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# Turning an End into a New Beginning: Contesting Epistemic Authority in Matthew's Olivet Discourse

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**W**e are nearing the end of the world. All types of crises do not matter anymore. The rapture, last judgement, great tribulation will occur, and these will be followed by Christ's second coming. Is this how we make sense of Jesus' teachings on the Mount of Olives in Matthew 24 and 25, which is also known as the Olivet Discourse?

Quick solutions and easy answers to complex issues are always appealing. But I wonder sometimes about those who believe in the apocalyptic prophesies, if they have found a better way to navigate the messy world and thus can avoid things that overwhelm them. Do these people find something more important and specific than the rest of us do not? Is the Olivet prophecy suggesting a secret rapture for some and a catastrophe for others? Who are the blessed and who are the ones being cursed and left behind?

Welcome to the dichotomized world. The practice of dichotomization is not anything new. But any irresponsible reading of scripture can hasten and deepen the divisiveness. In this article, I will question a triumphalist reading of Jesus' teachings about the end times and its consequences for society and the world. Tackling the triumphalism in epistemology is tackling the dominant knowledge structures that value one over others or set one against all others. A postcolonial reading of the Olivet discourse will offer a relevant strategy to find the hidden voice in the text. I contend that the voice of the marginalized is an important reference point for Christian life in a violent world; these people have endured tremendous suffering that is enough to problematize our inaction and indifference to injustice. Making the invisible visible means to help construct new knowledge and guide us to be more engaged in the world around us.

## **The fallacy of epistemological triumphalism in the interpretation of Jesus' teachings about the end times**

### ***Absolute certainty: The core of spiritual myopia***

The Olivet prophecy begins with Jesus' speech about the destruction of the temple. The disciples' immediate response was, in Matt 24:3, "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" The disciples' response was perfectly natural and understandable. They wanted to be sure of what was going to happen next. Jesus did tell them what those

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signs were like. But the text did not say what happened to them after Jesus' explanation of the things to come. The text did not tell us if the disciples were swamped and scared by Jesus' comments and examples. The disciples paused. We do not hear them anymore in the text.

The disciples' silence provides a good opportunity for doom-sayers to interpret the Bible by means of free association. Those who are fascinated with the last judgement can join the club to propose their way of understanding Jesus' teachings about the end times.

Signs, which Jesus talked about, now work to fit the schedule of apocalyptic events and fulfill the apocalyptic predictions. One common misconception is a secret rapture that comes with Jesus' return. The idea works, and some even turn it into profits. For instance, the *Left Behind* series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins are best-selling religious novels. Based on Matt 24:37–42, the authors put forward that some people will be taken whereas some others will be left behind. Those taken will be with Jesus in heaven, as the rapture happens, and the left behind will suffer tremendously, when the great tribulation occurs. Those taken will also return with Jesus in his glory, and Jesus will reign from

Jerusalem for one thousand years. That is basically a happy ending. Not all dispensationalists agree with this interpretative scheme, however. Some do not believe in a rapture and even suggest the opposite; after connecting the idea with verse 39, they find it was the unrighteous that were swept away by the flood in Noah's time. So they conclude that being taken is not a good omen and the left behind is actually the one who receives the blessing.

The question of whether or not the dispensationalists have found a satisfactory answer to the end times is not my concern. Rather, I am more concerned with how these end times beliefs impact Christian behaviors and the church's social responsibility. One thing is left unresolved in the end times interpretation: Who is the elect? Who is the elect whose days of suffering "will be cut short" as indicated in 24:22. It is absolutely correct that the text does not say which person or individual is the elect. No name is mentioned. Not even the appearance of the elect is described. So how can we be so positive that we are the elect and we will be taken to the heaven? Verse 24 however makes clear that "even the elect" can be led astray. If this happens to the Christian community, who will be taken and who will be left behind?

Underneath the question is another. Who gets to decide what and for whom is the certainty that is actively at work? Certainty, clothed in epistemological triumphalism, emboldens one to exude overconfidence and make exclusive claims. In the case of Christianity, spreading half-truths or putting forth a lopsided point of view on scripture crosses the line into domesticating the gospel. Those who employ a certain type of belief as the articles of faith or the only way to salvation usurp God's authority and make themselves judges of the law. Statements that rest on absolute certainty can further result in some dire consequences, such as categorization of people and culture, and inaction to injustice.

### ***Categorization and stereotyping***

When we come back to Jesus' saying about the sign of the end of the age, some specific things Jesus mentioned were "war" in 24:6 and "nation will rise against nation" in the following verse. Jesus was describing the situations or the scenes. However, some people will easily connect the information with their implicit bias and prejudice and target a particular culture or community of people. When Jesus' description of the situation is understood as a causal relationship, it can very likely mean those other people are problematic, therefore one group will fight against another. A perceived increase in "lawlessness" (v.12) in the land will be attributed to others and their transgression. It is feared that these things will spread to or infest us. They will hate us and torture us (v.9). Those people are bad so they deserve to be punished. Being the elect is actually predicated on the creation of the bad others. Being the elect makes one feel superior and secure.

The certainty embedded in end times beliefs explicitly separates us from them. We are faithful, and they are wicked. We are saved, and they are not. We know things, and they do not. We have better knowledge about the world, and they do not.

Edward Said argues that "knowledge gives power, more power

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requires more knowledge, and so on in an increasingly profitable dialectic of information and control."<sup>1</sup> Knowledge about others is a means to not only control people's destiny but also ensure one's dominance. Said would consider the relationship between us and them "a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony."<sup>2</sup>

The category of the other is far more than an imagination, as Said insists. We are seeing Christians intentionally pass moral judgement on others. Measuring others by our own standards widens the gap between one another. Kim Knott calls the space between each other "boundary." Knott believes it is the boundary that draws the line between inside and outside, and "establishes the principal of containment and the attribution of sacrality."<sup>3</sup> Knott continues, these boundaries "themselves constructed and invested with meaning...define containers and position people and objects, that generate margins, and encourage, permit or prohibit crossings."<sup>4</sup> In other words, the values generated from the boundaries determine who is good, as closer to God and "as contributing to salvation, and thus deliverance from evil," and who is bad, as "evil and contributing to damnation."<sup>5</sup>

(Mis)using scripture to attack others is wrong. Said warns that employing problematic methodology to investigate and study the subject matter is likely to produce problematic results. That only widens "the disparity between texts and reality," and further intensifies social categorization and mistreatment of others.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Developing habits of inaction***

Another setback for a triumphalist reading of the end times relates to the cost of our silence. But wait. Some people may think it is going too far and protest against the accusation of inaction. How is it possible that my faith breeds inaction? I am good and I belong to the elect. Is not Matt 25:41–45 very clear about Jesus' rebukes to those who are indifferent to the poor and marginalized?

Some Christians even have difficulty in relating the analogy to the issue of justice. For these people, poverty is primarily due to an individual decision. It is not easy for them to imagine how

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1. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 36.

2. *Ibid.*, 5.

3. Kim Knott, "Inside, Outside and the Space in-between: Territories and Boundaries in the Study of Religion," *Temenos* 44 (1) (2008): 45.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*, 47.

6. Said, *Orientalism*, 109.

marginalized communities are oppressed by unfair societal laws and discriminatory practices. These people may simply be contented with good music, good sermon, and good feeling.

It comes as no surprise that these people have never thought that they have done something to others and the world. Yet in reality they push people out, shut the door, and pretend they are not seeing the poor and not hearing their cries. If that sounds familiar, we might have something similar to what the slave did to his master. The slave “dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money” (25:18), and then accused the master by saying, “I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed” (25:24). Verse 45, however reads, “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.”

If we are still not convinced, we can go back to Jesus' other two analogies on the wicked slave. One in 24:48–51 and the other in 25:24–27. Like all other slaves, these two were entrusted with taking care of the master's household or property. Failing to be a good steward, the first slave “begins to beat his fellow slaves, and eats and drinks with drunkards” (24:49). Similarly, the second slave never intended to get the job done. The slave was trying to find any possible excuse to defend negligence, inertia, laziness, and arrogance.

Both slaves fail to live up to the master's expectation. Inaction *per se* is inexcusable. Inaction informed by the overconfidence in faith is totally unacceptable. Inaction has dire consequences. When we deny and refuse our responsibility for others, we give consent to different kinds of atrocities, including exploitation and violence against all forms of life. Then we are not simply ignoring the suffering of humanity, but also the groaning of the whole creation.

David Barker and David Bearce, who analyzed the correlation between end times theology and public resistance to addressing global climate change found that end times believers showed a tendency to downplay the urgency and reject efforts to combat climate change. Both Barker and Bearce indicate that “end-times believers often oppose costly policies to deal with global climate change because they have shorter *sociotropic* time horizons than do nonbelievers.”<sup>7</sup> Sociotropic time horizon refers to how a person perceives the entire community's future. Barker and Bearce explain, “If the time horizon is finite, then the global community would cease to exist at some point, and so policies designed to preserve the global community, at the expense of incurring some pain now, would become less desirable.”<sup>8</sup>

“To elaborate,” Barker and Bearce continue, “while non-end-times believers have little reason to doubt humankind's infinite persistence, all else being equal, end-times believers ‘know’ that life on Earth has a preordained expiration date, no matter what—and that all Christians will be raptured before the going gets too

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tough.”<sup>9</sup> Any efforts to confront the political establishment and stand up for justice will soon prove to be pointless and worthless. As a result, end-times believers would prefer doing nothing. To do nothing is simply saying let the earth destroy itself. This type of knowledge is really reckless and insensitive. The community that agrees with this line of thought will become more inward-looking, and hence they prioritize their own interests over others' concerns and needs.

Absolute certainty constitutes a major part of spiritual myopia. Reading the Olivet discourse provides us yet another opportunity to pause and think how we ground our commitment to justice in the core of Christian convictions. Instead of thinking about how we can get away from troubles, we need to think about how we live. We need to think about what the future implications of our choices may look like. We cannot afford to continue to cherish the thought that we live for today and live for the moment.

### A new reading strategy: Creating a third space for generations to come

Jesus' teaching about the end times is calling us to examine our belief and practice and see what we are doing to others and the whole creation. We will now need a better reading strategy to help us understand the text afresh and to envision a life together in times of uncertainty.

#### *Can there be another voice?*

The invisible does not speak. This is because when one upholds end-times beliefs, one easily reads oneself into the elect's viewpoint. The elect's agenda advances. The left behind continues to be stigmatized. Their voice remains hidden. To unearth the voice of the subjugated, let us abandon the triumphalist approach in favor of a reading strategy that subverts the prevailing interpretive system.

Edward Said's suggestion of contrapuntal reading to find counterpoint in narrative is a good place to start. Using the music metaphor of counterpoint, Said identified two divergent perspectives in a given text and he called the reading of that “contrapuntal.” The multiplicity of voices is normal; however, the discrepancy between the voices is often perceived negatively. Whereas one kind of voice becomes the center of attention, the other tends to be marginalized and considered less intelligent. It is important to consider the “two historiographies, one linear and subsuming, the other contrapuntal and often nomadic,” Said believes they can be

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7. David C. Barker, and David H. Bearce, “End-Times Theology, the Shadow of the Future, and Public Resistance to Addressing Global Climate Change,” *Political Research Quarterly* 66 (2) (2013): 269.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

complementary to each other.<sup>10</sup> Said insists that “we must be able to think through and interpret together experiences that are discrepant, each with its particular agenda and pace of development, its own internal formations, its internal coherence and system of external relationships, all of them co-existing and interacting with others.”<sup>11</sup> Reflection on the “entangled” concerns and interests through interweaving together a variety of voices will enable “those who see the whole as a complex but not reductively unified one” to continue the fight against “a unitary and homogenous thing.”<sup>12</sup>

Said's metaphor on the methodological reflections on the reading and interpretation of texts provides an alternative approach to address many of the complexities of the Olivet discourse.

Jesus does not abandon the ones who are subjugated and objectified. They are not the left behind. They are included in Jesus' love and care. As mentioned earlier, Jesus says that “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me” (24:45). Jesus did not despise the poor and marginalized, not even one of the least in society. Contrarily, Jesus identified with these people and empowered them by recognizing their intrinsic value. Jesus' promise to the poor and marginalized shatters the stereotypes imposed on them. Jesus and the least in society are inseparable. Jesus is one among them.

Anyone who ignores the poor and marginalized ignores Jesus. This statement is the turning point that totally subverts the binary logic. The least in society becomes the one who exposes hypocrisy and arrogance. Marginalizing or stigmatizing others does not make one pietistic. Being pietistic is not a subjective feeling. One cannot say I deserve certain privileges just because I feel pious or that my pietism justifies certain actions. One's piety is subjected to the scrutiny of or is measured by the standards of how one treats the forgotten other.

Rethinking the identity of the subjugated can further expand the meaning of the elect. We used to associate the elect with those good and faithful ones who will be saved without experiencing too much suffering. Then it was easy to miss an important reminder in 24:13 that reads, “But the one who endures to the end will be saved.” This does not restrict membership of the elect to a certain group of people but extends it to anyone who takes heed of Jesus' teachings. Anyone could be one of the elect. “The one who endures to the end” marks a path toward greater inclusivity in the household of God. No attempt is made to romanticize the life of the poor and marginalized. They have gone through tremendous suffering, but nothing seems to stand between them and God's faithfulness, even though hardship is thrown at them. Their stories and witness to God's faithfulness are beautiful and powerful as are those of other spiritual giants. True faith requires us to sincerely and humbly work with the least in society when envisioning a fair and equal society.

Transgressing epistemological and religious boundaries be-

10. Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), xxv.

11. *Ibid.*, 36.

12. *Ibid.*, xxv.

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comes necessary when challenging power asymmetries in reading and interpreting the text. If the problem is left unattended, the privileged will continue to monopolize the right to name, to draw boundaries, and to build walls against all others. The contrapuntal reading of Jesus' teachings about the end times interweave feelings, thoughts, and attitudes by recovering and recognizing the value of other people and culture. Opening up narrative possibilities can effectively bring the invisible to light. The once cursed now becomes the blessed.

### *Creating a hybrid space to embrace*

How then can we establish a mutually respectful relationship with one another through scripture reading? We now come to contesting the space that functions particularly to divide.

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha examined how different cultures can intermingle without losing their unique identities. Different cultures have different worldviews and values, and difference itself is not a problem. Bhabha observed that the contested space is “the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion. For, above all else, there is a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction.”<sup>13</sup> What one needs to do in these situations is to “think beyond narratives of origin and initiatory, initial subjects and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of ‘differences.’”<sup>14</sup>

Bhabha also employed the term “hybridity” to emphasize the importance of negotiation and articulation in the process of framing cultures and identities. Hybridity takes place through the encounters with others in the in-between spaces. These spaces, as Bhabha postulates, “provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood and communal representations that initiate new

13. Homi K. Bhabha, “Beyond the Pale: Art in the Age of Multicultural Translation,” in Lavrijsen Ria, *Cultural Diversity in the Arts: Art, Art Policies, and the Facelift of Europe*, (Amsterdam: Royal Tropical Institute, 1993), 62.

14. Bhabha, “Beyond the Pale,” 62–63.

signs of cultural difference and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation.”<sup>15</sup> The in-between space is also known as the third space. In an interview with Jonathan Rutherford, Bhabha described “the ‘third space’ which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom.”<sup>16</sup>

Hybrid spaces are created for everyone who rejects hegemony and systemic prejudice, so everyone can feel respected and valued. These spaces allow the faith community to learn to move from being inward-looking to becoming more welcoming and hospitable to others. Kwok Pui-lan believes these spaces can help the faith community “imagine new ways of being in the world and encountering God’s salvific action for the oppressed and marginalized.”<sup>17</sup> I have demonstrated earlier how Jesus has sided with the least in society and how that stretches the boundary for receiving God’s salvation and redemption.

Kwok takes it a step further to suggest that preaching is an act of performance. This is important because there is a gap between the preacher and the congregation. When a faith community gathers together, the preacher should do more than simply preach to the congregation, otherwise the preacher is only drawing a boundary between oneself and the congregation under a hierarchical structure. Kwok asserts, “Preaching as performance does not concentrate on the preacher, but calls for greater focus on context and the rich convergence of performer, situation, setting, audience, and society...Through speech act and gestures, the preacher as performer seeks to act or consummate an action, to construct new realities, and to perform or signal possible new identities.”<sup>18</sup> In an environment like this, everyone is encouraged to work together for the common good. No one deserves to be left behind. The shared space makes possible meaningful interactions between one another. It also makes a whole lot of difference when people can build trust and trust one another in the new realities. Church, as a third space, can become a healing force for a hurting world.

### ***The responsibility of our generation***

Taking the initiative to change is particularly meaningful to our society today. This statement puts an emphasis on the responsibility of the current generation. Before going into the specifics, I think it is relevant to take a quick look at Jesus’ saying about “this generation” in the Olivet discourse.

There are several ways to understand “this generation” in Matt 24:34. Some understand “this generation” to refer to Jesus’ contemporaries who might have witnessed the destruction of the temple in 70CE. Some consider “this generation” the Jews or

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Judeans, known as “a race” that “would last until the Parousia.”<sup>19</sup> Others regard “this generation” as “some future generation...starting from the generation of Jesus’ disciples.”<sup>20</sup>

Unlike these suggestions, Philip du Toit believes it is preferable to understand “this generation” in a negative sense. Du Toit argues that the term “has a pejorative connotation that refers to an evil kind of people.”<sup>21</sup> This understanding is in line with the general sense of evil in Gen 3:15; and also fits the framework of continual contrasting between good and evil within Matthew.<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, du Toit concludes that “‘this generation’ is neither time-bound, in that it would refer to Jesus’ contemporaries exclusively, nor is it connected to a certain ethnic group or race exclusively. Ultimately, ‘this generation’ points to the spiritual generation belonging to the devil (the serpent) and his kingdom, as opposed to the generation

19. Philip La Grange dDu Toit, “‘This generation’ in Matthew 24:34 as a timeless, spiritual generation akin to Genesis 3:15,” *Verbum Et Ecclesia* 39 (1) (2018): 2.

20. Ibid.

21. du Toit, *This generation*, 7.

22. du Toit offers a more detailed analysis of why “this generation” should be understood as “the spiritual generation belonging to the devil.” He asserts that

‘(T)his generation’ forms part of a larger, dual category akin to Genesis 3:15. Such a connection can especially be identified with the three references in the gospel (vs. only one in Luke) to the generation or offspring of vipers. The generation of vipers closely coheres with the idea behind the ‘seed’ of the serpent in Genesis 3:15. Such language, in turn, forms part of a continuous contrast within Matthew between the timeless generation or family belonging to the devil or the serpent, and the generation or family belonging to God or his kingdom. The enmity between the different ‘seeds’ (Gn 3:15) is especially resembled (1) by the murdering of the prophets, who Jesus considers as the spiritual fathers of the scribes and Pharisees (Mt 23:31–37), and (2) by the opposition against Jesus and his messiahship, constituted by the false prophets and false messiahs (Mt 7:15; 24:11, 24). Yet, the enmity between the different kinds of generations is also evident in the contrast between the ‘good seed’ and the ‘weeds’, constituting those who belong to God’s kingdom and bear good fruit, versus those who belong to the kingdom of the devil and do not produce the right harvest (Mt 13:24–30, 36–43). (7)

15. Ibid., 63.

16. Jonathan Rutherford, *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 211.

17. Pui-lan, Kwok, “Postcolonial Preaching in Intercultural Contexts,” *Homiletic* 40 (1) (2015): 10.

18. Kwok, “Postcolonial Preaching in Intercultural Contexts,” 10.

belonging to God and his (sic) kingdom.”<sup>23</sup>

The warning to our generation is loud and clear. Not only does it offer a right direction for us to understand the problems of this age, but it also speaks against the ones that oppose God's loving-kindness, mercy, and justice. It further signifies the right moment, the opportune moment for action.

We have seen the current administration implementing policies to forcibly separate migrant children from parents. Many others are detained in degrading and inhumane conditions. The president himself has consistently used vitriolic language to attack people of other races, people of other religions, and people with opposing political views. We have seen politicians publicly dispute over scientific information about global warming. We see hate speech, violence, and more violence almost every single day. All these are, however, considered to be the way to be good and great.

We are expected to endure to the end in face of adversity (24:13), but we are also called to engage our faith on the intense dynamics of our time. “Blessed is that slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives,” as Matt 24:46 assures. Not being deterred by those terrible signs, we are entrusted with the gospel. We are called to bring words of hope to those who feel despair, and comfort to those who are suffering. We are called to make peace when people feel disconnected and distrust one another. We are called to show compassion and care for those who are in need, even to one of the least. We are called to expose lies, because those lies are destructive and used to spread divisive messages. And together we can work to build a fair and equitable society.

## Conclusion

I have demonstrated that those who make or believe in apocalyptic predictions tend to (mis)use scriptures to support their end-times beliefs, reduce crises in the world to God's judgement, and create fear or promote hatred against certain groups of people.

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23. Ibid.

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Are spreading lies and rumors easier or is speaking truth and teaching people to be faithful?

We are not forced to choose between any one of them. But when we allow absolute certainty to shape our faith, we end up not only hurting other communities but also justifying our inaction. Especially in this generation, we see that information is used to shift our moral values and language to promote violence.

The Olivet discourse does not teach us that certain Christians have the privilege to avoid suffering. Rather, it refutes it. Faith in God never encourages escapism. A contrapuntal reading of the text uncovers the invaluable voice of the invisible that deepens the meaning of Jesus' solidarity with the poor and God's salvific grace. Creating hybrid spaces to embrace becomes more urgent and necessary. A responsible reading of the text further guides us to see clearly the signs of our time, and adjust our actions, accordingly, from social life, to the economy, and the environment. As we journey together with others, we learn to appreciate their wisdom. Together we engage our faith in darkness, witness to the gospel in times of trouble and endure to the end.