

Luke 17:37 and the Birds of Prey — Judgment Scene

or Illustration of the Gathering of God’s Elect?

J. Paul Tanner, ThM, PhD
Jan 7, 2020

***Abstract:** This article aims to shed fresh light on a very enigmatic saying of Jesus, made in the context of discussing his second coming, concerning birds of prey gathered around a dead body. The saying, recorded in both Matthew 24:28 and Luke 17:37, has been cast somewhat differently by Luke than Matthew. Luke has this as Jesus’s response to a question by the disciples when told that one would be “taken” and another left. A solution will be sought through a comparative contextual study of both passages with particular attention given to the setting of Luke’s account. In addition, the OT background of the saying will be examined, as well as how Luke uses various illustrations and Greek terms in the pericope. As a result, it will be demonstrated that the saying is a positive affirmation of the righteous who are taken by the angelic “gathering” mentioned in Matthew 24:31.*

***Key words:** Matthew, Luke, eagle, gather, taken, Noah, Lot, corpse, body, second coming*

In response to Jesus’s teaching that two people will be together in one place and one will be taken, the disciples asked him “Where, Lord?” Jesus replied, “Where the body *is*, there also the vultures will be gathered” (Luke 17:37).¹ Although the intention of their question is debated, the most defensible position is that the disciples wanted to know where the ones “taken” would go. Jesus’s response is sometimes considered to imply a place of judgment for the unrighteous.

¹ Translations of Scripture are from the NASB, 1995 edition, unless otherwise noted.

This article will consider the larger context of this verse (Luke 17:22-37) and its parallels to Matthew's account of the Olivet Discourse (Matt 24). The suggestion will be made that Jesus's reply to the question "where?" is not a reference to a place of judgment but is intended as an illustration of the gathering of God's elect by the angels as foretold in Matthew 24:31.

I. THE CONTEXT OF LUKE'S ACCOUNT - LUKE 17:22-37

Luke places this account (a dialogue between Jesus and the disciples) before Jesus's entry into Jerusalem for the final week that culminates in his crucifixion. In Luke's narration of events, Jesus's approach and entry into Jerusalem begin with Luke 19:28, "After He had said these things, He was going on ahead, going up to Jerusalem." I point this out, because these verses from Luke 17 are apparently part of the Olivet Discourse that occurs after Jesus enters Jerusalem for the final time. Matthew's account is given in Matthew 24:1–25:46, and the primary account for Luke is given in Luke 21:5-38.² Nevertheless, the parallels between Luke 17:22-37 and Matthew's account of the Olivet Discourse are so strong as to suggest that the material of Luke 17:22-37 was originally uttered after Jesus had entered Jerusalem for the final passion week.³ [The parallels will be pointed out later in this paper].

² For a helpful introduction to the interpretative difficulties and complexities of the Olivet Discourse, see D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 8 (ed. F. E. Gaebelin; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 488-95.

³ With this conclusion, Bock concurs. He writes, "Luke, unlike Matthew and Mark, divides his eschatological discussions. What Matt. 24–25 and Mark 13 present within the Olivet discourse, Luke divides between chaps. 17 and 21. What is interesting is that the portions of Luke 17 that overlap with Matt. 24 do not follow the order of the Matthean material. . . . In addition, some of what appears in Luke 17 is unique (vv. 22, 28-

Since Luke has his own account of the Olivet Discourse (Luke 21:5-36), why, then, would he place Luke 17:22-37 outside that block of material?⁴ Luke locates this pericope while Jesus was on the way to Jerusalem and as he was passing through Samaria and Galilee (Luke 17:11).⁵ While on that final journey, an important conversation took place between Jesus and the Pharisees that related to the coming of the kingdom, and so for that reason Luke includes this portion of the Olivet Discourse at this point in his account.⁶ The Pharisees questioned Jesus as to

29, 32, 34, 37a)” (Darrell L. Bock, *Jesus According to Scripture* [2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017], 387-88). For a more thorough-going discussion of the sources and historicity of the Gospel accounts (as well as their relationship to one another), see Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 1420-25. Although some scholars believe that Jesus’s discourse in Luke 17 may stem from separate events, Gertraud Harb points out about the proverbial statement in Luke 17:37, “The original position of the saying is not clear, but most scholars argue for the Matthean context as the more original one. Luke seems to have shifted the saying to the end of his discourse and introduced it with a redactional question (Luke 17,37a)” (“The Meaning of Q 17,37: Problems, Opinions and Perspectives,” *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 102:2 [2011]: 290 [n. 51]). For a helpful discussion of Luke’s redactional activity *vis-à-vis* Matthew, see chapter 2 of Steven L. Bridge, “‘Where the Eagles are Gathered’: The Deliverance of the Elect in Lukan Eschatology” (JSOTSup 240; London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 22-56.

⁴ For the eschatological material that Matthew and Mark confine to a single discourse, Luke scatters this among three different locations (Luke 12:35-48; 17:22-37; 21:5-36). One possible explanation for this is that in Luke 21:5-34, he is more concerned with the first-century destruction of the temple and limits his focus on the eschaton to vv. 25-36, having decided to devote a separate discourse to that elsewhere (primarily Luke 17:22-37).

⁵ A. T. Robertson, *A Harmony of the Gospels* (New York: Harper & Row, 1950), 139-40.

⁶ While noting the numerous parallels the Lukan pericope has with Matt 24, Robert H. Stein concludes, “Luke wove this section from various traditional materials and placed it here for reasons other than chronology” (*Luke* [NAC; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992], 436).

“when” the kingdom of God was coming, but he answered by telling them it was futile to be looking for a sign (Luke 17:20-21). Rather he said, “the kingdom of God is in your midst” (Luke 17:21). Certainly he did not mean in the hearts of the Pharisees. Bock quite correctly explains that it was Jesus, being in the midst of the people in those days, in which the *already* form of the kingdom was there, right before their eyes. Bock writes,

The much contested yet key phrase is ἐντὸς ὑμῶν. It means either “in your midst” (before you) or “in your grasp.” In this context of addressing Pharisees, the one meaning that it does not have is “within you.” . . . The kingdom and its promise of deliverance come with him (Luke 4:16-30; 6:2; 7:22, 28; 9:1-6; 10:17-24; 11:20; 16:16).
. . . All that is left is to respond.⁷

Having answered the question of the Pharisees in vague form, Jesus then turned in Luke 17:22 to speak directly to the disciples while providing them more specifics. Although he—in whom was the kingdom realization—was physically present at that moment, the disciples needed to be prepared for his departure in the near term, and then for his return in a more visibly dramatic fashion at some future time:

⁷ Bock, *Jesus According to Scripture*, 387. Similarly, Stein (*Luke*, 438) concludes that there was no need looking for such premonitory signs, because “the (realized) kingdom had already come into their midst (17:21b). . . . Since Jesus the ‘king’ was present, God’s reign had already begun.” Allison Trites adds, “Nonetheless, Jesus balanced a realized eschatology (17:21) with a strong futuristic one (17:24), as is also the case in Luke 21. The Kingdom had definitely come into history in the person of Jesus, and the Kingdom would be consummated and completed in the end time by the coming of Jesus as King” (*The Gospel of Luke & Acts* [Cornerstone Biblical Commentary; Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2006], 238).

²² And He said to the disciples, “The days will come when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it. ²³ “They will say to you, ‘Look there! Look here!’ Do not go away, and do not run after *them*. ²⁴ “For just like the lightning, when it flashes out of one part of the sky, shines to the other part of the sky, so will the Son of Man be in His day. ²⁵ “But first He must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation.

Verse 24 is obviously parallel to Matthew 24:27. Hence, Luke’s “so will the Son of Man be in His day” is parallel to Matthew’s “so will the coming (παρουσία) of the Son of Man be.” Jesus’s second coming is likened unto a flash of lightning in the sky, for it will be obvious and unmistakable to all. What is interesting is that Matthew places his “ἄετοί comment” (birds of prey) at this point: “Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures (οἱ ἄετοί) will gather” (Matt 24:28). Literally, Matthew says, they will “be gathered” (future passive of συνάγω), a variant form of the future passive verb form from ἐπισυνάγω used by Luke in 17:37 in his comment about the ἄετοί. Furthermore, Matthew himself uses ἐπισυνάγω about the angelic gathering: “And He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet and they will gather together (future tense of ἐπισυνάγω) His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other.” The Lord’s use of these “gathering” verbs is not without significance, as I hope to demonstrate in this paper.

II. THE SECOND COMING EVENTS HIGHLIGHTED IN LUKE 17

In the remainder of Jesus’s address to the disciples in chapter 17, Luke highlights four important truths, most of which—but not all—are also recorded in Matthew’s account of the Olivet Discourse, though not necessarily in the same order:

1. *An Illustration of the Unrighteous Who Were Destroyed in Noah's Day*

²⁶ “And just as it happened in the days of Noah, so it will be also in the days of the Son of Man: ²⁷ they were eating, they were drinking, they were marrying, they were being given in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all.

2. *An Illustration of the Unrighteous Who Were Destroyed in Lot's Day*

²⁸ “It was the same as happened in the days of Lot: they were eating, they were drinking, they were buying, they were selling, they were planting, they were building; ²⁹ but on the day that Lot went out from Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all. ³⁰ “It will be just the same on the day that the Son of Man is revealed.

3. *Jesus's Warning for the Righteous to Flee as their Lives will be in Danger*

³¹ “On that day, the one who is on the housetop and whose goods are in the house must not go down to take them out; and likewise the one who is in the field must not turn back.

³² “Remember Lot's wife. ³³ “Whoever seeks to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses *his life* will preserve it.

4. *Jesus's Prediction That Some will be “Taken” and Others Left*

³⁴ “I tell you, on that night there will be two in one bed; one will be taken and the other will be left. ³⁵ “There will be two women grinding at the same place; one will be taken and the other will be left. ³⁶ [“Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other will be left.”] ³⁷ And answering they said to Him, “Where, Lord?” And He said to them, “Where the body *is*, there also the vultures will be gathered.”

III. COMMENTS ON LUKE 17:26-33

All the material in Luke 17:26-37 concerns events to happen in conjunction with the second coming of Christ mentioned in verse 24. The first two paragraphs (17:26-27 and 27:28-30) are similar illustrations of what awaits the unrighteous at Christ's return. Stein correctly states, "This refers not so much to the evil of Noah's contemporaries (cf. Gen 6:11) but to how they were unsuspecting and unprepared for the judgment that came upon them. Life proceeded as usual when judgment came."⁸ The main point is that they will be caught unprepared by the return of Christ. They will have waited too long to have repented and to have turned to him in faith, and as a result they will be destroyed. Matthew has the illustration about Noah's day (see Matt 24:37-39) but not the one of Lot's day. Matthew records that the unrighteous will be "taken away" (using an aorist form of the verb αἶρω). The parallel account in Luke clarifies that to be "taken away" in Matthew 24:39 means to be destroyed (see Luke 17:27). They are not "taken away" by lifting them up but by bringing judgment upon them.⁹

Luke adds a second illustration from the days of Lot, Abraham's nephew (Luke 17:28-30). Although this serves to buttress the first illustration, does it add any significant detail? One thing should be noted: the judgment did not happen until "Lot went out from Sodom" (Luke 17:29). Lot was removed (taken out), so that God's wrath (signaled by the "fire and brimstone from heaven") did not touch him. This would parallel the idea that "Noah entered the ark," i.e. he was removed from the surface of the earth where the judgment was about to take place. So, in the

⁸ Stein, *Luke*, 439.

⁹ BDAG (28) places Matt 24:39 under category #3 for αἶρω: "to take away, remove, or seize control without suggestion of lifting up, *take away, remove.*"

narrative at large, there is a “taking away” in judgment of the unrighteous as well as a “taking out” (removing) of the righteous in God’s salvation act.

The third paragraph (Luke 17:31-33) basically parallels Matthew 24:17-18 and Mark 13:15-16. In light of Matthew 24:15, this would be in the aftermath of the “abomination of desolation” and before the second coming event.¹⁰ Once the abomination of desolation is set up in “the holy place” (i.e. the temple), Jesus warns the righteous to flee Jerusalem and Judea.¹¹ Matthew notes that it is this act that initiates what Jesus calls “the great tribulation,” a period

¹⁰ A contrasting interpretation is that of R. T. France who interprets Matt 24:4-35 (excepting vv. 27-28) in light of the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the temple during the years AD 66–70 (*The Gospel of Matthew* [NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007], 901-31). For France, the “Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory” is to be realized in Jesus’s vindication and enthronement in heaven—“a visible manifestation of a heavenly reality already established” (926). D. A. Carson regards Matt 24:15-21 as referring to the “violent display of judgment in the Fall of Jerusalem (vv. 15-21; Mark 13:14-20; Luke 21:20-24,” but differs from France by taking Matt 24:29-31 as the second coming following the inter-advent period (“Matthew,” 495). Bock, however, defends the position that Luke 17:31-33 has in mind the events leading up to the second coming rather than the events of AD 66–70. He writes, “But the Marcan connection to Jerusalem’s fall in A.D. 70 is not clear, since the days are described in Mark 13:19 as unequal in terror, which cannot be a reference to Jerusalem’s fall in A.D. 70, since the end-time is the only event that could meet that description. In addition, Matt. 24:14 refers to the gospel’s going out into all the nations of the earth, an action that was not likely completed in A.D. 70” (*Luke 9:51–24:53*, 1435). I would add that France’s attempt to explain Jesus’s coming “immediately after the tribulation of those days” is unconvincing, seeing that he must resort to a claim of “symbolic language” to explain the verse away (923).

¹¹ That Matthew’s “in the holy place” (ἐν τόπῳ ἁγίῳ) has the Jewish temple in mind, see Acts 21:28 and the LXX of Eccl 8:10 (ἐκ τόπου ἁγίου).

“such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will” (Matt 24:21). Luke 17:31 clearly parallels Matthew 24:17-18. The warning “Remember Lot’s wife” (Luke 17:32), an allusion to Genesis 19:26 when she looked back upon Sodom as it was being destroyed, is unique to Luke. It’s placement here by Luke can be explained by the following verse which reads, “Whoever seeks to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses *his life* will preserve it” (Luke 17:33). This is very similar to Mark 8:34-35 about the need for disciples to be willing to suffer and possibly even be martyred in their efforts to “take up their cross” and follow Jesus. They must be convinced that if they should suffer or even be martyred, they will gain for themselves a better life in eternity when Christ returns and rewards those who had honored him. Because of the challenges of being a faithful disciple of Christ in the great tribulation, one must diligently set his mind on God’s will (“God’s interests” – Mark 8:33), not be looking back longingly at a world under God’s judgment, as Lot’s wife did.¹²

IV. THE FINAL ILLUSTRATION: ONE “TAKEN” AND ANOTHER “LEFT” (Luke 17:34-37)

¹² Joel Green likewise sees the reference to Lot’s wife as applicable in the eschaton: “The admonition, ‘Remember Lot’s wife’ (cf. Gen 19:26), then, both interprets her action as the manifestation of an unwillingness to relinquish everything at the time of judgment and serves to warn Jesus’ followers against similarly misplaced values” (*The Gospel of Luke* [NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997], 635). I. Howard Marshall writes, “The allusion is to Gn. 19:26, and serves to warn those who have been saved against the danger of falling back into worldliness and sin and hence into judgment” (*Commentary on Luke* [NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978], 665).

Luke presents a two-fold illustration about those who are taken and those who are left in verses 34-35, while most scholars admit that verse 36 is probably not a part of Luke's original autograph.¹³ The first illustration involves two people in the same bed and the other two women grinding at the same mill. In both cases, one is "taken" and the other is "left." Some observations are in order. First, in Matthew's account, these illustrations directly follow the illustration of Noah and those who are "taken" in judgment, but in Luke's account they do not. Rather, in Luke they follow the admonition to be a faithful disciple, willing to give up one's earthly life if need be.

Second, the word for "taken" in Luke 17:34-35 is a different word in the Greek text from "taken" in Matthew 24:39. In the latter case, for the flood that "took them all away," the text has ἦρεν (aorist indicative active of αἶρω). However, for the one "taken" in Luke 17:34-35, the word παραλημφθήσεται is used (future indicative passive of παραλαμβάνω). [In Matthew 24:40-41, the same verb παραλαμβάνω is used of the two men working in the same field, one of whom is taken]. This shift in verb from αἶρω (Matt 24:39) to παραλαμβάνω (Matt 24:40-41 and Luke 17:34-35) should not be overlooked, as this raises the possibility that a different "taking" may be in view.¹⁴

¹³ Neither the UBS⁵ nor the NA²⁸ includes Luke 17:36, as is true of most English Bibles (so the NET Bible, NIV84, ESV, NKJV, and NRSV). Some (like the NASB95) place it in brackets with a footnote. Manuscripts omitting verse 36 include Ϝ⁷⁵ ⚭ A B L W Δ Θ Ψ Byz. Only a very few minor mss support it.

¹⁴ The word παραλαμβάνω is used twelve times in Luke-Acts of someone taking another with (or *along with*) him. Luke consistently uses the term in a positive sense of taking another with whom one is closely aligned or at least sympathetic with (Luke 9:10, 28; 11:26; 17:34, 35; 18:31; Acts 15:39; 16:33; 21:24, 26, 32; 23:18), though this

Third, although it may seem like a minor detail, the shift from a verb in the active voice in Matthew 24:39 (“took them all away”) to the passive voice in Matthew 24:40-41 (“will be taken”) may be of some significance in light of the other passive verbs that occur in Matthew 24:23-42 and especially in regard to the birds of prey in Luke 17:37. I will return to this point later.

V. THE QUESTION OF THE DISCIPLES: “WHERE, LORD?” (Luke 17:37)

Most commentators agree that the question by the disciples (“Where, Lord?”) pertains to those who are “taken,” not the ones who are left. The more disputed question is the identity of those “taken” and where they might be taken to.¹⁵ Some commentators jump to the conclusion

is not universally true outside Luke-Acts (e.g. Matt 27:27). The term is used in John 14:3 of Jesus’s promise to “come again and receive (παραλήμψομαι) you to Myself.”

¹⁵ For an abbreviated survey of various interpretations given Luke 17:37, see Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53*, 1439-40. Perhaps the most exhaustive treatment is provided by Steven L. Bridge, “Where the Eagles are Gathered,” 1-21. Carter is representative of those who argue for a first-century “Roman” interpretation. In reference to the scene in Matt 24:28, he writes, “the scene depicts the Roman army, symbolized by the eagles . . . , destroyed in the final eschatological battle when Jesus, Son of Man, returns to judge the Roman imperial order and to establish God’s reign” (Warren Carter, “Are There Imperial Texts in the Class? Intertextual Eagles and Matthean Eschatology as ‘Lights Out’ Time for Imperial Rome [Matthew 24:27-31],” *JBL* 122:3 [Aut 2003]: 468). Cf. Alexandria Frisch, “Matthew 24:28: ‘Wherever the Body Is, There the Eagles Will Be Gathered Together’ and the Death of the Roman Empire,” in *The Gospels in First-Century Judaea: Proceedings of the Inaugural Conference of Nyack College’s Graduate Program in Ancient Judaism and Christian Origins, August 29th, 2013* (ed. R. S. Notley and J. P. Garcia; Brill, 2015), 58-75. Advocating a modified “Roman” interpretation, Lang writes, “the description in 17:37 is a

that the ones taken in Luke 17:34-35 are taken to judgment, while those “left” are the righteous who are not removed in judgment. Martin, for example, writes, “Jesus stated that some will be **taken** into judgment. In some parts of the world it will be nighttime (**people will be in ... bed**); in other parts it will be daytime (people will be doing daily tasks, such as **grinding grain**). The taking away means **taken** into judgment, not taken up in the Rapture. The ones left are those who will enter into the kingdom.”¹⁶

However, several observations militate against such a conclusion. First, in the preceding context of Luke’s account, it is the unrighteous that are “left” to face God’s judgment. In Luke 17:26-27, Noah is safely *taken* into the ark, whereas the unrighteous *remain* on earth to be destroyed by the flood waters of judgment. Second, Lot is *taken out* of Sodom, with the result that those who remained were destroyed by God’s judgment of “fire and brimstone from heaven” (Luke 17:28-30). Third, Luke includes a short interlude of words of warning for the righteous (Luke 17:31-33) with the promise that those who lose their lives will preserve them (i.e. eternally). What we can conclude from these observations is that Luke places a strong emphasis

climactic image fore-shadowing the arrest of Jesus in Luke 22. According to this reading, the ἀετοί (as they so often do in biblical and other Jewish literature) represent enemy ‘powers’ that arrest and crucify Jesus, and the σώμα refers to Jesus himself” (T. J. Lang, “‘Where the Body Is, There also the Eagles Will Be Gathered’: Luke 17:37 and the Arrest of Jesus,” *Biblical Interpretation* 21.3 [2013]: 323). Lang adds (324), “Therefore, the seizure and division of individuals in 17:34-35 portends the events to occur on the night of Jesus’ arrest.” For discussion and refutation of the “Roman” interpretation of the eagle figure, see G. Harb, “The Meaning of Q 17,37: Problems, Opinions and Perspectives,” 287-89.

¹⁶ John A. Martin, "Luke," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary (NT)* (ed. J. Walvoord and R. Zuck; Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 249 [bold his].

upon the fate of the righteous in this pericope, as much if not more so than the fate of the unrighteous.

When we combine the foregoing points with the shift in verb from αἶρω (in Matt 24:39) to παραλαμβάνω (in Matt 24:40-41 and Luke 17:34-35)—which should caution us from assuming that those “taken” in these differing illustrations have the same destiny—we ought to be more open to the possibility that Jesus’s reply to the question of the disciples pertains to where the righteous are taken. Indeed, quite a number of commentators agree that the ones taken in Luke 17:34-35 are the righteous. Bock points out, “The most natural reading, based on the previous examples of Noah and Lot, is that one is taken for salvation (Ellis 1974: 212; Plummer 1896: 410; Fitzmyer 1985: 1172; Marshall 1978: 668; Tiede 1988: 303).”¹⁷ Geldenhuys concurs that it is “the faithful being taken up to meet Him and the unbelievers being left to undergo the judgment.”¹⁸ Similarly, Stein concludes, “‘Taken’ is best understood as positive because both Noah and Lot were taken (into an ark/ away from the city) and not left for judgment (cf. John 14:3; 1 Thess 4:17). . . . The term ‘taken’ does not mean *to disappear* but *to escape judgment*.”¹⁹

¹⁷ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53*, 1437. Despite this admission, Bock understands the question in 17:37 to pertain not to the righteous but as teaching “those who are ‘left to the birds’ experience judgment” (1437). I. Howard Marshall writes, “But in fact Noah was saved by being taken away from the flooded earth. The picture is of an act of God (a divine passive?), taking away his people from the scene of judgment” (*Commentary on Luke*, 668). Also understanding the ones “taken” in Luke 17:34-35 as the righteous is S. Bridge (“Where the Eagles are Gathered,” 48).

¹⁸ Norval Geldenhuys, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 442.

¹⁹ Stein, *Luke*, 441. Walter L. Liefeld adds, “‘Will be taken’ (*paralēmphthēsetai*, vv. 34–35) probably has its normal sense of being taken into fellowship (in Noah’s case into safety), rather than being taken into judgment, for

With this in mind, let us look more closely at Jesus reply in Luke 17:37, “Where the body is, there also the vultures will be gathered.” At first glance, one might assume that the ones “taken” are taken to judgment, because the imagery of vultures and a corpse has negative connotations (or alternatively, that the focus is on those who are left for judgment). Oddly, although a number of commentators understand the ones taken in Luke 17:34-35 to be the righteous, often the same ones view the disciples’ question in 17:37 to be about those left to face God’s judgment. Morris, for example, wrote, “Jesus does not explain what he means by *taken*, but evidently it means taken to be with him (cf. 1 Thess. 4:17).”²⁰ Yet, he immediately follows this by summarizing verse 37 to mean, “Where the spiritually dead are found, there inevitably will there be judgment.”²¹ Such a stance surely goes against the most natural reading of the text, i.e. that the disciples’ question pertains to those who are taken. They want to know where the ones taken go to. If the ones taken are the righteous (as Morris and most others acknowledge), then the question in 17:37 more logically has to do with where the righteous are taken—a place not for judgment but simply where they are “gathered together.”

which there seems to be no precedent (cf. *TDNT*, 4:11–14). The one ‘left’ (*aphethēsetai*) is thereby abandoned to judgment” (“Luke,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 8 [ed. F. E. Gaebelin; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984], 998).

²⁰ Leon Morris, *Luke: An Introduction and Commentary* (TNTC; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 279.

²¹ Bock himself takes the same basic interpretation as Morris. He concludes, “Jesus’ answer about vultures gathering makes it clear that they are concerned about the location of judgment. The gruesome image shows that judgment occurs where death reigns” (*Luke 9:51–24:53*, 1438).

If the imagery used of vultures and a “body” is merely to illustrate a point rather than being a depiction of judgment, then Luke 17:37 has a positive nuance, not a negative one. But do we have any biblical verification that Luke 17:37 is not intended to depict judgment? The answer is YES, because the parallel to this verse in Matthew’s account is not one of judgment.

As previously pointed out in this article, Luke’s account in 17:22-37 has numerous parallels with that of Matthew’s account of the Olivet Discourse (Matt 24). Likewise, the illustration of vultures about a corpse/body is found in both. Notice how this is portrayed in each:

| Matthew’s Account (Matt 24:26-28) | Luke’s Account (Luke 17:23-24, 37) |
|--|---|
| <p>²⁶ “So if they say to you, ‘Behold, He is in the wilderness,’ do not go out, <i>or</i>, ‘Behold, He is in the inner rooms,’ do not believe <i>them</i>.</p> <p>²⁷ “For just as the <u>lightning</u> comes from the east and flashes even to the west, so will the coming of the Son of Man be.</p> <p>²⁸ “Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures <u>will be gathered</u>.²²</p> | <p>²³ “They will say to you, ‘Look there! Look here!’ Do not go away, and do not run after <i>them</i>.</p> <p>²⁴ “For just like the <u>lightning</u>, when it flashes out of one part of the sky, shines to the other part of the sky, so will the Son of Man be in His day. . . .</p> <p>³⁷ And answering they said to Him, “Where, Lord?” And He said to them, “Where the body <i>is</i>, there also the vultures <u>will be gathered</u>.”</p> |

²² The reader should notice that I have changed the translation of the NASB’s “vultures will gather” to “vultures will be gathered” (Matt 24:28). The Greek text definitely has the passive form of the verb “will be gathered” (συναχθήσονται–future indicative passive of συνάγω). I point this out, because the parallel verse in Luke 17:37 also has a future indicative passive verb (ἐπισυναχθήσονται–future indicative passive of ἐπισυνάγω).

Many other English translations also express Matt 24:28 in the active voice (so NET Bible, NIV84, ESV, and NRSV). Yet the NET Bible has a note acknowledging the passive verb but choosing to render this in the active voice for stylistic reasons. The NKJV offers a literal translation, “will be gathered together.”

Upon closer examination, it is not just the illustration involving vultures and a corpse that the two share in common. First and foremost, both accounts refer to Christ's return (Matt 24:27b; Luke 17:24b). Second, both include the reference to lightning in the sky (Matt 24:27a; Luke 17:24a). Third, there is the admonition not to be deceived by reports of Messiah supposedly being seen (Matt 24:26; Luke 17:23). This last commonality revolves around the issue of "where" he will show up. In Matthew's account, the question is immediately answered following the lightning illustration. The disciples need not worry about where he will appear, because his appearance will be obvious—just as obvious as lightning across the sky or as birds gathered about a corpse.²³ In Luke's account, however, the issue of "where" resurfaces in verse 37.²⁴ This

²³ In their survey of eight differing interpretations of Matt 24:28, Davies and Allison indicate their preferred view: "The coming of the Son of man will be as public and obvious as eagles or vultures circling over carrion. This, which seems to be the consensus of recent commentators, has the advantage of making v. 28 parallel to v. 27 and would appear to have been the meaning in Q (so Guenther (v))" (W. D. Davies, and D. C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* [ICC; 3 vols.; London; New York: T&T Clark, 2004], 3:355-56). Cf. Heinz O. Güenther, "When 'Eagles' Draw Together," *Foundation and Facts Forum* 5 (1989): 140-50, esp. 141-43.

²⁴ Some scholars see Jesus's conversation with the Pharisees (Luke 17:20-21) and then with the disciples being intentionally cast together, in which questions of when and where permeate the two. The first asks "when," (not understanding how the kingdom or rule of God is going to come about) while the second asks "where" (since there are no signs and no observers to point them to the place of his return). J. Topel remarks, "Luke concludes the speech (and provides the immediate context for the proverb) with the obtuse question of his disciples, whose 'Where?' echoes to the Pharisees' 'When?' already so clearly rejected by Jesus" ("What Kind of a Sign are Vultures? Luke 17,37b," *Bib* 84:3 [2003], 409). For Topel, this technique supposedly reflects the disciples' dullness at understanding.

allows Luke to tie together the illustrations of those who are “taken” (Luke 17:34-35) with the concept of “being gathered.” Hence, the illustration of a corpse and vultures is more than a mere illustration of the obviousness of Christ’s return. His return is also highlighted by those who will be gathered together to him. In Matthew’s account, this gets clarified in Matthew 24:31 with the Lord’s teaching that “He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet and they will gather together (using the verb ἐπισυνάγω) His elect from the four winds.” In Luke’s account, those “taken” are seen to be one and the same with those who are gathered (using the verb ἐπισυνάγω).

Several commentators have noticed that the imagery of the vultures is proverbial, apparently drawn from the final line of Job 39:27-30:²⁵

²⁷ “Is it at your command that the eagle mounts up and makes his nest on high?

²⁸ “On the cliff he dwells and lodges, upon the rocky crag, an inaccessible place.

²⁹ “From there he spies out food; his eyes see *it* from afar.

³⁰ “His young ones also suck up blood; and where the slain are, there is he.”

²⁵ Referring to Job 39:30, John E. Hartley notes, “This line appears to be a proverbial saying (Pope) and has the same meaning as the aphorism in Matt. 24:28: ‘Wherever the body is, there the eagles will be gathered together’” (*The Book of Job* [NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988], 514).

The word for eagle in the Hebrew text is **נֶשֶׁר** which BDB defines as “griffon-vulture, eagle.”²⁶ *HALOT* simply indicates that the term can be used for either an eagle or vulture.²⁷ The LXX translated the term as **ἀετός**, the same term as used in both Matthew 24:28 and Luke 17:37. Alden notes how this bird is used in Scripture for illustrative purposes: “The ‘eagle’ is the most common bird in the Bible and includes several species. Most references to it are figurative with points made about its strength (Exod 19:4; Isa 40:31), speed (2 Sam 1:23; Jer 4:13), grandeur in flight (Prov 30:19; Jer 48:40), or ability to take prey (Job 9:26; Hab 1:8) or find carrion (Prov 30:17; Matt 24:28).”²⁸

²⁶ BDB, 676. As to whether **ἀετός** in Matt 24:28 and Luke 17:37 means vulture or eagle, see the discussion by J. Topel, “What Kind of a Sign are Vultures,” 404-06; and Dieter T. Roth, “Parable of the Vultures around a Corpse (Q 17:37),” in *The Parables in Q* (London: T&T Clark, 2018), 7.4.3. Topel has a helpful discussion of the various sub-species of eagles and vultures to be found in the area of Israel and concludes that the term **ἀετός** describes both birds (“a soaring bird of prey”), though in this context a type of vulture is in view (405). In Graeco-Roman culture, there was a more distinctive word for “vulture” (**γύψ**), but this is not used in the NT. S. Bridge, however, thinks Luke intentionally had in mind “eagles” and that this is the more accurate understanding (“Where the Eagles are Gathered,” 57-86). This fits his interpretation that the eagles represent the elect who are delivered from judgment. He concludes (85), “. . . a related tradition from antiquity offers more promise. In this tradition, the eagle acts as the deliverer of the elect, carrying heroes, lovers, and God’s chosen people, into the realm of the divine.” He appeals to the following passages to support his case: Exod 10:4; Deut 32:11; *I En.* 96.2; *T. Mos.* 10.8; *T. Jud.* 15.5.

²⁷ *HALOT*, 1:731. Marvin H. Pope indicates that “The term (*nešer*) in the OT designates both eagles and vultures, including the golden eagle and the carrion vulture” (*Job* [AB; 3rd ed.; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1973], 314).

²⁸ Robert L. Alden, *Job* (NAC; Broadman & Holman, 1993), 390.

The point of the passage in Job is that God made this incredible bird, the *nešer*, with an extraordinary ability of keen vision capable of spotting prey from a great distance. Alden notes, “A Talmudic proverb says that a vulture in Babylon can see a carcass in Palestine.”²⁹ Hence, it is not surprising that such birds would gather about the carcass of a dead or dying animal. God—not Job—created these birds with this ability by his great wisdom, which ought to silence Job’s thinking that he is even remotely as wise as God.

If indeed the reference to the ἀετός of Matthew 24:28 and Luke 17:37 is a proverbial saying drawn from Job 39:30, we should observe that in its original context, the imagery is not one of judgment but rather positively of these birds having keen eyesight that enables them to spot their prey and feed on it. It is the nature of vultures that they are attracted to something that is slain. Hence, when you see them circling in the air, you know there must be a dead or dying corpse on the ground. This is an obvious indication. Likewise, according to Matthew 24:27-28, the second coming of Jesus will be just as obvious.³⁰ One will not need to rely on the second-hand reporting of others as to “where” he might appear.

If reference is made in Matthew 24:28 to vultures and a corpse as a way of illustrating the obviousness of the Lord’s return rather than the fact or location of judgment, might we expect a non-judgmental nuance in Luke 17:37 which apparently parallels the verse in Matthew? That would be, after all, the more natural way of regarding the relationship of Matthew 24:28 to Luke

²⁹ Ibid., 391.

³⁰ Cf. R. T. France who takes the same interpretation for Matt 24:28: “the parousia of the Son of Man will be as obvious as the presence of the carcass” (*The Gospel of Matthew*, 918).

17:37. Looking at Luke 17:37 this way, if the question of the disciples is about where the ones “taken” go, then the Lord’s answer is more probably a positive response. Rather than telling the disciples a precise geographical location, the Lord simply indicates that it will become obvious at the time of his return, hinting that where he is, so will the ones taken be. Butler comes to a similar position:

You do not have to know where just as you do not have to know when, Jesus told them. It will be in plain sight and will be as natural and inevitable as eagles sensing the presence of a dead animal and gathering overhead to eat. Just as you see the eagles from afar and know what they are up to, so you will see the coming of the Son of Man and know what is happening. It is going to happen.³¹

Green understands verse 37 in light of Jesus’s earlier instructions in verses 22-24, i.e. that his return would be obvious as lightning. By their asking “Where?”, they displayed their lack of understanding of what will happen. Against the background of verses 22-24 Green writes,

“There he had informed them that the question of venue would be moot since the revelation of the Son of Man at the end will be a manifestly public affair, seen everywhere and by everyone. Jesus’ proverbial reply may be redundant, but, in light of the disciples’ slowness

³¹ Trent C. Butler, *Luke* (Holman New Testament Commentary; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000),

283. Stein came to the same conclusion when he wrote, “. . . it may mean that just as vultures know where carcasses are, so the world unmistakably will know when and where the Son of Man returns” (*Luke*, 441). Cf. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke (x-xxiv)* (AB 28a; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1985), 1173.

to understand, apparently it is necessarily so. Just as the presence of carrion is indicated by circling vultures, so will his presence at the end be clearly evident.³²

VI. UNDERSTANDING LUKE 17:37 IN LIGHT OF SECOND COMING EXPECTATIONS

Having demonstrated in the previous section that Luke 17:37 can be—and ought to be—understood in a positive light (not as depicting a scene of judgment), I shall now argue that the passive verb used in Luke 17:37 (ἐπισυναχθήσονται – “will be gathered” – future passive of ἐπισυνάγω) is most likely related to the gathering by angels that the Lord Jesus predicted in Matthew 24:31.³³ Immediately after announcing that his coming would be “on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory” (Matt 24:30), the Lord Jesus went on in the next verse to say, “And He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other.” The words “they will gather together” in Matthew 24:31 translate the one Greek word ἐπισυνάξουσιν (future indicative of ἐπισυνάγω), the same word used in Luke 17:37.

³² Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 636. Green buttresses his conclusion by an appeal to the structural features of the narrative as having “an inverted, conceptual parallelism, an A-B-C-B-A pattern” (631). In this design, the initial A component represents vv. 22-24 and the corresponding A’ component is vs 37.

³³ S. Bridge points out a connection of the passive verb of Luke 17:37 to verses 34-35: “The (divine) passive ‘will be taken’ (παραλημφθήσεται, vv. 34-35) is appropriately paralleled here by the (divine) passive ‘will be gathered together’ (ἐπισυναχθήσονται)” (“Where the Eagles are Gathered,” 54).

Of course the fact that Matthew 24:31 and Luke 17:37 both use the same Greek word ἐπισυνάγω for “gathering together” does not in and of itself mean they refer to the same event. However, there are reasons why I believe they do. First, Matthew’s use of the proverbial statement in Matthew 24:28, “Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will be gathered” (future passive of συνάγω) follows right after the promise of the Lord’s second coming in Matthew 24:27 and just before his elaboration of the details of the second coming in Matthew 24:29-31. This locates the gathering of vultures to the gathering by angels in very close context, as the following chart helps clarify.

| | Matthew 24:27-28 | Matthew 24:29-31 |
|--------------------------|--|---|
| The Second Coming | ²⁷ “For just as the lightning comes from the east and flashes even to the west, so will <u>the coming of the Son of Man</u> be. | ²⁹ “But immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ³⁰ “And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see <u>the Son of Man coming</u> on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory. |
| Gathering | ²⁸ “Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures <u>will be gathered</u> . | ³¹ “And He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet and <u>they will gather together</u> His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other. |

The point is this: the Lord Jesus used the proverbial statement about vultures being gathered to a corpse in connection with his second coming. Since both Matthew and Luke refer to this, they are most likely drawing from the same corpus of material in which it was originally uttered (that is, from the Olivet discourse). Though they place the proverbial statement at different points in the dialogue between Jesus and his disciples, that does not mean Matthew and

Luke have used it in disparate ways. If Matthew’s use is positive in nature (not indicative of judgment), then most likely Luke’s is also. Matthew’s use of the proverbial statement occurs in close proximity with the mention of the gathering of God’s elect by the angels. If the one’s “taken” in Luke 17:34-35 are the righteous—as argued earlier—then these passages harmonize nicely. Luke’s reference to the proverbial statement of vultures in Luke 17:37—in which he also uses the verb ἐπισυνάγω—implies that the ones “taken” are the same as those who are gathered by the angels as mentioned in Matthew 24:31. Hence, the Lord’s answer to the question “Where?” of the disciples concerning the ones “taken” is not a specific geographical location. Rather, they will be gathered by the angels to be where their Lord is, and this is probably a meeting with him in the sky upon his return. Otherwise, why would there be a need for the angels to gather them?

Is this, then, the rapture of believers that is later promised in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18? The conclusions drawn in this paper would certainly lend themselves to such an interpretation, especially in view of 1 Thessalonians 4:17, “Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord.”³⁴ However, any equating of Luke 17:37 with the rapture requires the consideration of a

³⁴ Worth pointing out is the observation that ἐπισυναγωγή, the cognate noun to ἐπισυνάγω, is used of the eschatological gathering of the elect in 2 Thess 2:1: “Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming (παρουσίας) of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together (ἐπισυναγωγής) to Him, . . .” Most commentators do understand this verse as referring to the same event as that described in 1 Thess 4:13-18 (see, for example, C. A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians* [NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990], 237-38); and J. A. D. Weima, *1–2 Thessalonians* [BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014], 499-501). Cf. the use of ἐπισυνάγω for a

great many passages, and that is beyond the scope of this paper. Regardless of the stance one takes about the time of the rapture, Matthew 24:31 makes clear that there will be a gathering of God's elect by angels in conjunction with the Lord's second coming in clouds in great power and glory. For reasons presented in this paper, the illustration of the ones unexpectedly "taken" (Matt 24:40-41; Luke 17:34-35) are best understood as the elect who are gathered by angels when the Lord returns in order to meet him in the air.³⁵ They would then be in position to accompany him in his final descent to earth.³⁶

regathering of God's people in Ps 105:47 of the LXX (Engl Ps 106:47) and also Matt 23:37. A similar use is also found in 2 Macc 1:27; 2:7-8; 2:18.

³⁵ Davies and Allison (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, 383) agree that this refers to the righteous taken to meet the Lord in the air, and defend this view accordingly: "(i) Often in Matthew ἀφίημι means 'abandon' or 'forsake'. (ii) παραλαμβάνω means 'take (to safety)' in 2:13, 14, 20, 21. (iii) The picture of angels taking the saints to meet the Son of man was probably common in early Christianity. (iv) In vv. 37-9 those 'taken' (into the ark) are saved while those left behind perish."

³⁶ In 1 Thess 4:17, the believers are caught up in the clouds "to meet the Lord in the air." The words "to meet" translate the Greek preposition phrase εἰς ἀπάντησιν. The noun ἀπάντησις, though often used in a general sense, was commonly used in ancient times of people who would go out (e.g. from a city or house) to meet and greet an important visitor in anticipation of their arrival, implying that they would then accompany them the rest of the way. There are numerous examples of this in ancient literature (see, e.g. Acts 28:15; Josephus, *Ant.* 13.101; *J.W.* 7:100-103). In his homily on 1 Thess 4, John Chrysostom interpreted verse 17 in this very way: "If He is about to descend, on what account shall we be caught up? For the sake of honor. For when a king drives into a city, those who are in honor go out to meet him; but the condemned await the judge within" ("Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the First Epistle of St. Paul the Apostle to the Thessalonians," in *Saint Chrysostom: Homilies on Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon* [ed. P. Schaff; trans. J. Tweed & J. A. Broadus; New York: Christian Literature Company, 1889], 13:356).

VII. CONCLUSIONS

Admittedly, the Lord's answer to the disciples' question in Luke 17:37 ("Where, Lord?") has perplexed students and scholars of the Bible throughout the ages. Too often, the imagery of birds of prey about a corpse has prompted a rush to the conclusion that a scene of judgment must be in view. In this paper, however, I have argued that this is not the intended meaning. The disciples' question of "where" echoes the very issue of *place* that Jesus himself had called attention to at the beginning of the pericope ("They will say to you, 'Look there! Look here!'"). This points in the direction of where Jesus will be at his return as well as those who are gathered to him. The disciples' question in Luke 17:37, "Where, Lord?", was spoken immediately after his comments about those who would surprisingly be "taken" (Luke 17:34-35). Since most commentators agree that the ones "taken" are those taken for salvation/deliverance, the most logical understanding of their question concerns where the righteous would be taken, not where the unsaved would suffer judgment. This suggests that the imagery of Luke 17:37 is not one of judgment but rather of something positive.

Several reasons were presented in this paper to reinforce this conclusion. First, the Lord's answer in Luke 17:37 is parabolic in nature, drawn from Job 39:30. The statement about ἀετοὶ ("eagles") in that context was a positive one—not that of judgment—having to do with the natural instinct of these birds as created by God. Second, though not all would agree on the relationship of Luke's eschatological sections with that of Matthew's, the commonalities between Luke 17:22-37 and Matthew 24:23-42 are quite strong, suggesting that both were originally uttered by the Lord Jesus as part of the Olivet Discourse. One implication of this is that Matthew's inclusion of the corpse and vulture statement (Matt 24:28)—being a positive illustration of the Lord's second coming—suggests that the same would be true of the parallel

statement in Luke 17:37. Third, a careful comparison of the Noah and Lot illustrations in Luke with that of Matthew's Noah illustration evidences that it is those that are left—not “taken”—that must face God's judgment. Noah, for instance, *went* into the ark, and Lot was *taken out* of the city. This paves the way for the idea that it is the righteous who are “taken” in Luke 17:34-35 (// Matt 24:40-41). Even though Matthew 24:39 indicates that the flood “took them (the unrighteous) all away,” the verb he uses for “take away” (αἶρω) is a different verb altogether than that used for those “taken” (παραλαμβάνω) in Luke 17:34-35. These are not the same kind of “takings.” Those “taken” by the flood of Noah's day were swept away in destruction (so Luke 17:27)—not by “removal” but simply as a result of being left outside the ark. Those taken in Luke 17:34-35 are *removed* and thus not “left” to face God's judgment at the time of Christ's return. Fourth, in Luke's account, he deliberately places a paragraph with instructions for the righteous between the Noah/Lot illustrations (Luke 17:26-30) and the revelation about those surprisingly “taken” (Luke 17:34-35). These instructions (Luke 17:31-33) remind God's elect that there will come a time to flee their homes and fields on account of the great tribulation (cf. Matt 24:15-21), that they must not long for earthly charms (as Lot's wife did), and that should they lose their physical life, they will nevertheless preserve it eternally. This instructional paragraph is thus meant to provide guidance to God's elect until the moment they are “taken” according to Luke 17:34-35.

If the point of Luke 17:37 is not to depict the horrid judgment awaiting the unsaved, what would be the Lord's purpose in utilizing the parabolic statement drawn from Job 39:30? Again, if those “taken” in the preceding verses (Luke 17:34-35) are the righteous, then we ought to expect the point to be something positive about their outcome. A major clue as to the correct interpretation comes with the final verb of verse 37, namely, a future passive form of

ἐπισυνάγω—they “will be gathered.” Not only does this correspond to the declaration in Matthew 24:28, “Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will be gathered” (future passive of συνάγω), but it should be understood in light of the use of ἐπισυνάγω in Matt 24:31, “And He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet and they will gather together (future tense of ἐπισυνάγω) His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other.” Where, then, are the righteous taken? They are taken by angels in conjunction with the second coming of Christ. The disciples need not worry where the righteous are taken, for it will be obvious at the time of Christ’s return. They will be where the Lord himself is! Concurring with this view, J. Nolland writes, “Though the image is rather gruesome, in the present setting it is likely to represent the gathering of the Son of Man of those to be delivered: they will be gathered to him like eagles/vultures to the prey upon which they will feast.”³⁷

Interestingly, this was the same conclusion that many of the early Church Fathers came to. Irenaeus for instance wrote: “Inasmuch as then, ‘wheresoever the carcass is, there shall also the eagles be gathered together,’ we do participate in the glory of the Lord, who has both formed us, and prepared us for this, that, when we are with Him, we may partake of His glory.”³⁸ In the same paragraph, Irenaeus saw this event as fulfilling Jesus’s prayer in John 17:24, “Father, I

³⁷ John Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34* (WBC 35B; Dallas: Word Books, 1993), 863.

³⁸ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (vol. 1; ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson; Edinburgh, 1867; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 479. Cf. S. Bridge, “Appendix 1; Patristic Commentators on the ἀετοί Saying,” in “Where the Eagles are Gathered,” 151-55. He surveys seven of the early Church Fathers who took the ἀετοί as “eagles” representing the saints of God, including Origen (d. c. 254), Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373), Ambrose (d. 397), John Chrysostom (d. 407), Jerome (d. 420), Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444), and Theodoret (d. c. 458).

desire that they also, whom You have given Me, be with Me where I am, so that they may see My glory which You have given Me.” Some early Church Fathers even saw Luke’s choice of the term σῶμα (“body”)—rather than Matthew’s πτώμα (“corpse”)—as his way of calling attention to the crucified yet resurrected “body” of the Lord Jesus.³⁹

Despite his rejection of the conclusion I have reached, Topel has well summarized the position advocated in this paper:

Contemporary exegetes who relate the proverb to its immediate context in 17,34-35 assert that Jesus is telling the disciples that the quest for a certain place is unnecessary. They will no more need a special sign than do the vultures: they will recognize the Son of Man wherever he appears with the same surety with which the vulture finds the carrion. In that way, Jesus’ proverbial response echoes the response he gives to the Pharisees’ question: the specific place is irrelevant.⁴⁰

³⁹ Even S. Bridge (“Where the Eagles are Gathered,” 52) takes this position: “Now, because Luke’s use of σῶμα elsewhere relates either to the crucified Lord or a living entity, it is entirely possible that its appearance in 17.37 marks the confluence of these two meanings. In other words, σῶμα signifies the crucified Lord as a living entity, namely, the resurrected Christ.”

⁴⁰ J. Topel, “What Kind of a Sign are Vultures? Luke 17,37b,” 410.