



“Whether the eagles represent God or the Roman army matters little, God used the Roman army to devour the object of his wrath” (130).

Luke records that Jesus had previously made this same statement in a discussion prompted by a question from the Pharisees about when the kingdom would come (Luke 17:20-37). In that discourse he also offered a similar declaration regarding the Son of Man’s coming like lightning (Luke

17:24), and offered the parallel to our text after a description of some who would be taken and some left (Luke 17:31-36). After being asked, “**where, Lord?**” Jesus declared, “**Wherever the body is, there the eagles will be gathered together**” (Luke 17:37). The context in Luke doesn’t help us determine if Jesus’ reference to “**eagles**” in His discourse on the Mount of Olives applies to Roman power, or something that like lightning is evident to all. In either sense, Jesus words are a graphic and chilling call to Christians in whatever time we may find ourselves, to be watchful and prepared.

Works Cited

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ISSUE

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BULLETIN OF
THE OLSEN
PARK CHURCH
OF CHRIST

Faithful Sayings

April 29
2012



Services

Sunday: 9:30 AM
10:20 AM
6:00 PM

Wednesday: 7:00 PM

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Kyle Pope

Deacons:

Dean Bowers
Eddie Cook
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Pat Goguen
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Lance Purcell
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Evangelists:

Kyle Pope
Jason Garcia

“For Wherever the Carcass is, There the Eagles will be Gathered Together”

By Kyle Pope

In Jesus’ discourse on the Mount of Olives, recorded in Matthew 24-25, Jesus makes the statement used in the title of this article (Matt. 24:28). *What was Jesus referring to with this statement?* Some have suggested that Jesus was alluding to the description of eagles given in Job 39:50. Speaking of God’s power over various creatures within nature, the Hebrew text put it “**where the slain are there it is.**” The Greek Old Testament translated before the time of Christ read very similar to Jesus’ words— “**wherever the carcasses may be, immediately they are found**” (Brenton). If this is the sense of His words, Jesus may be offering a paraphrase of Job 39:50, to illustrate how evident his final coming will be. In which case the word “**for**” connects this verse to the previous verse comparing Jesus’ coming to lightning—“**For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be**” (Matt. 24:27).

Some, along with commentator Robert Mounce argue that here, *aetos*, the word translated “eagles,” —“should be taken instead as ‘vulture’” given that “eagles are predatory but do not flock together around a carcass” (*Commentary on Matthew 225-226*). A number of modern translations accept this view (e.g. NASB, NIV, ESV). Warren Carter, however, argues that *aetos* “does not refer to vultures, for which there is a separate word *gups*,” explain-



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ing that, “ancient writers generally do not equate eagles and vultures” citing examples from Aristotle, Pliny the Elder, and Aelianus (“Imperial Texts” 469). He shows that even in Job 39:26-30 the Greek Old Testament distinguished “**the eagle (*aetos*) that mounts up**” (Job 39:27a) from the “**nesting vulture (*gups*)**” (39:27b). Carter concludes, “the eagles ‘gathered with’ the corpse seems, reasonably, to be the standards of Roman legions that represent Roman power” (ibid. 476).

What Carter is referring to is the fact that the top of military standards carried by Roman legions usually had the image of the emperor just below the image of an eagle. Unlike the decorative and symbolic use we see in the United States, the Roman eagle had religious and military significance within Roman culture. F. F. Bruce explains, “it is a fact that the ‘eagles’ and other standards of the Roman army were regarded as sacred objects. The ‘eagle’ the standard of the legion, was kept in a special shrine in the military camp and regarded as affording sanctuary” (“Habakkuk Scroll” 13). The ancient writer Appian, speaking of the Roman standards seized by Pompey called “the eagle (*ton aieton*)” something that was “the most lordly thing among the Romans” (*Civil Wars* 2.9, Pope). In describing the procession of a Roman army, Josephus wrote:

Then came the ensigns encompassing the eagle (*ton aeton*), which is at the head of every Roman legion, the king and strongest of the birds, which seems to them a signal of dominion and an omen that they shall conquer all against whom they march; these sacred ensigns are followed by trumpeters (*Wars of the Jews* 3.6.2; 5.2.1).

Would Jesus’ have referred to “**eagles**” here as an allusion to Roman power? Would this have been understood by his Jewish disciples? There is evidence that in the time of Jesus the Roman use of these images had come into conflict with Jewish opposition to idolatry. Pilate, for example, was the first procurator to bring standards with the image of the emperor into Jerusalem. This caused such a stir, that after being petitioned by Jews (who were even willing to lay down their own lives rather than see what they viewed as idols set up in Jerusalem) Pilate had the ensigns removed back to Caesarea (Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.3.1). Near the close of the reign of Tiberius, the Roman commander Vitellius was planning to march through Judea to go to war against the Nabataean king Aretas. When Jewish leaders learned of his plans they persuaded him not to do so because “the laws of their country would not permit them to overlook those images” (i.e. which were on the standards of the Roman legions) “that were brought into it” (Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.5.3). The Habakkuk Commentary (1QpHab) discovered at Qumran among the Dead Sea Scrolls, referred to a people it called the *kittim*, believed by many scholars to refer to the Romans. Daniel 11:30 prophetically used this designation of Rome. The text not only speaks of them as devouring nations “like an eagle” (3.8-11), but also “sacrificing to their standards” (6.4). Josephus records that after the Romans had burned the temple, they set their standards against the eastern gate and offered sacrifices to them there (*Wars* 6.6.1). If this is the sense, Jesus is not alluding to His final coming, but prophetically describing what would happen when



the Roman armies would surround the spiritual carcass of Jerusalem. This happened in A.D. when Jerusalem fell and the temple was destroyed. If this is the focus of Jesus’ words in Matthew 24:28, the word “**for**” must be understood to refer back to the previous subject in verses 15-22 of the “**abomination of desolation**” (referring to Roman desecration of the temple) which came as God’s punishment of Jerusalem. Marshal Patton points out fittingly,