

MISTAKE 35

THE PARABLE OF THE TEN MAIDENS DOES NOT SUPPORT A PRE-TRIBULATION RAPTURE

One of the parables of Jesus, that of the ten maidens in Matthew 25, has caused considerable controversy, since it had been cited as evidence for certain claims about the end times. This includes the idea that the Galilean wedding, in all its details, somehow provides a vivid picture of the pre-tribulation rapture of the church.

Supposedly, the parable gives further evidence from the Bible that Christians will not experience the final seven-year period of God's wrath that will come upon the earth, known as "the seventieth week of Daniel" or "the time of Jacob's trouble."

The author, in fact, has written two books where he sets out the evidence that the pre-tribulation rapture is the best way of interpreting what will take place in the future *The Rapture*, and *The Pre-Trib. Rapture Defended*. However, he does not believe that the parable of the ten maidens has anything to do with this subject. Therefore, we will examine the claims in some detail and demonstrate why these claims do not fit the biblical or historical evidence.

WHY I'M ANSWERING THIS QUESTION

At the outset, there also needs to be some sort of explanation as to why I'm looking at this question in such detail. We'll provide a bit of background that should help.

In 2020 I was doing an hour long daily program on Hischannel called "Breaking News." The idea was to look at the daily headlines and explain what they meant with respect to "last days" Bible prophecy. Eventually we added a half hour segment on Wednesday's and Friday's during which I would answer Bible questions that people sent in.

On one particular Wednesday I was handed a question that I had never heard about before. The person asked what I thought of the idea that the parable of the ten maidens reflected the Galilean wedding customs at Jesus' time, and that aspects of these customs provided solid biblical support for a pre-tribulation rapture.

I was incredulous. At the outset, I replied that this idea does not seem possible since the context of Matthew 24-25, and in particular the parable of the ten maidens, is about the Second Coming of Christ, not the rapture.

Furthermore, the whole idea of the parable can be summed up in two words, "Be prepared." It warns us not to be like the five foolish maidens who were not ready to meet the bridegroom when he arrived. In other words, prepare now to meet the Lord before it is too late.

After answering this question I went on to the next one, all the while assuming that the matter was closed.

Well, the next day I received another email from a viewer. The tone was unfortunate. The upshot was that I was ignorant of new evidence that had come to light making it obvious that the wedding was indeed a clear portrait of a pre-tribulation rapture. According to this viewer, indisputable evidence had been provided through a new movie titled "Before the Wrath."

I had not heard of the movie so I went online and found favorable reviews. There were two lengthy ones that I read which basically said the same thing: that the movie laid out a powerful case for the pre-tribulation rapture once the customs of the Galilean weddings in Jesus' day were understood.

Matthew 25: The Parable Of The Ten Maidens Does Not Support A Pretribulation Rapture

In response, I took the entire 30 minutes of the last half of the Friday program to thoroughly go through the entire context of Matthew 21-25 and demonstrated that we are dealing with judgment of the Lord upon those who had rejected Jesus. It culminated in Matthew 25:31-46 where the Lord judges people during His return, dividing between the sheep and the goats.

Furthermore, I added that as far as I was aware, we did not possess sufficient information about first-century weddings to make any firm conclusions about what the customs were at the time. I had not heard of any earth-shattering discoveries that supposedly filled the gap of our ignorance.

Anyway, I thought that this simple explanation was adequate. However, to some it was not! It seemed that I was trying to destroy a great argument for the pre-tribulation rapture when all I was doing was stating the obvious facts.

I eventually did get to see the movie. The arguments put forward were totally unconvincing to me. Additionally, should these arguments be proven true with anthropological evidence, they would not replace or nullify the context of this parable in Matthew's gospel.

However, I had already said my piece so I decided not to comment further.

Again, there were a number of people who would not let it go and I still continue to be asked this question. Therefore, I will explain in detail, hopefully once and for all, why this idea doesn't work.

CHECKING OUT THE EVIDENCE

We will start with citing three passages of Scripture that seem appropriate for putting this question into perspective.

First, we are commanded in Scripture to test all things and hold on to those things that are good:

Examine all things; hold fast to what is good (1 Thessalonians 5:21 NET).

This commandment addresses how to respond when someone is claiming to speak for the Lord. Paul issued this advice to the Thessalonians to assist them with sorting out the true from the false. In other words, we are to weigh and evaluate the evidence whenever an assertion is made.

Next, the Book of Proverbs gives us this wise warning:

The first to state his case seems right, until his opponent begins to cross-examine him (Proverbs 18:17 NET).

The New Living Translation puts it this way:

The first to speak in court sounds right—until the cross-examination begins (Proverbs 18:17 NLT).

Obviously, the point being made is that wisdom calls for us to hear both sides of any argument. This is very important. We must be careful not to jump to conclusions when we hear only one side of any presentation of a new claim.

Finally, Paul wrote to the Galatians:

So then, have I become your enemy by telling you the truth? (Galatians 4:16 NET)

Matthew 25: The Parable Of The Ten Maidens Does Not Support A Pretribulation Rapture

If someone comes along and refutes something that we have previously believed we should not denounce them. In other words, we should not “shoot the messenger.”

With these things in mind, let us take a look at this issue of the parable of the ten maidens and then discover precisely what we can, and cannot, conclude from the evidence.

THE CONTEXT OF MATTHEW 25

Before we look specifically at this particular parable, it is vital that we understand the context in which it was given.

The Lord Jesus made a statement in front of His disciples that caused them confusion. After arriving in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday in His “triumphal entry” and acknowledging that He was indeed the promised Messiah, Christ pronounced judgment upon the city, as well as the temple.

His disciples were perplexed. Jesus acknowledged that He was the promised Messiah, the Christ. According to Isaiah 2:1-4, when the Messiah arrives, He will rule and reign from the temple in Jerusalem when He sets up His kingdom. Now, they are told that it will be destroyed. What are they to make of this?

After they left the temple area and went up to the Mount of Olives, four of His disciples came to Him privately to ask Him about what He meant.

As he was sitting on the Mount of Olives, his disciples came to him privately and said, “Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (Matthew 24:3-4 NET).

These questions led Jesus to give the last of His major discourses: the Olivet Discourse. It is recorded in Matthew 24:4-25:46.

THE WIDER CONTEXT

Before we summarize His answer, and in particular look at the parable of the ten maidens, it is important that we go back a few chapters to put His words into a wider context.

THE TRIUMPHAL ENTRY

We start with His triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Upon coming near the city, Jesus wept over it for its people’s rejection of Him as the Messiah:

But as he came closer to Jerusalem and saw the city ahead, he began to weep. “How I wish today that you of all people would understand the way to peace. But now it is too late, and peace is hidden from your eyes. Before long your enemies will build ramparts against your walls and encircle you and close in on you from every side. They will crush you into the ground, and your children with you. Your enemies will not leave a single stone in place, because you did not recognize it when God visited you” (Luke 19:41-44 NLT).

This first episode begins a pattern of Jesus pronouncing judgment upon the populace for their unbelief. We must not miss the fact that he wept over the city for their lack of faith in Him.

JESUS DROVE OUT THE MONEYCHANGERS

Once Jesus made His triumphal entry into Jerusalem, He drove the moneychangers out from the temple courts and then spent the night outside of Jerusalem:

But when the chief priests and the experts in the law saw the wonderful things he did and heard the children crying out in the temple courts, “Hosanna to the Son of David,” they became indignant and said to him, “Do you hear what they are saying?” Jesus said to them, “Yes. Have you never read, ‘Out of the mouths of children and nursing infants you have prepared praise for yourself?’” And leaving them, he went out of the city to Bethany and spent the night there (Matthew 21:15-17 NLT).

HIS AUTHORITY WAS QUESTIONED

Upon returning to Jerusalem the next day, the Lord was approached by the religious leaders in the temple courts who questioned His authority. After silencing them, Jesus then directed two parables toward these hypocrites, the parable of the two sons and the parable of the tenants. He ended with His pronouncement of judgment upon religious leadership as well as the unbelieving nation:

I tell you, the Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation that will produce the proper fruit. Anyone who stumbles over that stone will be broken to pieces, and it will crush anyone it falls on.” When the leading priests and Pharisees heard this parable, they realized he was telling the story against them—they were the wicked farmers. They wanted to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowds, who considered Jesus to be a prophet (Matthew 22:43-46 NLT).

THE PARABLE OF THE WEDDING FEAST

He then proceeded to give the parable of the wedding feast. This also ended with the pronouncement of judgment:

But when the king came in to meet the guests, he noticed a man who wasn’t wearing the proper clothes for a wedding. ‘Friend,’ he asked, ‘how is it that you are here without wedding clothes?’ But the man had no reply. Then the king said to his aides, ‘Bind his hands and feet and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth’ (Matthew 22:11-13 NLT).

THE DENUNCIATION OF THE RELIGIOUS RULERS

In Matthew 23 we find the harshest words of condemnation in the entire Bible. It was given by the Lord Jesus and directed to the religious rulers. Not only did Jesus denounce the religious leaders, He did it with intense emotion. We will give a few examples:

What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! (Matthew 23:13 NLT)

This construction in the Greek is known as a “vocative of emotional address.” Simply put, Jesus is denouncing these hypocrites in the strongest of terms with language that shows intense emotion.

We have another example of Jesus’ emotion toward these false teachers:

Blind guides! What sorrow awaits you! (Matthew 23:15 NLT)

Again, the construction in Greek emphasizes His emotional response to these religious authorities leading the people astray. This emotion continued throughout all the “woes” which the Lord pronounced upon them.

JUDGMENT WAS THEN PRONOUNCED UPON THE CITY AND THE TEMPLE

It was then that the Lord Jesus pronounced judgment upon Jerusalem and the temple. Again we should not miss the emotion in His voice:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones God's messengers! How often I have wanted to gather your children together as a hen protects her chicks beneath her wings, but you wouldn't let me. And now, look, your house is abandoned and desolate. For I tell you this, you will never see me again until you say, 'Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the LORD!' (Matthew 23:37-39 NLT).

Again, syntax and grammar are important. Jesus repeated the word Jerusalem in a way that speakers often use to express strong emotion.

Therefore, from the time of His triumphal entry, through His denunciation of the religious leaders, it is marked by strong emotion from Jesus.

So, to sum up, Jesus revealed Himself as the Messiah at His triumphal entry, and was then rejected. His following actions, and the parables which He gave, all pronounced the coming judgment.

The crescendo was the condemnation of the religious rulers and then the emotional pronouncement of judgment upon the city and the temple.

These events set the stage for His final discourse in which He explained what would take place in the future.

THE OLIVET DISCOURSE

Hence, in answer to the questions to His disciples that concerned the coming judgments against the city and the temple, as well as His return to the earth in triumph, Jesus gave a number of illustrations designed to urge the people to be prepared, to be ready for His return.

ANSWERING THE DISCIPLES QUESTIONS

Jesus first listed a number of signs that would characterize the time of the end (Matthew 24:4-14). He then gave a specific sign that would start the final three-and-one-half-year period popularly known as the great tribulation.

THE ABOMINATION THAT CAUSES DESOLATION

Jesus made this proclamation:

So when you see the abomination of desolation-spoken about by Daniel the prophet-standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then those in Judea must flee to the mountains (Matthew 24:15-16 NET).

He later added this:

For there will be greater anguish than at any time since the world began. And it will never be so great again. In fact, unless that time of calamity is shortened, not a single person will survive. But it will be shortened for the sake of God's chosen ones (Matthew 24:21-22 NLT)

This event would signal the end is getting near.

After explaining a number of things surrounding His return Jesus urged the disciples to keep watch:

So you, too, must keep watch! For you don't know what day your Lord is coming. Understand this: If a homeowner knew exactly when a burglar was coming, he would keep watch and not permit his house to be broken into. You also must be ready all the time, for the Son of Man will come when least expected (Matthew 24:42-44 NLT).

Christ will return at a time when the people least expect it.

THE IMMEDIATE CONTEXT OF MATTHEW 25

Jesus then gave the illustration of two servants, a sensible one and a foolish one. The foolish one would be judged for his unbelief that the Lord may come sooner rather than later:

But what if the servant is evil and thinks, 'My master won't be back for a while,' and he begins beating the other servants, partying, and getting drunk? The master will return unannounced and unexpected, and he will cut the servant to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 24:48-51 NLT).

In this instance, the master returned earlier than this foolish man had expected.

Next came the parable of the ten maidens, where, as we will see, the master returned later than expected.

The first thing that should strike us is that the parable of the ten maidens is sandwiched between two other parables which *both* speak of Jesus' Second Coming to the earth. The first parable was that of the faithful and wise slave who was ready for the coming of his master and the evil slave who believed that the master was delaying his coming. Jesus concluded the parable as follows:

The master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not foresee, and will cut him in two, and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 24:50 NET).

The second was the parable of the talents. Before going on a journey the master entrusted money to three of his servants. When he returned he found that two servants were faithful but one was not. The Lord had the following to say about the third servant who was unfaithful:

Then he ordered, 'Take the money from this servant, and give it to the one with the ten bags of silver. To those who use well what they are given, even more will be given, and they will have an abundance. But from those who do nothing, even what little they have will be taken away. Now throw this useless servant into outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth' (Matthew 25:28-30 NLT).

Again, we notice that the parable ends with the useless servant being judged by the Lord, thrown into outer darkness.

Finally, the Lord Jesus then compared His return to the earth to a shepherd dividing the sheep, the righteous, from the goats, the unrighteous:

But when the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit upon his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered in his presence, and he will separate the people as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will place the sheep at his right hand and the goats at his left ... And they [the unrighteous] will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous will go into eternal life" (Matthew 25:31-33, 46 NLT).

Jesus' prediction of a return in judgment concludes these chapters, which began with His triumphal entry and His weeping over the city because of the rejection of His people of Him as the promised Messiah.

Now let's look where the parable of the ten maidens fits into the overall teaching of these chapters. In doing so, we will discover what we should conclude, as well as what we cannot conclude, from the text as it stands.

Matthew 25:1

At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten maidens who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom.

At that time

Notice the parable begins with the words “at that time.” What time is this? In context, it is the time of Jesus’ return to the earth in judgment as He had just explained in the previous parable, the parable of the wise and foolish servant. Greek scholar Charles L. Quarles explains:

The Greek word ... probably means “at that time” and probably refers to the time of the master’s coming mentioned at the climax of the preceding parable ... It highlights a distinction between the present manifestation of the kingdom (in which it is not too late to enter) and the consummation of the kingdom (at which time it will be too late to enter). (Charles Quarles, Matthew, *Exegetical Guide To the Greek New Testament*, Nashville, B&H Publishing Group, 2017, p. 296).

Bible commentator Thomas Constable wrote:

The introductory “then” ties this parable to the subject of the preceding instruction, namely, the Second Coming of the Son of Man. The beginning of “the kingdom of heaven” is in view. It will be similar to what the following story describes (Thomas Constable, Constable’s Online Expository Notes, Matthew, 2014).

In his comprehensive book on the parables of Jesus, Klyne R. Snodgrass agrees:

This is the only parable to begin with (then)... likely it refers to the coming of the future kingdom which was alluded to in 24:50-51 (Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Stories With Intent, A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*, Second Edition, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2018, p. 509).

Snodgrass also noted a number of themes in the parable of the ten maidens that are found elsewhere in the context:

Several themes are given prominence in this section: the fivefold repetition of no one knows the day or the hour (24:36,42,44,50; 25:13), (“watch” ... 24:42-43; 25:13—note the similarity of 24:42 and 25:13), wise 24:45; 25:2,4,8,9), prepared...24:44; 25:10, and delay 24:48; 25:5 (Snodgrass, p. 508).

Most commentators on Matthew concur that this parable is dealing with the same subject matter, the return of the Lord and the need to be ready. Merrill Unger, former professor at Dallas Theological Seminary, writes:

“Then” ... as a temporal particle, establishes the time context of this illustration as at the end of the Tribulation and at the advent of the Messiah to judge (24:36-51) His own people, Israel. Hence, it has no reference to the rapture (Merrill Unger, Unger’s Commentary On The Gospels, Copyright © 2014 by The Merrill F Unger Trust LLC, Published by AMG Publishers 6815 Shallowford Rd. Chattanooga, Tennessee 374216).

Therefore, the time frame that we are looking at is the Second Coming of Christ. This is crucial to understand. Indeed, the entire parable must be interpreted in light of this.

Consequently, from the very first word in the Greek text, it appears that we are NOT looking at an event that will take place some seven years prior to His return, the rapture of the church.

the Kingdom of Heaven will be like

This refers to the future time where God's kingdom will rule over the earth. The parable of the ten maidens will compare the kingdom of heaven to this illustration that Jesus will now give.

Merrill Unger writes how this parable speaks of the very moment the Lord will return to set up that kingdom:

This kingdom, completely suspended during the hiatus between Daniel's sixty-ninth and Seventieth Week ... is here in view. Moreover, it is surveyed at the precise moment the Messiah returns to judge the living for the purpose of entrance or non-entrance into the kingdom (Unger's Commentary On The Gospels).

ten maidens (virgins, handmaidens, young women, girls)

The parable is about the antics of ten maidens, not aspects of the maidens identities. While some English translations use the word "virgins" to render the Greek here, the idea of their virginity is not what is being stressed. This is a story about what happened to these young girls.

The Contemporary English Version translates it as "ten girls." Simply put, we are dealing with the experiences of ten young women.

Interestingly, the Greek word *parthenos*, translated as "virgin," can refer to either males or females. In fact, in the Book of Revelation, it is used of males:

These are the ones who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins (Revelation 14:4 NET).

From this context in Matthew, it seems clear that females are in view. Specifically this would refer to girls in their early teens. All ten of the maidens looked the same from the outside: they were all young girls, they all carried lamps, and engaged in similar activity.

The Tyndale New Testament Commentary makes an important point as to the identity of the ten young girls:

The details of the story are not all clear, as contemporary wedding customs are not fully known. The maidens may be attendants of the bride, or servants in the bridegroom's home, or perhaps friends and neighbours. The term 'bridesmaids' ... is not necessarily to be read in a modern cultural context! (R.T. France, Tyndale New Testament Commentary, Matthew, Inter-varsity Press, Nottingham England, website www.ivpbooks.com © R. T. France 1985).

We also have the suggestion that the maidens were female friends of the groom:

These were probably female friends and relatives of the bridegroom, who went out to welcome him and his new companion to their home. These are the virgins mentioned in this parable (Albert Barnes, *The Gospel According To Matthew*, Barnes Notes, Philadelphia, 1832).

In sum, these young girls could be bridesmaids, friends and neighbors of the bride and groom, relatives of the groom or servants in the home of the groom. We are simply not told.

The parable centers upon them, not the bride who is absent in Jesus' story.

who took their lamps (torches)

We now arrive at our next dilemma. What exactly did these ten maidens take with them? Commentators are divided as to whether it refers to lamps or torches. Craig Keener writes:

Weddings were held toward evening and torches were used as part of the celebration, which focused on a procession leading the bride to the groom's house. It is unlikely that "lamps" refers to the small Herodian oil lamps, which could be carried in the hand; all the evidence points instead here to real torches, which were also used in Greek and Roman wedding ceremonies. For many people, these torches may have been sticks wrapped with oil-soaked rags (Craig Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary New Testament*, Second Edition, 2014).

On the other hand, there are those who argue that it was lamps that were used.

and went out to meet the bridegroom

At this point we understand that this parable has a wedding ceremony in view. These ten young girls were to venture out and meet the bridegroom.

In the Old Testament the Lord's relationship with Israel is likened to a groom with His bride. In this instance, the bridegroom is seemingly referring to Jesus Himself. In fact, Jesus had earlier compared Himself to a groom:

Then John's disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples don't fast?" Jesus said to them, "The wedding guests cannot mourn while the bridegroom is with them, can they? But the days are coming when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and then they will fast (Matthew 9:14-15 NET).

The NET Bible has a note that explains the identity of the wedding guests:

"sons of the wedding hall," an idiom referring to wedding guests, or more specifically friends of the bridegroom present at the wedding celebration (NET Bible, note on Matthew 9:15).

These guests could have been either male or female. The Greek word used, translated as "sons" in the NET Bible, is not limited to males.

While the ten maidens took their lamps, we are not told the purpose of them having these lamp or torches. Were they used to light the way for the arriving groom or bride—who may or may not have been with him—or for the crowd that gathered?

Furthermore, were the young girls there to escort the groom somewhere, perhaps to his home, his parents' home, or to the home of the bride? Again, there is no information given and commentators differ on the answer.

Matthew 25:2

Five of the maidens were foolish, and five were wise.

Five of the maidens were foolish (dimwitted) and five were wise

Though these ten maidens outwardly looked similar, there was a difference between them: five were wise and five were foolish.

Matthew 25: The Parable Of The Ten Maidens Does Not Support A Pretribulation Rapture

We are first introduced to five who were dimwitted. We should note that they are mentioned first as they will furnish the illustration that Jesus was making about not being prepared.

The parable will now explain why five of them were foolish. Basically, they were not ready for what was about to take place.

This is a further statement of the “theme” of the story. The word translated “wise” or “prudent” stems from 24:45 in the previous parable, “the faithful and wise slave.” This parable continues the wisdom theme, namely discerning followers of Christ understand the situation and will do what is right in preparation for His coming.

Matthew 25:3

When the foolish ones took their lamps, they did not take extra olive oil with them.

When the foolish ones took their lamps (torches) they did not take extra [olive] oil with them

The wise and foolish maidens are similar to the faithful and evil servants that the Lord spoke of in the previous parable. The five foolish maidens expected the groom to arrive in a short period of time, but the wise were prepared for a possible delay.

The New English Translation adds the word “extra” before olive oil.

The word “extra” is not in the Greek text but is implied. The point is that the five foolish virgins had only the oil in their lamps, but took along no extra supply from which to replenish them. This is clear from v. 8, where the lamps of the foolish virgins are going out because they are running out of oil (NET Bible, note on Matthew 25:3)

Some translations omit the word “olive” before oil.

but they didn’t take any extra oil (God’s Word Translation) but no extra oil (The Contemporary English Version).

Their foolishness seemingly consisted of not being prepared for any possible delay in the arrival of the groom.

Greek scholar A.T. Robertson listed one possible scenario about their lack of oil:

[They took] probably none at all, not realizing their lack of oil till they lit the torches on the arrival of the bridegroom and his party (A.T. Robertson’s, *Word Pictures In The New Testament, Matthew*).

If so, then they brought either lamps or torches that could not be lit at all!

Matthew 25:4

But the wise ones took flasks of olive oil with their lamps (NET)

But the wise ones took flasks of olive oil with their lamps

On the other hand, the wise ones were prepared. They took along oil, or perhaps extra oil, in case of a delay. This is the only stated difference between these two groups.

Matthew 25:5

When the bridegroom was delayed a long time, they all became drowsy and fell asleep

When the bridegroom was delayed a long time

In the previous parable, the master came sooner than expected. In this instance, the groom was delayed for a considerable amount of time for some unspoken reason.

The lengthy delay is the key to understanding this parable.

In a real sense, it is the bridegroom's delay that distinguishes the wise from the foolish virgins. Any interpretation that ignores this central element in the story is bound to go astray (D.A. Carson, *Expositors Bible Commentary, Revised Edition*, Matthew).

they all became drowsy and fell asleep

The long delay caused all ten of them to fall asleep. The fact that they all fell asleep was not the problem.

Again, we have lack of specific details in this parable. We are not told as to their exact location as to where they fell asleep, what they were doing there, or how long they slept.

When we compare 24:48 with 25:5 we find that the lesson is the same as that of the evil slave in the previous parable. In both instances, some delay occurred. However, the two reactions to the delay were completely opposite.

In the first instance, the evil slave overestimated the delay of the return of his master. Therefore, the slave received an unpleasant surprise by the seemingly early arrival of his master.

In this instance, the foolish maidens unwisely underestimated the delay in the arrival the groom and hence were not prepared for it.

Excursus: Should We Interpret This Parable In Light Of John 14?

There have been those who have attempted to identify the words of Jesus in the upper room on the night of His betrayal with this particular parable. He said to His disciples:

Do not let your hearts be distressed. You believe in God; believe also in me. There are many dwelling places in my Father's house. Otherwise, I would have told you, because I am going away to make ready a place for you. And if I go and make ready a place for you, I will come again and take you to be with me, so that where I am you may be too (John 14:1-3 NET).

It is alleged that the Lord was specifically alluding to the well-known customs of a Galilean wedding. It is claimed that the custom of the day had the groom leaving the bride to go to the house of his father and take up to a year to build a room onto the house for the newly married couple.

Accordingly, when Jesus said gave this illustration to His disciples they would have immediately thought of the current wedding customs. Like a betrothed groom, the Lord will go away to build a house for His bride at the house of His Father.

This is supposedly further evidence that the Lord is providing some sort of future timeline with the wedding illustration of Matthew 25.

Matthew 25: The Parable Of The Ten Maidens Does Not Support A Pretribulation Rapture

However, there are a number of things that do not fit this claim.

First, the illustration Jesus gave was not meant to be understood literally! The Lord is symbolically letting His disciples know that when He does return there will be a place prepared for them in the presence of God the Father. We should not assume that these are literal houses in the unseen realm!

Second, there is nothing in the context, before or after, that suggests the analogy of a wedding is being brought up. Nothing!

Third, Jesus said His Father's house *already* had many rooms. This is not the same idea as a groom constructing an add on to the existing structure of his father's house.

Fourth the groom did not always build a room onto the house of his father. Indeed, he may have built a separate facility for his new bride.

Fifth, Jesus spoke of going away to do this. The bride and groom, though they were already considered husband and wife and did not live together, would have had no need for the groom to "go away" if they were previously living in proximity.

Sixth, unlike Jesus' ascension into heaven (after which His disciples would no longer see Him), there is no indication whatsoever that the groom in the first century spent the entire year building his new house without ever seeing his bride.

Seventh, even though Jesus had likened Himself to a groom, the illustration that believers in Christ are compared to a bride is not found in His teaching! It was the Apostle Paul who first gave this illustration in his letter to the Ephesians (5:32).

Hence, we should not equate Jesus' words in the upper room with His previously mentioned parable of the ten maidens. There is no connection between them whatsoever.

Matthew 25:6

But at midnight there was a shout, "Look, the bridegroom is here! Come out to meet him."

But at midnight

In other words, the delay was much longer than expected. Midnight may mean in the midst of the night, not necessarily 12 a.m.

there was a shout

We are not told who shouted to wake them up, whether it came from one of the maidens in the group who woke up or from someone else heralding the coming of the groom.

Look, the bridegroom is here! Come out to meet him.

Wherever their location, the maidens awakened by the shout. They were told to come out and meet the late-arriving groom. However, we are not told exactly *why* they were to meet him or where they were going.

Matthew 25:7

Then all the maidens woke up and trimmed their lamps.

Then all the maidens woke up

The shout woke all of them up.

and trimmed their lamps.

They then prepared their lamps or torches for the arrival of the groom to their unspoken location.

Matthew 25:8

The foolish ones said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil, because our lamps are going out."

The foolish ones said to the wise

The foolish maidens will now make a demand of those who were wise.

Give us some of your oil, because our lamps are going out.

They requested some of their oil as they noticed that their lamps were going out.

What we are not told was if the lamps had been burning the entire time while they were asleep. We only know that their lamps were starting to go out. Again, we are never told as to why their lamps or torches must be lit, or the specific reason they were needed.

Respected Bible commentator R.C.H. Lenski makes some interesting observations about the foolish maidens lack of preparedness:

It was necessary for the great purpose of the parable to set out first of all and apart from the following action this basic fact: some foolish—others wise. For this is really what decides all that follows, and this is the heart of the warning for us. We are also shown without delay the plain evidence for the senselessness of the one group and for the sensibleness of the other. The foolish took their lamps along but took no oil! Can you imagine anything more foolish? Of course, no Jewish maidens would do such a thing as that; but this is a parable. Jesus has to picture such maidens in order to make us see how silly we are when, in our preparation for meeting the heavenly Bridegroom, we do exactly this silly thing in a spiritual way. Lamps, perhaps with a few drops of oil left in them from a former burning—and no oil! (R.C.H. Lenski, *Commentary on the New Testament, Matthew*, Augsburg Publishing House, Minneapolis, Minnesota).

Lenski makes a couple of important points. First, this is merely a parable, Jesus is not attempting to explain a realistic situation. Second, it is possible that the five foolish maidens had no oil whatsoever in their lamps.

Matthew 25:9

No, they replied. There won't be enough for you and for us. Go instead to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.

No, they replied.

The wise ones would not give their foolish counterparts any of their oil. This was not because they were selfish.

There won't be enough for you and for us.

The stated reason was that there would not be enough for any of them if they shared what they had held in reserve.

Go instead to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.

They suggested the dimwitted maidens find someone from whom they could buy oil. Whether this was even possible has been disputed by commentators. Indeed, many argue that there would not have been shops open all night in a small village.

Matthew 25:10

But while they had gone to buy it, the bridegroom arrived, and those who were ready went inside with him to the wedding banquet. Then the door was shut.

But while they had gone to buy it, the bridegroom arrived

Unfortunately for the unprepared maidens, the groom arrived before they returned with extra oil.

and those who were ready went inside with him to the wedding banquet.

Those who were prepared were able to enter the wedding banquet.

Then the door was shut.

Sadly, for the foolish maidens the door was shut. The shut door indicated that the wedding feast had now commenced.

EXCURSUS: HOW LONG DID THE CELEBRATION LAST?

Interestingly, some have argued that the seven-day wedding feast, celebration, represented the seven-year "Time of Jacob's Trouble," or the "Seventieth week of Daniel."

However, we are not told precisely how long this feast would last.

In fact, the apocryphal Book of Tobit, written between the testaments, mentions a wedding feast that lasted fourteen days, not seven:

Now when the fourteen days of the wedding celebration had ended that Raguel had sworn to observe for his daughter (Tobit 10:7 NRSV).

This is another reason as to why we must be careful about claiming things about any ancient customs that we know so little about.

Matthew 25:11

Later, the other maidens came too, saying, "Lord, lord! Let us in!"

Later, the other maidens came too

The other maidens eventually arrived. We are not told if they had acquired oil for their lamps or torches or if they were lit. The only point mentioned is that they arrived too late.

saying, “Lord, lord! Let us in!”

They requested the keeper of the door to let them in. The repetition of Lord, lord revealed their concern, they were locked out and wanted to join the ceremony.

The identity of the doorkeeper is uncertain. If this event took place at the house of the father of the bride then her father would have been the one who answered. If it was at the house of father of the groom, then either he, or the groom would be the one answering.

Matthew 25:12

But he replied, “I tell you the truth, I do not know you!”

But he replied, I tell you the truth

The words, “I tell you the truth” indicates that the one who had control over the door was about to make a solemn statement.

I do not know you!

His statement is similar to an earlier one made by Jesus in the context of responding to false prophets:

On judgment day many will say to me, ‘Lord! Lord! We prophesied in your name and cast out demons in your name and performed many miracles in your name.’ But I will reply, ‘I never knew you. Get away from me, you who break God’s laws’ (Matthew 7:22-23 NLT).

Here is where the parable would not fit with what we know of weddings in the first century Ancient Near East.

As many commentators have mentioned, these two things would never have happened. The people in charge of the feast would not keep these young girls from entering the week-long celebration merely because they had been late to the ceremony, and they would never say to them, “I do not know you.” Indeed, in a small village the identity of these young girls would be known to whoever was the keeper of the door.

The Zondervan Study Bible makes the following comment:

By the time the unprepared girls return with their extra oil, the procession has already arrived at the groom’s home and gone inside. At a real wedding, the late arrivals would have been publicly shamed but probably let in. But this is a parable, teaching spiritual lessons. Jesus insists that once he has returned it will be too late to repent (*NIV Zondervan Study Bible, Notes on Matthew*).

Kenneth Bailey makes another important point based upon Middle Eastern customs:

As is often the case, the reader of the parable is left hanging. Does the bridegroom relent and let them in or not? The listener/reader is not told... We do not know what they receive when the conversation is over. In the Middle East the word no is never an answer, rather it is a pause in the negotiations (Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, Inter-Varsity Press, 2008, p. 273).

It is here where we are given the lesson to be learned, be prepared. There will come a time when it is too late to enter the kingdom of God. The parable ends with the following exhortation from Jesus.

None of these questions are explained in the parable. This is in contrast to the parables of the sower as the wheat and the weeds in Matthew 13. In these narrative parables, the Lord gives us an explanation of the various participants along with a timeline. We find nothing of the sort here.

The fact that so many questions remain unanswered is a problem for those who want to make more of this parable than a mere illustration of the importance of being ready.

Indeed, since there are so many things we do not know about the situation we may rightly question whether we can use it to understand some sort of timeline about the future.

**OBSERVATION 2 WE DO NOT HAVE DETAILED KNOWLEDGE
OF FIRST CENTURY WEDDINGS**

For anyone attempting to argue for some type of correspondence between first century weddings in the Galilee and the timeline of the rapture of the church, another problem is our lack of knowledge with respect to these weddings. There are many things that we do not know about the customs at the time of Jesus with respect to weddings. This is admitted by all who comment on this parable. We will provide merely a few examples.

Though not much is known about first-century Jewish wedding customs, it may be that these young, unmarried women leave the groom's home to welcome and accompany the couple back to the groom's household (Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 3:395).

Notice the admission that “not much is known about first-century Jewish wedding customs.” This citation is from the three volume commentary series of Davies and Allison, one of the standard works on Matthew.

The point they make is that we do not have a lot of information about first-century wedding practices.

Writing specifically on the subject of the background of the New Testament, well-known scholar Craig Keener acknowledges:

Because not all the details of ancient Palestinian weddings are known, it is not clear whether the parable envisions the lamps as burning while the bridesmaids slept (to avoid the delay of having to rekindle them) or as being lit only after the first announcement of the bridegroom's coming (as many scholars think) (Craig Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary New Testament*, Second Edition, 2014).

Note Keener, like Davies and Allison, also admits that “not all the details of ancient Palestinian weddings are known.” Indeed, as he states, it is unclear whether or not the lamps would burn while the bridesmaids slept. We simply do not have enough information to make a determination.

In the most comprehensive work on the subject of Jesus' parables, Klyne R. Snodgrass makes the following comment about the parable of the ten virgins:

To the frustration of all interpreters of this parable, information about wedding customs in the ancient world is relatively sparse, and practices may have differed from place to place (Snodgrass, p. 510).

Little information about the customs, as well as differing practices is what is found in the available literature. In other words, we have, at best, limited knowledge of the situation.

We have just cited three standard works: a three-book series on Matthew one on the subject of New Testament background, and the most comprehensive book on Jesus' parables. We also cited a few major commentaries on Matthew. They all admit the same thing: we do not know the exact customs that were practiced at the time.

Our lack of knowledge alone ought to stop anyone from trying to find some hidden truth from Jesus in this parable about a timeline of last days events.

**OBSERVATION 3 THERE HAVE BEEN NO RECENT EARTH-SHATTERING
DISCOVERIES ABOUT GALILEAN WEDDINGS**

The claim that something new has been discovered with respect to the uniqueness of first-century Galilean wedding customs has yet to be proven.

Where is the convincing evidence that the weddings were so different in the Galilee to the point that they mirrored the last days scenario in Scripture? Indeed, there is nothing from firsthand sources that herald such a unique finding in recent times.

To the contrary, well respected commentators admit that so many details of these weddings are not understood. If so, then how could anyone construct a timeline of last days events from something that is not completely understood?

OBSERVATION 4 THE PRIMARY SOURCES CONFLICT

There is something else that must be appreciated, the sources that we have conflict!

The primary sources above show some variety (Snodgrass, p. 512)

Since this is the case, which ones are we to believe? None of them has the authority of Scripture.

In sum, due to the conflicting nature of these sources, we cannot be certain as to the exact customs at the time of Jesus. Therefore, it is not possible to construct some predicted timeline of end time events.

**OBSERVATION 5 THERE ARE DETAILS WE DO KNOW ABOUT FIRST-CENTURY
WEDDINGS THAT DO NOT FIT THE RAPTURE SCENARIO**

There is a further problem. Indeed, there are some things that we do know about traditional weddings in the ancient Middle East that are problematic to coordinate with last days events.

Kenneth E. Bailey was a master biblical scholar who lived in the Middle East for 60 years. He is known for his unique understanding of Middle Eastern culture.

According to Bailey, in traditional village life in the Middle East, weddings occurred “during the seven months of the hot and cloudless summer” (Bailey, p. 271).

Does this mean if the return of the Lord follows the customs of the Galilean weddings, that He cannot return during those five months where weddings were not taking place at the time of Christ? So, is His return limited to a seven month window?

There is something else to consider. John 2 tells us that the wedding in Cana of Galilee took place on “the third day.” As scholar Craig Keener points out:

The “third day does not refer to the third day of the week, because virgins were married on the fourth day (Wednesday) and widows on the fifth (Thursday).” (Craig Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary New Testament*).

Does this indicate that if the Galilean weddings were a clear blueprint for the coming of the Lord that we should look for two comings of Christ? One for the virgins and one for the widows?

Should we also assume that He will follow the pattern of weddings on only two days of the week? Does this mean Christ can only return on a Wednesday or Thursday?

Kenneth Bailey also noted:

When the bride was ready, she would be placed on the back of a riding animal, and the groom, with his friends, would form a disorganized, exuberant parade (Bailey, p. 271).

How does this work with the catching up of believers at the time of the rapture of the church? Are we to ride horses when we meet the Lord in the air?

In sum, we not only discover that our knowledge of weddings at the time of Christ is limited; what we do know, moreover, conflicts with the scenario that some people are promoting.

Yet these are not the only problems of trying to claim that they are a “divine pattern” for understanding the end times.

OBSERVATION 6 THE WEDDINGS CEREMONIES WERE SIMILAR AT THE TIME OF CHRIST

However, that which do know, with the sparse information available to us, does fit the general background of the times.

Bailey also wrote the following comments on the work of Davies and Allison for this parable, Matthew 25:1-13, as well as a similar one found in Luke 12:35-38, “the parable of the serving master:”

W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison present a detailed discussion of the various options regarding the history of the composition of this parable...I note the above list of comparisons to make the point that both of these parables have similar traditional Middle Eastern culture behind them (Bailey, p. 271).

We learn that the parable of the wise and foolish young women has a setting that was similar to the Middle Eastern culture at that time. The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia concurs:

A general survey of ancient marriage laws and customs shows that those of the Hebrews are not a peculiar creation apart from those of other peoples. A remarkable affinity to those of other branches of the Semitic races especially, may be noted, and striking parallels are found in the Code of Hammurabi, with regard, e.g., to betrothal, dowry, adultery and divorce (ISBE E-text version Copyright 2002, HeavenWord, Inc. All rights reserved.)

In other words, there was seemingly nothing that sets the wedding illustration by Jesus, given in Matthew 25:1-13, apart as a unique practice, or something special.

So why look at the particular customs in the Galilee to form a “last days” timeline.

OBSERVATION 7 THERE IS NO COMMANDMENT IN SCRIPTURE AS TO HOW A WEDDING CEREMONY IS TO BE CARRIED OUT

While the Lord did institute marriage at the very beginning of creation, (Genesis 2:24) there is nothing prescribed in the entire Bible about how a wedding ceremony is to be conducted.

This illustrates the difference between what is merely described by the Lord as opposed to that which is prescribed, or commanded, by Him. In other words, we have to make the distinction between what the Scriptures are commanding us to do from passages that merely describe events or customs that were practiced. These marriage customs had no divine approval.

In fact, wedding ceremonies and their traditions in the Ancient Near East developed over time. As we mentioned in our previous observation, they go back to at least the time of Hammurabi which was before the time of Moses.

Are we to assume that these traditions, particularly the ones developed in the Galilee, were somehow divinely inspired to reveal a “last days” scenario?

OBSERVATION 8 THIS PARABLE IS UNIQUE TO MATTHEW: IT IS FOUND NOWHERE ELSE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

There is another important point that needs to be made. We only find the parable of the ten maidens in Matthew. Neither Mark’s gospel, which is attributed to Peter’s perspective, nor Luke or John mention it.

John does record a wedding that was attended by Jesus in Cana of Galilee but he says nothing about this parable. We do not find the parable referred to in the other writings of Peter (1,2 Peter) or the writings of John (1,2,3 John, Revelation) or any other New Testament writer for that matter. None of the recorded speeches in the Book of Acts refer to it.

If the parable was such a clear picture of the unique Galilean wedding, which supposedly portrayed a pre-tribulation rapture, we would likely expect at least something to be mentioned, or at the very least hinted at, in the New Testament. However, there is nothing!

This being the case, we seem to have three basic choices.

First, the possibility that this parable was highlighting a pre-tribulation rapture did not dawn upon these New Testament writers or any of Jesus’ disciples for that matter. In other words, they did not see the connection. Why would those intimately familiar with Jesus’ be unaware of such an important connection?

Second, they did understand the significance of this parable for “last days” Bible prophecy and they did speak about it, but there was nothing recorded in Scripture of what they said. Why would they choose to do this when they touch on the last days in other instances?

Third, the most likely scenario, they did not see any special connection to the rapture of the church because there was none. This is why the parable and its meaning is recorded nowhere else.

OBSERVATION 9 JESUS HAD NO INTENTION OF GIVING A REALISTIC PORTRAYAL OF A FIRST CENTURY WEDDING

There is another matter of the utmost importance that must be addressed, perhaps the most important issue of all. We must ask ourselves in what sense was Jesus trying to realistically portray a first century wedding in this illustration?

Indeed, there have been a number of commentators who have pointed out that Jesus is not necessarily using the precise customs of the day in this parable. In fact, the nature of a parable does not force one to assume that we are dealing with actual realities.

In a highly recommended book on the parables of Jesus, author Arland J. Hultgren explained:

Matthew 25: The Parable Of The Ten Maidens Does Not Support A Pretribulation Rapture

A parable is a figure of speech in which a comparison is made between God's kingdom, actions, or expectations and something in this world, real or imagined.

There are two types of parables:

1. Narrative parables: the comparisons made include narration; these parables typically have a "once upon a time" quality about them and the particularity of stories set in the past.
2. Similitudes: the comparisons are made without stories but by means of the words "is like" or "is as if;" analogies are made between their subjects and general and timeless observations (Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2002, p. 3).

Notice that the narrative parables do not have to be historically precise. They are merely given as illustrations of spiritual truths in a setting that is either real or imagined.

In his comprehensive book on the parables of Jesus, Klyne R. Snodgrass agrees:

Parables are not always realistic and do not need to be....Parables are not direct pictures of reality and do not claim to portray life as it should be. They only partially map the realities they seek to reveal (Snodgrass pp. 510,517).

In fact, we find a number of statements in Jesus' parable of the ten maidens illustrate a deeper truth without necessarily attempting to be historically precise.

For example, it has been suggested that the idea of these young girls' attempting to buy oil in the middle of the night in a small village is not realistic.

Furthermore, many have pointed out that in a first-century wedding the person in charge of the door of the house would not have shut out the foolish girls merely because they showed up a bit late. Neither would he have denied knowing them. Both of these actions would have been unrealistic.

These kinds of non-realistic illustrations are normal in parables. Note the following observations of commentators:

Jesus is not telling a story about something that actually happened; he is warning people of the dreadful fate of those who know that they should be watching for the coming of the Son of man but who do not do this (Leon Morris, *The Gospel According To Matthew*, Pillar New Testament Commentary, Eerdmans 1992).

Thus far all of the parable has seemed reasonably realistic, except perhaps for the unpreparedness of the foolish bridesmaids. But, as always in parables, the real point is at the spiritual level, as now becomes clear. An ordinary groom would let the girls enter, but this lord refuses admittance and denies even knowing them v. 12 (Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary, B and H Publishing Group, 1992).

With these words of pronouncement, the parable shifts from metaphor to meaning, since a bridegroom would know the identity of the bride's attendants (Teach the Text)

Jesus himself indicates that the features of certain parables have detailed correspondences with reality (13:18-23, 37-43, 49-50), but in the case of the present parable, Jesus supplied only a generalizing conclusion (25:13) (David L. Turner, *Matthew*, Cornerstone Bible Commentary, 2005).

Consequently, many commentators suggest that the point of the story is to relay an important message, not to give an accurate account of first century weddings. This lack of historical precision would have been understood by His audience.

If so, then we may again ask why we should attempt to find precise details in the story. It becomes all the more impractical to do this when it appears that Jesus had no intention of doing so.

We will give one final illustration that shows the difficulty of establishing some type of consistent understanding of the background of this parable. Klyne Snodgrass explains:

How should the wedding circumstances be understood? To whose house (or to what place) is the bridegroom coming? Because of the paucity of good evidence, this is one of the more difficult decisions. Implicit is the question of determining the *realism* of the wedding. For some, the description does not fit what is known of Palestinian weddings... explanations usually assume the bride is to be escorted to the home of the groom (or his parents), where the wedding takes place, but even that is not certain. Several options have been suggested:

The virgins are at the bride's house and the wedding will take place there, which is less common but possible.

The virgins at the bride's house, and the groom arrives there to find his bride and take her back to his house in a celebratory procession.

The virgins have left the bride's house and have stopped somewhere on the way to await the groom, for which I know of no evidence. This view seems to be a misunderstanding of 25:1, which should be seen as a title for the whole parable, not evidence that the virgins went out twice.

The virgins and the bride are already at the groom's house awaiting his arrival which is not the usual pattern.

The virgins are at the groom's house and await his return with his bride...it is hard to speak of realism when there is insufficient information about first-century Palestinian weddings, and it will not do to point to Arabic or Indian weddings of later times...no doubt practices varied in different locales and in different circumstances (Snodgrass, pp. 512-513).

Having said this, we again cite Snodgrass:

The parable is not unrealistic. It is sufficiently within the bounds of what is known that, even if it presents unusual circumstances, it works, and its warning to be ready is clear (Snodgrass, p. 513)

This is a fitting conclusion! While there are parts of this parable that do seem to be unrealistic, the basic thrust of it works to bring across the main point of Jesus: we must be ready for His return!

OBSERVATION 10 THE OTHER WEDDING PARABLE IN THIS CONTEXT IS NOT REALISTIC

One more observation needs to be made before we shift gears a bit. In this context, Matthew 21-25, there is another parable about a wedding given by Jesus. It is found in Matthew 22:1-13. It concerns a king inviting people to a wedding banquet for his son. The people refused to come and judgment was pronounced upon the nation.

Specifically, the parable concluded with a man who came to the wedding banquet but did not show up in a clean wedding garment. This would have insulted the king and it resulted in the pronouncement of the following punishment:

Then the king said to his attendants, 'Tie him up hand and foot and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth!' (Matthew 22:13 NET).

However, the judgment that was pronounced was unrealistic. The image of “outermost darkness” with “weeping and grinding teeth” is used often in Matthew’s gospel for eternal punishment.

Accordingly, it is the Lord and Him alone that can do this, not some earthly king. This fact tells us a couple of things.

First, like the narrative parable of the ten maidens, it does not have to be completely realistic to get its message across. The illustration in the parable points to a heavenly king, the Lord Himself, who alone can send someone into everlasting punishment.

Second, the wedding to which the king invited the people could not have occurred in the nation of Israel; Israel had no king at that time! In fact, they had not had a king since the time of the Babylonian captivity, some six hundred years previously!

Therefore, this wedding illustration which precedes the ten maidens parable, had nothing to do with the situation on the ground at that time in history.

If so, then why would anyone assume that the next parable about a wedding, the ten maidens, which was given two days later, would be any different?

The simple explanation is that neither parable was uniquely confined to the customs of the day, and neither was meant to be realistic in all of its details.

FURTHER OBSERVATIONS ON THE CLAIM OF A PARALLEL BETWEEN ANCIENT CUSTOMS OF THAT TIME AND THE PRE-TRIBULATION RAPTURE

There are also a number of other observations that we can make from the text itself that seem to rule out the subject of the pre-tribulation rapture of the church being embedded in the story. They are as follows:

OBSERVATION 11 THE COMPARISON IN THIS PARABLE IS TO JESUS’ SECOND COMING

There is also a timing factor in the comparison between the parable and what the Lord has revealed about the future.

As we earlier emphasized, the Greek adverb at the beginning of verse one, translated “at that time,” makes it clear that the setting is the Second Coming of Christ—not the pre-tribulation rapture of the church.

OBSERVATION 12 THE PLACEMENT OF THE PARABLE IS BETWEEN TWO OTHERS THAT DEAL WITH JESUS’ RETURN

As we also mentioned, the parable previous to the ten maidens warned against assuming that the master would not come immediately in judgment. It centered on those who were not expecting Him to come for a long time. Hence, they lived their lives in sin.

The parable of the talents, that follows that of the ten maidens, is also a warning against not being ready when the Lord returns. It emphasizes the need for people to fulfill their responsibilities while waiting for the coming of the Lord. Therefore, it is problematic to argue that Jesus changes the subject in the parable of the ten maidens, to deal with the catching up of the living believers to meet Him in the air does not fit the context.

**OBSERVATION 13 COMMENTATORS ON MATTHEW AGREE IT IS ABOUT THE
RETURN OF THE LORD TO THE EARTH**

Historically, those who have commented upon Matthew view this parable as speaking about the Second Coming of the Lord to earth. It is not seen as a picture of the rapture of the church.

To be fair, there are some who argue that the Day of the Lord is in view, not merely the Second Coming of Christ. If so, that would include the rapture of the church. This is a minority view, but it is not impossible.

Having said this, passages on the rapture emphasize the joyous reunion of believers with the Lord while passages on the Second Coming, such as this one, basically emphasize that He is returning to judge sin.

In other words, these passages *warn* the hearers and the readers. The thrust is to “be ready” for His coming, not to give some hidden message about a timeline of events.

Again, this is especially true when we have so few details in the parable about the precise situation to which the Lord is referring.

**OBSERVATION 14 THE PARABLE CONCURS WITH THE CONSISTENT THEME
OF JUDGMENT IN THESE CHAPTERS**

From the moment Jesus came into Jerusalem in His triumphal entry, until the final illustration of Him returning to earth and dividing the people as a shepherd divides the sheep from the goats, there is one constant theme in everything recorded: judgment.

In fact, every episode recorded from Matthew 21 through Matthew 25 sets the stage for Jesus’ dying for the sins of the world because He was rejected by the people of His day. This rejection would lead to their judgment. They should have known who He was, but they did not. They were willfully blind. Hence, the predicted judgment.

Therefore, we find nothing joyous in these chapters, which we should expect if they referred to the believers being caught up to meet Him in the air, the rapture. This is not the subject matter of these chapters.

**OBSERVATION 15 THE EMOTION OF JESUS’ WORDS IN THIS OVERALL
CONTEXT MUST BE APPRECIATED**

In addition, from the time of the triumphal entry to the denunciation of the religious leaders and the prediction of the destruction of the city and the temple in Matthew 23, we find a number of emotive statements from Jesus. This is consistent with the theme of judgment that characterizes each of these chapters.

Consequently, to attempt to place the rapture of the church in the midst of these predicted punishments seems out of place. Indeed, there is nothing obvious in the context that the Lord is changing the topic.

**OBSERVATION 16 THE ANALOGY OF THE PARABLE TO THE RAPTURE
OF THE CHURCH DOES NOT WORK**

Even if we had sufficient knowledge of the customs at the time of Christ a problem arises for those who contend that this is an illustration of the rapture—that is, the Lord coming for His bride: there is no mention of a bride in the parable. Furthermore, the bride analogy for believers is not even stated in the four gospels! This was something developed later by Paul.

As we mentioned earlier, there is no explanation in the parable as to who the various participants represent: neither the groom nor the ten maidens. Various answers to this question have been given by Bible commentators. This merely proves that it is not substantiated to claim that the groom, or the maidens, are representative of such and such.

OBSERVATION 17 IF THE BRIDE REPRESENTS THE CHURCH THEN WHO ARE THE MAIDENS?

If this is a picture of the Lord coming for His bride, then who are the maidens? Whom do they represent? If the bride is an example of those who have believed in Him then who is this other group?

A much simpler way to interpret the parable is that the details were not meant to single out certain groups, whether at the time of Jesus or at the time of the end.

In other words, it is a straightforward illustration about the need to get ready for the coming of the Lord. Perhaps, nothing else should be read into it. The Tyndale New Testament Commentary says:

But to look for specific identifications of the oil (faith? good works?), or the bridesmaids, beyond being representatives of those who are ready or not, seems to be going beyond what the context requires (Tyndale New Testament Commentary)

OBSERVATION 18 THE RAPTURE TEACHING WAS FIRST REVEALED TO PAUL

When we read the words of the Apostle Paul, it appears that the doctrine of the rapture of the church was first revealed to him. He wrote:

Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed (1 Corinthians 15:51 NIV).

According to Paul, the doctrine of the rapture is a “mystery.” This does not mean something that is difficult to comprehend. Instead the word has the idea of a “sacred secret.” There was no divine revelation of this truth to the people of God before Paul unveiled it. He had written about it previously to the Thessalonians and now he is further explaining it to the Corinthians.

Consequently, since these truths were given to Paul to reveal, we should not look for the rapture doctrine in the Old Testament or, for that matter, even in the teachings of Jesus. While Jesus spoke of coming again for His own, He did not elaborate on the details. This responsibility was given to the Apostle Paul.

This being the case, we ask the question: should we look for some hidden message in a parable about a wedding for a timing of an event that had not been revealed yet?

OBSERVATION 19 THE SPECIFIC QUESTIONS JESUS WAS ASKED DEALT WITH GOD’S COMING KINGDOM TO THE EARTH

As we attempt to understand Matthew 24 and 25, we must remember that they are Jesus’ answers to questions about His coming back to earth to set up His kingdom:

As he was sitting on the Mount of Olives, his disciples came to him privately and said, “Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (Matthew 24:3 NET).

They were asking for signs of the end of this present age. There was no thought whatsoever in the minds of the disciples that certain believers would be taken out of the world before His return in order to escape His wrath. The entire idea was foreign to them and also to the context of these two chapters.

Consequently, it is misguided to look for some hidden teaching on this subject by Jesus in a parable about His coming judgment, the one theme that is consistent throughout these chapters.

**OBSERVATION 20 GOD'S WORD IS CLEAR: WE ARE NOT TO LOOK
FOR HIDDEN MEANINGS IN THE TEXT**

This is the most important point that we can make. Scripture was written for us to understand who God is, what He is like, who we are, and what He requires from us.

In doing so, the Lord gave us a message that was clear. In fact, the Bible tells us not to look for any hidden meanings in the text and not to go beyond that which is written. Paul wrote:

Now, brothers and sisters, I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, so that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying: "Nothing beyond what is written" (1 Corinthians 4:6 CSB).

In the Scriptures, God has revealed everything that is necessary for us to know about Him and His plan for time and eternity. Jude wrote:

But now I find that I must write about something else, urging you to defend the faith that God has entrusted once for all time to his holy people (Jude 3 NLT).

The faith has been "once and for all delivered." God has told us everything that needs to be said. Therefore, we derive our information from the Bible and from it alone. We do not go elsewhere to discover what will happen in the future.

Second, we are to read the Bible at face-value. In other words we do not have to read between the lines to find hidden messages. Paul wrote:

Our letters have been straightforward, and there is nothing written between the lines and nothing you can't understand (2 Corinthians 1:13 NLT).

The Amplified Bible puts it this way:

For we write you nothing other than what you read and understand [there is no double meaning in what we say]. And I hope you will [accurately] understand [divine things] until the end (2 Corinthians 1:13 Amplified Bible).

To sum up, we go to the Bible alone for our information about the future and in doing so we read the Scriptures in a straightforward manner. There are no hidden messages or any double meanings in the text.

CONCLUSION

After a close look at the parable of the ten maidens and the overall context in which it is recorded there is no reason whatsoever to suppose that it deals with any other subject other than Jesus' return to earth in judgment! To insert the doctrine of the rapture of the church through Galilean wedding customs is foreign to the context.

In sum, the claim that this particular parable somehow illustrates a last days timeline has no supporting evidence whatsoever. Hence, it should not be used to illustrate the doctrine of the pre-tribulation rapture.