

## Keith Mathison and the Biblical Time Statements pt. 2

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**M**Y APPRECIATION TO ALL of you who have expressed thanks for the first article in response to Mathison. If you haven't done so, be sure to read the first article in this series.

Before examining a couple more of Mathison's attempts to escape, avoid, and mitigate the multitude of New Testament time statements indicating the nearness of the Lord's coming, the end of the age, and the judgment, I want to demonstrate that his attempts are at direct odds with his own well documented position on time statements; that is, when he was addressing dispensationalism. Specifically, I want not only to expose his utter inconsistency, but I want to expose the fallacy of his hermeneutic that leads to his faulty attempts at exegesis.

In the first article I pointed out Keith Mathison's own words in which, seeking to negate the time statements of imminence found in the Bible, he has contradicted not only himself, but, more importantly, Scripture. So, let's look a bit closer at Mathison's position on time statements when he is not attacking Covenant Eschatology.

### Mathison's Earlier Position on Time Statements of Imminence

The reader needs to keep in mind that historically, Mathison has argued vehemently (e.g., against dispensationalism) that to deny the objective imminence of the "at hand" time statements of the kingdom and the Lord's coming is a dangerous and false doctrine. I demonstrated this in the first article (Fall 2020 issue), but let me give here some more of Mathison's comments about New Testament time indicators. First is Mathison's concluding comment regarding 1 Thessalonians 5 and his reasons for applying the "Day of the Lord" language there as reference to the impending AD 70 judgment:

"On the basis of this evidence, we conclude that the coming of Christ for judgment in 2 Thessalonians 1 is the same as the coming of Christ for judgment revealed in the Olivet Discourse and elsewhere."  
(*Postmillennialism: An Eschatology of Hope*, New Jersey: P & R Publishing, 1999, 231f.)

So, Mathison clearly appeals to the language of imminence for understanding the impending AD 70 parousia. And we have more from his own keyboard.

In responding to the dispensational argument that time indicators of imminence are essentially nebulous, timeless indicators of imminence, meaning something "could be, or could not be, at any moment" (does that even make sense?), Mathison offered this on Revelation and the dispensational claim of "non-imminent imminence":

The other texts that are used as proof of the doctrine of Christ's imminent return (e.g. Rev. 1:1, 3;

22:6, 7, 10, 12, 20) do not support this doctrine (the dispensational doctrine, DKP). The words used in these verses mean ‘soon’ or ‘near.’ They do not allow for an interval of thousands of years. They indicate that the event referred to was impending at the time of writing. They must therefore refer to first century coming in judgment of Jerusalem, not to his personal return at the end of the age.” (Keith Mathison, *Postmillennialism An Eschatology of Hope*, (Phillipsburg, NJ, 1999), 205).

Notice also that in his tome *From Age To Age: The Unfolding of Biblical Eschatology*, (Phillipsburg, NJ; P & R Publishing, 2009), 347), commenting on the message of John the Baptizer: “Repent for the kingdom of heaven has drawn near,” Mathison claims John’s message meant: “When he announces that the kingdom of heaven is at hand, he is announcing the arrival of this kingdom that the faithful within Israel have been waiting for centuries.” In other words, per Mathison, what had once been far off, not near, not at hand, was now, truly near! For Mathison, at hand (literally, “has drawn near”) meant precisely what the words indicate.

So, when writing against dispensationalism in both 1999 and 2009, Mathison rejected the idea that language of imminence is to be mitigated and negated. He rejected the idea that “at hand” means that it might or might not be soon. He condemned the dispensational claims that the Lord’s coming is “imminent but not near,” but rather claims that the time indicators must be taken objectively. (It should be noted of course, that he is correct in his rejection of the dispensational word games. No lexicon, no dictionary, supports the definition of “imminent but not near” as claimed by the dispensationalists. Imminent means “near” and “at hand”).

We could multiply this kind of quote from Mathison’s writings many times over. But, since penning those words in defense of the objective imminence of “at hand,” he has—at least when arguing against preterism—decided that “soon,” “at hand,” “shortly,” etc., do not, after all, demand the fulfillment of those words imminently. After all, he now wants us to believe: “It must also be remembered that the Old Testament prophets regularly used terms implying ‘nearness’ to describe events that did not occur for centuries” (WSTTB, p 202). (We should point out that while Mathison claims that the Old Testament prophets “regularly” used terms of imminence to refer to events spanning hundreds of years, he made no effort to produce *several* of those “regular” occurrences of such usage. He posited one or two [false examples] but, that hardly qualifies as “regular” usage).

### **Mathison and Misguided Hermeneutic**

The reader needs to keep in mind that Mathison is employing a very dubious hermeneutic. He is seeking to destroy what is universally admitted to be *the normal meaning of time words*, and trying to make them mean the exact opposite of what they normally—and lexically—mean! Just ponder the power of that!

Mathison is arguing that if we can find examples (*no matter how few!*) in the Old Testament where these words of imminence spoke of events hundreds of years away (the claim is false, DKP), this means we can now dismiss and ignore *all* New Testament references to the imminent, soon, shortly to come to pass Day of the Lord and “the end of all things.” Of course, if Mathison accepted his own argument this would be to totally capitulate to the dispensational claims which he condemns. This violates his comments about Revelation and the kingdom cited above.

Mathison's argument is a prime and glaring example of the *illegitimate totality transfer* of context. What that term means is that if you can find a given definition of a word or term in one text, that you impose (transfer) that definition to *all occurrences* of that word or term. While that may *sound* legitimate, all grammarians, all linguists, all commentators recognize the dangers in such an assumptive approach. Language is a "flexible" thing, and words are always subject to context. This does not mean that the normal definition of words is meaningless, or should be ignored—*not at all!* To the contrary, it suggests that the normal definition of words is to be honored and applied UNLESS context forces us to find another definition. And that would suggest that Mathison's attempt to impose the "exceptional" definition (which he imagines he has found) of the imminence language onto the normal definition is misguided and false.

Clearly, Mathison is trying to do just that, however. He imagines that he has found an exception to the norm and then imposes that exceptional use on all other texts that are inconvenient to his eschatology!! The rule of normal definition and consistency would suggest just the opposite. You determine the normal, usual definition of words, terms, phrases. You apply that normal, usual, customary definition on texts—UNLESS THE CONTEXT DEMANDS A DIFFERENT DEFINITION IS BEING APPLIED. Make no mistake: Mathison cannot find any lexicon that supports his aberrant hermeneutic, which claims that "at hand" means hundreds of years, that "shortly come to pass" entails centuries. Mathison turns that normal and correct linguistic and grammatical practice on its head, insisting that the exceptional usage of a word (which he thinks he has found) is in fact to be imposed on all other texts. This is truly a misguided hermeneutic. In reality, he is positing the dispensational view of the language of imminence. *He is claiming, just like the millennialists, that "at hand" means imminent but not near!*

So, Mathison is saying, "If I can find one or two passages in which "at hand," "soon," "shortly" did not mean objective imminence, in spite of what I have written about imminence in other books, since I am seeking to defeat preterism, I will impose that "exceptional" usage on all other contexts."

Now, consider carefully: If one argues as Mathison does, that one or two examples of "imminent but not near language" signifies that "at hand" did not mean "soon," what would it mean if we could (and DO!) find many, many examples, a wealth of references of "at hand," "shortly," "soon," "quickly," etc. that *did mean objective, true imminence*? Do you see the problem with Mathison's hermeneutic? He is trying to make a few (claimed, but false) exceptions to the normal meaning of language to be the overriding definition, in spite of the fact that the lexicons do not support this, the context of Scripture does not support it, and logic itself suggests (demands) that such a hermeneutic is fatally flawed.

A closing thought or two: The reader needs to realize that Mathison only makes his "imminent but not near" argument about language regarding the imminence of the Day of the Lord, the judgment, and the resurrection. He does NOT make this argument when the language speaks of "mundane," i.e., non-prophetic, language. Thus, he is, tacitly and rather quietly, telling us that when the Bible speaks of non-prophetic, non-eschatological events as "at hand" and "shortly" to come to pass, then the language is prosaic, literal, and means precisely what the words normally indicate.

Not only is he inconsistent in his application of the "imminent but not near" claim in non-prophetic texts, remember that just above we documented how he insists that "at hand" in regard to the coming of the kingdom communicated objective imminence. Thus, Mathison's glaring inconsistency in regard to the

“imminent but not near” approach to the language of imminence is exposed for all to see. He claims to reject that very hermeneutic when the dispensationalists employ it. Yet, he employs it when seeking to counter Covenant Eschatology. He insists that “at hand,” “shortly,” etc., when used of mundane events express objective imminence, and when John said the kingdom was “at hand,” then it was truly near. And yet, when the Bible affirms, repeatedly, explicitly, unambiguously, that the coming of the Lord, the judgment, and the resurrection were near and coming soon, in the first century, he runs to the dispensational camp for help, abandoning his former arguments.

There are, according to Douglas Wilkinson, in his excellent book: *The Coming of the Lord is At Hand*, (Available at [www.donkpreston.com](http://www.donkpreston.com)) well over 200 indicators of the imminent parousia, end of the age, and the judgment in the New Testament. Words that when commonly used in everyday conversation, in literary works, and in virtually every other context are admittedly indicators of imminence of other events, are now, in Mathison’s view, to be mitigated, ignored, or radically modified as to have no temporal significance whatsoever! Of course, as we have just seen, this is totally different from his other writings—when not attacking preterism—in which he has historically, adamantly, and correctly insisted that “at hand,” “shortly,” “soon,” and “quickly” mean, well, precisely what they normally mean!

In our next installment we will examine Mathison’s appeal to what is known as the “telescoping of events” (sometimes called the “Mountain Peaks” argument). We will also examine and refute his claim that there are “multiple fulfillments” of prophecy.

In the meantime, get a copy of my book, *Who Is This Babylon?*, in which I have an extensive, in-depth response to the efforts like those of Mathison to counter the time statements of the Bible. If you order the book, mention that you read this article in *Fulfilled!* Magazine, and I will refund your shipping and I will also give you a free copy of my smaller book *Can God Tell Time?* absolutely free. You can order my book at [www.donkpreston.com](http://www.donkpreston.com). †