so keep watch etc.

4. In Bolt (see attached notes), the logic of the question and answer is reconstructed like this:

(1-2) The temple is not the place to look for security, merely a part of transitory creation.

(3) The disciples’ question is: when will these things be? This further divides into (i) ‘What will be the sign of your coming?’ and (ii) ‘When will be the close of the age?’

(4-14) Answering part (ii) of question: Do not be led astray because the normal chaos of the world will continue until the gospel is proclaimed in all the all the world – then the end will come.

Jesus now turns to answer part (i) of the question:
(15-22) Since the end is not yet, look for the abomination of desolation spoken of by Daniel and flee. This will be the greatest of all tribulations (21).

(23-28) But the coming of the Son of Man will be obvious – don’t fall for anything else

(29-31) Its ‘sign’ will immediately follow the great tribulation. Then ‘all the tribes of the land will mourn’, alluding to Zech. 12:10 which also states that ‘they will look on him whom they have pierced’. Jesus is therefore referring to the cross. The Son of Man then comes with power and great glory (the resurrection/exaltation). With his coming, the Son of Man will send his angels=messengers (the disciples) to gather the elect.

(32-35) All this will take place in a generation.

(36-44) But exact timing remains open, so (you disciples) keep watch. (See 26:36-46, esp. vv.38, 40, 41).

These suggestions all have some advantages and some disadvantages.

Davies and Allison’s solution at least has the advantage of simplicity. However, if we take them to be saying that the final Parousia will take place within a generation, it is also difficult on this view to see Jesus as other than wrong or deceptive about the future.

Caron’s reconstruction just about works, but is somewhat strained in places. In particular, ‘that tribulation’ in v.29 must refer to all the tribulation described in the previous verses, not merely the tribulation of verse 21. When Jesus says ‘all these things’ in verse 34 we also have to exclude from that verses 29-31.

France’s reconstruction looks at first like a neat way of thinking about the distinction between near ‘comings’ and far ‘comings’. However, it is also rather strained in places. In particular, it is not at all obvious that Matthew marks v.36 as Jesus turning to address a completely different issue, such that his answer neatly divides into material concerning the immediate future (24:4-35) and material concerning the far future (24:36-25:46). France argues that ‘that day’ (v.36, the eschatological future day of judgment) contrasts with ‘these things’ (v.34, things which take place in ‘this generation’, which he takes to encompass everything in vv.4-33). That is possible: but is it strong enough to bear the weight he places on it? We could also quite naturally read ‘that day’ in v.36 as simply picking up what Jesus has just been talking about: the coming of the Son of Man in v.30. The line of thought flows on without contradiction: when they see the signs, they know he is near (v.33), but they do not know the day or hour (v.35). Likewise, there is nothing obvious which indicates a strong distinction between the ‘coming of the Son of Man’ in verses 37 and 39 and the related expression back in v.30. Indeed, the very fact that Matthew has Jesus repeating the phrase within such a short span suggests he wants us to connect them together. (At least, we would expect a much stronger indication if he does not.) In the end, this black and white near-far division of Jesus’ answer feels just too neat – much neater than Matthew 24! There is plenty in vv.4-35 which reads naturally as referring to events beyond the immediate future. This is especially true in vv.9-14, but we may also suppose that false Christs and the danger of going astray will remain a danger in the long-term.

Peter Bolt’s approach has the unique advantage of highlighting the connections between chapters 24-25 and the narrative which follows. We see the disciples called upon to keep awake (see 26:36-46, esp. vv.38, 40, 41). We see darkness over the land (27:45), the land shaking (27:51). Then Jesus is vindicated in his resurrection (28:1-10), he is given all authority (28:18) and the gospel is taken into all the world by his messengers=angels (28:19-20). However, the connections are harder to make sense of from 24:36 onwards. Is ‘that day’ merely the cross – in which case the uncertainty is now past? It seems more natural to read a long-term uncertainty over timing in the parables of 24:36-25:30, culminating in a future day of judgment (25:31-46).

An alternative to the above suggestions is to explore the possibility that Jesus’ answer is paradigmatic rather than programmatic. That is, rather than give a chronological program of coming events, Matthew has Jesus giving a basic paradigm that supports
the paraenetic material in the chapters, and his pastoral purpose that followers of Jesus should (a) not be deceived (24:4, 6, 13, 23-24, 26), and (b) keep usefully awake (24:42-44, 46; 25:4, 13, 29).

There therefore may be a degree of referential ambiguity and obscurity in Jesus’ answer – but it is deliberate and controlled. There is something of this suggestion in J. Meier, who comments on 24:15-22, saying, ‘The intended vagueness of this apocalyptic manner of speaking allows the past historical event to act as a model and forewarning of the greater sacrilege still to come, hence, the admonition to read with understanding. The “great tribulation” of the destruction of Jerusalem foreshadows the great tribulation of the end’.³

(In pursuing this line of interpretation, what we are doing is bearing in mind that it is likely Matthew is reporting this question-answer session for some purpose applicable to post-resurrection (and post AD70) readers. Jesus is talking to his disciples before the events of the cross (...and resurrection, exaltation, destruction of the temple, and end-time judgement). Matthew is showing his readers Jesus telling his disciples... (showing after the events of the cross) We are simply asking: for what purpose?)

The basic paradigm in Jesus’ answer is that turmoil and tribulation will inevitably be followed by vindication. They are the (ironically) comforting signs that vindication is ‘near’, just as leaves on a fig tree are signs that summer is near (24:32). Therefore, in the midst of turmoil and tribulation, do not mistake the signs for what they signify and thereby be deceived and led astray. Vindication will be clear when it comes. But also, because the timing of vindication is open, keep awake.

However, Matthew also gives the clues we need to see this paradigm working out in identifiable historical events in such a way that reinforces how the paradigm functions for disciples preparing for end-time judgment:

1. The first time we encounter the paradigm in action lies within the narrative of Matthew itself, as in Peter Bolt’s analysis above. Likewise, Meier describes the death and resurrection of Jesus as a ‘proleptic parousia’.⁴

2. A disciple witnessing the final fall of the Temple in AD70 also sees the paradigm in action. (The same applies to later readers looking back on those events.) There is great tribulation in Jerusalem, and Jesus’ followers are under extreme pressure. Nevertheless, they are publically vindicated in their choice. It is those who failed to recognise Jesus as Christ who are judged, and the temple at the centre of that is finally destroyed.

3. These historical expressions of vindication following tribulation give weight and credibility to the promise that vindication will follow the tribulation faced by later disciples. Within a generation of Jesus speaking, instances of

³ Meier, Matthew, 283.

⁴ That is, anticipating something future using present-tense language. Meier, Matthew, 289. We could also say that the death and resurrection of Jesus are a proleptic end of the temple, as the temple curtain is torn in 27:51.
every example he has talked about in 24:4-31 have taken place – including foretastes of the end-time vindication itself! His word is trustworthy (24:35). Therefore keep going: do not be led astray; keep awake.

1. Tribulation and the danger of deception (24:4-28)

vv.4-8 Jesus begins his answer with a general warning against being led astray (v.4, ‘See that no one leads you astray’; v.6, ‘See that you are not alarmed). This sets the paraenetic tone for everything which follows. Many things will happen that may look like the end, but ‘the end is not yet’. These are but ‘the beginning of the birth pangs’. The most straightforward reading of ‘the end’ here (also v.14) is that it refers to ‘the close of the age’ raised in the disciples’ question.

vv.9-14 This is followed by a call to long-term endurance. Jesus seems to be presupposing the international witness following the Great Commission: ‘you will be hated by all nations’. The disciples need to endure, because ‘the end’ is delayed, so that the gospel can be proclaimed throughout the whole world.

vv.15-22 Jesus then turns to consider a specific instance of great tribulation within this. When they see ‘the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel standing in the holy place’, then there will intense tribulation in the heart of Judea.

This is an allusion to Dan 9:27 (also Dan 11:31, 12:11), where the ‘abomination of desolation’ is linked with the destruction of the temple sanctuary, its profanation and the end of temple sacrifices. Daniel’s prophecies build upon Jeremiah’s prophesy of judgment and return (Dan 9:2) and Jeremiah’s preaching was focussed on the fruitless temple (Jer 7:1-8:3; 8:13; cf. Ezekiel 5:11-15) announcing the destruction of the whole city, an event fulfilled on a ‘Day of the LORD’ in 586 BC (Lamentations 2:21-22). Daniel’s prophesies build on that and some commentators think they may refer forward to the profanation and destruction of temple and city by Antiochus Epiphanes in 167 BC. Given that similar events took place in 70 AD and 135 AD, it is reasonable to suppose that is what Jesus was referring forward to in vv.15-22. Readers after 70 AD might well associate this with the corruption and destruction of the temple which happened in that year (cf. the clearer allusion in Luke’s account, Lk 21:20).

However, we need to keep in mind that in that in the Synoptics the temple effectively ends when Jesus dies and the curtain of the temple is torn (Mt 27:51, Mk 15:38, Lk 23:45). The cross is also an ‘end-time event’ or ‘Day of the L ORD’. Indeed, it is the key end-time event: it is God coming in judgment in a manner that prefigures his judgement at the final end – but this time, on the Son of Man (27:51-54). It is therefore possible that we should include the cross as part of the complex web of inter-relations and allusions in this chapter, as suggested in the notes above.
Either way, what is described in vv.15-22 is the only event in 24:4-28 we can link unambiguously with the prediction of verse 2.

However, whatever this is an allusion to, it seems to be deliberately coded. As Davies and Allison note, it is written in the language of ‘eschatological events to come’ (compare, for example, v.21 to Dan 12:1). While it was common to use such language in OT accounts of divine judgement that were not the end (e.g. Isa 13, on the destruction of Babylon by the Medes; note also similar language to verse 21 in Ex 9:18, 11:6), it may well be that Jesus is using such language to show that this event at least prefigures the end. The ‘coding’ of the allusion may also serve to restrict the direct application of the imperatives here. For example, if the allusion is to events preceding AD70, then it is only those in Judea at the time (who would be familiar with the book of Daniel) who need to take note and flee.

By placing vv.15-22 at this point, Jesus is implying that no-one should be distracted by what he is describing (see v.24). The end of the temple (if that is in view) is hugely significant, as is made clear in 21:12-13, 24:1-2 and 27:51 – its end makes way for the ‘vineyard’ to be given to others (21:41). Nevertheless, it is, literally, not the end of the world! Rather than be distracted, disciples at the time, or disciples facing similar great tribulation, can take comfort that such tribulation is cut short by God (v.22), and that vindication will always come in the end.

vv.23-26 Jesus returns to the exhortation not to be led astray by false Christs, forming an inclusion with vv.4-8.

vv.27-28 There is no warrant to be distracted by things which are not the end, because when the Son of Man does come, it will be plainly obvious to the whole world.

2. Vindication will surely follow tribulation (24:29-35)

v.26, 31 If we insist that ‘the tribulation of those days’ must refer especially to vv.15-22 and that must refer to the tribulation preceding AD70, then we are led to a reading along the lines of R. T. France above. Similarly, if vv.15-22 refers to the tribulation preceding the cross, then we are led to a reading along the lines of Peter Bolt above. In these cases, the vindication in vv.26-30 would be a partial vindication, and the gathering of the elect in v.31 would mark the start of the mission to the nations (cf. 28:18-20).

However if ‘the tribulation of those days’ refers more generally to all the kinds tribulation described in vv.4-28 (with AD70 as a possible special instance), then we are led to a reading along the lines of Davis

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5 Davies and Allison, Matthew 19-28, 331.

6 Notice that the timing fits Peter Bolt’s reading better.
and Allison or Carson above. In this case, the vindication of vv.26-30 would be the final, end-time vindication of God’s purposes, and v.31 would mark the gathering at the end of the age (cf. 25:31-46).

Or there could be a deliberate ambiguity, as suggested above. Both particular and general instances of tribulation are followed by vindication. (But the emphasis in this case would be on final vindication. After all, final judgment and final vindication has been the repeated emphasis in Matthew from the beginning, and we would expect to see that here too.)

vv.29-31 There are clear allusions here to the coming of one like a Son of Man in Dan. 7. However, darkened sun, falling stars and shaking are familiar images across the Scriptures of the LORD coming in divine judgment (e.g. Isa 13:10, 34:4; Joel 2:10, 3:15-16). In Dan 7:13 the Son of Man comes to the Ancient of Days; the direction might suggest a unique connection with Jesus’ ascension rather than his end-time return. But the event in Dan 7:13 is parallel to its interpretation in Dan 7:26-27 (the final vindication of the saints) and also, in the structure of Daniel, the final victory of God’s kingdom in Dan 2:44. In any case, Jesus does not mention the direction of movement in verse 30.

vv.32-35 The parable most likely explains the relationship between 24:4-28 and 24:29-31. On a fig tree, leaves are a sign that summer is near. Likewise, seeing ‘all these things’ is a sign that the coming of the Son of Man is near.

Jesus talks about ‘all these things’ again in verse 34 – so again referring to the tribulations in 24:4-28: he says all of them will be seen within the current generation. (But see also notes above on how in some sense vv.29-31 could also be said to have occurred in the same time-frame.)

If Jesus is saying that The End is near, then the nearness of the end is ‘near’ as in the kingdom being ‘at hand’ in 3:2 and 4:17 – i.e. imminent, next on God’s agenda, already present in some partial sense, but not necessarily temporally immediate (as we see in the parables of chapter 13). The final timing is known only by the Father (24:36ff).

3. The uncertain timing of vindication – keep watch (24:36-25:46)

Davies and Allison identify six main themes in this section related to the uncertain timing of The End: (1) There will be division into two groups (24:37-41, 45-51; 25:14-46); (2) the End will be delayed (24:48; 25:14, 19); (3) the hour is unknown (24:36, 42, 44, 50); (4) the End will be sudden (24:27-9, 39, 43-4, 50); (5) there is a need to keep watch (24:42, 43); and (6) there is a requirement of prudence or faithfulness (24:45-51; 25:14-30).7

7 Davies and Allison, Matthew 19-28, 394.
They also have a useful chart mapping out some of the key textual patterns in this section, reproduced here:\(^8\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Because you</th>
<th>do not know</th>
<th>the day</th>
<th>or hour</th>
<th>of the coming</th>
<th>of the Son of Man</th>
<th>keep watch</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>24:36</td>
<td>know</td>
<td>day</td>
<td></td>
<td>hour</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>24:37</td>
<td></td>
<td>days</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Son of Man</td>
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<tr>
<td>24:38</td>
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<tr>
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<td>know</td>
<td>came</td>
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<td>Son of Man</td>
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<tr>
<td>24:42</td>
<td>know</td>
<td>day</td>
<td></td>
<td>comes</td>
<td>watch</td>
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<tr>
<td>24:43</td>
<td>know</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>comes</td>
<td>watch</td>
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<td>24:44</td>
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<td>comes</td>
<td>Son of Man</td>
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<td>24:46</td>
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<td>comes</td>
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<td>24:48</td>
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<td>comes</td>
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<td>24:50</td>
<td>know</td>
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<td>hour</td>
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<td>25:10</td>
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<td>came</td>
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<td>25:13</td>
<td>know</td>
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<td>hour</td>
<td>watch</td>
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<td>25:19</td>
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<td>came</td>
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<td>25:27</td>
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v.36 _Contra_ France, it does seem most natural to take ‘that day or hour’ to refer to the ‘Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven’ in v.30, hence the repeated phrase ‘the coming of the Son of Man’ in verses 37 and 39 (cf. v.44). _With_ France (and most others), in the parables which follow, and in the final scene in 25:31-46, it also seems fairly clear that from this point we are concerned with the eschatological judgment.

Not even the Son knows the day or hour. This ignorance is presumably part of his profound dependence on his Father in his incarnation.

v.37 Verse 37 begins with a ‘for’ (missing from the NIV and ESV), linking what follows to the uncertainty of ‘that day or hour’ in v.36.

vv.37-39 A **comparison with the days of Noah** begins three **parables on vigilance**. Like the judgment at the time of Noah, the final judgment will burst in unexpectedly and many will be caught off guard.

vv.40-42 This is followed by two examples, in perfect parallelism, of **one taken, one left**. Just as ‘See that no one leads you astray’ set the paraenetic tone of 24:4-35, so here ‘Therefore, **stay awake**’ (v.42) sets the tone for 24:36-25:46. The reason is, ‘for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming’.

vv.43-44 In the next parable, **the coming of the Son of Man** is compared to the uncertain timing of **a thief coming in the night**. The application is: ‘Therefore, you must also be ready’.

vv.45-51 The **parable of the servant** continues the idea of an unexpected coming: v.50, ‘the master of that servant will come on a day when he

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\(^8\) Davies and Allison, _Matthew 19-28_, 377.
does not expect him’. If the servant is diligent, then he is a **faithful and wise** servant (v.45) and will be rewarded (v.47). If the servant uses the **delay** of his master to indulge in self-serving activity, he is a **wicked** servant (v.48) and when the master returns **unexpectedly** (v.50), will be severely punished (v.51).

The **parable of the wise and foolish virgins** is longer and even more allegorical in style, though probably not a formal ‘allegory’. The scene is a wedding celebration. This is a classic five act story. Five **wise** virgins take oil for their lamps and five **foolish** virgins do not (**setting**, vv.1-4). The bridegroom is **delayed** (**complication**, v.5). In the middle of the night (i.e. **unexpectedly**), the arrival of the bridegroom is announced and the foolish virgins ask for oil from the wise virgins, but there is none to spare (**conflict**, vv.6-9). Then the bridegroom arrives and only the wise virgins go in to the marriage feast (**climax**, v.10). Afterwards, the foolish virgins are denied entry (**denouement**, vv.11-12). Jesus gives the application in v.13: ‘**Watch** therefore, for you **know** neither the **day** nor the **hour**.’

Jesus has already made the equation Jesus = Christ = bridegroom (9:15), drawing on OT precedents equating Yahweh to a bridegroom. The virgins clearly represent disciples, wise or foolish, but it is undoubtedly stretching the allegory too far to suppose their virginity is significant (as Augustine did)! David Garland suggests the oil represents ‘evidential works of righteousness’. This is possible, but also probably going too far. As Carson says, ‘It is merely an element in the narrative showing that the foolish virgins were unprepared for the delay and so shut out in the end’.

The (even longer) **parable of the talents** lacks the elements of unexpected and sudden return and the call to watchfulness. Rather than there being a ‘delay’, the master is simply away ‘for a long time’ (v.19). The focus is more on **faithfulness** and **prudence** while awaiting his return.

There are three scenes.

In **Scene I** (vv.16-18), a master entrusts property to three slaves: five talents to one, two talents to a second and one talent to a third.

In **Scene II** (vv.16-18), the master departs and the slaves carry out their

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business: the first makes five talents more, the second one talent more
and the third simply buries his talent.

In **Scene III** (vv.19-30), the master returns and settles accounts. There
is reward for the one who made five talents; reward for the one who
made one talent; and punishment for the one who buried his talent.

Despite the groups of threes, this is still a separation into two groups.
The reward for the first two servants is identical: ‘Well done, good and
faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over
much. Enter into the joy of your master’ (vv.21, 23). The punishment
for the third servant is severe (vv.26-30).

What did the third servant do so wrong? He tries to blame the master
for his actions and slanders him, saying ‘I knew you to be a hard man,
reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you scattered no
seed’ (v.24) – i.e. he was afraid of losing his money, which is why he
buried it (v.25). His words and actions betray a ‘fear which is the
opposite of love and trust’.  

vv. 31-46 The final scene uses the image of a shepherd dividing his flock
to portray the judgment of the nations when the Son of Man finally
appears in his glory. (The ‘Son of Man coming’, ‘glory’ and ‘angels’
also appeared in 24:29-31, supporting the readings of Davies and
Allison and Carson above, over and against those of France and Peter
Bolt.) Davies and Allison, following Gnilka, describe this as ‘a word-
picture of the Last Judgment’, rather than a parable.

This is a conventional judgment scene. The scene is set in vv.31-34,
with the nations gathered before the King, who will separate them into
two groups, ‘as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats’. The
King speaks first to those on his right (vv.34-40) and then to those on
his left (vv.41-45). Jesus concludes: the second group will go away to
eternal punishment; the first to eternal life (v.46).

The two speeches follow an identical pattern. The King speaks,
declaring reward or punishment on the basis of whether or not the
group gave him food or drink, welcomed him, clothed him, visited him
when he was sick, or came to him in prison (vv.34-36, 41-43). The
group then ask when these things happened (vv.37-39, 44). The King
responds: ‘Truly I say to you, as you did (not do) it to one of the least
of these (my brothers), you did (not do) it to me’ (vv.40, 45).

This criterion almost certainly builds on **the test of worthiness** in
chapter 10. In chapter 10:9-15 when a messenger with nothing greets a
household, whether he is welcomed and heard dictates whether or not

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that household is ‘worthy’. As David Garland notes,\textsuperscript{15} this is
generalised at the end of chapter 10: ‘...whoever gives one of these
little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly I say
to you, he will by no means lose his reward’ (10:42). ‘Brothers’ is a
term used exclusively of Jesus’ disciples in Matthew (12:49-50; 23:8;
28:10). ‘Little ones’ is used of those who believe in Jesus (10:42; 18:6,
12, 14). How you treat the messenger shows how you respond to the
message; and how you treat the ‘brothers’ and ‘little ones’ shows how
you treat Jesus and the one who sent him (cf.10:40). Garland
concludes: ‘The nations are judged according to the way they treated
Jesus’ humble brethren who represented Christ to them’\textsuperscript{16}.

Garland also notes that this judgement scene ‘has often been used to
emphasise the Christian’s obligation to the down and out in society’\textsuperscript{17} —
and, we might add, thus makes such activity a primary condition of
salvation. Without negating the Scriptural call to attend to the needy in
general, it would seem that the purpose of this scene lies elsewhere.

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\textsuperscript{15} Garland, \textit{Reading Matthew}, 243.
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\textsuperscript{17} Garland, \textit{Reading Matthew}, 244.
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