Matthew 24:28 has long puzzled scholars. In the midst of an eschatological vision about the coming of the Son of Man, we read, “Wherever the corpse is, there the eagles will be gathered” (RSV). The consensus is that the verse serves to indicate that the coming will be as noticeable and as obvious as birds hovering over carrion,¹ and, thereby, functions as a metaphor. However, this understanding fails to take a number of factors into account. First, the text uses ἀετοί, which is the Greek word for eagles, not vultures.² This is a significant

¹ This reading considers v. 28 as parallel to v. 27, which reads, “For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.” For example, this is the understanding of H.O. Guenther, “When ‘Eagles’ Draw Together,” Forum 5 (1989): 142; R.T. France, The Gospel of Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 343; and R.H. Gundry, Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church Under Persecution (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 487. For alternative readings (although they present the consensus reading as well), see W.D. Davies and D.C. Allison, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew (3 vols.; ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 3:355–6. Some other possibilities are that: 1) the dead body represents the dead sinners after eschatological judgment; 2) the birds represent the arrival of Jesus to the dead body, which symbolizes the wicked world; 3) the dead body is Jesus and the birds are his followers gathered to him.

² See the discussions in W. Carter, “Are There Imperial Texts in the Class? Intertextual Eagles and Matthean Eschatology as ‘Lights Out’ Time for Imperial Rome,” JBL 122/3 (2003): 469–70; and S.L. Bridge, ‘Where the Eagles are Gathered’: The Deliverance of the Elect in Lukan Eschatology (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 58–66. Both Carter (“Imperial Texts”, 469 n.13) and Bridge (‘Where the Eagles are Gathered’, 59) point out that the ancient writers—Aristotle, Pliny the Elder, and Aelianus—all clearly distinguished eagles from vultures (Aristotle, Hist. an. 6.5–6, 8.32–34; Pliny, Nat., 10.3.6–10.6.18; and Aelian, Nat. an. 2.39–40). Moreover, there is a separate Greek term for vulture, γύπας, and this difference is most pronounced in the Septuagint tradition. In the Hebrew Bible the term רעננה can be used to describe either an eagle or a vulture, but in Job 39:27 a רעננה and its young eat the dead. The Greek translator used γύπας making it clear that ἀετοί are not the birds that consume the dead (Bridge, ‘Where the Eagles are Gathered’, 64–65; Carter, “Imperial Texts”, 469 n.15).
difference, because it is vultures, not eagles, that circle over carrion.\(^3\) Secondly, the verb used, συνακχήσονται, has nothing to do with eating. In fact, as a passive form, the verb indicates that the birds are not actively doing anything and certainly not anything to the corpse.\(^4\) If v. 28 is a metaphor, then it is not a very good one. I propose, instead, that we view the verse symbolically so that the scene of the eagles and the corpse are understood to stand in for a larger event—that is, for the downfall of the Roman Empire.

A symbolic reading finds support in two aspects of this verse and its literary context. First, there is the eagle imagery. As many scholars have previously pointed out, a survey of both Roman and Jewish sources from the Second Temple period demonstrate that the eagle was a common symbol for Roman imperial might.\(^5\) The odd behavior of the eagles combined with this widespread association between the Empire and eagles, therefore, gives us reason to think (as it most likely did for the earliest audience of the Gospel) that these eagles are not natural eagles, but Roman eagles. Second, there are striking parallels between Matt 24 and the biblical text of Daniel that have not received significant attention in discussions of v. 28.\(^6\) There are numerous allusions to Daniel and, in particular, Dan 7 throughout Matt 24. Like the eagle imagery, Dan 7 employs a distinct set of symbols to depict imperial rule. More specifically, the symbolic framework of Dan 7 functions to disclose the eschatological end to that imperial rule. The eschatological focus of Matt 24 combined with its Danielic allusions suggests that not only should we treat the Matthean passage as, in part, an interpretation of Dan 7, but, more importantly, as an apocalyptic text similarly foretelling the downfall of an empire.\(^7\)

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\(^3\) This is the reason that some translations read “vultures,” not “eagles.” This is the case for the NRSV and the NIV.

\(^4\) See Carter, “Imperial Texts,” 469–72, for a detailed discussion of the “serious shortcomings” of the consensus reading.


\(^6\) For example, while Carter, “Imperial Texts,” 473–6, devotes an entire section of his article to eagle imagery, he only briefly references allusions to Dan 7 (482). Presumably this is because he only focuses on the immediate context of Matt 24:27–31, not the entire chapter.

\(^7\) In his overview of scholarship on early Jewish apocalyptic texts, Bennie Reynolds concludes that most scholars “describe symbolic language as a defining feature—a sine qua non—of ancient Jewish apocalypses” (B.H. Reynolds, III, Between Symbolism and Realism: The Use of