



AN ASSESSMENT OF THE INTERPRETATIONS OF MATTHEW 24.18 IN THE LIGHT OF THE APOCALYPTIC RUPTURE AND SURVIVALIST PRAYER CULTURE IN NIGERIAN ECCLESIOLOGY

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Abstract

This paper examined the interpretive trajectory of the apocalyptic phrase "the abomination that causes desolation" with a specific hermeneutical focus on Matthew 24.18 ("Neither let him which is in the field return back to take his clothes"). Rooted in the Intertestamental crises of the Book of Daniel and the Maccabean Revolt, Jesus uses this symbol in the Olivet Discourse to emphasize extreme tactical and spiritual urgency. Employing historical and analytical frameworks as well as reader-response hermeneutical approaches, this paper examined how the mandate for immediate, cloakless flight has been adapted across three distinct historical contexts: the literal-historical reading of the Patristic era, the systematized preterist and futurist debates of Eurocentric biblical scholarship, and the dual socio-political and spiritual contextualization within contemporary Nigerian ecclesiology. By evaluating mainline denominations, classical Pentecostalism, and the digital prophetic paradigm of Pastor Jerry Eze (NSPPD), this paper demonstrated how an ancient warning of physical flight is operationalized today into an immediate, real-time demand for moral reform, spiritual deliverance, and prophetic breakthrough. While commending these hermeneutical innovations, this paper called for caution in over-stretching the meaning of biblical texts by invoking divine mandate to legitimise subjective reflections on biblical texts.

Keywords: Olivet Discourse, Matthew 24:18, Lukan parallel, Abomination of Desolation, Maccabean Revolt, First Jewish-Roman War, Zealots, Nigerian Pentecostalism, Jerry Eze, NSPPD, Hermeneutics.

Introduction and Historical Background

The discourse on the "abomination that causes desolation" remains one of the most complex hermeneutical puzzles in Christian eschatology. Rooted in the apocalyptic visions of Daniel, Jesus's invocation of this symbol in Matthew 24.15–18 anchors it directly within New Testament prophecy. Matthew 24.18, which commands, "Neither let him which is in the field return back to take his clothes," introduces an intense narrative urgency (King James Version).

To comprehend the urgency embedded in Matthew 24.18, the passage must first be grounded in its Jewish historical and literary origins. The phrase "abomination of desolation" (*bdelugma tes eremoseos* in the Greek text) explicitly refers back to the prophetic visions in the Book of Daniel (Dan. 9.27, 11.31, 12.11). In the Old Testament context, an "abomination" (*shiqquts*) typically refers to a horrific manifestation of idolatry that pollutes Yahweh's sacred spaces, rendering them ritually unclean or "desolate" (Collins, 1993; Bright, 2000, Igwe, 2011).

Historically, the structural prototype for this apocalyptic crisis occurred during the Intertestamental period, culminating in the Maccabean Revolt (167–160 BCE). Seeking to enforce

radical Hellenization upon Judea, the Seleucid emperor Antiochus IV Epiphanes issued decrees outlawing the Torah, criminalizing circumcision, and halting the daily tamid sacrifices in the temple (1 Macc. 1.41-50; Goldstein 221; Tcherikover 193). The absolute climax of this religious persecution occurred in December 167 BCE, when Seleucid forces erected a pagan altar to Zeus Olympius directly on top of the sacrificial altar of burnt offering in the Second Temple precincts and sacrificed swine upon it (1 Macc. 1.54; 2 Macc. 6.1-5; Bickerman 44; Nickelsburg 33). This horrifying acts of sacrilege was branded by the author of Daniel as the "abomination that maketh desolate" (Dan. 11.31).

The immediate catalyst for physical resistance broke out in the village of Modein, where the elderly priest Mattathias killed a Hellenized Jew attempting to offer a pagan sacrifice on a temporary altar, sparking a guerrilla campaign led by his son Judas Maccabeus (1 Macc. 2.15-28; Schürer, 1973ed). Mattathias's initial call to arms required an immediate, asset-less retreat into the wilderness: "Whosoever is zealous of the law, and maintaineth the covenant, let him follow me. So he and his sons fled into the mountains, and left all that ever they had in the city" (1 Macc. 2.27-28). The Maccabean context firmly fused the "abomination" with a tactical mandate to abandon domestic properties in order to preserve religious covenantal purity (Gruen, 1998; Harrington, 1988).

When Jesus references this symbol in the Olivet Discourse, he treats the Danielic and Maccabean patterns not merely as past events, but as a typological blueprint for an impending localized crisis during the First Jewish-Roman War (66–73 CE). Within this immediate first-century historical matrix, the "abomination" manifested in two distinct stages: internal desecration by radical Jewish factions and external encirclement by Roman legions. As tensions escalated in 67–68 CE, radical Zealot factions led by Eleazar ben Simon seized control of the temple inner courts, transforming the sanctuary into a military fortress (Josephus 4.3.7). Josephus chronicles that the Zealots committed egregious acts of sacrilege, including the installation of a mock high priest and allowing murderers to walk freely through the Holy of Holies, which the contemporary Jewish population viewed as an internal abomination that polluted the sanctuary from within (Josephus 4.3.10; Marcus, 1992; Fine, 2016).

This internal defilement was compounded by external pagan forces. The arrival of the Roman general Cestius Gallus in 66 CE, and later the legions under Vespasian and Titus, brought pagan military standards—the *signa*—bearing idolatrous images of the Roman emperor into the immediate environs of Jerusalem (Brandon, 1967; Smallwood, 1976). For a Judean observer, the positioning of these standards on sacred soil constituted a direct realization of the *bdelugma* standing where it ought not (Matt. 24.15; Hengel, 1989; Theissen, 1992).

The warning in Matthew 24.18 to the labourer in the field to not "turn back to take his clothes" refers directly to the *himation*—the heavy outer cloak left at the edge of the field or at home while working in a light tunic (Keener, 1999). In the ancient Near East, discarding this cloak meant risking exposure, yet Jesus demands its immediate abandonment, signaling an architectural or military breach so sudden that even a few seconds of delay would guarantee death. The geopolitical volatility of Judea in 66–70 CE meant that once Roman cavalry breached regional perimeters, outlying fields became instant kill zones (France, 2007; Hagner, 1995). This paper traces how this verse and its accompanying sign have been interpreted across three distinct eras and contexts: The Patristic era, Western Eurocentric scholarship, and contemporary Nigerian ecclesiology.

Textual Synergy: Interacting with the Lukan Narrative

A critical step in unpacking the Matthaean discourse requires a horizontal cross-examination with its Synoptic counterpart, specifically the Lukan narrative. While Matthew 24.15 relies on an apocalyptic code, instructing the reader to look for the abomination standing "in the holy place" and adding the parenthetical warning "whoso readeth, let him understand," Luke 21.20 strips away the cryptic Jewish apocalyptic phrasing for a Gentile audience: "And when ye shall see Jerusalem compassed with armies, then know that the desolation thereof is nigh."

This Lukan variation serves as an essential interpretive cipher for historians and theologians alike (Fitzmyer, 1985). Where Matthew uses the theological term *bdelugma* (abomination), Luke substitutes a concrete historical reality: the encirclement of the city by foreign military powers (Marshall, 1978; Bovon, 2012). Despite this linguistic divergence, both accounts converge seamlessly when detailing the absolute urgency of flight in the subsequent verses. Luke 21.21 demands, "let them which are in the midst of it depart out; and let not them that are in the countries enter thereinto," mirroring Matthew's field-worker who is banned from turning back (Green, 1997).

However, Luke adds a distinctive theological dimension in verse 22, explicitly calling these occurrences "the days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled." By synthesizing the two accounts, it becomes clear that the physical desolation by pagan armies in Luke is the historical manifestation of the spiritual abomination in Matthew (Nolland, 1993; Bock, 1996). For centuries of interpreters, this textual interplay created a crucial tension: is the text a literal blueprint for escaping an imperial siege, or is it a timeless manual for fleeing spiritual compromise when secular forces encircle the sacred spaces of the soul?

Patristic Hermeneutics: Immediate History and Ecclesial Preservation

For the early Church Fathers, the "abomination of desolation" and the radical flight commanded in Matthew 24.18 were viewed primarily as literal, historical events tied to the tragic fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE. Early Christian theologians read the text through the lens of divine judgment on Israel and the providential preservation of the nascent Church. The primary historical anchor for this view comes from Eusebius of Caesarea. In his *Ecclesiastical History*, Eusebius relies directly on the Lukan clarity of surrounding armies to explain Matthew's text, recording that the Christian community in Jerusalem received a prophetic revelation prior to the Roman siege, prompting them to abandon the city entirely and flee across the Jordan River to Pella. For Eusebius, the warning in verse 18 to not return for one's cloak was a literal, tactical directive that saved the early Church from the slaughter executed by the Roman legions under Titus (Pelikan, 1971).

Other patristic writers historicized the "abomination" based on Roman desecrations. John Chrysostom, (1888) in his *Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew*, explicitly identified the abomination as the Roman army invading the inner sanctuaries of Jerusalem, stating that the presence of pagan standards in the holy place signalled the finality of Jewish temple worship. Chrysostom noted that the command for the labourer in the field to abandon his garment emphasized that the Roman wrath would be so swift that any attachment to physical property or homeland would lead to immediate death (Simonetti, 2002).

Similarly, Augustine of Hippo aligned the Matthaean account with Luke's parallel text ("when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies"), interpreting the abomination as the complete overturning of the old covenant order through the physical desolation of the city (Lienhard, 2001). For the Patristic writers, the "holy place" mentioned in verse 15 was strictly the literal, physical



temple building in Jerusalem (Chrysostom, 1888). Thus, the Patristic consensus minimized cosmic speculation, reading verse 18 as a historical vindication of Christian faith over temple-centered Judaism.

Eurocentric Interpretations: From Preterism to Dispensational Futurism

As historical distance from 70 CE grew, European biblical scholarship fragmented the interpretation of Matthew 24.18 into competing, highly systematized eschatological frameworks. These Eurocentric models heavily reflected Western intellectual movements, the Enlightenment, and the rise of systematic theology.

The Preterist and Historicist Schools

During the Reformation and the subsequent rise of European historical-critical scholarship, many Western theologians maintained a preterist approach (Ladd, 1974). Scholars like modern British theologian N.T. Wright heavily echo this classical Eurocentric preterism, arguing that Matthew 24.18 operates entirely within first-century Jewish apocalyptic imagery. Wright (1996) and Allison (2005) contend that the "cloak" represents the false security of nationalistic rebellion against Rome; Jesus's warning was an appeal to abandon the socio-political structures of Judea before they were crushed by empire. In their scholarly Western view, the "holy place" is treated strictly as an ancient Judean geographical marker rather than a modern spiritual space.

The Dispensational Futurist Paradigm

Conversely, the nineteenth century witnessed the rise of Plymouth Brethren scholar John Nelson Darby in England, who pioneered dispensationalism—a framework that came to dominate American and European evangelical theology (Darby, 1867; Sandeen, 1970). Dispensationalists split Matthew 24 into two distinct timelines. In this view, the abomination of desolation has a dual fulfillment: a minor historical echo in 70 CE, and a major future fulfillment during a global Great Tribulation (Darby, 1867; Walvoord, 1980; Pentecost, 1958).

John F. Walvoord, a prominent Western dispensationalist, argues that Matthew 24.18 addresses a literal, future remnant of Jewish believers in Judea who must flee when a revitalized European political leader (the Antichrist) desecrates a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem. For Walvoord and the futurist school, the "holy place" shifts back to being a physical, reconstructed temple structure in literal Jerusalem, which will become the epicenter of global apocalyptic events (Ryrie, 1965). In these works, the urgency to leave behind one's clothes is interpreted as a literal instruction for a future generation escaping a global totalitarian regime.

Contemporary Nigerian Interpretations: Mainline, Pentecostal, and Prophetic Paradigms

In contemporary Nigeria, the interpretation of Matthew 24.18 shifts dramatically away from Western academic debates between preterism and futurism. Instead, the passage is read through the immediate, lived realities of economic hardship, political instability, spiritual warfare, and the explosive growth of the church (Sanneh, 1989; Manus, 2003).

Mainline Denominations: Moral Vigilance and National Crisis

Nigerian mainline theologians (Anglican, Methodist, Catholic) generally adopt a historicist-metaphorical approach that mirrors patristic caution, adapting it to the contemporary Nigerian socio-political landscape (Ukpong, 2000; Bediako, 1995). In these churches, the

"abomination causing desolation" is frequently contextualized as systemic corruption, institutional decay, terrorism (such as Boko Haram or banditry), and the desecration of sacred values within the nation (Gwamna, 2008; Enuwosa, 2005).

Mainline scholars view the urgency of verse 18 as a call to holistic, ethical alertness. For these theologians, the "holy place" is redefined metaphorically as the moral conscience of the nation, the sacred institution of the Church, or the corporate purity of society (Ukpong, 2000; Agbiji, 2015). The command for the farmer to not return for his cloak is interpreted as a warning against spiritual compromise and materialism. For a Nigerian mainline believer, returning to get the "cloak" symbolizes a dangerous clinging to ill-gotten wealth, tribalism, or corrupt structures when divine judgment or societal collapse looms (Gwamna, 2008).

Classical Pentecostalism: Deliverance and Spiritual Warfare

Within classical Nigerian Pentecostalism—represented by megachurches like the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) and Living Faith Church (Winners Chapel)—Matthew 24.18 is filtered through the lenses of holiness preaching, deliverance ministry, and personal destiny (Kalu, 2008; Meyer, 1999). Rather than looking for a temple building in Jerusalem, Pentecostal pastors focus heavily on 1 Corinthians 6.19 ("your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost"). Consequently, they define the "holy place" individualistically: it is the human spirit, the believer's body, or their divinely ordained destiny (Kalu, 2008; Adeboye, 2018).

In this context, prominent church leaders apply the text to immediate personal crises. Pastor E.A. Adeboye, the General Overseer of the RCCG, frequently emphasizes that the "field" represents the secular marketplace, where a believer is constantly exposed to spiritual contamination. Adeboye asserts that when temptation or compromise presents itself, the believer must run immediately without looking back at worldly benefits, as delay leads to spiritual death (Adeboye, 2018).

Similarly, Bishop David Oyedepo of Winners Chapel frames the urgency of verse 18 around breaking free from stagnation. Oyedepo preaches that the "cloak" represents the old garments of poverty, failure, and ancestral patterns. He argues that looking back or returning for the cloak means choosing comfort in mediocrity over the strenuous upward climb to one's prophetic destiny (Oyedepo, 2005; Burgess, 2008).

1.1. The Neo-Pentecostal Prophetic Paradigm: Pastor Jerry Eze (NSPPD)

A distinct contemporary shift is embodied by Pastor Jerry Eze, the leader of Streams of Joy International and convener of the massively popular daily digital prayer movement, New Season Prophetic Prayers and Declarations (NSPPD). Eze's hermeneutical approach to texts like Matthew 24.18 radically operationalizes apocalyptic urgency into immediate, real-time prophetic decrees against negative life circumstances (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2013; Wariboko, 2012).

On the NSPPD platform, the literal apocalyptic framework of Matthew 24 is localized into individual spiritual warfare, bypassing the structural preterist or futurist debates of Europe. Instead, Eze synthesizes the narrative speed of Matthew with the warfare tones implied in Luke's 'days of vengeance' (Eze, 2026a). Eze addresses text fragments like verse 18 by reinterpreting the imagery through the vocabulary of immediate, supernatural 'reversals' and prophetic accelerations (Obadare, 2018). The texts are awarded spiritual symbols that calls for a matching spiritual warfare as follows:



- **The Spiritualized "Garment":** For Eze, a "cloak" or "garment" left behind in the field is not a neutral physical piece of clothing; it is frequently spiritualized as a "garment of lateness," a "garment of shame," or a "satanic evil covering" that limits a believer's progress (Eze, 2026b).
- **The Danger of Turning Back:** To "turn back to take his clothes" is interpreted by Eze as a dangerous spiritual hesitation where the believer allows fear, ancestral patterns, or "powers attempting to elevate and then strip one bare" to pull them back into bondage (Eze, 2026a).
- **The Command for Immediate Flight:** Eze weaponizes the extreme urgency of verse 18. He commands an immediate, forceful progression out of "dry seasons" and "unknown battles" (Eze, 2026b). Instead of fleeing physically to the mountains of Judea, the believer is told to run forward by faith into their "season of evidence," leaving behind the old identity of affliction and sickness. The urgency of the text is transformed from a warning about cosmic doom into a daily, mandatory demand for a prophetic breakthrough (Eze, 2026a).

2. Implications for Nigerian Christians: Caution In Abusing The Fluidity Of Biblical Texts

The historical and contemporary trajectory of interpreting Matthew 24.18 presented in the foregoing reveals that biblical texts are not static, historical artifacts but fluid, living deposits of divine communication. This hermeneutical fluidity carries profound theological, ethical, and ecclesial implications for Nigerian Christians navigating a complex socio-religious landscape in the following ways.

Validation of Mother-Tongue and Intercultural Hermeneutics

For decades, Western Eurocentric scholarship treated preterist and dispensational-futurist frameworks as the objective, universal standards for reading apocalyptic literature (Ladd 198; Ryrie 135). However, the dramatic shift toward localized interpretations in Nigeria—ranging from mainline structural critiques to Pastor Jerry Eze's real-time prophetic decrees—demonstrates that the meaning of scripture is unlocked when it interacts directly with the lived experiences of a people (Manus, 2003; Ukpong, 2000).

The primary implication is that Nigerian Christians must confidently claim their place as legitimate co-authors of global theological discourse. When the text is allowed to be fluid, the "holy place" ceases to be a disputed geopolitical site in the Middle East and becomes a living temple requiring preservation from systemic corruption and spiritual decay (Kalu, 2008; Gwamna, 2008).

Guarding Against Textual Weaponization and Manipulation

While the flexibility of scripture allows for deep contextual relevance, its extreme fluidity can easily degenerate into eisegesis—the practice of forcing personal agendas into the text. In the Neo-Pentecostal sphere, transforming a physical warning about a Roman siege into a mandate against a localized "garment of lateness" showcases an imaginative interpretive freedom (Eze, 2026b). However, this pattern imposes a critical responsibility on Nigerian interpreters, hence the need for the following safeguards to be observed. Firstly, there is the need to maintain historic anchors. Christian leaders and interpreters must cross-check contemporary prophetic declarations with the text's original historical and literary gravity. Second, there is the need to avoid material

delusions. Interpreting the "cloak" solely as ancestral baggage can blind Christians and prevent them from appreciating the literal call for material detachment that Jesus emphasized. Third, there is need to exercise discernment. Fluidity should never be used to justify the manipulation of vulnerable members of the congregations who are under economic stress but promised that every problem would be solved as a reward for their prophetic statements and participation in spiritual declarations. Solving the problems of Nigerian society is more complicated than a faith declaration. Solutions to these problems require implementing the right policies, to the right proportion and in the right manner. These require a collaborative, dedicated effort from both those who are attune with faith declaration and those who are not.

Fostering Ecumenical Dialogue Over Eschatological Dogmatism

The striking differences in how Nigerian mainline churches (focusing on corporate ethics and institutional corruption) and Pentecostal bodies (focusing on individual deliverance and destiny) read Matthew 24.18 should not be a source of division. Instead, the fluid nature of the text reveals that these frameworks are complementary rather than contradictory. Mainline hermeneutics provide the social conscience needed to combat systemic desolation, while Pentecostal models offer the spiritual vitality and hope necessary to survive harsh economic realities (Enuwosa, 2005; Asamoah-Gyadu, 2015). Recognizing that a single verse can speak simultaneously to structural and personal struggles can bridge the historical gap between different denominations in Nigeria and enhance ecumenical dialogues and collaborations in finding a solution to common socio-economic challenges.

Reclaiming the Urgency of Immediate Action

Across every single era of interpretation—from the Maccabean flight into the mountains, to the early Church's exodus to Pella, to modern prophetic accelerations—the core demand of Matthew 24.18 is unyielding speed (1 Macc. 2.27; Eusebius, 1989ed; Oyedepo, 2005). For the Nigerian Christian, the overarching implication of this study is a call to end spiritual and ethical hesitation. It is a call to make immediate and honest positive steps towards addressing socio-economic problems that devalue life in Nigerian society. It is a call for leaders not to use dishonest rhetorics to manipulate the people into believing that social problems would be resolved quickly but rather to educate them to join hands in taking their destiny into their hands by following practical steps that move towards problem solving.

Whether responding to the Lukan warning of surrounding socio-political crises by executing immediate moral reform, or embracing the Matthaean call to drop the "cloak" of compromised worldly assets, the text demands instant obedience (Matt. 24.18; Luke 21.20). In a nation experiencing rapid shifts, the fluid text reminds the church that when a crisis hits the sanctuary, lingering for material security or past traditions is a luxury no believer can afford.

Recommendations

From the foregoing discussions this paper recommends as follows

- Church leaders and interpreters should continue to encourage Christians to relate biblical texts to their everyday experiences within their environments. Biblical texts should be interpreted in a way it addresses the good and bad experiences of people withing their locality.
- Interpreters and Church leaders should guard against weaponizing biblical texts as a tool to create fear and dominate their members into doing their bidding. Negative events should and experiences of people should not be capitalised on to heighten their fear and insecurity.
- Mainline and Pentecostal Church leaders and interpreters should listen and learn from each other without claiming their interpretations are superior to the other. This mutual listening and learning form each other would foster honest ecumenical dialogue and collaborations.
- Caution should be exercised in over-reading into the text and claiming that such readings are revealed by God. Interpreters should speak honestly that such readings are their reflections and thoughts and do not carry absolute divine authority.



Conclusion

The interpretive trajectory of Matthew 24.18 highlights how a single prophetic warning adapts to the anxieties of different eras. While its historical background is rooted in Intertestamental Seleucid desecrations, the heroic resistance of the Maccabean Revolt, internal Zealot pollutions, and the impending Roman destruction of 70 CE, its application has shifted dramatically across time and space. The textual interplay between Matthew's apocalyptic abomination and Luke's enveloping armies provides the hermeneutical sandbox for these shifts.

The Patristic writers saw it as a historical blueprint for physical survival and ecclesial transition. Eurocentric scholars transformed it into an intellectual battleground, debating systematic timelines and literary genres. In contemporary Nigeria, the text undergoes a vibrant, multi-layered contextualization. Mainline Churches utilize its urgency to preach ethical reform amid national desolation; classical Pentecostals leverage it as a standard for holiness and destiny preservation; and prophetic leaders like Pastor Jerry Eze fully operationalize it as an urgent mandate to strip away spiritual garments of shame and step into immediate divine acceleration by engaging in daily online energetic and systematic prayer sessions.

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