

## Keith Mathison and the Biblical Time Statements – pt. 1

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**IN THE BOOK WRITTEN** to blunt the explosive growth of Covenant Eschatology, i.e. full preterism, editor and contributing author Keith Mathison attempted to negate the force of the biblical use of the language of imminence. That book, *When Shall These Things Be? (WSTTB?)*, *When Shall These Things Be? A Reformed Response to Hyper-Preterism*, Keith Mathison, editor, (Phillipsburg, New Jersey, P & R Publishing, 2004), has done literally nothing to stem the tide of the growing preterist movement, and one of the reasons why is that readers of the book, familiar with Mathison's other writings, realize that he has seriously contradicted himself—and Scripture. We will illustrate that as we go along.

Mathison seeks to lay a foundation of understanding Old Testament prophetic fulfillments to guide our understanding of New Testament prophetic fulfillment:

“Are there any eschatological time texts in the Old Testament, and, if so, how are they used? A brief look at the answers to these questions will help us to understand better the meaning of the New Testament eschatological writings.” (p 157)

“Of particular significance for our study is the use of time texts by the prophets. If we can understand how they used these kinds of texts, and if we can understand how (and when) these prophecies were fulfilled, we will be much closer to understanding the use of such texts in the New Testament.” (p 16)

Based upon this premise, Mathison lists several types of Old Testament prophetic fulfillment that he believes allow for “wiggle” room in the New Testament time texts. For example, he writes:

“Even more relevant for our discussion are those Old Testament passages that may be classified as short-term time texts. Both Isaiah 13:22 and Habakkuk 2:3-3, for example, speak of the imminence of the judgment to come upon Babylon. (p 165, 2nd paragraph).

Mathison then implies that, given the dates for the writing of these prophecies and the fall of Babylon, the prophecies were fulfilled as much as 200 years after they were given.

**Response:** It is fascinating that Mathison would appeal to Isaiah 13 as proof that time statements mean nothing. When he does so, he stands at odds with some of his own brethren and even at odds with the dispensationalists whom he often condemns for *their* rejecting of time statements!

Notice what the *Bible Knowledge Commentary* (a dispensational commentary), says of Isaiah 13:

In Isaiah's day that judgment was coming because of the tremendous political turmoil of the next several decades that would culminate with the fall of Babylon at the hands of the Assyrians in 689 BC. . . . the statements about the heavenly bodies no longer functioning may figuratively describe the total turnaround of the political structure of the Near East. The same would be true of the heavens trembling and the earth shaking, v. 13, figures of speech suggesting all-encompassing destruction." (P. 1060) – "The word 'them' against whom the Medes were stirred up (v. 17) were the Assyrians referred to in v. 14-16, not the Babylonians. It seems better to understand this section as dealing with events pertaining to the Assyrian's sack of Babylon in December 689 BC." (Walvoord and Zuck, *Bible Knowledge Commentary* Vol. I, Wheaton, Ill; Victor Books, 1985, 1059f).

Then, Kenneth Gentry, fellow Postmillennialist with Mathison and contributor to *WSTTB?*, says this of Isaiah 13: "Babylon did fall soon thereafter. It came in 689 BC. This was around eleven years after Isaiah wrote in about 700 BC." Gentry notes that commentators (Ice) confuse "separate falls of Babylon, the one here in 689 BC and a later one in 539 BC."

Gentry then cites Walvoord and Zuck, who point out that in Isaiah 13:17, when it says that the Medes and Persians would be "stirred up against 'them' that the antecedent is to the Assyrians, whom the Medes destroyed." (Kenneth Gentry, *The Great Tribulation Past or Future*, Grand Rapids, Kregel, 1992, 185f).

Thus, Mathison's claim that "at hand" in Isaiah 13 refers to a period of perhaps 200 years is falsified by history and by both those in his own camp and dispensationalism.

Then, when Mathison claims that Habbakuk was not fulfilled for a long time, he is either ignorant of the dating of Habbakuk, (he is not) or is misleading his readers. In his tome, *From Age To Age: The Unfolding of Biblical Eschatology*, Mathison wrote of Habakkuk: "He likely prophesied between 609 and 605 (BC) during the reign of the Judean king Jehoikim in the last days of Assyria's long period of imperial dominance." He chronicles the decline of Assyria at the hands of the Babylonians, but the book of Habakkuk foretold the fall of Jerusalem at the hands of Babylon, and the then coming destruction of Babylon. Notice now, Habakkuk 2:3:

*For the vision is yet for an appointed time; But at the end it will speak, and it will not lie. Though it tarries, wait for it; Because it will surely come, It will not tarry.*

Several things are to be noted here:

- The time appointed for the fulfillment had been determined—it was "appointed."
- Fulfillment was certain—"It will surely come."
- There are two temporal aspects of the prophecy, i.e., the predicted destruction of Judah at the hands of Babylon (this *was* imminent), and the judgment of Babylon herself.

**Fact:** Within 3-5 years (ca. 606 BC), the Babylonians invaded Judah for the first of three waves of invasion, with the final destruction of Jerusalem occurring in BC 586. Thus, there was no long

protracted period before fulfillment. It is interesting, perhaps revealing, that Mathison would have us remove our focus from the imminent fulfillment of the impending invasion *by* Babylon, and think instead that the real concern of the text was the later invasion *of* Babylon.

**Fact:** As Habakkuk chapter 3 so poignantly and powerfully shows, it was this judgment—the impending and imminent destruction of Jerusalem—at the forefront of Habakkuk’s concern and vision. That does not mean that he was totally unconcerned with what would happen to Babylon, but the Lord basically told him not to worry about that—“He” would take care of that in His own time. Habakkuk was to focus on what was to happen to his people, and that was going to happen—and did happen—within a short time. And thus, again, there was no long protracted period before fulfillment.

In what seems like a paradoxical bit of verbiage, note that the Lord said: “*Though it tarries, wait for it; Because it will surely come, It will not tarry.*” How do we take this seeming contradiction—“If it tarries wait for it, because it will not tarry”? Well, first of all, YHWH assured the prophet that fulfillment would NOT tarry. So, what does the comment “though it tarries, wait for it” mean? I suggest that it has to do with the mental state of Habakkuk. Perhaps he had a particular time frame in mind for fulfillment—still within the confines of “it will surely come,” but in his own dread and impatience he pondered, “when is it coming?”

As K. L. Barker noted, (citing Heflin):

Impatience is the normal human response to God’s promise to answer his people. God warned the prophet to wait on the prophecy. The answer of God would surely come, but the prophet should write down the message because from the prophet’s point of view the prophecy might seem slow. The prophet was to “preserve it until its fulfillment could be demonstrated historically.” God. (Heflin, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, and Haggai*, 90.) Achtemeier notes that “from the beginning of his work, God has seen its goal and completion” (*Nahum–Malachi*, 43). (Barker, K. L. (1999). *Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah* (Vol. 20, p. 323). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers).

Likewise, *The Translator’s Handbook on Habbakuk* offers this:

*For* indicates the relationship between this verse and the previous one. The message is to be written down because the time of its fulfillment has not yet come. makes this explicit by saying “*Put it in writing, because...*” In some languages this first clause may be expressed as “You must write this message down, because...”

The reason is stated in RSV as *still the vision awaits its time* (better, “appointed time,” as in RV, NIV), TEV expresses this much more clearly as “*it is not yet time for it to come true.*” Despite this the Lord reassures Habakkuk that the vision

*hastens to the end—it will not lie.* The Hebrew word translated *hastens* can mean “to puff or pant.” Thus translates “it will come in breathless haste” gives the meaning less vividly but more simply as “*But the time is coming quickly, and what I show you will come true.*” Note that here the negative statement *will not lie* is expressed in positive form as “*will come true.*” It may be helpful to some translators to follow this example.

The second half of the verse deals with impatience, the natural human reaction to delay: *If it seems slow, wait for it.* The word translated “wait” has overtones of hope, which are strengthened by the context here. “*It may seem slow in coming, but wait for it.*” (Clark, D. J., & Hatton, H. A. *A Translator’s Handbook on the Book of Habakkuk*, New York: United Bible Societies, from Logos, 91, 1989).

Many other similar citations could be given, but these suffice to show that the “delay” in the text *was in the mind of the prophet*, not in any objective, historical delay. After all, the day was “appointed.” It was not some elastic, “silly putty” appointing. The time was set in the council of God, and it would not delay.

So, the Lord’s word was sure. The time was appointed. The time would not be delayed. Fulfillment would not tarry.

In following articles we will examine other claims by Mathison in which he attempts to convince his readers that “at hand,” “shortly,” “quickly” etc. do not convey true temporal imminence. However, before examining his other claims, let me share with the readers what Mathison has had to say about time statements of imminence, when he is not trying to answer the full preterist view.

In 1999, Mathison wrote a book in which he defended the postmillennial paradigm against dispensationalism. Many have and do find his interpretation of several key eschatological texts to be more than strange, and certainly not something found in the creeds or early church history. Nonetheless, here are Mathison’s comments on 1 Thessalonians 5:1f which he applies—as he also does 2 Thessalonians 1-2—to AD 70. He gives five reasons for that application (pay careful attention to the hermeneutic that Mathison employs, which is in stark contrast to his arguments on Isaiah and Habakkuk above, not to mention other passages that we will examine in subsequent issues):

1.) Language of impending judgment links it to 1 Thessalonians 5. It is to be noted that on page 231f, commenting on 2 Thessalonians 2, Mathison also applies 2 Thessalonians 2 to the first century: “when the time indicators within the chapter itself are also taken into consideration there seems to be no compelling reasons to understand the ‘coming’ and ‘gathering’ of 2 Thessalonians 2 to refer to anything other than the same first-century ‘coming’ and ‘gathering’ described in Matthew 24.”

2.) The text speaks of God's coming judgment upon those who are afflicting them at the time of the writing.

3.) Those afflicting them are the Jews.

4.) There is a distinct parallel between 2 Thessalonians 1, Daniel 7:9-12, and Joel 2-3, in which fiery judgment is intimately connected with events that are known to have occurred in the first century, namely the rule of the fourth kingdom. Joel in fact refers to this judgment as the Day of the Lord.

5.) There is a distinct parallel between 2 Thessalonians 1 and Matthew 16:27-28 which describes a coming in judgment in the lifetime of the first-century generation. (Keith Mathison, *Postmillennialism: Eschatology of Hope*, (P & R Publishing, 1999, 227ff).

Again, observe Mathison's hermeneutic, which is absolutely valid and correct. Yet, the very hermeneutic that he employs here is abandoned and distorted when he attempts to refute preterism in *WSTTB?*.

As we proceed to examine other claims by Mathison regarding Old Testament time statements being used in non-objective senses, I will show that Mathison has NEVER—prior to *WSTTB?*—claimed that the time statements of imminence are not to be taken seriously and objectively. As I will document, he has been adamant that any attempt to negate, mitigate, obscure, or deny the objective temporal imminence in the biblical time statements is in fact to pervert the truth of Scriptures.

What we have seen so far, however, is more than revealing. We have seen that Mathison has ignored the historical context—and the imminent fulfillment—of the very texts that he adduces to negate the language of imminence! We have likewise seen that in his other works, in which he was not arguing against the truth of preterism, he acknowledges and honors the language of imminence. In fact, he does more than honor the “at hand” statements. He honors the audience relevance, the historical context, and the use of the personal pronouns! Unfortunately, when seeking to refute Covenant Eschatology, he ignores the hermeneutic he employed in his own books,! This utter inconsistency is more than enough for us to declare: “Objection Overruled!” But, we have much, much more, so stay tuned!