

The Olivet Discourse: The Tribulation and the Second Coming

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The Olivet Discourse¹ is Jesus' longest, most important and detailed discussion of eschatology. In it he deals with the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple which occurred in AD 70, discusses his second coming, exhorts his followers in light of these eschatological events, and concludes (in the Matthew account) by discussing, both in parables and direct discourse, the final judgment that will occur when he returns.

Interpretive approaches to the Olivet Discourse

There are three general approaches to interpreting the Discourse:

The preterist interpretation

Full preterists view the entire discourse as referring to the events surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. Most partial preterists see the destruction of Jerusalem as the subject of Matt 24:1-35 and the future second coming beginning with Matt 24:36.

The dispensationalist/futurist interpretation

This interpretation views the entire discourse (at least the Matthew and Mark accounts) as pertaining to future events surrounding Christ's *parousia*.

The combined interpretation

This interpretation views the discourse as applying to the entire period between Christ's first coming and his second coming. Some portions of the discourse deal with the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, and some portions deal with Christ's second

¹ Matt 24:1-25:46; Mark 13:1-37; Luke 21:5-36; see also Luke 17:20-37 for a similar discourse.

coming at the end of the age. This view has always been the approach taken by the vast majority of conservative Christian scholars, although there are differences among them concerning exactly how the different parts of the discourse fit together. This is the approach that will be presented here.

The context of the Olivet Discourse

“Most agree that the Olivet Discourse relates to (a) Israel’s rejection of Christ, (b) Christ’s rejection of Israel, and (c) the disciples’ questions in Matthew 24:3.”²

Following his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus rejected Israel, condemned the Jewish leaders, and foreshadowed the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. The judgment upon Israel was based primarily on Israel’s rejection of Jesus (see Matt 21:33-46; Mark 12:1-12; Luke 20:9-18; Matt 22:1-14; Matt 23:1-39).

The immediate context of the discourse was the disciples’ mention of how beautiful and wonderful the temple buildings were. Jesus responded by telling them, *“Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, not one stone here will be left upon another, which will not be torn down.”* (Matt 24:2; see also Mark 13:2; Luke 21:6). That statement prompted the disciples’ questions, *“Tell us, when will these things happen, and what will be the sign of Your coming and of the end of the age?”* (Matt 24:3; see also Mark 13:4; Luke 21:7). The Olivet Discourse is Jesus’ answer to those questions.

The theological significance of the destruction of the temple in AD 70

Although the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in AD 70 was not the “end of this age” as preterists claim, it nevertheless was theologically significant. The destruction of Jerusalem and the temple fulfilled Christ’s prophecies and demonstrated God’s rejection of the nation of Israel as his chosen people and as the vehicle for spreading his truth. Jesus’ death on the cross ended the Old Covenant and instituted the New. At that time *“the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom”* (Matt 27:51), symbolizing the destruction of the temple and, more importantly, the Old Covenant temple system. The destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in AD 70 was the outward, visible sign that confirmed the truth of the supreme theological event that had occurred forty years before: that the Old Covenant system was no longer effective and had been abrogated by the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ.

The destruction of Jerusalem and the temple also vindicated the church as God’s

² Toussaint, “A Critique,” 474.

chosen people and as the vehicle for spreading his truth.³ Jews were exempt from having to worship the Roman emperor. “Up until the era of the mid-A.D. 60s (but not after A.D. 70) the Romans were prone to identify Christianity as a sect of Judaism, intimately and necessarily bound up with it.”⁴ The destruction of Jerusalem and the temple led to the formal separation of Judaism and Christianity. After the formal separation from Judaism, “Jewish Christians were no longer perceived by the Roman government as under the umbrella of Judaism and, therefore, faced the cruel dilemma of either forsaking Christ (if they were to be readmitted into the synagogues) or worshipping Caesar.”⁵

The signs of the times (Matt 24:4-28; Mark 13:5-23; Luke 21:8-24)

“Literary and structural arguments suggest that [Matt 24:4-28; Mark 13:5-23; Luke 21:8-24] must be taken as one time period [culminating in the second coming] with [the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem—Matt 24:15-21; Mark 13:14-19; Luke 21:20-24] a critical part of it.”⁶ Structurally, this is especially seen in Mark’s account, since Mark “brackets” the entire section with the Greek word *blepete* (“watch out”; “take heed”; “see”) at the beginning (Mark 13:5) and at the end (Mark 13:23).

Matt 24:4-14; Mark 13:5-13; Luke 21:8-19

In this part of the discourse, “Jesus deals with certain outstanding features of the interadventual period. We are reminded at [Matt 24:6] that the end is not immediately, that the activity of deceivers, and reports of wars and rumours of wars, are not to be regarded as portents of an imminent consummation (cf. Luke 19:11); and at [Matt 24:7-8] that wars, famines, and earthquakes are but the beginning of sorrows. . . . However, this section of the discourse brings us to what is surely of the same purport as ‘the consummation of the age’ in the question of the disciples [Matt 24:3], namely, ‘the end’—‘then shall the end come’. So we are compelled to construe [Matt 24:4-14; Mark 13:5-13; Luke 21:8-19] as, in brief outline, a forecast of interadventual history.”⁷

Matt 24:15-28; Mark 13:14-23; Luke 21:20-24

This section begins with the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 and then recapitulates the entire inter-advent period. Murray notes that it “cannot be a continuation, because [Matt 24:14; Mark 13:10] brought us up to the end. It must be, to some extent, recapitulation.”⁸ Luke’s parallel account is more focused on Jerusalem.

³ See Gentry, “A Preterist View,” 80.

⁴ Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell*, 227.

⁵ Pate, “Progressive Dispensationalist View,” 140; see also Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation*, 55; Stylianopoulos, “I Know,” 22n.19.

⁶ Carson, “Matthew,” 8:502.

⁷ Murray, “Interadventual Period,” 388.

⁸ *Ibid.*

Nevertheless, Luke 21:24b (“*and Jerusalem will be trampled under foot by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled*”) also covers the entire inter-advent period until the *parousia*. This is seen in light of Zech 14:2 which, if taken literally, speaks about the future subjugation of Jerusalem just before the second coming. The same result obtains if one looks at Jerusalem spiritually. In its rejection of Jesus, Jerusalem lost its claim to be called the holy city. Its true character is seen as Sodom and Egypt (Rev 11:8). Consequently, in the most important (spiritual) sense, *physical* Jerusalem will continue to be “*trampled under foot by the Gentiles*” until Christ returns.

Before AD 70 all of the “signs of the times” that Jesus predicted occurred in principle

Before Jerusalem fell in AD 70 all of the predicted “signs of the times” had begun to occur. With the fall of Jerusalem, “*all these things*” that Jesus had prophesied in the Olivet Discourse had been initiated and had taken place *in principle*.⁹ Consequently, after Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed in AD 70, Jesus could return in any generation, suddenly and unexpectedly.¹⁰

The occurrence of the “signs” before AD 70 and the “delay” of the parousia

While the form of the disciples’ question indicates that they viewed the first century and “end times” as a single complex of events, Jesus’ answer separates the two. The difficulty is finding the precise point of separation in the answer because all the events in different ways appear to be linked.¹¹ Here is where the “contingent” element of prophecy may be at work. The “signs of the times” have continued since AD 70 and will continue to occur until Christ returns.

The “abomination of desolation” (Matt 24:15; Mark 13:14)

The “*abomination of desolation*” was referred to in Dan 8:13; 9:27; 11:31; 12:11. In 1 Macc 1:54, the “*abomination of desolation*” was applied to the desecration of the altar of the temple by Antiochus Epiphanes.¹² Nevertheless, in the first century many in Israel believed that Antiochus had not completely fulfilled Daniel’s visions of the “*abomination of desolation*.” Therefore, they reasoned, the woes under Antiochus must have been pre-figurative of worse woes to come.”¹³ In the Olivet Discourse, Jesus likewise views the times of Antiochus as prefigurative of what lay ahead. He takes the same prophetic language and reapplies it—or, rather, is saying that the true fulfillment related to the nation’s

⁹ See Matt 24:33-34; Mark 13:29-30; Luke 21:31-32. Preterists, of course, cite this in support of their contention that “*all these things*” had occurred in full by AD 70. Mathison, *Postmillennialism*, 111-15.

¹⁰ Schnabel, *40 Questions*, 157.

¹¹ Ford, *Abomination of Desolation*, 68.

¹² See Josephus, *Ant.* 12.7.6; Schnabel, *40 Questions*, 154.

¹³ Ford, *Abomination of Desolation*, 157.

rejection of *him*.¹⁴ That happened in AD 70 when the Romans again desecrated the temple by virtually razing it to the ground.

The specific identification of the “*abomination of desolation*” is unclear but is related to the events of AD 66-70 in Jerusalem and the temple. The “*abomination of desolation*” has been identified with: the Zealots who defiled the temple, killed the priests, and deposed the high priest;¹⁵ the invading Roman armies;¹⁶ the Roman eagle military standards which had religious significance and which the Roman army brought into the temple where they offered sacrifices to them;¹⁷ Titus’s standing in the temple;¹⁸ and other things.¹⁹ Rikk Watts wisely cautions, “Perhaps the attempt at an overly precise identification [of the “*abomination of desolation*”] is misguided. Mark 13, although clearly referring to a historical event, does so using prophetic topoi [rhetorical conventions or motifs]. As with all such prophetic language, the concern is the significance of the event, not an exact description.”²⁰

The reference to the “*abomination of desolation*” indicates an historical event surrounding the AD 70 destruction of Jerusalem, not an “end-time” Antichrist. Christ’s admonition to his disciples, “*when you see . . .*” (Matt 24:15; Mark 13:14; Luke 21:20) suggests the events of AD 70, since Jesus was talking to his disciple and the events of AD 70 were in the lifetime of the disciples. Kenneth Gentry articulates what should be self-evident: “Surely Jesus does not denounce the first-century temple in which He is standing (24:1) by declaring it ‘desolate’ (23:38), prophesying its total destruction (24:2), then answering the question ‘when shall these things be?’ (v.3), and warning about the temple’s ‘abomination of desolation’ (v.15) only to speak about the destruction of a totally different temple some two thousand years (or more) later!”²¹

The exhortation to flee from Judea (Matt 24:16-20; Mark 13:14-18; Luke 21:21)

Matt 24:16-20; Mark 13:14-18; Luke 21:21 is related to the war of AD 66-70, not to an “end-time” event, as Desmond Ford notes: “V. G. Simkhovitch long ago lunged at the heart of the matter when he asked ‘If it refers to the end of the world, what difference does it make whether that end is to come in the winter or

¹⁴ Compare Dan 7:13 and Mark 13:26; Dan 8:13 and Luke 21:24; Dan 9:27 and Mark 13:14; Dan 11:31 and Mark 13:14; Dan 12:1 and Mark 13:19; and possibly Dan 11:45 and Matt 24:15 (“*in the holy place*”).

¹⁵ Gentry, “Exposition,” 47; Schnabel, *40 Questions*, 156; Carson, “Matthew,” 8:501. See Josephus, *J.W.* 4.6.3; see also *ibid.*, 4.3.4—4.7.2; 5.1.1—5.3.1; 5.6.1; 5.13.1-7.

¹⁶ Ford, *Abomination of Desolation*, 163-66.

¹⁷ Josephus, *J.W.* 6.6.1; Gentry, “Exposition,” 48; Carson, “Matthew,” 8:501.

¹⁸ Such, *Abomination*, 96-98.

¹⁹ Watts, “Mark,” 224; Ford, *Abomination of Desolation*, 158-62.

²⁰ Watts, “Mark,” 224.

²¹ Gentry, “Exposition,” 24.

in the summer?' . . . Unless these verses have reference to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, Christ has not truly replied to the enquiry from His disciples which provoked the discourse."²²

The “great tribulation” (Matt 24:21; Mark 13:19; Luke 21:22-23)

Both Matt 24:21 and Mark 13:19 state that the events of AD 70 “*will be a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will.*” Matt 24:21 and Mark 13:19 tie the “*great tribulation*” to the immediately preceding AD 70 context (i.e., fleeing from Judea) since both verses begin with the word “for” (Greek = *gar*). In other words, the reason to flee is “*for [or ‘because’] there will be a great tribulation*” (Matt 24:21; see also Mark 13:19). Luke 21:22 states that the *theological* reason to flee is “*because [Greek = hoti] these are days of vengeance.*” This alludes to Hos 9:7 LXX, which “announces that ‘the days of vengeance have come.’ . . . This announcement belongs to Hosea’s accusation that Israel has rejected Yahweh and rebuffed his prophet, the basis for his prophecy that God will punish the nation.”²³ In other words, Luke is confirming that Jerusalem and the temple would be destroyed because of God’s rejection of Israel, as a result of its rejection of Jesus.

Jesus’ statement about the events of AD 70 being an unparalleled tribulation is factually correct. “There have been greater numbers of deaths . . . but never so high a percentage of a great city’s population so thoroughly and painfully exterminated and enslaved as during the fall of Jerusalem.”²⁴ Further, “The *covenantal significance* of the loss of the Temple stands as the most dramatic redemptive-historical outcome of the Jewish War.”²⁵ Consequently, since AD 70 Judaism has not been able to be practiced as required by the OT.

The “abomination of desolation” and “great tribulation” as foreshadows

Although the references to the “*abomination of desolation*” and the “*great tribulation*” relate to the events of AD 70, principles of foreshadowing may apply to events that will occur shortly before Christ returns, just as the prophesied actions of Antiochus Epiphanes in 167 BC foreshadowed the events of Titus and the Romans in AD 70.

By its very nature, however, a “foreshadow” is not identical to the event it foreshadows. Since Jesus’ prophecy of “*great tribulation*” already has been fulfilled, we should not look for another “*great tribulation*” in which armies

²² Ford, *Abomination of Desolation*, 65-66.

²³ Pao and Schnabel, “Luke,” 376.

²⁴ Carson, “Matthew,” 9:563.

²⁵ Gentry, *Dominion*, 346-47, emphasis in original.

surround Jerusalem, there is an “*abomination of desolation*” in a new temple, people have to flee from Judea into the mountains, etc. Nothing in the text suggests an exact repetition of such events.

The signs of the times: recapitulation (Matt 24:22-28; Mark 13:20-23)

There are several reasons why Matt 24:22; Mark 13:20 probably begins a new section (Matt 24:22-28; Mark 13:20-23) that covers the entire period until the second coming:

(1) Although the “kai” of Matt 24:22; Mark 13:20 could connect those verses to the prior section, Matt 24:21; Mark 13:19 themselves make a suitable ending to Matt 24:15-21; Mark 13:14-19; (2) The grammar of Matt 24:22; Mark 13:20 combines with the substantive context to show that the entire section deals with events of the entire inter-advent period ending with the second coming; (3) The themes of persecution and false Christs are characteristic of the entire period before Christ comes again, not merely the time before AD 70; (4) Jesus describes the time period as “those days” which God will “cut short”; (5) The reference to “no life” being saved in Matt 24:22 and Mark 13:20 suggests a worldwide event; (6) The reference to cutting the days short “for the sake of the elect” (Matt 24:22; Mark 13:20) suggests a worldwide event.

The second coming of Christ (Matt 24:27-31; Mark 13:24-27; Luke 21:25-28)

In describing his *parousia*, Jesus drew upon and synthesized a rich background of OT passages that talk about the coming of the Lord. For example, Ps 50:4-6 says that God comes in order to judge. He says, “*Gather My godly ones to Me*” (Ps 50:5). Isaiah says, “*The Lord is about to come out of His place to punish the inhabitants of the earth*” (Isa 26:21). Associated with this are the resurrection of the dead (Isa 26:19), the blowing of the “great trumpet” (Isa 27:13), and the gathering together of God’s people (Isa 27:13). T. Francis Glasson summarizes this OT picture as follows: “If we put together the various items, the picture that emerges is that the Lord will descend from heaven with the sound of a trumpet; he will be accompanied by hosts of angels; his people will be gathered; there will be resurrection and judgment. Anyone familiar with the NT will immediately recognize that this is precisely the picture presented in its pages of the Parousia of the Lord Jesus.”²⁶

The parable of the fig tree: “all these things” and “this generation” versus “that day and hour” (Matt 24:32-25:30; Mark 13:28-37; Luke 21:28-36)

²⁶ Glasson, “Theophany and Parousia,” 260.

In this portion of the discourse Jesus contrasts events that will happen in his own generation (the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in AD 70) and his second coming (the timing of which is unknowable). B. J. Oropeza explains: “Once we understand ‘this generation’ to be first-century believers, it solves the problem of how the disciples were expected to be able to know when the time was near—even ‘right at the door’ (Mt 24:32-34)—but not able to know when Jesus would return as a thief in the night (Mt 24:36-44).”²⁷

Matthew’s account of the discourse includes several parables: the thief in the night (Matt 24:42-44); the faithful and unfaithful slaves (Matt 24:45-51); the ten virgins (Matt 25:1-13); and the talents (Matt 25:14-30). Each one of these parables emphasizes that we will *not* know when the Lord will be returning: “The premium of discipleship is placed not on predicting the future but on *faithfulness in the present*, especially in trials, adversity, and suffering.”²⁸

The second coming of Christ is totally unpredictable

The “signs of the times” are deliberately general and open-ended; they characterize the entire period between Jesus’ first and second comings. Further, even if some end-time “Antichrist” figure arises, “we simply do not know how the final antichrist will arise or what form his appearance will take.”²⁹ Although it appears that there will be increased persecution before the end, other passages indicate that most people will continue to go about their normal affairs of daily life (see Matt 24:38-41).

The idea that because Jesus referred to “*that day and hour*” in Matt 24:36; Mark 13:32, we can at least predict the month, or year, or general time period when he will return is nonsense. First, “*that day and hour*” is a technical term that stands for the second coming itself, not a time reference contrasted with week, month, or year.³⁰ Second, since Jesus himself and the angels of heaven do not know when that will be (Matt 24:36; Mark 13:32), how can any mere human being presume to know or predict when it will occur?

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²⁷ Oropeza, *99 Reasons*, 93.

²⁸ Edwards, *Mark*, 386, emphasis in original.

²⁹ Hoekema, *Bible and Future*, 162. For a detailed discussion of this see chapter 10—The “Antichrist.”

³⁰ Murray, “Interadventual Period,” 394-95; see also Moore, *The Parousia*, 100 (“‘*That day*’ carries Old Testament overtones [of the last judgment and *parousia*] which ‘*the day*’ in modern usage does not”).

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