



THE END

Has Come

Why an Ethnolinguistic Reading of Matthew 24:14 is Extrabiblical

By **BRAD VAUGHN**

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Matthew 24:14 states, “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (NRSV). This verse is often read as a directive for modern Christian missions to evangelize all ethnolinguistic groups with the purpose of hastening Christ’s second coming. (This view is integrally linked with popular understandings of “people group theory.”) However, an exegetical and contextual analysis of Matthew 24 within the framework of first-century events offers a different perspective, indicating that this prophecy was fulfilled within the lifetime of the early church.

The Context of Matthew 24

The chapter’s opening sets the context for interpreting Jesus’ meaning. Matthew 24:1–2 says,

As Jesus came out of the temple and was going away, his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. 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.”

The discourse begins with Jesus prophesying the destruction of the temple. His statement that “not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down” is a direct prediction of what occurred in AD 70 when the Romans, led by Titus, dismantled the temple during the siege of Jerusalem.

Then, in verse 3, we read:

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 of the end of the age?”

The disciples’ question in Matthew 24:3 links the destruction of the temple with signs of Jesus’ coming and the end of the age. This suggests an intertwining of the temple’s fall with broader eschatological events, as understood by the early Christians.

Indicators of First-Century Fulfillment

What about the rest of the chapter? The burden of proof falls on those who interpret Matthew 24 as primarily (if at all) referring to some final fulfillment in our future. Especially in light of 24:1–3, we have ample evidence to suggest that the chapter describes events that occurred in the first century.

1. False Christs and Prophets

Matthew 24:4–5, 11–24 warn of false messiahs and prophets who will deceive many. The first century saw numerous messianic figures, such as Theudas and the Egyptian prophet (described in Acts and by Josephus), who led people astray, fitting into the deception theme outlined by Jesus.

2. Wars and Rumors of Wars

Verses 6–7 speak of wars and rumors of wars, nation against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. The period leading up to AD 70 was marked by significant regional conflicts within the Roman Empire, including Jewish revolts and the broader geopolitical unrest in areas like Gaul and Britain.

3. Famines and Earthquakes

Verse 7 mentions famines and earthquakes. Acts and other historical sources like Tacitus and Suetonius record famines and natural disasters during this era, particularly under the reigns of Claudius and Nero.

4. Persecutions

Verses 9–10 predict persecutions against Jesus’ followers, a reality well documented in the New Testament and historical accounts regarding the early Church’s suffering under Rome.

5. The Abomination of Desolation

Verse 15 references the “abomination of desolation,” a term drawn from Daniel used here to likely signify the profane acts and sacrileges associated with the Roman siege of Jerusalem, including possibly the placement of idolatrous ensigns on the temple grounds.

6. Great Tribulation

Verses 21–22 describe a period of unparalleled tribulation, which can be correlated with the documented horrors and extensive destruction during the Jewish War, particularly in AD 70 when Jerusalem was sacked.

The Language of Matthew 24

How do we interpret the specific language found in Matthew 24, especially verse 14? First, what do the disciples mean by “your coming” and “the end of the age” (24:3)? As others have seen, these terms do not concern world-ending catastrophes, but rather major military upheavals that profoundly impacted the life of God’s people.¹ Simply go read the prophets to see this standard way of speaking. The disciples’ language echoes the prophetic language in Isaiah, where God’s judgment against Egypt is depicted not as a literal descent on clouds but as a sovereign intervention into political and social affairs as punishment for idolatry (Isa 19:1).

In Matthew 24, the destruction of the temple and the “end of the age” are concurrent events, suggesting a monumental shift in God’s earthly dealings. The obliteration of the temple concerns more than a physical space; it also is a pivotal moment in the kingdom’s expansion and the divine mission. God is closing an age in which he dealt primarily with the nation of Israel; now the new covenant hastens in the gentiles. The church, consisting of believing Jews and gentiles, constitutes God’s temple.

1 For instance, Paul Penley, “Have We Misunderstood the Great Commission? ‘The End’ Jesus Predicted in Matthew 24:14 Started a Whole New Era,” *Reenacting the Way* (blog), 14 May 2017, www.reenactingtheway.com/blog/great-commission-is-complete-as-jesus-predicted-in-matthew-24-14.

In addition, the phrase “in the whole world” deserves attention. Elsewhere in ancient literature, the Greek word (οἰκουμένη) here routinely refers to the Roman Empire.² In the New Testament, one such example is Acts 11:28, which says, “One of them named Agabus stood up and predicted by the Spirit that there would be a severe famine *over all the world*; and this took place during the reign of Claudius.” Similarly, Paul’s accusers assert, “For we have found this man a plague, one who stirs up riots among all the Jews *throughout the world* and is a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes” (Acts 24:5; cf. Acts 17:6; 19:27; Rev 3:10).

What about the phrase “as a testimony to all nations”? Paul Penley’s response is clear and concise. He explains,

Acts 2:5 claims that Jews “from every nation under heaven” gathered in Jerusalem and heard the disciples proclaim the Gospel in their native languages. That’s quite a universal claim if we read it with our globalized perspective. Jews from every nation under heaven heard the Gospel! If we read that claim without regard for the historical context, we would think Jews had come from China or from the Aztec nation or from the aboriginal peoples of what would become Australia. But such transportation wasn’t possible in the first century, and no Jews lived among all the distinct ethnolinguistic tribes on planet Earth at the time.

Claiming that Jews “from every nation under heaven” gathered in Jerusalem is simply a figure of speech. It meant that Jews had come from all over the known world.³

Not only this, but biblical scholars have long noted that “nations” (ἔθνος) in Scripture consistently refers to gentiles (i.e., non-Jews).⁴ Certainly, ἔθνος (particularly the singular) can signify “a people group in an ethnographic sense denoting a group of people with common affinity and way of life”

2 Walter Bauer, BDAG, s.v. “οἰκουμένη.” rev. and ed. Frederick W. Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000).

3 Paul Penley, “Have We Misunderstood the Great Commission?,” and BDAG, s.v. “οἰκουμένη.”

4 For example, see Jarvis J. Williams and Trey Moss, “Focus on ‘All Nations’ as Integral Component of World Mission Strategy,” in *World Mission: Theology, Strategy, and Current Issues* ed. Scott Callaham and Will Brooks (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2019), 131–48.

(to include Israel).⁵ Still, in Matthew's Gospel, we don't see unambiguous examples where the plural ἔθνος refers to distinct sociolinguistic entities as opposed to gentiles more generally.

Whatever the case, even if we presuppose that ἔθνος in Matthew 24:14 speaks of sociolinguistic groups, we have no scriptural basis for demarcating one ethnic group from another (effectively making much "people group" strategy arbitrary or disconnected from any biblical foundation).⁶

Conclusion

If we want to understand the word "nations" in sociolinguistic terms, we are free to do so. However, we cannot appeal to the Bible to support that claim. To be clear, this article does not argue against some pragmatic uses of people group theory. My goal is more precise and biblically oriented. I've suggested that mission advocates ought not to use Matthew 24:14 to propagate people

⁵ Hans M. Weerstra, "Mission to the Nations: A Biblical Word Study of Ethnos," *IJFM* 9, no. 3 (July 1992): 99.

⁶ Compare Darren Carlson and Elliot Clark, "The 3 Words That Changed Missions Strategy—and Why We Might Be Wrong," *The Gospel Coalition*, 11 September 2019, www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/misleading-words-missions-strategy-unreached-people-groups.

group theory. We certainly cannot claim Jesus' words as a divine mandate for strategies and interpretations that depend on sociolinguistic definitions.

To accept the biblical evidence above does not necessarily mean we should throw out all efforts to reach "unreached people groups." When we discern the meaning of Matthew 24:14, we see people group strategies for what they are—pragmatic efforts to make the task of spreading the gospel more manageable and equitable so that all people might have a chance to accept Jesus as Lord. There's nothing wrong with that. The problem comes with ad hoc scriptural justifications and/or eisegesis by which we insert foreign ideas into the biblical text.

Scripture beckons us to break through sociolinguistic boundaries. This is why Revelation looks forward to the worship of Christ among "every tribe and people and language and nation" (Rev 5:9; 13:7). God will fulfill his promise to Abraham, "in your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed" (Acts 3:25; cf. Gen 22:18). These passages acknowledge God's comprehensive plan to save people across social groups; they do not however give us license to commit eisegesis by using contemporary social science to define biblical terms. ❏

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