

Matthew 24 and the Great Tribulation

Chapter 1: The Context and Theological Setting of Matthew 24

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Introduction

A section of Scripture that has perplexed many interpreters and caused a multitude of speculations and differing opinions is Matthew 24. In this brief study we will examine this prophecy (and the parallel chapters-Mark 13 and Luke 21) in order to dispel the many common misconceptions regarding its teaching. If one is careful not to impose one's eschatological presuppositions upon the text and follows standard historical-grammatical procedures of interpretation, the confusion surrounding this great prophecy will dissipate.

Common Interpretations of Matthew 24

Before we examine Matthew 24, we will briefly consider the variety of opinions related to Jesus' discourse. (1) One opinion that is very common today is that Matthew 24 (and Mark 13) has nothing to say about the destruction of the Jewish Temple in A.D. 70, but rather speaks solely of signs that portend the Second Advent. This view is popular among old-style dispensationalists who argue that the Olivet Discourse is directed to Jewish disciples who are representatives of the converted Israel of the last days. In other words, the passage is directed to Jewish converts who will live in the far distant future (e.g., 2,000 years). Such interpreters argue that only the Luke 21 discourse (written to a Gentile audience) applies to the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem in A.D. 70. As we consider this passage, we will see that such an interpretation is arbitrary, imposed on the text, and violates the perspicuity of Scripture as well as standard Protestant methods of interpretation.

(2) Another very common interpretation is that Jesus in the Olivet Discourse *intertwines* predictions regarding two entirely different events: the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 and the second bodily coming of Christ at the end of human history. Godet writes, "Matthew combines in the answer of Jesus the two subjects indicated in the question as Matthew has expressed it, and he unites them in so intimate a way that all attempts to separate them in the text from Chrysostom to Ebrard and Meyer have broken down."¹ Hendriksen writes, "The prophetic material found in this sixth discourse has reference not only to events near at hand (see, for example, verse 16) but also to those stretching far into the future, as is clear from 24:14, 29-31....By the process of prophetic foreshortening, by means of which before one's eyes the widely separated mountain peaks of historic events merge and are seen as one...two momentous events are here intertwined, namely, a. the judgment upon Jerusalem (its fall in the year A.D. 70), and b. the final judgment at the close of world's history."² This view is held by the vast majority of

¹ Frederic Louis Godet as quoted in William E. Biederwolf, *The Second Coming Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985 [1924]), 326.

² William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), 846.

commentators (e.g., John Calvin, David Dickson, Matthew Henry, James Moffat, William Manson, R. C. H. Lenski, William Hendriksen, R. V. G. Tasker, David Hill, etc.). Indeed, it is so common one could call it the standard evangelical interpretation. Therefore, when one disagrees with this interpretation eyebrows are raised. Given the widespread acceptance of this view in the church we must only depart from it on the basis of solid exegetical evidence. (This evidence will be presented shortly.)

(3) Some interpreters view the Olivet Discourse as a type of the tribulation that will occur immediately prior to the end of history. In other words the signs that precede the destruction of Jerusalem will also precede the second coming. Similarly, some interpreters think of the discourse as having a double fulfillment. Our Lord's words (we are told) apply simultaneously to the generation that witnessed the destruction of the temple (A.D. 70) and a future generation that witness the second coming of Christ. (This view is sometimes combined with view number 2.)

(4) It is not uncommon to find modernist interpreters who argue that in Matthew 24 Christ predicted the destruction of Jerusalem, the second coming and the end of the world. These interpreters teach that Jesus believed that all these things would occur within one generation (Mt. 24:34) and thus conclude that Christ was wrong when He predicted the second coming and the end of the world. This view, which is based on an anti-supernaturalistic bias and a misunderstanding of key sections of the text, must be rejected.

(5) There are interpreters who teach that Jesus did indeed predict that the second coming and end of the world would occur within the generation then living (i.e. by A.D. 70); and, that therefore the rapture, second coming, bodily resurrection and final judgment have already taken place. Those who adhere to such a view often label themselves full or consistent preterists. However, since this view involves an unbiblical view of the timing and nature of such crucial doctrines as the second coming, the general resurrection, the last judgment, the glorified bodies of believers and the final state, it properly has been designated as heretical and dangerous. Orthodox theologians and exegetes describe this heresy as "hyper-preterism" (Kenneth L. Gentry), "Hymenaenism" (Andrew Sandlin) or "pantelism" (Jonathan Seraiah). Hyper-preterists must redefine a number of very clear, confessional, established doctrines in order for them to fit into their unbiblical paradigm.

(6) Another view which has gained popularity in Reformed circles within the last thirty years is that everything in the Olivet discourse at least up to verse 34 refers to the destruction of Jerusalem and the close of the Jewish age. This view had been labeled "partial preterism" in order to distinguish it from "hyper-preterism." This interpretation respects the clear teaching of Scripture regarding the rapture, second coming, general resurrection, final judgment and nature of glorified bodies, yet takes literally the various time indicators within the discourse (e.g., verse 34). It is this view that will be set forth in this study of Matthew 24.

Important Interpretive Procedures

If one is to arrive at a correct understanding of the Olivet discourse, he must follow biblical principles of interpretation (i.e. one must adopt a genuine grammatical-historical-theological hermeneutic). Some basic principles of biblical interpretation are as follows. (1) The section of Scripture in question must be interpreted in light of the original audience. For example, would a first century Jewish audience regard a phrase such as "blood, fire, vapor and smoke" (Ac. 2:19ff.; Rev. 6:12; cf. Joel 2:28-32) as referring to nuclear war or as old covenant prophetic imagery for God's impending judgment on Israel? (2) Scripture must be used to

interpret Scripture. In Matthew 24 Jesus uses terminology that comes directly from the Old Testament prophetic books. What makes more sense: using the Bible to give us the meaning of such apocalyptic images or using speculations founded upon the New York Times or Newsweek? (3) One must interpret biblical passages according to their literary type. Many prophetic passages use poetic metaphor and apocalyptic imagery. Apocalyptic or poetic imagery must be treated in a different manner than a straight-forward historical account. Once again the key to understanding prophetic imagery (e.g., stars falling from heaven, the sun becoming dark, the sky rolled up like a scroll, etc.) is to see how such imagery is used in the Bible, rather than use current events and modern scientific discoveries to speculate (e.g., nuclear war, bar codes, computer chips in the hand and forehead, attack helicopters, tanks, etc.). Most books written on prophecy today are disconnected exegetically from the biblical text and thus are nothing more than the clever fantasies of the different authors. (4) The time indicators within the discourse and the immediate context that relates to the discourse (e.g., Mt. 23:36) must be taken into account when determining the meaning of this section of Scripture. The time indicators (if taken at face value, i.e. according to the normal etymological meaning) prove that Jesus' discourse at least up to verse 34 must be applied directly and solely to Christ's judgment upon Jerusalem and the complete end of the Jewish age. (This point will be discussed in more detail below.) (5) Whenever one is interpreting a section of Scripture in the synoptic gospels (i.e. Matthew, Mark and Luke), parallel accounts should be carefully compared and analyzed. Matthew wrote to a predominately Jewish audience while Mark and Luke wrote to a predominately Gentile audience. Therefore, if Matthew uses a phrase from Old Testament history or poetical prophetic imagery that would be obscure or difficult for a Gentile audience, the other gospels should be checked for clarification (e.g., the disciple's question, Mt. 24:3; Mk. 13:4; Lk. 21:7; the abomination desolation, Mt. 24:15, Lk. 21:20).

Chapter 1: The Context and Theological Setting of Matthew 24

The Olivet discourse (Mt. 24, 25) comes almost at the very end of Jesus' ministry, only a few days before the institution of the Lord's supper and His betrayal (Mt. 26:2). In this lengthy discourse our Lord discusses the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of the age (Greek, *aion*). That is the end of the old covenant order, the time when the kingdom of God was to be taken from Israel and given to the multi-national church (Mt. 21:43). Christ also spoke about the second coming and final judgment (Mt. 24:36-51; 25:31-46). The central propositions of our Lord throughout His discussion of coming in judgment upon Israel and His bodily coming to judge the whole world are perseverance, faithfulness, readiness and watchfulness. He warns the disciples that only those who endure to the end will be saved (24:13). He commands them to "be ready" (24:44), to "watch" (25:13). In the parable of the ten virgins only those virgins who had made proper preparations and are ready at the bridegroom's appearing are permitted to go into the wedding. The rest are excluded (Mt. 25:1-13). In the parable of the talents (Mt. 25:14-30) only those who were faithful in investing the master's money and making a profit were given a reward. The rest were cast into "outer darkness" (Mt. 25:30). In Jesus' teaching on the final judgment only those who did good works toward Christ by serving and loving His people are given eternal life. The rest "will go away into everlasting punishment" (Mt. 25:46).

As one studies the gospels, it is clear that the four evangelists in their presentation of the life and ministry of Jesus were careful to note the lack of faithfulness, perseverance, watchfulness and readiness on the part of the covenant nation. The prophesying of our Lord in

Matthew 24 against Israel is God's response to the nation's rejection, hatred, blasphemy and murder of the Messiah and their similar treatment of Christ's disciples after the ascension. Because the Jewish people had the oracles of God (Rom. 3:2) and were in covenant with Jehovah (Ex. 19:8), they had a much greater responsibility to believe in, love and serve the Son of God. To reject Jesus would be the final straw in their rebellion. Luke writes, "Now as He drew near, He saw the city and wept over it, saying, 'If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things that make for your peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment around you, surround you and close you in on every side, and level you, and your children within you, to the ground; and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, *because you did not know the time of your visitation*'" (Lk. 19:41-44). The Jews could commit no greater crime than murdering the Prince of life (Ac. 3:15). Although the Jewish leaders held the chief responsibility in delivering up the Messiah unto death (cf. Jn. 19:11), the people were also guilty. At our Lord's trial "all the people answered and said, 'His blood be on us and on our children'" (Mt. 27:25). Thus on the way to the cross Jesus said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for Me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For indeed the days are coming in which they will say, 'Blessed are the barren, wombs that never bore, and breasts which never nursed!' Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us!' and to the hills, 'Cover us!'" (Lk 23:28-30).

The gospels carefully documented the covenant nation's rejection, hatred and persecution of Christ. When the political and religious leaders were informed by the wise men from the East that the Messiah had been born, the only person who showed any interest was King Herod. He, however, was not interested in worshiping the Messiah but only in killing Him. When John the Baptist (the greatest of all the Old Testament prophets, Mt. 11:11) appeared on the scene both he and his message were totally rejected by the scribes and Pharisees (Mt. 3:7-8; 11:18; 21:25). Under inspiration John called them a "brood of vipers" (Mt. 3:7). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus refuted the false teaching of the Pharisees regarding God's law (Mt. 5:17 ff.) and then warned the people that those who do not obey His teachings are like a house built on sand that will be destroyed by a coming storm (Mt. 7:26-27). After remarking about the great faith of a Gentile centurion, Christ said "the sons of the kingdom will be cast into outer darkness" (Mt. 8:12). After our Lord sent out the twelve on a preaching mission, He discussed the great judgment that would come upon those cities that rejected His word. "Assuredly, I say to you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city" (Mt. 10:16)! He also warned the disciples of the coming persecution. "Now brother will deliver up brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and cause them to be put to death" (Mt. 10:21; cf. 22-23; 10:34-42). (This severe persecution is documented in Acts 4:1 ff.; 6:11 ff; and especially 8:1 ff.). Our Lord speaks of the nation's rejection of John the Baptist and Himself in Matthew 11, "But to what shall I liken this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their companions, and saying: 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we mourned to you, and you did not lament.' For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' But wisdom is justified by her children" (16-19). Christ then proceeds with severe rebukes for the cities in which He had preached (Chorazin, Bethsaida, Tyre, Sidon and Capernaum). He emphasizes the fact that a rejection of the preaching of the Son of God Himself accompanied by amazing, authenticating miracles merits a much greater punishment. "But I say to you that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment

than for you” (Mt. 11:24). The theme of greater judgment because of a rejection of the Messiah, the prophet greater than Moses (Heb. 3:3 ff.), continues in the next chapter. “The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here. The queen of the South will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and indeed a greater than Solomon is here” (Mt. 12:41-42).

The hatred and rejection of Jesus is also very pronounced in the gospel of John. The apostle says, “He came to His own and they did not receive Him” (Jn. 1:11). The Jews accused Christ of being demon-possessed and sought to kill Him (Jn. 7:1, 19, 20, 25; 8:37; 10:20). They accused our Lord of being a hated half-breed, a Samaritan (Jn. 8:48), born of fornication (Jn. 8:41), a mad man (Jn. 10:20), a blasphemer (Jn. 5:18; Mt. 26:65; Lk. 22:71), a glutton and drunkard (Mt. 11:19). The Jews were so angry about our Lord's teaching that on more than one occasion they wanted to kill Him (Jn. 5:18; 7:20; 8:59). They even rejected Him after observing proof of incredible miracles (e.g., Jn. 9:30 ff.; 11:47; Ac. 4:14-18). The Pharisees accused Jesus of casting out demons by the power of Satan (Mt. 12:24). This, Jesus said, was blasphemy against the Holy Spirit which could never be forgiven by God (Mt. 12:31-32). The religious leaders were guilty of blasphemy, a death penalty offense (Lev. 24:16), and had committed a sin so heinous that restoration was impossible. As we will see in a moment the nation of Israel as a covenant nation (i.e. a nation with a special redemptive role and purpose) would forever lose their kingdom status. The official policy of the religious leaders was to excommunicate anyone who confessed Jesus as the Messiah (Jn. 9:22; 12:42; 16:2). After Lazarus was raised from the dead, the response of the Jewish leaders was a conspiracy to murder Christ (Jn. 11:3) and even eliminate proof of the miracle by killing Lazarus (Jn. 12:10-11). When the Jewish people were given a choice between setting free the sinless Son of God and a thieving murderer (Barabbas) they choose Barabbas (Jn. 18:39-40; Mt. 27:15-17). When our Lord hung on the cross in intense pain and agony, He was mocked, reviled and blasphemed against by the people and religious leaders (Mt. 27:39-44). Jesus was justified in referring to the generation of Jews living at the time of His visitation as an “evil and adulterous generation” (Mt. 12:39; 16:4), a “faithless and perverse generation” (Mt. 17:17), a wicked generation full of unclean spirits (Mt. 12:45), a “generation of vipers” (Mt. 12:34; 23:33).

As the ministry of our Lord on earth nears its end, Jesus increasingly reveals the coming covenantal curse upon the Jewish nation.³ “And seeing a fig tree by the road, He came to it and

³ As we study this section of Scripture it is important that we understand that God's covenant with Israel was a *conditional* covenant. Jehovah always expects and demands genuine faith and good works that are the fruit of true saving faith. God repeatedly promised Israel that if they turned from Him and rejected His law for a life of idolatry and wickedness that a time of destruction would come. Note the following passages. “Take heed to yourselves, lest you forget the covenant of the Lord your God which He made with you, and make for yourselves a carved image in the form of anything which the Lord your God has forbidden you...I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that you will soon utterly perish from the land which you cross over the Jordan to possess; you will not prolong your days in it, but will be utterly destroyed. And the Lord will scatter you among the peoples, and you will be left few in number among the nations where the Lord will drive you” (Dt. 4:23, 26-27). “But it shall come to pass, if you do not obey the voice of the Lord your God, to observe carefully all His commandments and His statutes which I command you today, that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you...The Lord will bring a nation against you from afar, from the end of the earth, as swift as the eagle flies, a nation whose language you will not understand, a nation of fierce countenance, which does not respect the elderly nor show favor to the young” (Dt. 28:15, 49-53). “If those ordinances depart from before Me, says the Lord, then the seed of Israel shall also cease from being a nation before Me forever” (Jer. 31:36). “Now hear this, you heads of the house of Jacob and rulers of

found nothing on it but leaves, and said to it, Let no fruit grow on you ever again.’ Immediately the fig tree withered away” (Mt. 21:19; Mk. 11-13, 20; cf. Lk. 13:6-9). After cleansing the temple (Mt. 21:12-13), which was a symbolic denunciation of Israel's perversion of the worship and service of God, Christ curses the covenant nation. The great majority of Jews had rejected the truth, replaced it with their own human traditions (Mt. 12) and were living in gross immorality (Mt. 12:39, 45; 16:4; 17:17; 23:33). While they had leaves (that is the outward appearance of religion), they had no fruit. They did not believe in Christ, nor did they love their neighbor. If a tree does not bear fruit, especially after being nurtured and fertilized, then it needs to be cut down (Lk. 13:8-9). The cursing and withering of the fig tree was a prophetic act predicting the coming destruction of the nation.

After the encounter with the barren fig tree, Jesus entered the temple and spoke three parables against the Jews, especially the leadership. In the first parable the Jews are compared to a son who promised to obey his father yet did not. In their covenant with Jehovah, Israel had promised to obey God's voice (Ex. 19:6) yet they refused. Their rejection of the law and the prophets is reflected in their unbelief toward John the Baptist (Mt. 21:32). The Jews had rejected God's covenant. They did not believe. Therefore, “Jesus said to them ‘Assuredly, I say to you that tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you’” (Mt. 21:31).

In the second parable (concerning the wicked tenants) our Lord uses a story about an absent landowner who sends servants and then finally his own son to check on certain vinedressers in charge of his vineyard (cf. Isa. 5:1-7). In this parable Christ indicts the Jews for their persecution and murder of the prophets (Mt. 21:35-36) and (the climax of their rebellion) their murder of the Messiah (Mt. 21:39). To press home the central message of the parable Jesus asks a rhetorical question. “Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vinedressers” (Mt. 21:40)? The Jews give the correct and obvious answer, “They said to Him, ‘He will destroy those wicked men miserably, and lease his vineyard to other vinedressers who will render to him the fruits in their seasons’” (Mt. 21:41)? Christ then interprets the parable to make sure He is not misunderstood. “Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it” (Mt. 21:43). There is to be a coming in judgment on the generation of Jews that our Lord was speaking to (Mt. 21:40). The nation will be destroyed, its leaders killed and their covenant privileges removed. Matthew, writing under inspiration, makes it very clear that our Lord was speaking of the *present generation*. He wrote, “Now when the chief priests and Pharisees heard His parables, they perceived that He was speaking of them” (Mt. 21:45).

In the third parable (about the wedding feast) the Jews are compared to people who reject a king's invitation to his son's wedding announced by the king's servants. The king is God and acceptance to the wedding feast is belief in the gospel. The wedding feast is the marriage supper of the Lamb. The Jews show that they are unworthy not only by their indifference (Mt. 12:4-5), but especially by their treatment of God's servants who are “seized,” “spitefully treated” and “killed” (Mt. 22:6). Noting God's response to such behavior Jesus said, “But when the king heard about it, he was furious. And he sent out his armies, destroyed those murderers, and burned

the house of Israel, who abhor justice and pervert all equity, who build up Zion with bloodshed and Jerusalem with iniquity: her heads judge for a bribe, her priests teach for pay, and her prophets divine for money. Yet they lean on the Lord, and say, ‘Is not the Lord among us? No harm can come upon us.’ Therefore because of you Zion shall be plowed like a field, Jerusalem shall become heaps of ruins, and the mountain of the temple like the bare hills of the forest” (Mic. 3:9-12). The Jeremiah passage taken in context apparently applies directly to the destruction of Israel in A.D. 70. While it is true that Israel exists as a nation today, they are not a covenant nation, but a nation of unbelieving heathen.

up their city” (Mt. 22:7). In these terrifying words, our Lord makes a very clear reference to the siege of Jerusalem by the armies of Titus, to the slaughter of the people and even the burning of the city. This all occurred within one generation (by 70 A.D.).

The parables in Matthew 21 and 22 are a prelude to the scathing condemnation of the Jewish leaders (the scribes and Pharisees) in Matthew 23. This chapter is important because it sets forth the immediate context of the Olivet Discourse. It also foretells in detail the destruction of Jerusalem (Mt. 23:35, 38) and the time of the coming judgment (i.e. “this generation,” 23:36). The question that the disciples ask in Matthew 24:3 comes as a direct result of Jesus' statements in Matthew 23:32-24:2.

There are a number of things that we should consider regarding this chapter. First, the teachings of the parables given in chapters 21 and 22 are made explicit and elucidated. Like the unfaithful son, the scribes and Pharisees “say, and do not do” (Mt. 23:3; cf. 21:30). Like the wicked vinedressers and the people who killed the servants who announced the wedding feast, the scribes and Pharisees persecuted and murdered the prophets (Mt. 23:29-35; cf. 21:36-39; 22:6). Like those in the parables who were judged and excluded from the kingdom, the scribes and Pharisees will be destroyed (Mt. 23:35, 38; cf. 21:31, 41, 43-44; 22:7).

Second, our Lord sets forth the extent of the Jewish leadership's covenant-breaking and lawlessness in the fashion of a prophetic covenant lawsuit. Christ documents their sins in the form of eight woes (eight indicating that their wickedness would lead to a new beginning, a new age, a new kingdom universal in scope). The scribes and Pharisees were hypocrites (Mt. 23:13, 14, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29; 15:7) who through their false teaching “shut up heaven” (Mt. 23:13) and made their converts “sons of hell” (Mt. 23:15). They had perverted the doctrine of salvation to the extent that they were teaching damnable heresy and thus had completely lost the preeminent mark of the true church. No wonder Jesus said that their father was the devil (Jn. 6:44) and their synagogues were of Satan (Rev. 3:9). The scribes and Pharisees were also exceedingly wicked in their behavior. They were stealing from widows (Mt. 23:14) and putting on an insincere religious show (Mt. 23:14). They made up human traditions in order to circumvent the law of Moses (Mt. 23:16 ff.; Mt. 15:6). They neglected the weightier matters of the law to focus on trifles (Mt. 23:23-24). Thus they were “fools and blind” (23:17, 19), “blind guides” (Mt. 23:16, 24; cf. 15:7), “white-washed tombs” (23:27), “full of hypocrisy and lawlessness” (Mt. 23:28), “serpents” and a “brood of vipers” (23:33). They were the “sons [i.e. of like mind and behavior] of those who murdered the prophets” who will “persecute,” “scourge,” “crucify” and “kill” the “prophets, wise men and scribes” that Christ will send (Mt. 23:34).

Third, Jesus explains the reasons for the severity of the coming judgment. “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, and say, ‘If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets.’ Therefore you are witnesses against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers’ guilt. Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell? Therefore, indeed, I send you prophets, wise men, and scribes: some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from city to city, that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. Assuredly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation” (Mt. 23:29-36). Our Lord’s condemnation of the Jewish leaders sets forth a number of reasons for the just sentence of destruction against them. Jesus, in the role of a prosecutor and judge, first points out

that these men are condemned by their own statements. They acknowledged that their fathers had persecuted the prophets and even implicitly condemned their behavior (Mt. 23:30). But they themselves were guilty of the same behavior and even worse for they murdered the Son of God (Mt. 21:39). By condemning the sin of their forefathers while engaging in the identical behavior, these men were inexcusable (Rom. 1:32-2:1). Their testimony sealed their own prosecution. Their intimate knowledge of the Scriptures and their own history also indicates that they have committed high-handed sin, a sin against knowledge. “Our Lord does not mean that the Scribes and Pharisees of His own day were responsible for murders committed by their forefathers centuries before that time. But the guilt of wickedness is increased by the accumulation of previous instances and warnings. Each generation that condemns the wickedness of its predecessors, and yet repeats the wickedness, is more guilty than its predecessors, and has more to answer for.”⁴ Further, Jesus takes the Jewish leaders’ statement regarding their persecuting fathers and turns it against them as an admission that they ethically are of the same cloth: like father, like son. “Indeed, you are the sons of these men for you too are full of envy, malice, hatred and cruelty; you too are unbelievers, full of rebellion, who persecute and murder the saints of God (cf. Ac. 7:51).”

Christ then tells the leaders that they are the ones who will fill up the measure of their father's guilt (Mt. 23:32). The cup of God’s wrath has been filling over time because of the sins of the nation. These religious and political leaders and the deluded populace who follow their example will overflow the cup by the murder of Christ and the severe persecution of the Christian church. The Bible views nations as covenantal persons that can accumulate injustice and sin until God can no longer forbear. After carefully documenting the rank idolatry of the Jewish people Jeremiah wrote, “So the Lord could no longer bear it, because of the evil of your doings and because of the abominations which you committed. Therefore your land is a desolation, an astonishment, a curse, and without an inhabitant, as it is this day” (Jer. 44:22). The Bible speaks of nations that forget God being turned into hell (Ps. 9:17), of four generations of time being necessary before the destruction of the Amorites “for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete” (Gen. 15:16), of the land vomiting out its inhabitants because it is defiled by so much iniquity (Lev. 18:25), of the land (Gk. *ges*) being ripe for the harvest of the sickle (Rev. 14:15). The nation of Israel had been storing up guilt for generations. However, it was the murder of Christ and the persecution of His people that put the final nail in the coffin. The leaders had blasphemed the Holy Spirit and killed the Son of God. Therefore the coming destruction deserved to be and was more terrible than anything that the world had ever witnessed, either before or since. God had promised, “He repays those who hate Him to their face, to destroy them. He will not be slack with him who hates Him; He will repay him to his face” (Dt. 7:10). Paul said, “For you also suffered the same things from your own countrymen, just as they did from the Judeans, who killed both the Lord Jesus and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they do not please God and are contrary to all men, forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they may be saved, so as always to fill up the measure of their sins; but wrath has come upon them to the uttermost” (1 Th. 2:14-16). “V. 16b suggests the image of a scale weighing up the sins of the Jewish people until the fixed amount is achieved that will lead to their judgment.”⁵ Indeed, all the righteous blood shed upon the earth from Abel to Zechariah will come upon the Jewish nation. The scribes and Pharisees, by murdering the Son of God—the

⁴ Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982 [1915]), 323.

⁵ Charles Wanamaker, *Commentary of I and II Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 116.

Prophet of prophets and the head of the body (the church)—commit the ultimate crime of persecution of which all others were types. “Though God bear long with a persecuting generation, he will not always; and patience abused, turns into the greatest wrath. The longer sinners have been heaping up treasures of wickedness, the deeper and fuller the treasures of wrath be; and the breaking of them will be like breaking up the fountains of the great deep.”⁶

God's wrath will result in the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple (23:37-38; 24:2) and the condemnation of hell (23:33). With the destruction of the city by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. there was a temporary separation. “‘But if you will not hear these words, I swear by Myself,’ says the Lord, ‘that this house shall become a desolation’” (Jer. 22:5). However, after 70 years a remnant returned, the temple was rebuilt and the *shekinah* presence restored. But with the rejection of the Messiah, the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit and the persecution of the church, God will permanently divorce Israel. Jehovah's special presence will leave the temple forever. “See! Your house is left to you desolate” (Mt. 23:38). Morison writes, “[T]he Savior's reference is to His own leaving or departure, a leaving that involved the penal departure of His Father as the Head of the theocracy. The Jewish theocracy was to be a theocracy no longer. ‘*Ichabod*’ was to be its name. Judaism henceforth would be mere Judaism, not Jehovahism or Jahveism. The Jews henceforth, instead of being the people and kingdom of God, would be a mere Semitic nationality under the dynasty of the Herods or under no dynasty at all. Their temple would just be like any other temple of any other contemporaneous people, an empty edifice dedicated to the empty celebration of an empty ritual.”⁷ In order to make sure His pronouncement of doom could not be misunderstood, Christ explicitly tells His disciples what will happen to the temple. “Then Jesus went out and departed from the temple, and His disciples came up to show Him the buildings of the temple. And Jesus said to them, ‘Do you not see all these things? Assuredly, I say to you, not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down’” (Mt. 24:1-2).

The Time Indicators

One of the main reasons we have taken the time to examine the context of Matthew 24 is to establish the proper timing of our Lord's prophecy. We have seen that the gospels take great care in documenting the unfaithfulness and wickedness of the Jewish leadership and nation. We have also observed that much of Matthew chapter 21 and 22 and almost all of chapter 23 is concerned with the wickedness of the Jews in rejecting Christ and persecuting His prophets (both past and future). Jesus also carefully explains that the behavior of the Jews has filled the cup of God's wrath, that total destruction and the permanent removal of covenant privileges is coming. The all-important question is when? The answer to this question is the generation living when Jesus spoke His words of judgment. He said, “On you [the scribes and Pharisees] may come all the righteous blood shed on earth” (Mt. 23:35). “Assuredly I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation” (Mt. 23:36). “See! Your house is left to you desolate” (Mt. 23:38). Then in chapter 24 after listing a number of signs that precede the end (i.e. the coming of the Son of God in judgment and the destruction of Jerusalem) our Lord once again asserts, “Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place” (Mt. 24:34).

⁶ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (McLean, VA: McDonald Publishing, n. d.), 5:342.

⁷ James Morison, *A Practical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Minneapolis: Klock and Klock, 1981 [1884]), 451.

Christ's words are very clear and easy to understand. They leave no room for controversy. Jesus taught that His prophecy of doom (at least up to verse 34) must take place within the lifetime of the existing generation. But what about the futurist contention that the word generation (*genea*) in Matthew 24:43 really means nation or race; that many or even most of the events prior to verse 34 refer to the distant future (i.e. the second bodily coming of Christ)? There are a number of solid exegetical reasons for rejecting the common futurist understanding of generation (*genea*). First, there is the immediate context. In Matthew 23:36 the words, "this generation" cannot refer to a race or nation thousands of years in the future.⁸ They can only refer to the leaders and people living at that time. Jesus addresses the scribes and Pharisees personally. He uses the pronoun "you" twenty-six times. Then He laments over Jerusalem. All commentators agree that the word generation in Matthew 23:36 refers to the group of people living at the time our Lord uttered those words. Even the *New Scofield Study Bible* says, "The prediction of v. 36 was fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70."⁹ Given the fact the Jews used the word generation with this specific meaning in 23:36, is it exegetically responsible to assert that only moments later when discussing the same topic (cf. Mt. 24:2) our Lord would without warning or explanation give the identical word, in an almost identical statement, a completely new and different meaning? Further, the common practice of Jesus in the gospels was to teach the multitudes and then privately to give further instruction regarding His public teaching to His close disciples. In these teaching sessions Christ would answer questions and clarify His doctrines. He wanted to make sure the apostles understood what He had to say. Given this pattern does it make sense to assert that our Lord would give a statement to the apostles in 24:34 that they would most certainly misunderstand?

Second, the broader context proves that Jesus was referring to the contemporary generation. If one carefully examines every occurrence of the word generation (*genea*) in the gospels (Mt.1:17; 11:16; 12:39, 41, 42, 45; 16:4; 17:17; 23:36; 24:34; Mk. 8:12, 38; 9:19; 13:30;

⁸ By far the most popular futurist interpretation of "generation" (*genea*) in Matthew 24:34 is that the word means race. The passage says (according) to this view that the Jewish race will still be in existence when all these things take place. This interpretation is then often accompanied by comments regarding God's amazing preservation of the Jewish people. Although this view is immensely popular and even has an emotional appeal, it is not supported by any sound scriptural argumentation whatsoever. To prove this assertion let us examine the typical argumentation for choosing the meaning of race. The excellent Bible commentator and Greek scholar William Hendriksen offers the following passages as evidence for the meaning of race in Matthew 24:34 in the Septuagint (LXX) version of the Old Testament. He points to Deuteronomy 32:5, 20; Psalm 12:7; 78:8; in the New Testament-Acts 2:40; Philippians 2:15; Hebrews 3:10. Apparently whenever Hendriksen finds the expression "a wicked and perverse generation," he believes generation can or should be interpreted as meaning the Jewish race. There are a number of reasons why we must regard Hendriksen's proof texts as insufficient proof for his assertion. First, substituting the meaning of race for generation doesn't work in these passages any more than does it work in Matthew 24:34. For example when Peter said in Acts 2:4, "Be saved from this wicked and perverse generation," he was preaching to men "from every nation under heaven" (Ac. 2:5). The Gentile God-fearers didn't need to be saved from the Jews but from the ethical degeneracy of that evil generation. Second, if the meaning of generation is not retained, Hendriksen's proof texts give a false understanding of Jewish history. The Jewish race in the Old Testament dispensation did have great periods of revival and obedience (e.g., under Joshua, Hezekiah, Josiah). The Jewish nation could not *always* at *every time* be classified as an evil race. The word generation retains the biblical fact that some generations were exceedingly evil while other generations were not. Third, if the word "generation" is given the meaning "race" then the urgency of prophetic preaching loses its force. The whole point of using the phrase "this generation" is to instruct a particular audience that covenant sanctions are about to come to pass. Fourth, the context of Matthew 24 (both broad and narrow) renders such an interpretation (i.e. race) impossible. This will be dealt with in detail below.

⁹ Editor C. I. Scofield, *The New Scofield Study Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989), 1167, footnote 3.

Lk. 1:48, 50; 7:31; 9:41; 11:29, 30, 32, 50, 51; 16:8; 17:25; 21:32), one will note that the word always refers to a specific generation living at the same period of time.¹⁰ We will examine three different manners in which the word is used. First, there are passages that speak of generations in history. That is, the totality of the covenant people living during a specific period of time. “So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations, from David until the captivity in Babylon are fourteen generations...” (Mt. 1:17). “His mercy is on those who fear Him from generation to generation” (Lk. 1:50). If one attempted to translate generation as race in these passages he would end up with a very absurd meaning. For example, there would be 42 different races of Jews between Abraham and Christ (cf. Mt. 1:17). Second, the word generation is frequently coupled with a scathing criticism of our Lord's contemporaries: “an evil and adulterous generation” (Mt. 12:39); “a wicked and adulterous generation” (Mt. 16:4); “faithless and perverse generation” (Mt. 17:17; Lk. 9:41); “this adulterous and sinful generation” (Mk. 8:38); “faithless generation” (Lk. 9:41); “this perverse generation” (Ac. 2:40). In these passages, generation clearly refers to the people of Israel alive during Christ's ministry. Not only are these criticisms directed to his contemporaries (e.g., the scribes and Pharisees Mt. 12:39; 16:4), they are often coupled with the lament: “how long shall I be with you” (e.g., Mk. 9:19; Lk. 9:41).

By far the most common usage of the term comes in the formula “this generation” (*he genea haute*). It occurs 18 times in the gospels (Mt. 11:16; 12:41, 45; 23:36; 24:34; Mk. 8:12 [twice], 8:38; 13:30 Lk. 7:31; 11:29 [in sentence form]; 11:30, 31, 32, 50, 51, 17:25; 21:32). The reason that this formula is found so frequently on the lips of Jesus is that He repeatedly condemned the Jews for their unbelief and wicked behavior. The men of Nineveh and the queen of the South will condemn “*this generation*” on the day of judgment because they did not repent at the preaching of the Messiah (Mt. 12:41, 42; Lk. 11:31, 32). The Jews repeatedly asked Jesus to show *them* a sign (e.g., Mk. 8:11; Lk. 11:29). Our Lord responded by saying, “no sign shall be given to *this generation*” (Mk. 8:12), “except the sign of Jonah the prophet” (Lk. 11:29). As the day of Christ's betrayal drew near Jesus said, “But first He must suffer many things and be rejected by *this generation*” (Lk. 17:25). When our Lord prophesied to the Jews regarding their coming destruction He said, “Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place” (Mt. 24:34; Mk. 13:30; Lk. 21:32; cf. Mt. 23:36; Lk. 11:49-51). The words “this generation” obviously apply to the *existing generation* of the Jewish nation to whom Jesus spoke. Indeed, in all of the passages above they are incapable of any other interpretation. Those who argue that Christ was referring to a race or nation more than 2,000 years in the future can only do so by intruding their eschatological presuppositions upon the text. No one in the original audience would have understood our Lord's words in this manner. In fact, the only reason that Christians today suddenly change the meaning of “generation” when they come to Matthew 24 is that they have been trained to do so.

Third, the idea that “*this generation*” refers to a group of people in the distant future cannot be reconciled with the normal meaning and usage of the word “this.” The adjective “this” has a specific meaning. It designates “the person or thing mentioned or understood.”¹¹ Webster's Unabridged Dictionary says, “designating the thing that is nearer: distinguished from *that*.”¹²

¹⁰ The one possible exception is Luke 16:8: “For the sons of this world are more shrewd in their generation than the sons of light.” The phrase “their generation” apparently means “with worldly people like themselves.” This passage is the only place in the New Testament with this meaning. Note, that the word *this* is not used and this passage still cannot be interpreted to mean race or nation.

¹¹ *Webster's New Century Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged* (Collinsworld & World Publishing, Inc., 1978), 1899.

¹² *Ibid.*

When somebody says “this house” or “this car” or “this person” they obviously are not referring to a different house, car or person in the future. To use the adjective *this* in such a manner would render meaningful discourse impossible. When Matthew wrote his gospel he used normal, existing rules of grammar (e.g., “this day” [6:11]; “this man” [8:9]; “this city” [10:23]; “this place” [12:6]; “this people” [15:8]; “this rock” [15:18]; “this little child” [18:4]; “this mountain” [21:21]; “this stone” [21:44]; “this image” [22:20]; “this gospel” [24:14]; “this woman” [26:13]; “this night” [26:31], etc.). “If some future generation had been in view, Jesus could have chosen the adjective *that* (cf. 7:22; 10:19; 24:10, 36; 26:29). The passage would then read this way: ‘*That* generation will not pass away until all these things take place.’”¹³ Given the meaning of “this,” we are compelled to conclude that all of the events prior to Matthew 23:34 occurred before the contemporary generation of Jesus’ day passed away.

Fourth, Christ’s audience could only have understood the phrase “this generation” as applying to their own generation. All books on biblical interpretation emphasize the importance of taking into consideration the way in which words, phrases and expressions would have been understood by a contemporary audience. The phrase “this generation” did not occur in a vacuum. We have noted how our Lord used the word “generation” (with qualifying criticisms, e.g., “an evil and adulterous generation” Mt. 12:39) throughout His ministry to condemn His apathetic, unbelieving, wicked contemporaries. We also have noted that “this generation” is used in Matthew 23:36 after Jesus used the pronoun “you” 26 times. The disciples had heard Christ use the word “generation” and the phrase “this generation” to designate the contemporary generation of Jesus for over three years. In Matthew 24 our Lord continues to use the phrase “this generation” in the same manner. Speaking directly to the disciples, looking into their eyes, Jesus said to them: “Take heed that no one deceives *you*” (v. 4); “*you* will hear of wars” (v. 6); “see that *you* are not troubled” (v. 6); “they will deliver *you* up to tribulation and kill *you*, and *you* will be hated by all nations” (v. 9); “when *you* see the abomination of desolation” (v. 15); “So *you* also, when *you* see all these things, know that it is near-at-the doors!” (v. 34), “Assuredly I say to *you* this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place” (v. 34). Given all these things we can say with assurance that the disciples most likely took Christ’s words at face value. If one accepts the futurist interpretation of Matthew 24:5-34, then one has accepted an interpretation of which the apostles were almost certainly ignorant. The futurist view (which takes “generation” in the sense of race or nation in the distant future) would have completely baffled the apostles. Would our Lord switch the meaning of metaphors and repeatedly use the plural form of “you” in Matthew 24 if He wanted the apostles to understand Him? Obviously not! Yet note how Jesus opens the discourse: “Take heed that no one deceives *you*” (v. 4). In other words, make sure that you understand what I am saying so that you will not be fooled by false teachers (v. 5). The evidence for the fulfillment of the prophecy (of events discussed prior to verse 34) taking place in their generation (i.e. by A.D. 70) is overwhelming.

This analysis raises an important question. If standard hermeneutical procedures lead to only one viable conclusion (i.e. “this generation” must be applied to the generation of Jews living when our Lord uttered those words [c. A.D. 30]), then why do the vast majority of commentators (at least after 1850) insist that the word “generation” (*genea*) must refer to the Jewish race or the generation living thousands of years in the future when Jesus returns? The simple reason is that these expositions interpret many sections of the discourse prior to verse 34 as clearly referring to the second *bodily* coming of Christ. Some of the phrases that are taken as indisputable proof of the futurist view are: “the gospel...will be preached in all the world...then

¹³ Gary Demar, *Last Days Madness: Obsession of the Modern Church* (Atlanta: American Vision, 1999), 58.

the end will come” (v. 14); “there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be” (v. 21); “For as lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west; so also will the coming of the Son of Man be” (v. 27); “the stars will fall from heaven” (v. 29); “they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” (v. 30); “they [His angels] will gather together His elect from the four winds” (v. 31). Obviously, if any verses prior to verse 34 speak of the second *bodily* coming of Christ to judge the quick and the dead (which every one [except spiritually blind hyper-preterists] knows has not yet occurred), then verse 34 must somehow be harmonized with this fact. Evangelical scholars (who rightly accept biblical inerrancy) cannot say (as modernists often do) that Jesus made a blatant error when He gave the time indicator as “this generation.” This point explains the contrived, eisegetical and absurd attempts at redefining “this generation” in Matthew 24:34. If, however, our Lord’s apocalyptic language is interpreted in light of the identical imagery found in the Old Testament prophets, the prophecy comes into focus. Indeed, without a careful examination of relevant Old Testament texts, one will invariably think in terms of the second coming. But, we must let Scripture interpret Scripture.

Second, the interpretation which holds that Matthew 24 (up to verse 34) refers to a coming in judgment upon Israel in Jesus’ own generation is supported by other passages. We will briefly consider these passages in order to dispel the erroneous notion that every mention of Christ’s coming must refer to our Lord’s second bodily coming at the end of history. “And you [the apostles] will be hated by all for My name’s sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in this city, flee to another. For assuredly, I say to you, you [the apostles] will not have gone through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes” (Mt. 10:22-23). “[T]he reference is to the time of judgment which came upon the Jewish people at the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans. It was a time of Divine judgment. It was Christ, too, who was judging. He came to judge. He sat upon His judgment throne, and pronounced a sentence of condemnation, and delivered up the guilty nation to the hand of the executioner.”¹⁴ “The coming here referred to is the terrible judgment which came upon the Jews in the war of the year 66, ending with the total destruction of Jerusalem.”¹⁵ Brown writes, “‘The coming of the Son of man’ has a fixed doctrinal sense, here referring immediately to the crisis of Israel’s history as the visible kingdom of God, when Christ was to come and judge it; when ‘the wrath would come upon it to the uttermost’ [1 Th. 2:16]; and when, on the ruins of Jerusalem and the old economy, He would establish His own kingdom.”¹⁶

Another important passage is Matthew 16:27-28: “For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works. Assuredly, I say to you, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom.” The parallel passage in Mark reads, “Assuredly, I say to you that there are some standing here who will not taste death till they see the kingdom of God present with power” (9:1). The phrase “there are some standing here” can only refer to persons actually present to hear Christ’s words. “This restricts the meaning of what follows to a single generation or a single life time.”¹⁷ Jesus taught that His *coming* would take place during the

¹⁴ James Morison, 166.

¹⁵ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961 [1943]), 405-406.

¹⁶ John Brown, *The Four Gospels: A Commentary, Critical, Experimental and Practical* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1969 [1864]), 63.

¹⁷ J. A. Alexander, *Mark* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1960 [1858]), 230.

lifetime of some of His contemporaries. What then does the coming refer to? Many commentators see this passage as problematic and offer various opinions as to its meaning. Many believe it refers to the transfiguration (e.g., Richard Baxter, J. C. Ryle, William L. Lane), others to the resurrection of Christ (Luther, Melanthon, Calvin, Lange), still others to the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost (e.g., Henry Barclay Swete, Gleason Archer). The problem with all these interpretations is that they all point to events that are only days or weeks in the future. The whole point of our Lord's statements "some standing here will not taste death" is irrelevant if His coming is only a few days or weeks away. Jesus' "language implies that most of them would be dead, while a few would live to see the great event."¹⁸ The coming that Christ refers to is a coming in judgment upon Jerusalem and the apostate nation of Israel. "The Parousia of Christ may be viewed in a narrow sense, as referring to his coming at the end of the world, but also in a wider sense, as including the preliminary judgments, in particular that visited upon the Jews."¹⁹ This interpretation is superior for a number of reasons. This view comports with our Lord's time indicator. Christ's visitation of wrath upon the Jews occurred about 40 years after He spoke these words. Thus, while many of the saints had perished through persecution and old age, some still remained. Also, the context of both passages is a discussion of the cost of discipleship. Following Jesus in that wicked generation will mean denial, pain and persecution. The purpose of these passages is to show the disciples that the cost of discipleship is well worth it. The suffering and humiliation of the saints will be vindicated by an awesome manifestation of the glorified Savior's power as the eschatological judge. "The kingdom with power" means that in the destruction of the Jewish nation the Lord Jesus will *openly* manifest His power and glory as the King of the nations who sits at the right hand of God. "The ordinary workings of the kingdom are invisible, but in this judgment upon the Jews the royal rule of Jesus 'in power' would actually be seen as fulfilling what he now tells his hearers."²⁰ Matthew Henry concurs,

Here is, I. A prediction of Christ's kingdom now near approaching, Mk. 9:1. That which is foretold, is, 1. That the kingdom of God would come, and would come so as to be seen: the kingdom of the Messiah shall be set up in the world by the utter destruction of the Jewish polity, which stood in the way of it; this was the restoring of the kingdom of God among men, which had been in a manner lost by the woeful degeneracy both of Jews and Gentiles. 2. That it would come with power, so as to make its own way, and bear down the opposition that was given to it. It came with power, when vengeance was taken on the Jews for crucifying Christ, and when it conquered the idolatry of the Gentile world. 3. That it would come while some now present were alive; There are some standing here, that shall not taste of death, till they see it; this speaks the same with Mt 24:34, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled. Those that were standing here with Christ, should see it, when the others could not discern it to be the kingdom of God, for it came not with observation.²¹

In addition, this interpretation is supported by Matthew 26:63-64. "And the high priest answered and said to Him, 'I put You under oath by the living God: Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God!' Jesus said to him, 'It is as you said. Nevertheless, I say to you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of

¹⁸ Ezra Gould, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1975 [1896]), 159.

¹⁹ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Mark's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961, [1946]), 357.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (McLean, VA: McDonald Publishing Co., no date), 5:506.

heaven.” After identifying Himself as the Christ, the Son of God our Lord applies Psalm 110:1 and Daniel 7:13-14 directly to Himself. The phrase “you will see” is not a reference to the second coming and final judgment, but a reference to Jesus' manifestation of power in the destruction Jerusalem and the Jewish nation. This point is evident from the phrase “coming on the clouds” which in Scripture symbolizes divine judgment (cf. Ps. 104:3; Isa. 19:1; Nah. 1:3; Mt. 24:30; Rev. 1:7) and the word “hereafter” which is equivalent to “soon.” Jesus in essence is telling the high priest and his accomplices that “Yes, I am the Messiah, however, you will not see the power you expect in this office until I am glorified and exhibit My power by destroying you and your unbelieving comrades.”

Another passage that speaks of Christ coming in the first century is John 21:21-22. “Peter, seeing him [the apostle John] said to Jesus, ‘But Lord, what about this man?’ Jesus said to him, ‘If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you?’” The “coming” in this passage cannot refer to Pentecost for both Peter and John were still alive. Nor can it refer to the second bodily coming of Christ for both apostles have already died. The only logical alternative is that Jesus promised “the preservation of John’s life until the great judgment in the fall of Jerusalem.”²² It is a fact of history that all the apostles died before the destruction of Jerusalem (A.D. 70) *except* the apostle John. Hengstenberg writes, “The *coming* of Jesus could not have had an individual meaning in relation to John; not the coming to take him in the hour of death, ch. xiv. 3, for in this sense the Lord came even to Peter. But we must find a sense in which John remained, and Peter did not, until Christ came. If the coming was one of universal import, we must needs think at once of the Lord’s coming in judgment upon Jerusalem, concerning which He had said, Matt. xvi. 28, ‘Verily I say unto you, there be some standing her who shall not taste of death until they see the Son of man coming in His kingdom:’ comp. Mark ix. 1; Matt. xiv. 34, which teaches that that generation was not to pass before the sign of the Son of man would be seen in heaven. Peter fulfilled his course in martyrdom some few years before that catastrophe: John, on the other hand, survived that great and solemn coming of Jesus.”²³ There are accordingly, very good biblical grounds for interpreting Matthew 24:4-34 as a coming in judgment, a “day” of the Lord on the temple, city and people.

The Prediction

Before we turn to an examination of the Olivet Discourse, we must first consider the immediate context (i.e. our Lord’s prediction that the Jewish temple and city would be destroyed). After the cursing of the barren fig tree (Mt. 21:12-13; Mk. 11:15-17; Lk. 19:45-46);²⁴ the parables of condemnation (Mt. 21:28 to 22:14; Mk. 11:1-12; Lk. 20:9-19); the scathing indictment of the Jewish leaders (Mt. 23:1-36; Mk. 12:38-40; Lk. 20:45-47); the lament over Jerusalem (Mt. 23:37) and the declaration “your house is left to you desolate” (Mt. 23:38); our Lord finally states plainly what He had been leading up to in all these prior acts and teachings. “Then Jesus went out and departed from the temple, and His disciples came up to show Him the buildings of the temple. And Jesus said to them, ‘Do you not see all these things? Assuredly, I

²² Frederic Louis Godet, *Commentary on John's Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1978 [1886]), 1011.

²³ E. W. Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John* (Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, 1980 [1865]), 2:493.

²⁴ When Christ cleansed the temple He used words taken from Jeremiah 7:11. Jeremiah 7 contains the declaration of destruction upon the first Jewish temple. “Therefore I will do to the house which is called by My name, in which you trust, and to this place which I gave to you and your fathers, as I have done to Shiloh” (v. 14). The Jewish leaders would have taken our Lord's statement as a condemnation and threat of coming judgment.

say to you, not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down” (Mt. 24:1-2). Note that Matthew, writing to a predominantly Jewish audience, places this prediction immediately after Jesus’ declaration of judgment on the contemporary generation (Mt. 23:34-36) and the terrifying pronouncement, “Your house is left to you desolate” (Mt. 23:38); leaving out the story of the poor widow’s gift (Mk. 12:41-44; Lk. 21:1-4). Matthew also focuses his audience’s attention on the destruction of the temple complex. Jewish leaders would have regarded the temple as the center of their religion and as a symbol of their covenant relationship to Jehovah. Luke, however, writing to a predominately Gentile audience applies the prophecy to the whole city. “For days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment around you and close you in on every side, and level you, to the ground; and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not know the time of your visitation” (Lk. 19:43-44). This different emphasis between these authors is due to the fact that a Jewish audience would easily understand that the abandonment of the temple by Jehovah and its destruction entails the destruction of the people and city. It is of particular interest that in Ezekiel’s prophecy regarding Solomon’s temple, God first abandons the temple (9:3) before the temple is defiled (9:7) and the people of the city are slaughtered (9:7 ff.). Similarly, the prophet Jeremiah refers to the destruction of God’s house (7:14) and then the total destruction of Jerusalem and the cities of Judah (7:17, 20).

The extent of the devastation is given in the phrase “not one stone shall be left upon another.” As Jews, the disciples had great pride in their magnificent temple. The temple of Herod was indeed a grand spectacle. It was one of the wonders of the ancient world. Jesus shocked the disciples by predicting that the pride of the nation was doomed to complete humiliation. Our Lord’s phrase (literally in Greek, “stone upon stone”) is almost identical to the phrase used by the prophet Haggai in his preaching to encourage the Jews to rebuild the temple. “Now Jesus announces the approach of a day when utter devastation will overtake the city and the temple will be systematically dismantled”²⁵ Although the phrase “not one stone shall be left upon another” is hyperbolic or rhetorical and need not be taken literally, it was fulfilled literally regarding the temple complex of buildings. “But while a part of the substructure remains [e.g., the western wailing wall], the buildings on the platform of the *ieron* [temple, or temple area], to which the Lord referred, are wholly gone; not a stone there is left in its place.”²⁶ The extent of the destruction of the city was documented by the contemporary historian Josephus (A.D. 37-101). He writes, “Caesar gave orders that they should now demolish the entire city and temple, but should leave as many of the towers standing as were of the greatest immanency; that is, Phasaelus, and Hippicus, and Marianme, and so much of the wall as enclosed the city on the west side...but for all of the rest of the wall, it was so thoroughly laid even with the ground by those that dug it up to the foundation, that there was left nothing to make those that came thither believe it had ever been inhabited” (VII. I).²⁷

Because of the current popularity of futurist interpretations, it is important to note that Jesus could not be speaking about another Jewish temple to be built almost 2,000 years in the future. Our Lord said “Do you not see all these things” to His disciples. The buildings to be destroyed were right in front of their eyes. Note also the phrase, “not one stone shall be left here upon another” (Mt. 24:2). The dispensational idea of a future temple has absolutely no basis in

²⁵ William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 452.

²⁶ Henry Barclay, *Commentary on Mark* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1977 [1913]), 296.

²⁷ Flavius Josephus, translated by William Whiston, *Josephus: Complete Works* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1960), 589.

Scripture. Although it cannot be found in the prophets, such eschatological fantasies make for great profits.

The Disciples' Question

The disciples were understandably shocked by Christ's prediction. After leaving the temple area, Jesus and the apostles stopped to rest on the Mount of Olives. Mark's account tells us that they were facing the temple. "The position here of Christ and his disciples is not only striking in itself, but suited to enhance the grandeur of the prophetic discourse that follows."²⁸ As soon as an opportunity arose, some of the disciples (the inner circle—Peter, James and John—plus Andrew, Peter's brother, Mk. 13:3) asked Jesus a multi-faceted question relating to the prophecy. It is likely that all the disciples had discussed Christ's prediction and that the four agreed to ask the Lord privately about the prediction while the others waited apart for the relayed response. Mark and Luke record the question as having two parts: *when* will these things occur and *what* are the signs that tell us these things are about to happen. Matthew writing to a Jewish audience adds a third clause regarding the end of the age. "[T]he disciples came to Him saying, 'Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your coming, and the end of the age'" (Mt. 24:3)?

The disciples' inquiry is crucial to an understanding of the Olivet Discourse, for if it is misunderstood, the discourse itself will be wrongly interpreted. Unfortunately, most students of prophecy today regard the inquiry as relating to two completely different events that are separated from each other by over 19 centuries. The first question ("when will these things be?") is usually applied to the destruction of the temple by the Romans in A.D. 70. The second and third questions ("what will be the sign of Your coming and the end of the age?") are applied to the second coming of Christ and the end of the world. This approach to the inquiry, while common, must be rejected for a number of reasons. (1) The disciples' inquiry comes directly as a result of Jesus' prediction that the temple then in existence was about to be completely destroyed. Therefore, we can safely assume that the disciples were not meditating on events in the distant future. Even if in their minds the coming in judgment and end of the age were to be coterminous with the second bodily coming of Christ, there can be no question but that they believed everything relating to their inquiry was simply a different aspect of the same great event. (2) The question "what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age" in Matthew's gospel, is paralleled in Mark's and Luke's account by, "what will be the sign when all these things will be fulfilled" (Mk. 13:4; Lk. 21:7). Matthew, writing to Jews, uses language significant to the old covenant people of God. The destruction is a coming in judgment that will dissolve the old covenant order. The Jewish age, that is, Israel's special status as a covenant nation was coming to a complete end. Mark and Luke, writing to a predominately Gentile audience, simply speak of a sign of impending doom on the temple and city. (3) That the inquiry refers to a single complex of events is evident in the repeated use of the phrase "*all these things* will come upon this generation" (23:36); "Do you not see *all these things*" (24:2). Then as His discussion of the destruction of Jerusalem comes to a close He again says "this generation will by no means pass away till *all these things* take place" (24:34). The phrase "these things" in Matthew 24:3 is parallel in its intention and reference to the "these things" in 23:36. The disciples regarded the judgment of the *contemporaneous* generation of Jews, the destruction of

²⁸ J. A. Alexander, *Mark* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1960 [1858]), 346.

the *existing* temple and *the end of the Jewish age* as all part of the same complex of events. They held to the unity of the eschatological complex regarding the prediction of 24:2 as regards to the timing sequence of fulfillment.

(4) A proper understanding of the phrase “end of the age” in Matthew 24:3 supports the interpretation that the prophecy to 24:34 refers solely to events that occurred prior to A.D. 70. That many people regard Christ as speaking about events in the distant future is understandable given the misleading translation of the King James Version of the Bible (also the ASV). The KJV has the disciples asking our Lord for a sign of the “end of the world.” The Greek, however, does not say “the end of the world” (*kosmos*), but “the end of the age” (*aion*). In the New Testament, passages which speak of “the end of the age” or “the ends of the ages” usually refer to the end of the Jewish age or the permanent termination of the Jewish nation as the visible church, as a special covenant nation. Thus, the apostle Paul could write, “they were written for our admonition, upon whom the end of the ages have come” (1 Cor. 10:11). “It means that the Corinthian Christians had lived in and had witnessed the completion of the Mosaic and earlier epochs.”²⁹ Christ Himself appeared to put away sin “once at the end of the ages” (Heb. 9:26).

The first century apostolic understanding of the “end of the age” is reflected in the biblical phrase “the last days.” Many modern Christians have been conditioned by Bible prophecy books to think that we alone of all generations are living in the last days or at the end of the age. A study of the New Testament, however, reveals that the apostles themselves were living in the last days. Peter said, “He indeed was foreordained...but was manifest in *these last times* for you” (1 Pet. 1:20). The author of Hebrews said that God “has in *these last days* spoken to us by His Son” (Heb. 1:2). James, writing to Christians in his day, said “You have heaped up treasure in *the last days*” (Jas. 5:3). On the day of Pentecost, Peter applied the prophecy of Joel 2:28-32 to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that had just occurred saying “It shall come to pass in *the last days*, says God” (Ac. 2:17).³⁰ Since the divinely inspired apostles said that they were living in “the last days” at “the end of the age,” their question regarding the end of the age in Matthew 24:3 must apply to something that occurred in their own generation. The context and the manner in which the New Testament uses this terminology prove that they wanted to know when the temple would be destroyed and the Mosaic economy would end.

Such matters seem inconsequential to modern Christians, but to the disciples the destruction of the temple, the end of the sacrificial system and the end of Israel as a special covenant nation was exceedingly radical. From the time of Moses the true covenant religion was organized around one central sanctuary (Dt. 12:5 ff.). If a person wanted to join himself to the true religion he or she would have to essentially become a part of the covenant nation (e.g., Ruth 1:16). With the coming of Christ, however, true worship will exist anywhere in the world where

²⁹Gordon H. Clark, *First Corinthians: A Contemporary Commentary* (Jefferson, MD: The Trinity Foundation, 1991 [1975]), 156.

³⁰In 1 Corinthians 14:21 Paul quoted Isaiah 28:11-12, which connects foreign tongues to the impending destruction of Israel by a foreign nation. When Peter quoted Joel 2:28-32 on the day of Pentecost, he spoke of “the coming of the great and awesome day of the Lord.” The tongues on the day of Pentecost were a sign of impending doom on Israel. David Brown writes, “This well-known prophetic language was employed by our Lord in his prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem (see on Mark xiii. 24, 25); and to this the prediction quoted by Peter beyond doubt refers, when he seeks to fix the attention of his audience upon ‘the great and notable day of the Lord’-the day that closed their day of grace as a nation; the day when, ‘the judgment being set, and the books opened,’ they were adjudged to lose their standing as God’s visible witness upon the earth, and to have their whole civil and ecclesiastical polity swept away” (Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset and David Brown, *A Commentary: Critical, Experimental, and Practical on the Old and New Testaments* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973, Vol. 3, Part 2], 10).

believers gather, hear the preaching of the word, sing psalms and partake of the sacraments. As Jesus had promised, “the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father....But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth” (Jn. 4:21, 23; cf. Mal. 1:11). Also, no longer did people have to become Jews in order to follow God for the apostles were to disciple all nations (Mt. 28:19) and preach the gospel to every creature (Mk. 16:15). The new covenant temple is the multi-national, pan-ethnic body of Christ-the church (Ac. 15:16 ff.; Eph. 2:21). (There is absolutely nothing in Scripture that predicts a future third temple. When the Bible is not speaking of rebuilding Zerubbabel’s temple, it speaks of the building of Christ’s church [Eph. 2:21; 4:12, 16; 1 Pet. 2:5, 9]).

When Jesus died on the cross “the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom” (Mt. 27:51). The whole sacrificial system (which included the types and ceremonies) was rendered obsolete by Christ’s perfect sacrifice. The inferior (Heb. 9:11-15), the shadow (Heb. 10:1; 8:4-5), the obsolete (Heb. 8:13), the symbolic (Heb. 9:9), and the ineffectual (Heb. 10:4) have been replaced by Jesus Christ and His perfect work. Once our Lord said “it is finished” (Jn. 19:30), the temple had no reason to exist. The temple system, which had created a wall of separation between Jews and Gentiles, has been removed by Christ (Eph. 2:11-22). The temple and the continued use of the animal sacrifices became visible symbols of the Jewish nation’s unbelief and rejection of their Messiah. Their continued use was an insult to Christ and His redemptive work. God, however, in His forbearance gave the nation one generation to repent and turn to Jesus before publicly meting out the covenant death penalty on the apostate Christ-persecuting nation. The new covenant kingdom, which was established definitively at our Lord’s resurrection, was exhibited in power at the divorce and dissolution of Israel in A.D. 70. The new covenant age was permanently established upon the smoking ruins of the old.

Note once again that the terminology of the disciples’ question, when compared with the rest of the New Testament, applies very specifically to their own generation. There is no sound exegetical reason for us to apply these questions to the future second bodily coming of Christ. As we study Jesus’ answer to the disciples’ inquiry, it will become even more clear that all the things discussed in verses 2 through 34 of Matthew 24 have all already taken place.

Signs Preceding the End

The disciples asked Jesus when the destruction of the temple would take place and they wanted a sign to identify the coming of Christ in judgment. Our Lord answers the “when” in Matthew 24:34 with “this generation.” Regarding the request for a sign, Jesus discusses the history prior to the end giving the disciples seven distinct signs. Christ goes into considerable detail for a number of reasons. First and foremost, there is a deep concern for the welfare of His church. Our Lord wants to prepare the disciples for the false Messiahs and persecutions to come. Second, He does not want the disciples to panic and flee prematurely. The gospel is to be preached and the elect gathered from the land to the last possible moment. Thus, there is a progression in the signs from the general to the more specific. “[T]he signs seem to become more specific and pronounced until we reach the final, immediate precursor of the end.”³¹ Third, Jesus wants to make sure that the Jerusalem church is not destroyed by the coming devastation. When they see “the abomination of desolation” they are to immediately flee to the mountains.

³¹ David Chilton, *The Great Tribulation* (Fort Worth, TX: Dominion Press, 1987), see also <http://www.freebooks.com/docs/html/dcgt/Chapter01.htm>), 3.

1. False Messiahs (Mt. 24:5; Mk. 13:5, 6; Lk. 21:8)

Our Lord begins the discourse with a word of caution. “For many will come in My name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and will deceive many” (Mt. 24:5). The disciples are to be on guard for the many false christs and false prophets (Mt. 24:24) who will make their appearance before the destruction of Jerusalem. Tragically, these imposters will be very effective in gaining a following. Did this prophecy come to pass before Jerusalem was destroyed? Yes, it did. Both the Bible and secular historians confirm our Lord's prediction. When the Jewish leader Gamaliel discussed the claims of the apostles regarding Jesus Christ with the council, he said, “For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody. A number of men, about four hundred, joined him....After this man, Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census, and drew away many people after him” (Ac. 5:36-37). Luke also mentions Simon whom the church fathers tell us was a significant false messiah in his day. “But there was a certain man called Simon, who previously practiced sorcery in the city and astonished the people of Samaria, claiming that he was someone great, to whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, ‘This man is the great power of God’” (Ac. 8:9-10). “Justin, himself a Samaritan, reports in *I Apol.* 26.3, *Dial.* 120.6 that really all his countrymen revered Simon as the highest god. It is clear from the history of his movement that ‘the great power’ was a Samaritan designation for the supreme deity. Simon declared that this deity had come to earth in his person for the redemption of men.”³² “According to different early writers, he professed to be the Logos, the Messiah, the Samaritan Archangel, and the Power of God personified.”³³

There were so many false teachers in the first century that John could write: “Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour” (1 Jn. 2:18). The noteworthy phrase, “it is [present tense] the last hour” reveals that the prevalence of false teachers indicated to John that a major eschatological event was about to occur. The only major event that we know occurred shortly after this epistle was composed was the destruction of Jerusalem. (This author rejects the late date (A.D. 92) for the authorship of 1 John).

Although false messiahs and teachers can be found throughout church history, it is the prevalence of such imposters in the first century Palestine that Jesus said is significant as a sign. This prediction was literally fulfilled.

2. Wars and Rumors of Wars

In the second preliminary sign our Lord spoke of a plurality of conflicts. “And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not troubled; for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of sorrows” (Mt. 24:6-8). The disciples will hear of wars (that is, actual conflicts

³² Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1971), 303.

³³ J. A. Alexander, *Acts* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1963 [1857]), 327. The early church father, Irenaeus wrote, “Simon Magus set himself to contend against the Apostles, that he might also appear glorious. He was for his Magic honored with a statue by Claudius Caesar. He was glorified by man as a god, and taught that himself was he that appeared as the Son among the Jews, that in Samaria he descended as the Father, and in other nations came as the Holy Ghost. That he was the most sublime virtue, that is, he which was the Father over all, and that he was content to be called by the highest titles than many men did call him” (Henry Hammond translator [1681], as quoted in John L. Bray, *Matthew 24 Fulfilled* [Lakeland, FL: John L. Bray Ministry, 1996] 25).

which are taking place) and they will hear rumors of wars (that is, they will hear talk of conflicts that the people think are about to break forth). The outbreaks that occur in various provinces of the Roman Empire will cause uneasy whispers and trembling among the people.

Sensationalist prophecy peddlers often quote this passage and then list the many wars of the twentieth century or the dozens of conflicts that have occurred since Israel became a nation in 1948. The problem with this interpretation is that if this is a sign meant for the whole inhabited earth before the second coming, then it is essentially useless as a sign. The reason we are making this point is that for “wars and rumors of wars” to be significant as a sign, there must first be a period of relative peace. But, if we include the whole planet there are always “wars and rumors of wars.” If, however, our Lord was speaking of the Roman Empire proper and the region of the Middle East, Christ’s words were very significant because there had been peace for a whole generation. The *Pax Romana* (Roman Peace) was established under Augustus in 17 B.C.. Christ and the apostles lived during the most peaceful period of the Roman Empire. The last major insurrection in Palestine occurred before Jesus was born in 7 B.C.

Jesus’ reference must then have applied to the conflicts which arose in the Roman Empire and Palestine after the ascension and before the fall of Jerusalem. In Palestine there was “the expedition of Cuspius Fadus against Theudas and of Felix against the Egyptian Jew; the riots at Jerusalem under Agrippa II; the early movements of the last struggle which began in A.D. 66.”³⁴ The Roman Empire became filled with strife, and wars and various insurrections. “In Rome itself, four emperors came to a violent death in the short space of eighteen months. Were one to give account of all the disturbances that actually occurred within the Empire after Jesus’ death, he would be constrained to write a separate book.”³⁵ Because the Roman Empire consisted of several separate nations held together by the conquests and tyranny of Rome, the prophecy of Jesus that “nation will rise against nation” was literally fulfilled.

Christ’s added injunction “not to be troubled for the end is not yet” (Mt. 24:65) serves the purpose of informing the disciples that such turmoil does not mean the end is immediate. This sign means there are distant clouds on the horizon. Indeed, so distant that the disciples must remain diligent in their task of making disciples. “[T]hey are not to be disconcerted or diverted from their task.”³⁶ The time to make haste and flee the area has not yet arrived.

3. *Natural Disasters*

Jesus extends the description of wars and strife in the empire with earthquakes, famines and pestilences. “There will be famines, pestilences and earthquakes in various places” (Mt. 24:7). The linking of wars, famines and pestilence is common in prophetic pronouncements of divine judgments (cf. Jer. 14:12; 21:7; Ezek. 5:12; 14:12-23; Rev. 6:3-8). Earthquakes also are

³⁴ Henry Barclay Swete, *Commentary on Mark*, 298. “They heard of war! In A.D. 40 there was a disturbance at Mesopotamia which (**Josephus** says) caused the deaths of more than 50,000 people. In A.D. 49 a tumult at Jerusalem at the time of the Passover resulted in 10,000 to 20,000 deaths. At Caesarea contentions between Jewish people and other inhabitants resulted in over 20,000 Jews being killed. As Jews moved elsewhere, over 20,000 were destroyed by Syrians. At Scythopolis, over 13,000 Jews were killed. Thousands were killed in other places, and at Alexandria 50,000 were killed. At Damascus, 10,000 were killed in an hour’s time. These were not wars of a world-wide scope as we know the world today. They were in Galilee, and in Syria, and in the areas east and south of Judaea. And Judaea was in revolt against Rome, ‘while the armies of Spain, Gaul and Germany, Illyricum and Syria, converged upon Italy, to decide who should succeed to Nero’s purple’” (John L. Bray, 28).

³⁵ J. Marcellus Kirk, *An Eschatology of Victory* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971), 92.

³⁶ William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, 458.

often associated in Scripture with God's judgment against sin (Isa. 29:6; Rev. 6:12; 8:5; 11:13, 19; 16:18), and the deliverance of Christ's people from death (Mt. 27:51-52) and persecution (Ac. 16:26).

Did these predictions come to pass in the generation prior to the destruction of Jerusalem? Yes. They all were fulfilled. In the book of Acts we read, "Then one of them, named Agabus, stood up and showed by the Spirit that there was going to be a great famine throughout all the world, which also happened in the days of Claudius Caesar. Then the disciples, each according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea" (11:28-29). The famine prophesied in Acts occurred in the ninth year of Claudius (A.D. 49). "It was great at Rome, -and therefore probably Egypt and Africa, on which the Romans depended so much for supplies, were themselves much affected by it. Suetonius speaks of *continual droughts*; and Tacitus of *death of crops, and thence famine*, about the same time. There was famine in Judea in the reign of Claudius..."³⁷ This great famine did indeed affect the whole world (*oikoumene*, the inhabited world; an expression often used in Jesus' day to describe the Roman Empire). There were also a series of localized famines in A.D. 41-54 as well as a particularly severe famine in Palestine between 46 and 48.³⁸ Remember Paul's appeal for funds to relieve the Jerusalem church in 1 Corinthians 16:1-5 and Romans 15:25-28.

There was pestilence just as our Lord predicted. When warfare and famine occur to large bodies of people it invariably leads to outbreaks of disease. "And as to pestilences, though their occurrence might, as above, be inferred from the other, we have distinct accounts of pestilence at Rome (A.D. 65) in Suetonius and Tacitus, which in a single autumn carried off 30,000 persons at Rome. But such matters as these are not often related by historians, unless of more than usual severity."³⁹

Our Lord predicted earthquakes in various places. This too came to pass. The major earthquakes that occurred after the Olivet Discourse but before the destruction of Jerusalem noted by historians are: Crete (A.D. 46 or 47), Rome (A.D. 51), Phrygia (A.D. 53), Laodicea (A.D. 60), Campania (A.D. 62 or 63), Pompeii (A.D. 63), and Judea (according to Josephus).⁴⁰ There is abundant historical evidence that the generation leading up to the destruction of the temple was one of unusual seismic activity. Seneca wrote (A.D. 58): "How often have cities of Africa and Achaëa fallen with one fatal shock! How many cities have been swallowed up in Syria, how many in Macedonia! How often have Pathos become a ruin! News has often been brought us of the demolition of whole cities at once."⁴¹ Note, once again that if one applies these signs (earthquakes in various places, famines and pestilences) to the whole planed earth, they essentially are meaningless, for over the entire planet these calamities are always in existence. If,

³⁷ Henry Alford, *The New Testament For English Readers: Containing the Authorized Version...and a Critical and Explanatory Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 1:163.

³⁸ See Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 374.

³⁹ Henry Alford, 1:163.

⁴⁰ See Henry Alford, 1:163. There are also the three supernatural earthquakes mentioned in Scripture. One occurred at the crucifixion (Mt. 27:54), another at the resurrection (28:2) and still another when God set Peter free from prison (Ac. 16:26). Wilhelmus á Brakel writes, "The earth shook again at His resurrection, which was not only a proof of His divinity, but also of the wrath of God against the Jews and their land which would be destroyed and left destitute. The inhabitants would perish miserably and their religion would be taken from them and be transferred to the Gentiles. It also indicated that all temporal ceremonies were now terminated and that an unchangeable religion had taken place" (*The Christian's Reasonable Service* [Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1992], 1:627).

⁴¹ Seneca as quoted in Henry Alford, 1:163.

however, they are to be applied to the Roman Empire (southern Europe, the Middle East, North Africa), they are noteworthy as signs.

After noting these signs, Jesus told the disciples that they are to be regarded as signaling the beginning of the end. "All these are the beginning of sorrows" (Mt. 24:8). The word translated "sorrows" (*odinon*) is used in Scripture for both the sharp pains of childbirth (Ps. 48:7; 1 Th. 5:3) and the pain of death (Ps. 18:5; Ac. 2:24). In rabbinic literature the phrase "the beginning of sorrows" referred to a period of intense sufferings which were to take place before the coming of deliverance of the Messiah (Book of Jubilees, 23:18; Apoc. of Baruch 27-29). "In the OT the pangs of birth are a recurring image of divine judgment, often in the context of God's eschatological action (cf. Isa. 13:8; 26:17; Mic. 4:9 ff.; Hos. 13:13; Jer. 4:31; 6:24; 13:21; 22:23; 49:22; 50:43)."⁴² Our Lord's statement suggests that even when these signs take place the disciples will still have an extended period of time in which to minister to Israel and Jerusalem.

4. Persecution

After concentrating on convulsions and calamities in the Roman Empire, Jesus turns His attention on the rise of persecution against the church, and betrayal and apostasy within the church. These events will occur at the time the first birth pangs appear. "Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for My name's sake" (Mt. 24:9; cf. vs. 10-13). The events described here are very specific and are addressed directly to the disciples. Although they apply to the whole church of that period, we must not neglect the fact that Christ says the apostles themselves shall see and suffer these things.

The tribulation predicted by our Lord is well documented in the New Testament. The first persecution is recorded in Acts chapter 4 where Peter and John are arrested, placed in custody (4:3), commanded not to preach (4:18) and threatened by the Sanhedrin (4:21). In Acts chapter 5 the apostles are arrested, placed in prison (5:18) and commanded once again to stop teaching in Jesus' name (5:28). The persecution escalates in Acts chapter 6 when Stephen is arrested and falsely accused of blasphemy (6:12-13). This results in Stephen's murder (7:58-60). A "great persecution" is discussed in Acts chapter 8. It is so severe that the Jerusalem church is scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. In this persecution both men and women are dragged from their homes, placed in prison (Ac. 8:1, 3; 9:1-2, 26:9-10) and put to death (Ac. 26:10). Saul even attempted to force believers to blaspheme the Lord (Ac. 26:11). In Acts chapter 12 Herod also begins to persecute the church "because he saw that it pleased the Jews" (vs. 3). Herod's policy led to the murder of James (12:2) and the arrest of Peter (12:4-5). Fortunately, God delivered the apostle by supernatural means (12:7ff.).

⁴² William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, 458-459. In the gospel of Luke, the parallel to Matthew 24:7 and Mark 13:8 adds "great signs from heaven." Modern prophecy speculators have on occasion pointed to the great increase of UFO sightings since 1952 as a fulfillment of Luke 21:11. Since we have established that at this point in the discourse Jesus is still discussing signs prior to the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70, there is not need for us to fantasize even though it may be great fun and certainly sells a lot of books. The truly important question is this. Were there notable signs in the heavens prior to the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus? Indeed, there were such signs. A comet appeared in A.D. 60 in the 9th year of Nero's reign that caused distress among the people. (In the ancient world comets were viewed as signs of impending doom.) In A.D. 66 Halley's Comet appeared. "Historians have linked the appearance of Halley's comet not only with the death of Nero, but with the destruction of Jerusalem four years later" (Demar, 82; for historical documentation see Demar, 82 and 90). Once again, the signs set before the disciples by Jesus find a perfect fulfillment in their own generation (A.D. 30 - A.D. 70).

The disciples were also persecuted by the Greeks and Romans. At the instigation of unbelieving Jews, the mob at Lystra “stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead” (Ac. 14:19). Paul gives us a glimpse of his experience as an apostle to the Gentiles in 2 Corinthians 11: “From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren” (vs. 24-26). In 1 Corinthians Paul speaks of the “present distress” (7:26). In 2 Thessalonians the apostle writes about the suffering of believers “in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure” (1:4) and promises that God will “repay with tribulation those who trouble you” (1:6). Peter warns the church “concerning the fiery trial which is about to try you” (1 Pet. 4:12). The Roman persecution, which was often sporadic and unorganized, became an official policy under Nero. Bromily writes, “A drastic change came in July of A.D., 64, when Nero accused of setting a disastrous fire in Rome and unable to clear himself by gifts or sacrifices, decided to make the Christians scapegoats, and started a persecution which for its cruelty would evoke censure even from those who regarded Christianity as a debased superstition (Tacitus Ann. xv. 44). References to this persecution may perhaps be found in 1 Peter, and also in 2 Timothy, in which Paul mentions his trial and impending death. 1 Clem. 1:1 also refers to the martyrdom of Peter and Paul at this time, and Eusebius (HE ii.25.5ff.) adds that Peter suffered death by crucifixion and Paul by beheading. If Revelation belongs to the age of Nero, the persecution extended to Asia Minor, for the opening letters mention pressures and martyrdoms (2:2, 10, 13, 19; 3:8), and the author himself suffered exile for the word of God and the witness of Christ (1:9).”⁴³

Although persecution in one form or another has always plagued the church of Christ throughout its history, only the persecutions between the ascension and destruction of the temple area are the direct fulfillment of Jesus’ words in Matthew 24:9. One must not forget the context of our Lord’s statement (Mt. 23:34) where he chides the Jewish leaders because they will persecute the new covenant “prophets, wise men and scribes.” They will fill up the measure of their fathers’ guilt (Mt. 23:32) and thus all these things will come upon their generation (Mt. 23:36).

5. *Betrayal, Apostasy and Lawlessness*

Jesus said that the generation preceding the destruction of the temple will be one of betrayal, apostasy and lawlessness. “And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another. Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. And because

⁴³ G. W. Bromily, “Persecute; Persecution” in G. W. Bromily General Editor, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 3:772. Philip Schaff gives us a glimpse of the barbarities of Nero. He writes, “A ‘vast multitude’ of Christians was put to death in the most shocking manner. Some were crucified, probably in mockery of the punishment of Christ, some sewed up in the skin of wild beasts and exposed to the voracity of mad dogs in the arena. The satanic tragedy reached its climax at night in the imperial gardens on the slope of the Vatican (which embraced, it is supposed, the present site of the place and church of St. Peter): Christian men and women, covered with pitch or oil or resin, and nailed to posts of pine, were lighted and burned as torches for the amusement of the mob; while Nero, in fanatical dress, figured in a horse race, and displayed his art as a charioteer. Burning alive was the ordinary punishment of incendiaries; but only the cruel ingenuity of this imperial monster, under the inspiration of the devil, could invent such a horrible system of illumination” (*History of the Christian Church* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991 (1910)], 1:381-382).

lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold” (Mt. 24:10-13). There was an incredible hatred of Christ and the gospel among the Jews in that first generation of the church. Christianity was seen as a betrayal of the Jewish religion, the temple and the nation. Jews who betrayed their own family members over to prison and execution believed they were doing so out of service to God. Jesus had earlier elucidated the degree of hatred and betrayal saying, “Now brother will deliver up brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and cause them to be put to death. And you will be hated by all for My name’s sake....and a man’s enemies will be those of his own household” (Mt. 10:21, 22, 36). Our Lord’s statement also likely refers to Jewish believers who rejected the faith and who “like Judas, use[d] their knowledge and their former connection to help to destroy the faithful by denouncing and by delivering them up.”⁴⁴

The apostolic church also had a great problem with false teachers and apostasy. There were the Judaizers who struck at the very heart of the gospel by insisting upon human merit and Jewish ceremonies as necessary to salvation (cf. Ac. 15:1; Gal. 1:6-7; 3:1). There were the antinomian Gnostics who taught that obedience to God’s word as a fruit of saving faith was unnecessary (1 Jn. 2:3-4). John had to deal with the Nicolaitan antinomians who taught that committing acts of sexual immorality were lawful for believers (Rev. 2:6; 3:15). There were even Gnostic teachers who taught that Jesus did not have a true human body. “For many deceivers have gone out into the world who do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh” (2 Jn. 7). Paul had to warn the Ephesian church of “savage wolves [who] will come in among you, not sparing the flock...speaking perverse things to draw away disciples after themselves” (Ac. 20:29-30). He warned the Corinthian church of “false apostles, deceitful workers” who transform “themselves into apostles of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:13). Paul instructed Timothy to stop false teachers (1 Tim. 1:3-4, 7, 19-20; 6:3-5, 20-21, 2 Tim. 2:16-18), some of whom even taught that “the resurrection is already past” (2 Tim. 2:18). The problem of false teachers was so prevalent that Peter wrote, “But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed” (2 Pet. 2:1-2; cf. 2:1-22; 3:1-9). Paul, writing about his own generation, said, “Now the Spirit expressly says that in the latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons” (1 Tim. 4:1). Although this passage is usually directly applied to the rise of Romanism or the heresies of our own day, we need to keep in mind that the apostolic church was living in the last days—at the end of the Jewish age.

There also was a general increase of lawlessness just as our Lord predicted. When Paul described the end result of suppressing the truth of God in unrighteousness in his epistle to Romans, he was describing the Greco-Roman culture of his own day. He writes, “For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature. Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful, and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due. And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting; being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; they are whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to

⁴⁴ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 933.

parents, undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful” (Rom. 1:26-31). Throughout the Roman Empire there was gross sexual immorality: homosexuality, pederasty, prostitution and fornication. A reading of the epistles reveals that heathen sexual practices were affecting the various churches. There were problems with incest (1 Cor. 5:1), prostitution (1 Cor. 6:15-16) and fornication (1 Cor. 5:1, 11; Rev. 2:20). The Roman Empire was also notorious for violence and cruelty. People would actually watch gladiators cut each other to pieces for entertainment. Gladiators, political enemies and even innocent Christians were torn apart by wild beasts. The emperors Caligula and Nero were notorious for their disgusting perversions (e.g., bestiality, incest, homosexuality) and murderous rage (e.g., assassination, murder, torture, etc.). The great increase in lawlessness extended to Judea (murder, adultery, terrorism and persecution) and is well documented by Josephus. While there is no question but that our own culture is growing more evil at the present time, we must not make the mistake so common today of applying this prediction to our generation, for it was fulfilled over 19 centuries ago.

After discussing persecution, betrayal, apostasy and lawlessness, Jesus encourages His disciples to persevere through the coming trials. “But he who endures to the end will be saved” (Mt. 24:13). Although it is true that all those who profess faith in Christ must persevere in that faith and the good works that are the fruit of saving faith if they are to be saved and go to heaven (Mt. 7:21; 13:3-23; 1 Cor. 6:9; Heb. 3:12-19; 4:2, 6; Jas. 2:14-26; 1 Jn. 2:3-4; 3:6, 8-10; Rev. 22:14, etc.), the passage before us (taken in its context) refers not to being saved from hell but to being saved from the coming wrath upon the city. Christ says that great trials are coming, that believers will be hated, persecuted and betrayed. In such a situation there will be a great temptation for believers (especially Jewish Christians) to return to their former religion. Our Lord says that only those who endure these trials will be saved from the slaughter. “It is most interesting to know that none of the Christians perished during the final siege and destruction of Jerusalem. When Titus the Roman general finally came into the city, he did not find a single Christian there. Of course, they had all fled the city upon the instruction of Jesus when they saw the armies surrounding the city (see vs. 16-20 [note the parallel in Lk. 21:20-21]).”⁴⁵ Gill concurs, “The same shall be saved; with a temporal salvation, when Jerusalem, and the unbelieving inhabitants of it shall be destroyed: for those that believed in Christ, many of them, through persecution, were obliged to remove from thence; and others, by a voice from heaven, were bid to go out of it, as they did; and removed to Pella, a village a little beyond the Jordan, and so were preserved from the general calamity; and also with an everlasting salvation, which is the case of all that persevere to the end, as all true believers in Christ will.”⁴⁶

6. *Worldwide Evangelization*

We now come to the point in the discourse where futurists say that any idea of a past fulfillment is totally absurd. Jesus says that the gospel must be preached throughout the whole world before the end will come. “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come” (Mt. 24:14). Had the gospel

⁴⁵ John L. Bray, *Matthew 24 Fulfilled*, 32.

⁴⁶ John Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament* (Streamwood, IL: Primitive Baptist Library, 1979 [1809]), 1:288. It is interesting that after using the pronoun “you” in verses 4 through 9, Jesus changes to the pronoun “he” (“he who endures”) in verse 13. It is likely that this change was made for two reasons. First, Christ wants to make it perfectly clear that this injunction applies to the whole church and not just the apostles. Second, our Lord knew that when the final siege of Jerusalem began only the apostle John would still be alive.

been preached in all the world when Israel was destroyed by the Romans in A.D. 70? The answer to this question is both yes and no depending how one interprets the word *world* (*oikoumen*). If by “world” Jesus meant the world *as we understand it*, then obviously it could not have been fulfilled. There were no preachers in North or South America, China, Japan, Greenland or even Russia at that early date. However, if we interpret the word *world* according to its common New Testament usage, then Jesus' words did come to pass before A.D. 70. To the inspired authors of the gospels and epistles the term “world” (*oikoumen*) meant the inhabited “civilized” world of their day—the Roman Empire. Luke writes, “And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world [*oikoumene*] should be registered” (Lk. 2:1). The word *world* in this context obviously refers to Roman citizens and subjects, not Aztecs and Eskimos. Likewise Acts 11:28 reads, “Agabus...showed by the Spirit that there was going to be a great famine throughout all the world, which also happened in the days of Claudius Caesar.” Hackett writes, “*Over all the inhabited land—i.e. Judea and the adjacent countries, or, according to some, the Roman Empire. The Greek and Roman writers employed the inhabited (land) (oikoumene) to denote the Greek and Roman world, and a Jewish writer would naturally employ such a term to denote the Jewish world. Josephus appears to restrict the word to Palestine in Ant., 8.13.4.*”⁴⁷

Thus, not only is it biblically permissible to regard the phrase “all the world” as the whole Roman Empire, the Bible also explicitly teaches that the gospel was indeed preached throughout the whole world before the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Writing around A.D. 64 to the Colossian Church Paul said, “...the word of the truth of the gospel...has come to you, as it has also in all the world” (Col. 1:5-6). He also exhorted the Colossians to have “the hope of the gospel which you heard, which was preached to every creature under heaven” (Col. 1:23). To the church at Rome Paul wrote, “I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world” (Rom. 1:8). Plummer writes, “Her faith was spoken of over the Roman empire, which now embraced Western Asia and Northern Africa, as well as nearly all Europe. In Luke 2:1 the phrase *all the world* is so used, though the Greek terms are not the same in the two places [one uses *oikoumene*, the other *kosmos*]; but they mean the same thing.”⁴⁸ In Romans 10:18 Paul says that the voice of gospel preachers, “has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world.” “According to the infallible Word of God, the Gospel was indeed preached to the whole world, well before Jerusalem was destroyed in A.D. 70.”⁴⁹

But, some may object, what about the phrase “as a witness to all nations” in Matthew 24:14. Doesn't the designation “all nations” rule out the interpretation that applies this passage to the Roman Empire. No, not at all! Luke in the Acts of the Apostles wrote, “And there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven” (2:5). Does this passage teach that there were Jews from Mongolia, China, New Zealand, South Africa, Peru and Canada at the feast of Pentecost? No, obviously not. Luke even lists the nations represented: “Parthians and Medes and Elamites, those dwelling in Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia,

⁴⁷ Horatio B. Hackett, *Commentary on Acts* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1992 [1882]), 141. J. A. Alexander writes, “*Throughout all the world, literally on (or over) the whole inhabited (earth).* This phrase, though strictly universal in its import, is often used in a restricted sense. The Greeks, in their particular pride of race, applied it to their own country; the Romans, in like manner, to the empire. A similar restriction of the term by Jesus to Palestine would be perfectly analogous, though it may not be demonstrable in usage” (Acts, 438). Alexander then goes on to say that in this passage it refers to the Roman Empire (pp. 438-439).

⁴⁸ Wm. S. Plumer, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1971 [1870]), 46.

⁴⁹ David Chilton, 4.

Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya adjoining Cyrene, visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs -- we hear them speaking in our own tongues the wonderful works of God”(Acts 2:9-11). Luke essentially lists a series of Roman provinces “passing from the extreme west (Italy) to the extreme south (Arabia);”⁵⁰ also covering the island of Crete as well as North Africa. Paul also says that the gospel “has been made known to all nations” (Rom. 16:26). Given the inspired teaching of both Luke and Paul there is sound biblical warrant for applying the direct fulfillment of Matthew 24:14 to the generation living when Jerusalem was destroyed.

7. The Abomination of Desolation

The last sign that the disciples are to look for before “the great tribulation” (Mt. 24:21), the coming in judgment (Mt. 24:27) and the destruction of the temple is “the abomination of desolation.” “Therefore when you see the ‘abomination of desolation,’ spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place” (whoever reads, let him understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let him who is on the housetop not go down to take anything out of his house. And let him who is in the field not go back to get his clothes. But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! And pray that your flight may not be in winter or on the Sabbath” (Mt. 24:15-20).

Thus far Jesus had instructed the disciple regarding general signs (false christs, wars, famines, pestilences, earthquakes, persecutions, false prophets), the beginning of sorrows. Our Lord now turns His attention to a very specific sign, the “abomination of desolation.” When this sign appears, believers in Judea are to immediately flee to the mountains. In order to understand the phrase “abomination of desolation” we must consider the background, the immediate context and the parallel passage in Luke.

The Background

In order to examine the background of this phrase we will need to consider the law, the prophets, the specific reference in Daniel and Jewish inter-testamental history.

(1) In the law of God, and “abomination” applies to idolatry (Dt. 7:25-26; 12:31; 17:3-4; 27:15); the corruption of worship (Lev. 7:18) and the offering of a defective sacrifice (Dt. 17:1); practicing a false religion, spiritualism and divination (Dt. 18:9 ff.); homosexuality and cross-dressing (Lev. 18:22; 20:13; Dt. 22:5); unclean animals (Lev. 11:10-13, 18, 20, 23, 41-42); the tithe of a harlot (Dt. 23:18) and unjust or dishonest business practices (Dt. 25:16). Interestingly, Israel in the days of our Lord was guilty of corrupting the worship of God (Mt. 15:3 ff.). They rejected Christ’s perfect sacrifice and continued to offer the blood of bulls and goats. Thus, they were guilty of offering a defective sacrifice (cf. Heb. 9:11 ff.). Further, the Jews had turned the temple into a “house of merchandise” and “a den of thieves” (Mt. 21:13). The Jews had made the true religion of Jehovah into a false religion, and unclean thing, and abomination. Thus, Jesus proclaimed the temple “desolate.”

(2) When the prophets set forth God's reason for the destruction of the cities of Israel it was because the people had committed abominations. They even set up abominations in God’s temple. “‘For the children of Judah have done evil in My sight,’ says the Lord. ‘They have set

⁵⁰ J. A. Alexander, Acts, 54.

their abominations in the house which is called by My name, to pollute it...the land shall be desolate” (Jer. 7:30, 34). Ezekiel’s prophecy is virtually identical to Jeremiah’s in its reason for desolation. ““Therefore, as I live,’ says the Lord GOD, ‘surely, because you have defiled My sanctuary with all your detestable things and with all your abominations, therefore I will also diminish you; My eye will not spare, nor will I have any pity...Moreover I will make you a waste [lit. a desolation] and a reproach among the nations...a reproach, a taunt, a lesson, and an astonishment to the nations that are all around you, when I execute judgments among you in anger and in fury and in furious rebukes. I, the Lord, have spoken”” (Ezek. 5:11, 14-15). The emphasis in the prophets is that the Jews had committed abominations (e.g., idolatry, corrupt worship) that resulted in desolation. If the Jews who lived in the period of the major prophets received destruction and horror for defiling God’s house (which typified Christ), then we should not be surprised when God brings desolation on the people and city who crucified the Son of God.

(3) The phrase “the abomination of desolation” is used in Daniel 11:31 and 12:31 to describe Antiochus Epiphanes and his abomination that occurred in the inter-testamental period. Antiochus surnamed Epiphanes was the Greek ruler of Syria from 174 to 164 B.C. His efforts at the Hellenization of the Jews and at the stamping out of Jewish resistance are discussed in the uninspired apocryphal book 1 Maccabees. Beasley-Murray writes, “Antiochus Epiphanes, on returning from his conquest of Egypt, entered Jerusalem and plundered the temple. He later sent an official, who by guile attacked the Jews, plundered Jerusalem, and set it ablaze. Orders were given that sacrifices in the temple should cease and the ancestral law no longer be observed. Altars, idols, and sacred precincts were to be established, and ‘swine and other unclean beasts’ were to be offered in sacrifice. This reached its climax on the fifteenth day of Kislev, 167 B.C.; ‘the abomination of desolation was set up on the altar....On the twenty-fifth day of the month they offered sacrifice on the pagan altar which was on top of the altar of the Lord’ (1 Macc. 1:54, 59)...there is evidence that Antiochus ordered not only a pagan altar to be placed on the altar of the Jerusalem temple but also an image of Zeus made in his own likeness.”⁵¹ Although there is no question that Antiochus and his activities would come to the disciples’ mind when our Lord referred to the abomination of desolation in Daniel’s prophecy, these prophecies were already fulfilled and could not be directly applied to events in the disciples’ own generation. Antiochus could at the most only serve as a type of a future leader who committed abominations and brought destruction to Jerusalem. There is, however, a reference in Daniel to “the abomination of desolation” that cannot be applied to Antiochus. This reference applies to a period of time after the crucifixion of Christ. We will now turn our attention to this passage found in Daniel chapter 9.

(4) In Matthew 24:15 Jesus makes a specific reference to the ““abomination of desolation,’ spoken of by Daniel the prophet.” Our Lord refers to Daniel 9:27, “Then he shall confirm a covenant with many for one week; but in the middle of the week He shall bring an end to sacrifice and offering. And on the wing of abominations shall be one who makes desolate.” Contrary to dispensational futurist interpretations of this passage, Jesus sets before His disciples a prediction of the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 by the armies of Rome. Dispensationalists argue that verse 27 refers to a future (i.e. future even for us) antichrist who will make a covenant with Israel but who will break this agreement and force them to stop their sacrifices in their rebuilt temple. The antichrist will then set up a statue of himself in the temple, proclaim himself

⁵¹ George R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Last Days: The Interpretation of the Olivet Discourse* (Peabody, MA: Hendriksen, 1993), 409.

to be God and demand that people worship him. There are a number of reasons why such a theory must be rejected as unscriptural. First, the passage does not say that he will *make* a covenant but that he will *confirm* a covenant. A covenant is confirmed that is already in existence. Who confirmed the covenant? None other than Jesus Christ. Most scholars rightly argue that the final week of Daniel 9 begins with the baptism of Jesus, the anointing of the most Holy One (Dan. 9:24). Christ ministered to the Jews for 3½ years, then in the middle of the week “He shall bring an end to sacrifice and offerings” (Dan. 9:27). This statement has nothing to do with a supposed (still future) antichrist that will break a covenant with the Jews. It refers to the fact that Christ’s perfect sacrifice of Himself brought a complete end to the sacrificial system. Our Lord confirmed the divine covenant of God’s redemptive grace by His substitutionary death. Zacharias said by the Holy Spirit that Jesus came “to perform the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember His holy covenant” (9:22). This interpretation fits in perfectly with the immediate context (vs. 26) which says that after the sixty-two weeks (i.e. sometime in the last week) “Messiah shall be cut off but not for Himself.” This is a clear reference to Jesus’ vicarious atonement.

Second, there is absolutely no biblical evidence for a future rebuilt *physical* temple. All of the biblical references to a rebuilt temple refer either to the temple rebuilt after the Jews returned from the Babylonian exile or refer in a spiritual manner to the New Covenant church (cf. Ezek. 47:1-12). Note the following New Testament reference. “After this I will return and will rebuild the tabernacle of David which has fallen down; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will set it up” (Ac. 15:16). (In context this passage is an explicit reference to God building up His church by calling out the Gentiles.) “Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit” Eph. 2:19-22). In Matthew 23 Jesus abandoned the earthly temple in Jerusalem (vs. 38). Further, Paul says that the earthly Jerusalem corresponds to Hagar and is in bondage (Gal. 4:26). The author of Hebrews exhorts Christians to go outside the earthly Jerusalem, “For here [on earth] we have no continuing city, but we seek the one to come” (Heb. 13:13-14). Jesus told the Samaritan woman “the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father” (Jn. 5:21). In other words in the new covenant era, Jerusalem and the temple mount hold no special religious significance whatsoever. The church is God’s temple. “You also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 2:5). Indeed, even if the Jews did somehow rebuild a temple and offer sacrifices in Jerusalem it would be a blasphemous rejection of the atoning blood of Christ. The New Testament is crystal clear when it speaks of Christ rendering the Old Testament sacrificial system obsolete. Hodge writes,

That the ceremonial law introduced by Moses was typical of Christ and his work is taught throughout the New Testament, and especially in the Epistle to the Hebrews. It was declared to be “a shadow of things to come, but the body is of Christ.” The tabernacle and its service were “patterns of things in the heavens,” and figures, antitypes, of the true tabernacle, into which Christ has now entered for us. Col. ii. 17; Heb. ix. 23, 24. Christ is said to have effected our salvation by offering himself as a sacrifice and by acting as our high priest. Eph. v. 2; Heb. ix. 11, 12, 26, 28; xii. 11, 12. That the coming of Christ has superseded and for ever done away with the ceremonial law is also evident from the very fact just stated—that its ceremonies were

types of him, that they were the shadows of which he was the substance. Their whole purpose and design were evidently discharged as soon as his real work of satisfaction was accomplished; and therefore it is not only a truth taught in Scripture (Heb. x. 1-14; Col. ii. 14-17; Eph. ii. 15, 16), but an undeniable historical fact, that the priestly work of Christ immediately and definitely superseded the work of the Levitical priest. The instant of Christ's death, the veil separating the throne of God from the approach of men "was rent in twain from the top to the bottom" (Matt. xvii. 50-51), thus throwing the way open to all, and dispensing with the priests and their ceremonial for ever.⁵²

Tragically, dispensational interpreters are so concerned with a future program for ethnic Israel and are so obsessed with a carnal concept of the kingdom that they minimize the cross.

Third, the dispensational interpretation of Daniel 9:27 is based on the novel arbitrary idea that a gap exists between the sixty-ninth and seventieth week of Daniel. We are told that the sixty-ninth week ended with Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem (some dispensational scholars say it ended with the crucifixion) and that it will not begin again until the rapture of the church at the beginning of the seven-year tribulation. There are a number of reasons why the gap theory must be rejected. For one thing, it has absolutely no scriptural support. It is simply assumed and then imposed on the biblical text in order to fit certain passages into the dispensational paradigm. Also the concept of a gap that has now lasted almost two thousand years destroys the very purpose of Daniel's prophecy, which is to set time limits to the scope of his prophecy. Daniel's prophecy speaks of 70 weeks then subdivides these weeks into 7, 62 and 1. The seventy weeks represent 490 years. The first 7 weeks gives us the 49 years in which the temple was rebuilt in Jerusalem. Virtually everyone agrees that the sixty-two weeks immediately follow the seven weeks giving us 483 years ending at the baptism of Jesus. Given the precise and consecutive nature of this prophecy why would anyone regard the last week as disconnected from the other weeks by thousands of years? There is certainly nothing in the text about a gap that is already over four times longer than the period covered by the prophecy. Allis writes, "It would seem to be obvious that the more definite and precise the chronology of the weeks is held to be, the more difficult must it become to regard the insertion of a quite indefinite and timeless interval into it as permissible or possible. $483+7$ is 490, no more and no less. $483+x+7$ is a very different total, especially if x is an 'unknown,' already proved to represent more than 1900."⁵³ After a careful consideration of how prophetic measures of time were fulfilled in the Old and New Testaments (e.g., Gen. 15:13; Ex. 12:40; Gal. 3:17; Gen. 45:6; Num. 14:34 and Jesus' prediction of three days until His resurrection), Mauro concludes, "We are bold, therefore, to lay it down as an absolute rule, admitting of no exceptions, that when a definite measure of time or space specified by the number of units composing it, within which a certain event is to happen or a certain thing is to be found, the units of time or space which make up that measure are to be understood as running continuously and successively."⁵⁴

Lastly, the dispensational understanding of a lengthy gap or "mystery parenthesis" is based in a large part on two totally unscriptural presuppositions. The first is that in the new covenant era God has two separate and distinct peoples--Israel and the church. The gap we are told refers to the church age. In other words the time-clock of prophecy stopped when Israel rejected Jesus' offer of a literal earthly kingdom. The time-clock will resume ticking as soon as the church is raptured and Israel is once again the center of attention (e.g., the converted Jewish

⁵² A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1958 [1869]), 255-256.

⁵³ Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974 [1945, 47]), 118.

⁵⁴ Philip Mauro, as quoted in Edward J. Young, *Daniel* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1972 [1949]), 216.

remnant of the tribulation, the 144,000). Does the Bible teach that God has two separate peoples? No, absolutely not! God has one church one bride, one people composed of both Jews and Gentiles. The New Testament teaches that with the coming of Christ the distinction between Jew and Gentile has been removed. Christ has *one* body not two (1 Cor. 10:17, 12:12). The middle wall of partition between Jew and Gentile has been removed (Eph. 2:14). God has made two peoples into *one* (Eph. 2:15). Gentiles are fellow citizens and full members with the Jews in God's household; God is building both Jewish and Gentile believers into *one* temple (Eph. 2:11-22).

After the resurrection, ascension and Pentecost there is neither Jew nor Greek, for Christians are all *one* in Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:28). Gentiles who believe in Christ are called the true sons of Abraham (Gal. 3:29). The Apostle Peter takes Old Testament titles for Israel and applies them directly to the church: "You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people...who once were not a people but are now the people of God" (1 Pet. 2:9-10; cf. Ex. 19:5-6). "The word *genos* [nation] denoting blood-relation is applied to the Christians as members of one family through the new birth."⁵⁵ Paul calls the church "the Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16). He says of believers, "We are the circumcision" (Phil. 3:3). Paul says that in Christ neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but what is important is the new birth (Gal. 6:15). "It is not natural descent, that makes man a child of Abraham."⁵⁶ "Those who are the children of the flesh, these are *not* the children of God; but the children of the promise are counted as the seed" (Rom. 9:8). The promises to Israel were made not according to "the flesh" but according to "the spirit." In the Old Testament, Israel is the bride of Jehovah. Yet in the New Testament, the church is repeatedly called the bride of Christ (Rev. 18:23; 21:2, 9; 22:17). Christ only has one bride-the church. To say that God has two separate peoples is to implicitly assert that God is a polygamist. God only has one people: the church, "the Israel of God." When the Apostle Paul discusses ethnic Israel he has nothing to say about earthly blessings but aims to show that the spiritual blessings promised to Israel are to be secured only by faith, and are the common possession of all believers, both Jew and Gentile. Paul's concern for Israel was not that they might inherit the land of Canaan, but "that they might be saved" (Rom. 10:1; cf. v. 9). Further, Jesus refers to unbelieving Jews not as His people but as "the synagogue of Satan" (Rev. 3:9). They claim to be Jews but because they do not believe in Christ they are not true Jews (Rev. 3:9). Such a designation belongs to the church (Rom. 9:8; Gal. 6:16; Phil. 3:3; etc.).

The second unbiblical presupposition is that Old Testament prophecy only applies to ethnic Israel and has nothing to say regarding the New Testament church. This presupposition is explicitly contradicted by passages such as Acts 15:14-17. In Acts 15 the apostles and elders are gathered together in Jerusalem to discuss the conversion of the Gentiles and what to do regarding their keeping certain aspects of the Mosaic law. Peter discussed the conversion of the Gentiles and their receiving the Holy Spirit (vs. 7-8). He said that God "made no distinction between us and them" (v. 9). Paul and Barnabas relate also what God did among the Gentiles (v. 12). James spoke and quoted an Old Testament prophecy regarding the tabernacle of David and applied it to the ingathering of Gentiles into the church: "Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name. And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written: 'After this I will return and will rebuild the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will set it up; so that the rest of mankind may seek

⁵⁵ Charles Bigg, *The Epistles of St. Peter and St. Jude* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1978), 134.

⁵⁶ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 3:810.

the LORD, even all the Gentiles who are called by My name, says the LORD who does all these things” (vs. 14-17). Note that James used the plural “prophets.” All the prophets agree that the tabernacle of David is being rebuilt by Jesus Christ the Lord and all the Gentile nations are flowing into it. James applies Amos 9:11-12 to the present church age not to a future tribulation in the distant future or to a future millennium.

If the common modern evangelical understanding of the “abomination of desolation” is pure fiction, then to what does Daniel 9:27 refer? It refers to the presence of the Roman legions encompassing Jerusalem with their idolatrous emblems. There are a number of reasons why this interpretation must be accepted: (1) The parallel passage in Luke says in unequivocal language that Jesus’ statement refers to Jerusalem being surrounded by armies. “But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation is near” (21:20). Matthew, writing to Jews, points them to a passage in Daniel and says, “...whoever reads, let him understand” (Mt. 24:15). Luke, writing to a predominantly Gentile audience, interprets the passage in Daniel for them. “To a large extent the problems that confront anyone who tries to explain Matthew’s or Mark’s parallel accounts, with their highly symbolic language...are absent from Luke’s account. The latter could almost be called a commentary on that of Matthew and Mark.”⁵⁷ The fact that Luke’s comments are exactly parallel to Matthew and Mark’s statements regarding the abomination of desolation cannot be denied, for all three accounts are immediately followed by warnings to flee using identical statements. The dispensational view that Matthew 24:15 points to an event in the distant future (i.e. the antichrist of a revived Roman Empire) while Luke 21:20 applies to Roman armies immediately prior to and during A.D. 70 is exegetically untenable. It is an arbitrary distinction imposed on the text.

(2) The immediate context supports the interpretation that regards the “abomination of desolation” as the Roman armies. When the abomination appears, “then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.” Jesus switches from the second person “when you see” to a third person imperative “then let those...flee.” When Christians are aware of this event they are commanded to flee to the mountains. Why did our Lord issue an imperative to flee? The reason for such a command is that the Jews under such circumstances would normally flee into a walled, well-armed city such as Jerusalem for protection. Jews throughout Judea would especially seek refuge in Jerusalem where the temple dwelt, where God had “set His name.” Christians are to act differently because Christ had prophesied “not one stone will be left upon another” (Mt. 24:2). The fourth century historian Eusebius tells us that this is exactly what happened. He writes, “But before the war, the people of the Church of Jerusalem were bidden in an oracle given by revelation to men worthy of it to depart from the city and to dwell in a city of Perea called Pella. To it those who believed in Christ migrated from Jerusalem. Once the holy men had completely left the Jews and all Judea, the justice of God at last overtook them, since they had committed such transgressions against Christ and his apostles. Divine justice completely blotted out that impious generation from among men” (*Ecclesiastical History III. v. 3*). The oracle to which Eusebius refers is none other than Christ’s prophecy recorded in the synoptic gospels.

There are a number of things regarding Jesus’ warning that indicate an A.D. 70 fulfillment and preclude a twenty-first century fulfillment. a) The houses have flat roofs (Mt. 24:17; Mk. 13:15). While the flat roofed houses were common in first century Palestine (cf. Mk. 2:4; Ac. 10:9), they are virtually non-existent in modern Israel. b) The people are told to pray that their escape does not occur on the Sabbath or in the winter (Mt. 24:20). In ancient Israel

⁵⁷ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 937.

there were strict Sabbath laws. These laws restricted a Jew's travel to a "Sabbath day's journey" (around three quarters of a mile). This concern obviously does not apply to modern Israel, which is a secular state. The concern about flight in winter applies to people on foot or donkey. It, however, is not a major concern to people driving cars or wearing down jackets. c) Jesus' warning presupposes a slow moving ancient army. Such a warning would not be applicable to a modern war with jeeps, helicopters, airplanes, tanks, jets, missiles, armored personal carriers and so on. d) The account in Luke describes the ancient method of taking a city that obviously does not apply to modern warfare. "For days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment around you, surround you and close you in on every side, and level you, and your children within you, to the ground; and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not know the time of your visitation" (Luke 19:43-44). Embankments were used to take walled, well-defended cities. The Roman use of this technique is well-documented (cf. Jos. Bel. 5:262 ff., 491 ff.). Modern explosives, jet plane, etc. have rendered such methods unnecessary.

(3) The passage which our Lord calls to the disciples' attention refers to the destruction of the city and sanctuary by armies that are the consequences of the cutting off of the Messiah. "And after the sixty-two weeks Messiah will be cut off, but not for Himself; and the people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary. The end of it shall be with a flood, and till the end of the war, desolations are determined. Then He shall confirm a covenant with many for one week; but in the middle of the week He shall bring an end to sacrifice and offering. And on the wing of abominations shall be one who makes desolate" (Dan. 9:26-27). Verses 26 and 27 are set in parallel. In verse 26 we learn of two events that are to occur after the 62 weeks. The Messiah will be cut off and the city and temple are to be destroyed. From a study of the chapter and verse 27 we learn that Jesus will be cut off in the middle of the seventieth week. The destruction of the city and temple occurs sometime after the seventieth week is completed. Both verses, however, connect the destruction of Jerusalem and city by an army to the death of the Messiah. Gentry writes, "The indefinite pronoun 'he' does not refer back to 'the prince who is to come' of verse 26. The word 'prince' is a subordinate noun; 'the people' is the dominant noun. Thus, the 'he' refers to the last dominant individual mentioned: the 'Messiah' (v. 26a). The Messiah is the leading figure in the whole prophecy, so that even the destruction of the Temple results from His death. In fact, the people who destroy the Temple are providentially 'His armies,' according to Christ (Matt. 22:2-7)."⁵⁸ Because the Jews commit an abomination by killing the Messiah they receive the covenantal death penalty and are set apart for destruction. This destruction must occur while those who killed the Messiah are still alive. The Jews have committed an abomination which causes desolation. As a just recompense for their deeds they will witness an abomination, the unclean Roman idolaters will surround their city, holding the signs of the eagles; thus, the term "on the wing of abominations." "As soon as Christ's disciples saw 'the abomination of desolation,' that is, the Roman ensigns, with their idolatrous emblems, 'stand in the holy place,' they knew the time for them to escape had arrived; and they did 'flee into the mountains.'"⁵⁹

Morison concurs, "These images then were emphatically an abomination to the Jews; and being the ensign images of the devastating Romans, they were *the abomination of the devastations*, that devastation which was brought upon Jerusalem and Judea by the Romans.... When we get to the true conception of the reference of the expression then the entire peculiarity

⁵⁸ Ken Gentry, *Perilous Times: A Study in Eschatological Evil* (Texarkana, AR: Covenant Media Press, 1999), 32.

⁵⁹ C. H. Spurgeon, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1987), 347.

of the phraseology is accounted for; as also the peculiarity of the Hebrew expression in Daniel ix. 27, *upon the wing (shall be) the abominations of the desolator*. The standards may either be regarded collectively as *one abomination*, or distributively as *abominations*. They belonged to the *desolator*, that is, to the Romans *conceived collectively*; and they pertained therefore to the *desolation* or *desolations* which resulted from the hostile campaign which the Roman army was engaged in prosecuting.”⁶⁰ With this interpretation we see a perfect harmony between Luke’s clarification of the expression “abomination of desolation” for his Gentile readers and the prophecy of Daniel 9:27. Both connect the “abomination of desolation” to the Roman campaign against Israel in A.D. 68 and following.

Objections

A major objection to the view enumerated above is that the abomination is said to occur within “the holy place.” The expression “the holy place” is taken by a number of commentators to refer to the temple. Thus, it is argued that an idol or an abominable act must take place within the temple to fulfill this prophecy. There are a number of reasons why the expression “the holy place” need not be restricted to the temple. a) The Bible often refers to Jerusalem as a holy place (Neh. 11:1, 18; Isa. 48:2; 52:1; 66:20; Dan. 9:16, 24; Joel 3:17) and thus there is no need to restrict the phrase to the temple. b) Luke, writing under divine inspiration interprets the phrase as inclusive of the whole city and the area surrounding the city (Lk. 21:21). Indeed, Israel itself is called the “holy land” (Zech. 2:12). c) Jesus warns the apostles that all Christians must flee Judea (Mt. 24:16 ff.). The abominable ensigns, the profuse shedding of blood and the desolation affects the whole city and region not just the temple complex. d) The passage that our Lord sets before the disciples (Dan. 9:27) taken in context refers to the city and sanctuary (Dan. 9:26) and calls attention to armies of destruction. “Daniel 9:25 even calls Jerusalem ‘the holy city’ (whereas Matthew speaks of ‘the holy place.’”⁶¹ Given all these considerations there is more than sufficient biblical warrant for regarding the expression “the holy place” as inclusive of the holy city and its environs.

Although, the parallel account in Luke and the reference to Daniel 9:27 make it clear that our Lord was referring to the Roman armies encompassing Jerusalem, one should note that the Roman attack did culminate in an abomination in the temple complex itself. Josephus writes, “And now the Romans upon the flight of the seditious into the city, and upon the burning of the holy house itself, and of all the buildings lying round about it, brought their ensigns to the temple, and set them over against its eastern gate; and there did they offer sacrifices to them, and there did they make Titus emperor, with the greatest acclamations of joy.”⁶² Tertullian the church father said, “That the entire religion of the Roman camp almost consisted in worshiping the ensigns, in swearing by the ensigns, and in preferring the ensigns before all the [other] gods.”⁶³

Another objection is that the sign to escape is the Roman armies encompassing Jerusalem (Lk. 21:20-21) how could Christians escape at that time? Wouldn’t it be too late to get out of the city? Interestingly, God did give all the Christians adequate time to escape when the Roman

⁶⁰ James Morison, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, 1981 [1884]), 467-468.

⁶¹ Kenneth L. Gentry, *Perilous Times: A Study of Eschatological Evil* (Texarkana, AR: Covenant Media Foundation, 1999), 60.

⁶² Flavius Josephus, “The Wars of the Jews” (6:6:1), in *Complete Works*, 583.

⁶³ Havercamp as quoted by William Nimmo in Josephus, 583.

general (Cestius Gallus) and his armies fled the area for a time. William Whiston (the translator of Josephus) writes, “There may another very important, and very providential reason be here assigned for this strange and foolish retreat of Cestius; which, if Josephus had been now a Christian, he might probably have taken notice of also; and that is, the affording the Jewish Christians in the city an opportunity of calling to mind the prediction and caution given them by Christ about thirty-three years and half before, that ‘when they should see the abomination of desolation’ (The idolatrous Roman armies, with the images of their idols in their ensigns, ready to lay Jerusalem desolate,) ‘stand where it ought not;’ or, ‘in the holy place,’ or, ‘when they should see Jerusalem encompassed with armies,’ they should then ‘flee to the mountains.’ By complying with which those Jewish Christians fled to the mountain of Perea, and escaped this destruction.”⁶⁴ The Christians escaped because they believed Jesus’ prophecy applied to them, to their own generation. The Jews who rejected the Christ stayed in the city and were slaughtered because they mistakenly believed that the Messiah would come and deliver them out of the hands of the Romans. Over one million Jews were slain. It is a good thing that the first century Judean believers were not exposed to Hal Lindsay’s lucrative horror stories. If they had believed such nonsense and not taken our Lord’s words at face value (e.g., “all these things will happen to *this* generation”) they all would have perished.

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[HOME PAGE](#)

⁶⁴ William Whiston as quoted in John Bray, *Matthew 24 Fulfilled*, 57.