

# Matthew 24 and the Great Tribulation

## Chapter 2: The Great Tribulation

[Brian Schwertley](#)

Perhaps the most discussed subject among evangelical prophecy prognosticators is the subject of the “great tribulation.” This (we are told) is the seven year period (many dispensationalists limit the great tribulation to the latter half of the seven years) that begins with the secret rapture of the church and ends with the great battle of Armageddon and second coming of Christ. In between these events the antichrist will be revealed, the mark of the beast will become law and great tribulation will come upon the whole earth. In this section of Matthew 24 we come to passages that futurists argue cannot be explained as having a pre-A.D. 70 fulfillment. As we study this section of Scripture, however, we will see that the common futurist understanding of this section of Scripture is fallacious. Indeed, a pre-A.D. 70 fulfillment is unavoidable if one follows standard historical-grammatical procedures of interpretation. The passage under consideration reads, “For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be. And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect's sake those days will be shortened” (Mt. 24:21-22).

After quoting this passage, futurists will argue that since Jesus refers to a tribulation that is the worst the world has ever seen or ever will see, that it must refer to events that have not yet occurred, that must immediately precede the second bodily coming of Christ. If we take Jesus' expression regarding the severity of this tribulation in isolation from the rest of Scripture such an objection seems irrefutable. After all, no one would argue that the destruction of Jerusalem was worse than the havoc caused by the black plague in the middle ages, or the slaughter of World War I or World War II. Certainly, it was not as bad as the holocaust where estimates of the Nazi extermination of the Jews reach six million souls. But, if one takes our Lord's statement and interprets it within the broad and narrow context of Scripture this common argument falls to the ground.

There are a number of solid scriptural arguments as to why Jesus' statement applies directly to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. First, (as we noted earlier) the time indicator in verse 34 (“this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place”) cannot be dismissed by arbitrary forced interpretations of the word “generation.” Our Lord was very specific in His statement. He did not say “some things” or even “the things” but “all these things.” Christ's statement should not be ignored or redefined to fit one's own preconceptions about “the great tribulation.”

Second, Jesus was using dramatic hyperbole or a proverbial method of speech taken directly from the Old Testament. Note the words spoken by Ezekiel regarding the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. “And I will do among you what I have never done, and the like of which I will never do again, because of all your abominations” (Ezek. 5:9). Does this passage teach that Israel endured the worst judgment in human history in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.? No. No one believes that the destruction wrought by the Babylonians was worse than that of the Romans in A.D. 70. The point is that the destruction will be severe, excruciating and unique. Similarly

Daniel says, "...by bringing upon us a great disaster; for under the whole heaven such has never been done as what has been done to Jerusalem" (Dan. 9:12). "And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation, even to that time" (Dan. 12:1). "The language of v. 19 [i.e. Mk. 13:19 the parallel to Mt. 24:21], as also of Dan, 12:1, which it cites, uses traditional expressions to denote severe tribulation, not simply of Israel but of other people also."<sup>1</sup> For example, such language is even used to describe the anguish of the Egyptians after the tenth plague. "Then there shall be a great cry throughout all the land of Egypt, such as was not like it before, nor shall be like it again" (Ex. 11:6; cf. 9:18; 10:14). "The cry of anguish sent up by this destruction will be unique, just as the disaster will be unique."<sup>2</sup> Morison writes regarding Matthew 24:21, "It is superlative in its relation both to the past and to the future. We might explain this superlative mode of representation by the freedom which is universally assumed and accorded in popular speech. Men speak unhesitatingly, when referring to anything remarkable, of the 'highest,' the 'greatest,' the 'extremist.' It is an idiom of hyperbolism."<sup>3</sup>

If futurist interpreters want to insist on taking Jesus' words literally (meaning that a future tribulation is coming that will be by far the worst thing to happen in human history), then they must argue that Ezekiel, Exodus and Daniel were not meant to be taken literally while Jesus' words were. Such a view, however, is both arbitrary and inconsistent. If all are taken literally then Scripture contradicts itself, for two or more different events cannot all be the worst thing that ever happened.

Third, Jesus' words cannot be taken literally because even the typical futurist conception of the "coming" great tribulation with its world-wide calamities (e.g., nuclear war, dreadful diseases, giant hail, a 200,000,000 men Chinese army, etc.) is nothing compared to the destruction of mankind and the earth that occurred in the days of Noah. The whole human race was exterminated except for one family (8 people). Further, the flood caused such destruction as to eliminate all animal life except the animals that dwelt in the ark. So dramatic was the destruction that even the geological table was greatly affected. The wild speculations and fantasies of the modern prophecy writers do not compare to what occurred during the flood. Does this mean that Jesus was wrong? No, of course not! It simply means that our Lord was using dramatic, prophetic hyperbole.

Fourth, the immediate context in the gospel accounts describes an ancient local event, not a distant, future, worldwide calamity. (1) The army uses ancient tactics of taking a city (i.e. they build siege mounds around the city [cf. Lk. 19:43-44]). (2) The Pharisaical Sabbath laws are still in effect (Mt. 24:20). (3) The disciples are to be persecuted by synagogues and brought before kings (Mk. 13:9). (4) The Christians are to flee *Judea* and go to the mountains (Mt. 24:16). (5) The people are dwelling in flat-roofed houses (Mt. 24:17). It should be obvious to any unbiased interpreter that the "great tribulation" has reference to the Jews living in Palestine in the first century. One cannot even apply this passage to a twenty-first century Jerusalem. For those who do so we ask: What kings will Christians appear before? Why does a mechanized army with missiles, planes and high explosives build a siege mound? Where are the flat roofs that people must not return to? Why is there a concern about the Sabbath laws when the Pharisaical laws have been out of civil use for over nineteen hundred years? What synagogues will stand in judgment over believers? Who in Tibet or Peru will be able to "see" the "abomination of desolation?"

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<sup>1</sup> George R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Last Days*, 481-419.

<sup>2</sup> John I. Durham, *Exodus* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 149

<sup>3</sup> James Morison, *A Practical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 471.

## Shortened Days for the Elect's Sake

The “great tribulation” that came upon Israel (A.D. 68-70) was shortened for the sake of the elect. Jesus promised, “And unless those days be shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect's sake those days will be shortened” (Mt. 24:22). The “those days” in context clearly refers to the days of “great tribulation.” the elect in this passage can be interpreted as referring to the Jewish Christians living in Jerusalem. If this interpretation is accepted then our Lord may be referring to the lifting of the siege by Cestius Gallas that allowed the Christians within the city to escape to the mountains. This view fits in well with the previous passages warning believers to flee. If one interprets the word “elect” in this passage as inclusive of people who are elect but who have not yet come to Christ, then Jesus may be referring to the quick manner in which Titus and his troops brought the military campaign to its conclusion. Because of the war there was widespread starvation in the city. There were also warring factions in the city who were butchering their own people like demonic savages. Although roughly 1,000,000 people perished (according to Josephus), it would have been even worse had the days not been shortened.

## A Second Warning against False Christs

Earlier in the chapter Jesus had warned the disciples about false christs (Mt. 24:5) and false prophets (Mt. 24:11). Our Lord (showing His love and concern for the disciples) returns to this theme. “Then if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or ‘There!’ do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. See, I have told you beforehand. Therefore if they say to you, ‘Look, He is in the desert!’ do not go out; or ‘Look, He is in the inner rooms!’ do not believe it” (Mt. 24:23-36). The place of this warning (i.e. it comes *after* the sign of the “abomination of desolation,” the warning to flee and the description of the severity of “the great tribulation.”) indicates that false prophets and messiahs will come forth in the midst of tribulation. The rise of such imposters is not surprising given the expectations of the Jews of that generation and the severity of the events coming upon them. The Jews who did not believe in Christ were looking for a Messiah to come and save them from the Romans. Our Lord wants to make sure that Christians are not taken in by such expectations and imposters. One must take into consideration the allurements of Jewish pride and nationalism. It is very likely that a Jewish Christian living in A.D. 67 would have wanted Jesus to come and destroy the Romans (cf. Ac. 1:7). Christ wants to make sure the disciples understand that this is not a physical bodily coming but a coming in judgment. Gentry writes, “In essence, the Lord is warning against the notion of an imminent return—a position the wisdom of which history has borne out for the past nineteen centuries. His people could expect only false christs during the first century. The Lord’s glorious, bodily return will be in the distant future: ‘But while the bridegroom was *delayed*, they all slumbered and slept’ (Matt. 25:5). ‘For the kingdom of heaven is like a man traveling to a *far* country, who called his own servants and delivered his goods to them.... After a *long time* the lord of those servants came and settled accounts with them’ (Matt. 25:14, 19).”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *Perilous Times: A Study of Eschatological Evil*, 69. The book of Acts describes Jesus’ second bodily coming as something very different than His coming in judgment upon Jerusalem. “Now when He had spoken these things, while they watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel, who also said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you

The importance and accuracy of Jesus' prophetic warning can be seen by observing Josephus' account of the fall of Jerusalem. He writes, "A false prophet was the occasion of these people's destruction, who had made a public proclamation in the city that very day, that God commanded them to get upon the temple, and that there they should receive miraculous signs of their deliverance. Now, there was then a great number of false prophets suborned by the tyrants to impose upon the people, who denounced this to them, that they should wait for deliverance from God...."<sup>5</sup> Like the false prophets of old who gave the people a false sense of security during the Babylonian invasion (Jer. 5:2ff.; 6:14; 8:11; 29:9), the various false prophets of the great tribulation caused incredible misery.

## Like Lightning

Jesus emphasized to His disciples that His coming in judgment upon Jerusalem was not a physical-bodily coming. He said that if anyone says, "Look, He is in the desert" (Mt. 24:26) or "Look, He is in the inner rooms" (Mt. 24:26) do not believe it. This coming does not involve Christ's physical presence. Our Lord then explains why the disciples should not pay any attention to reports of His bodily presence among them. He says, "For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be" (Mt. 24:27).

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into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven" (Ac. 1:9-11). The phrase "in like manner" (NKJV) means literally "in what manner" or "in that manner in which" (see C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom-Book of New Testament Greek*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960], 132.) In other words "in like manner" means "in the same manner." "The Greek phrase (*hon trogon*) never indicates mere certainty or vague resemblance; but wherever it occurs in the New Testament, denotes identity of mode or manner" (J. A. Alexander, *Acts of the Apostles* [Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1963 (1857)], 16). Note that "in like manner" and "as you saw Him" are essentially expressions of the same idea twice. "The fact of his [bodily] second coming and the manner of it [are] also described by this emphatic repetition" (A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Baker, n. d. (1930)], 3:12). God wants to make sure that the church gets the doctrine of the second coming right.

Now, let us compare the description of the second coming in Acts 1:9-11 to the coming in judgment that occurred in A.D. 70. (1) Acts teaches that Christ's return will be *bodily*. He left in the same body in which He lived, was crucified, buried and resurrected. He ascended in His glorified human body and He will descend in the same body. Did Jesus return in His glorified physical body in A.D. 70? No. He most certainly did not. In Matthew 24 we are specifically told that the judgment upon Jerusalem is "the sign of the Son of Man in the heaven" (Mt.24:30, *Young's Literal Translation of the Bible*). In other words, Christ judges Jerusalem from His throne in heaven. There is no bodily descent. (2) The account in Acts describes a *literal bodily* coming. Matthew 24 (to verse 33) describes a *non-literal, non-bodily* coming. The coming on the clouds terminology of Matthew 24:30 is taken from the poetic metaphor language of the Old Testament prophets (e.g., Isa. 19:1; Nah. 1:3). In the Old Testament Jehovah did not literally come upon heathen nations riding on the clouds. Acts 1:9-11 however, teaches that just like the apostles, people will be able to see Jesus' body. (3) The account in Acts emphasizes the fact that our Lord's ascension was visible. Thus "in the same manner" His second coming will be *visible*. That is, His resurrected body will be on display. In the judgment on Jerusalem, Christ was *invisible*. He was not on display, because He was at the right hand of God in heaven. (4) The account in Acts teaches that Jesus second bodily coming will involve a literal descent from heaven. He will come in a *vertical* descent from heaven to earth. The account of our Lord's coming in judgment does not describe *vertical* motion but *horizontal*; "as lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west" (Mt. 24:27). The difference between Acts 1:9-11 and Matthew 24:27 is very easy to account for because they are describing two completely separate and different events. In one, Jesus literally in His glorified body descends to earth. In the other, Christ never leaves heaven but judges apostate Israel. His coming is figurative. The coming from east to west describes the massive Roman armies moving across the land from east to west. Any one willing to study the Scriptures who is not spiritually blind can see that hyper-preterism is heretical nonsense.

<sup>5</sup> Josephus, "Wars of the Jews", (6:5:2), 582.

Jesus points out that this coming (i.e. the coming in judgment upon Jerusalem) will be a plain unmistakable fact, observable by all.

The majority of commentators ignore the time indicators and context of this passage and argue that Christ's second bodily coming will involve a brilliant display of Jesus' heavenly glory. While our Lord's second bodily coming will no doubt be glorious, there are no solid exegetical reasons for applying this verse to the distant future.

To what then does the lightning refer? The key to understanding this verse is to consider both its broad and narrow context. For the broad context one needs to examine the biblical significance of lightning. (This makes more sense exegetically than speculating about meteorology or guessing about its meaning.) Lightning in Scripture is often associated with God's hatred of sin and judgment. Thunder and lightning accompanied the giving of the Ten Commandments to the covenant people by Jehovah Himself from Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:16). This occurred only "three days" after the people covenanted with God promising obedience (Ex. 19:8). Lightning is often associated with the judgment and destruction of God's enemies. In David's song of deliverance from his enemies we read,

In my distress I called upon the Lord, and cried out to my God; He heard my voice from His temple, and my cry entered His ears. Then the earth shook and trembled; the foundations of heaven quaked and were shaken, because He was angry. Smoke went up from His nostrils, and devouring fire from His mouth; coals were kindled by it. He bowed the heavens also, and came down with darkness under His feet. He rode upon a cherub, and flew; and He was seen upon the wings of the wind. He made darkness canopies around Him, dark waters and thick clouds of the skies. From the brightness before Him coals of fire were kindled. The Lord thundered from heaven, and the Most High uttered His voice. He sent out arrows and scattered them; lightning bolts, and He vanquished them (2 Sam. 22:7-15).

Lightning is also used to describe God's coming judgment upon Assyria. "Behold, the name of Jehovah cometh from far, burning with his anger, and in thick rising smoke: his lips are full of indignation, and his tongue is as a devouring fire...And Jehovah will cause his glorious voice to be heard, and will show the lighting down of his arm, with the indignation of his anger, and the flame of a devouring fire, with a blast, and tempest, and hailstones" (Isa. 30:27, 30 ASV). Such apocalyptic imagery is also found in Zechariah 9:14: "Then the Lord will be seen over them, and His arrow will go forth like lightning. The Lord GOD will blow the trumpet, and go with whirlwinds from the south."

Lightning and the judgment associated with it is also repeatedly found in the book of Revelation. "And from the throne proceeded lightnings, thunderings, and voices" (4:5). After we read a song celebrating God's power for deliverance and judgment the Holy Spirit says, "And there was opened the temple of God that is in heaven; and there was seen in his temple the ark of his covenant; and there followed lightnings, and voices, and thunders, and an earthquake, and great hail" (11:19 ASV). After the seventh seal of God's wrath is poured out we read, "And there were noises and thunderings and lightnings; and there was a great earthquake..." (Rev. 16:18). The Israelites had violated the covenant, murdered the Messiah and persecuted God's people. Therefore, they will experience the terror and destruction of God's wrath. The lightning signifies a coming in judgment to destroy.

The immediate context supports the coming in judgment interpretation. It is a time of "great tribulation" (Mt. 24:21). Luke refers to this time as the "days of vengeance" (Lk. 21:22). He obviously refers to God's vengeance against Israel. Believers are emphatically warned to flee

to the mountains (Mt. 24:16; Mk. 13:14; Lk. 21:21). If this passage was discussing Jesus' second bodily coming which will be accompanied by the general resurrection and final judgment, why would our Lord be so concerned to preserve the lives of Jewish believers? The destruction will be so severe that it needed to be shortened by God to preserve the lives of the elect (Mt. 24:22; Mk. 13:20). This point raises the same question regarding the need to preserve life when believers are about to be resurrected with glorified, immortal bodies. Further, Luke's account clearly says that preconsummate human history will continue after the coming. "For there will be great distress in the land [Israel] and wrath upon this people [the Jews]. And they will fall by the edge of the sword, and be led away captive into all nations. And Jerusalem will be trampled by Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled" (Lk. 21:23-24). Further, the time indicator of Matthew 24:34 places this coming within the generation of people alive when Christ spoke these words. Therefore, this passage cannot refer to our Lord's second *bodily* coming unless one argues for some type of double fulfillment. While the double fulfillment theory may be popular, there is nothing in the context of the passage that supports it exegetically.

Given all these factors, it is best to consider Jesus' statement about His coming being like lightning from the east to the west as figurative of the *dramatic public nature* of His coming in judgment upon Jerusalem. Interestingly, the coming in judgment did literally proceed from the east to the west. The Roman armies with their shields glistening in the sun marched toward the holy city from the east to the west. The spectacle was no doubt as awesome and terrifying to the Jews as thunder and lightning would be to a small child. The Reformed Baptist commentator John Gill (1720-1771) argues that the coming in Matthew 24:27, "must be understood not of his last coming to judgment [i.e. His bodily coming], though that will be sudden, visible, and universal...but of his coming in his wrath and vengeance to destroy that people, their nation, city, and temple: so that after this to look for the Messiah in a desert, or secret chamber, must argue great stupidity and blindness; when his coming [in judgment] was a sudden, visible, powerful, and general, to the destruction of that nation, as the lightning that comes from the east, and, in a moment, shines to the west."<sup>6</sup>

## The Eagles Gather

The idea that the coming of Christ in Matthew 24:27 is a coming in judgment and not a literal bodily coming is supported by the following verse. "For wherever the carcass is, there the eagles will be gathered together" (Mt. 24:28). The picture presented here is that of Israel as a carcass (a dead body) that attracts vultures and other meat-eating birds to feast on her flesh. Israel had murdered the prophets (Mt. 23:35) and killed the author of life (Ac. 2:36). Therefore, she received the covenantal death penalty from God (Mt. 21:19-20, 44). The Roman armies would come and devour Jerusalem as birds of prey tear apart a corpse. The word translated "eagles" (*aetoi*) refers to any large carrion eating bird and (although it includes eagles) is best translated as vultures. The most common bird that would be seen feasting on dead bodies after a battle in Israel would be the griffon vulture.

The interpretation that says this verse pictures the armies of Rome descending upon apostate Israel is supported by the Old Testament. The eagle is often employed to describe a nation coming as an instrument of judgment against idolatrous Israel. "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

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<sup>6</sup> John Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament* (Streamwood, IL: Primitive Baptist Library, 1979 [1809]), 1:292-293.

language you will not understand.... They shall besiege you at all your gates until your high and fortified walls, in which you trust, come down” (Dt. 28:49, 52). “He shall come like an eagle against the house of the Lord, because they have transgressed My covenant and rebelled against My law” (Hos. 8:1). “Their horses also are swifter than leopards, and more fierce than evening wolves. Their chargers charge ahead; their cavalry comes from afar; they fly as the eagle that hastens to eat” (Hab. 1:8). “The corpses of this people will be food for the birds of the heaven and for the beasts of the earth. And no one will frighten them away....For the land shall be desolate...” (Jer. 19:7-8).

In the law and prophets, the eagle or eagles are used to describe both the destruction caused by violating God’s covenant and the curse of having the dead bodies exposed to the elements where they are consumed by vultures and wild beasts. In Matthew 24, Jesus follows the law and the prophets in the use of this term. In its immediate context the gathering of eagles indicates a swift, fierce and certain destruction. It also, however, conveys the idea of a curse from Jehovah. The streets of Jerusalem will be filled with the rotting corpses of the covenant-breaking people. The birds will literally feast on their flesh.

## Signs in the Heavens

After describing the great tribulation and the nature and result of the Christ coming in judgment upon Jerusalem, our Lord uses language that seems to describe the collapse of the universe. “Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken” (Mt. 24:29). What does Jesus mean by such language? Is this passage meant to be taken literally? Before we turn our attention to the biblical meaning of this verse, we first need to discuss two common errors associated with this statement. One mistake that is made by a number of competent scholars and commentators is to argue that such language proves that this passage is discussing events surrounding the second *bodily* coming of Christ. Another very common error, which is the stock and trade of the modern prophecy gurus, is to argue that Jesus is referring to literal astronomical events. Modern prophecy books are full of speculations regarding nuclear missiles and their effect (e.g., they darken the sun and turn the moon a blood color because they kick up so much dust), UFOs and alien encounters, giant hail, bombs raining down upon cities (this view was popular during WWII), meteor showers, the “Jupiter-effect,” comets streaking across the sky (and the possibility of devastating impacts) and black holes. Although such phenomena are exciting to read about and it helps to sell a lot of books, we will see that the events described by Jesus were not meant to be and cannot possibly be taken literally.

There are three reasons why we can make such an assertion. First, it is impossible to apply dispensationalism’s literalistic hermeneutic to this passage because the idea of literal stars (which are hundreds and thousands of times bigger than the earth) falling to earth is absurd. Dispensational prophecy writers understand this and thus offer various explanations all of which are not literal. The idea that this passage refers to nuclear weapons, bombs, UFOs or asteroids, etc. is a very non-literal interpretation. If the specific language in the passage cannot be taken literally, then the attempt to link the passage to literal astronomical events is not necessary. Second, this passage lies within the section of the discourse that Jesus unequivocally says must take place in the generation alive at that time (Mt. 24:34). Therefore, this passage (whatever its meaning) took place in the first century. Third, Christ uses apocalyptic language drawn directly

from well-known passages from the prophets. Since our Lord is making direct allusions to prophetic apocalyptic language, the only logical and biblical manner of understanding His statement is to examine how such language is employed in the Old Testament. Once again we ask the question: Should we use Scripture to interpret Scripture or should we turn to Newsweek, the New York Times and Scientific American and then guess or speculate about the matter? The answer to this question should be obvious.

An examination of such Old Testament passages will prove that Jesus is using apocalyptic imagery associated with the terror, judgment and destruction of a nation by God. When the prophet Isaiah described the coming destruction of Babylon by the Medes he uttered these prophetic words. "For the stars of heaven and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be darkened in its going forth, and the moon will not cause its light to shine" (Isa. 13:10). One of the central features of apocalyptic "day of the Lord" judgment imagery is that God turns the lights out. God extinguishes the heavenly lights to show that a nation has been set apart for darkness. God has decreed the death of that wicked nation. Isaiah adds, "Therefore I will shake the heavens, and the earth will move out of her place, in the wrath of the Lord of hosts and in the day of His fierce anger" (Isa. 13:13).

The imagery of cosmic convulsions is also applied to Edom. "All the host of heaven shall be dissolved, and the heavens shall be rolled up like a scroll; all their host shall fall down as the leaf falls from the vine, and as fruit falling from a fig tree....For it is the day of the Lord's vengeance" (Isa. 34:4, 8). "Once again, it is immaterial whether the literal stars will fall in the day of God's judgment; the point is that even the mysterious, unchanging stars, the seeming guarantors of the universe's perpetuity, are in the hands of the God of Jerusalem."<sup>7</sup>

When Ezekiel writing under divine inspiration describes God's destruction of Egypt he says, "'When I put out your light, I will cover the heavens, and make its stars dark; I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give her light. All the bright lights of the heavens I will make dark over you, and bring darkness upon your land,' says the Lord GOD" (Ezek. 32:7-8). From this and other passages it is clear that God's darkening of the heavenly luminaries symbolizes a day of judgment. The very fabric of creation is in terror and confusion because God is coming in wrath and indignation.

In Habakkuk the mountains tremble and the sun and moon stand still in their habitation as God marches through the land in indignation and judges the nations (Hab. 3:10-12). In the book of Amos God applies the "lights out" terminology to Israel's impending destruction by Assyria (722 B.C.). "'And it shall come to pass in that day,' says the Lord GOD, 'that I will make the sun go down at noon, and I will darken the earth in broad daylight'" (Amos 8:9). The prophet Joel uses the lights out theme to point the people of Israel to repentance before the coming of the Lord. "Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble; for the day of the Lord is coming, for it is at hand: a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness....The earth quakes before them, the heavens tremble; the sun and moon grow dark, and the stars diminish their brightness" (Joel 2:1-2, 10). Such dramatic poetic language highlights the glory of the coming event and sets it in its proper category: that of divine intervention for judgment.

The apostle Peter even applies the dissolution of the heavenly bodies' terminology from Joel directly to his own generation. "But this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:... 'I will show wonders in heaven above and signs in the earth beneath: blood and fire and vapor of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the coming of the great and awesome day of the Lord. And it shall come to pass that whoever calls on the name of

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<sup>7</sup> John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-39* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 609.

the Lord shall be saved' (Ac. 2:16, 19-21; cf. Joel 2:30-31)." The apostle informs the Jews that tongues are a sign that the great day of judicial visitation is coming upon the unbelieving Jews and Jerusalem. This interpretation is supported by Paul in 1 Corinthians: "In the law it is written: 'With men of other tongues and other lips I will speak to this people; and yet, for all that, they will not hear Me,' says the Lord. Therefore tongues [Greek: *the* tongues] are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers; but prophesying is not for unbelievers...." (14:21-22). The apostle quotes Isaiah 28:11 which refers to the coming of the Assyrians whose language the Judahites could not understand. Tongues are a sign to unbelieving Israel that the day of wrath and indignation is at hand. The outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost (publicly evidenced by the miraculous speaking in tongues) was visible proof that Christ was sitting at the right hand of Power in heaven. It proved that a change of dispensation, of covenant status was coming upon the Jewish nation. It pointed to revolutionary change in the history of redemption. It was a promise that the covenantal execution of Israel was about to be fulfilled. Kik writes, "With the outflow of the Holy Spirit and the destruction of Jerusalem, the Kingdom was to be enlarged with the inclusion of the Gentiles as these words indicate: 'And it shall come to pass, that *whosoever* shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved'" (Joel 2:32). The kingdom of God was no longer to be limited to the Jews. The mosaic economy with its Levitical priesthood and ceremonial law was finished. The judgment against Jerusalem had brought all this to an end. And now as both Joel and Peter declared, "whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved."<sup>8</sup> The people in Peter's own day were witnessing the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy. The sun, moon and stars were darkened for Israel in that generation.

Jeremiah uses the "lights out" terminology to describe the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians (586 B.C.). "At that time it will be said to this people and to Jerusalem....I beheld the earth, and indeed it was without form, and void; and the heavens, they had no light. I beheld the mountains, and indeed they trembled, and all the hills moved back and forth....The whole land shall be desolate...For this shall the earth mourn, and the heavens above be black, because I have spoken" (Jer. 4:11, 23-24, 27-28). In describing God's coming in judgment upon Jerusalem the prophet uses primeval chaos phraseology from Genesis 1:2ff.. Jehovah in His anger takes that which is orderly and reduces it to chaos. The point is that the lives of the people of Jerusalem will be turned upside down and inside out by the coming visitation of wrath. "[T]he language is poetic; Israel's judgment will be *like* a return to primeval chaos."<sup>9</sup>

Even our Lord's phrase "the powers of the heavens will be shaken" (Mt. 24:29) is an allusion to the Old Testament. Centuries earlier the prophet Haggai said, "For thus says the Lord of hosts: 'Once more (it is a little while) I will shake heaven and earth, the sea and dry land; and I will shake all nations, and they shall come to the desire of all nations, and I will fill this temple with glory,' says the Lord of hosts" (Hag. 2:6-7). The author of Hebrews takes the Haggai passage (2:6) and applies it directly to the desolation of the old covenant order and the receiving of the new covenant expression of Christ's kingdom. The inspired writer says that the old ceremonial Levitical system has been surpassed and superseded by the perfect sacrifice of Christ. The destruction of Jerusalem is a shaking of the heavens. The old order is dissolved and replaced by a kingdom that cannot be shaken (cf. Heb. 12:25-29).

After examining how a number of Old Testament prophets used the imagery of cosmic phenomena (e.g., lights out terminology) to describe God's judgment of particular nations (e.g., Isa. 13:10-Babylon; Isa. 34:4-Edom; Ezek. 32:7-Egypt; Am. 8:9-Israel; Joel 2:10--Judah; Joel

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<sup>8</sup> J. Marcellus Kik, *An Eschatology of Victory*, 132.

<sup>9</sup> Peter C. Craigie, Page H. Kelley, Joel F. Drinkard, Jr., *Jeremiah 1-25* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1991), 82.

2:30, 31-post-resurrection Israel; cf. Dt. 30:4; Isa. 19:1; 27:13; Dan. 7:13; Zech. 2:6; 12:10-14; Mal. 3:1; Rev. 6:12; etc.) that have been fulfilled in history, it is exegetically inexcusable to *arbitrarily* treat Jesus' use of such imagery in a completely different manner (e.g., UFOs, comets, meteorites, missiles, etc.). Interpreting our Lord's language in light of the common Old Testament prophetic use of such terminology can only lead to one conclusion. Christ is going to turn off the lights of the Jewish nation. Jerusalem and the temple will be destroyed by God.

## The Sign of the Son of Man in Heaven

We now must consider the passage that most interpreters insist must refer to the second bodily coming of Christ. "Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory" (Mt. 24:30). As we consider this verse it is very important that we are not misled by a poor or biased translation of the Greek. Many translations give the impression that a sign is going to appear up in the sky (e.g., *The New American Standard Bible* reads, "And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky"; note also the *New King James Version* translation above which unfortunately departs from the literal word order of the old Authorized Version). A literal rendering of the Greek reads, "And then will appear the sign of the Son of Man in the heaven." If we base our interpretation of this passage on a literal rendering of the Greek, then we will not be looking for a sign up in the sky; but, rather a sign that indicates that the Son of Man is in heaven. "The Son of Man does not appear, the sign appears. Then Christ defines what the sign signifies: it is the sign 'of the Son of Man' (a descriptive genitive)." <sup>10</sup>

Christ is telling the disciples to look for a sign that proves that He is at the right hand of God enthroned in heaven. Remember, the phrase "in heaven" tells us the location of Jesus Christ not the location of the sign. What then is this sign? The text itself does not explicitly tell us what the sign is. Therefore, over the centuries there has been a great deal of speculation regarding this verse. Although there is no explicit reference to the meaning of the sign, the most logical explanation is that the sign is the destruction of Jerusalem itself.

There are a number of reasons why the sign refers to the destruction of Jerusalem; why the coming of Christ in this passage is not a literal bodily coming but a coming in judgment—a spiritual coming. First, it is a sign that points to Jesus' kingship, power and authority, especially to the unbelieving Jews of that generation. The unbelieving Jews had rejected our Lord's authority when He ministered to them on earth. They also rejected the abundant "signs" and "miracles" done in their presence that proved He was the Messiah. Not only was our Lord's kingship rejected but He was persecuted and unjustly crucified as a common criminal. Because of His rejection and murder by the Jews, Christ is going to give them a sign that proves they were wrong and guilty. The sign proves that Jesus indeed is the Lord and Christ, the ruler over all nations. Given the fact that Jesus explicitly told the unbelieving Jews that such destruction was coming, what better sign could there be to prove He was who He claimed to be? The smoking ruins of Jerusalem were a sign that Christ was the exalted Lord who is able to bring vengeance upon His enemies and who rules the nations with a rod of iron (Ps. 2:9).

Second, this view is supported by the immediate context (Mt. 24:30b) where our Lord refers to Daniel 7:13, "I was watching in the night visions, and behold, One like the Son of Man,

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<sup>10</sup> Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., *Perilous Times: A Study in Eschatological Evil* (Texarkana, AR: Covenant Media Foundation, 1999), 80.

coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days...” Note that Jesus’ reference has nothing to do with a *descending* in the clouds toward the earth. The passage refers to the Son of Man’s *ascension* to the heavenly throne room of the Father where He was given all power and authority over the nations. The following verse reads, “Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him...” (Dan. 7:14).

In Matthew 24:30 Christ refers to a sign that the Son of Man is in heaven and then quotes a passage in Daniel that explicitly refers to the Messiah's ascension into heaven to receive power. It should be quite clear by now that our Lord is not referring to His second *bodily* coming but to an enthronement that leads to an exercise of power to destroy apostate Israel. The ascension to power calls to mind Psalm 2 where the Messiah is described destroying enemy nations after being made king over the earth. “Yet I have set My King on My holy hill of Zion. I will declare the decree: The Lord has said to Me, ‘You are My Son, today I have begotten You. Ask of Me, and I will give You the nations for Your inheritance, and the ends of the earth for Your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron; you shall dash them to pieces like a potter’s vessel.’ Now therefore, be wise, O kings; be instructed, you judges... of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest He be angry, and you perish in the way, when His wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all those who put their trust in Him” (Ps. 2:6-12).

The assumption of power leading to an execution of judgment is also prominent in our Lord's trial where Jesus refers to both Daniel 7:13 and Psalm 110:1. “Again the high priest asked Him, saying to Him, ‘Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?’ Jesus said, ‘I am. And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven’” (Mk. 14:61-62). When the Jewish leaders rejected the Messiah they secured Jesus’ exaltation, as well as His coming in judgment. At His trial before the Sanhedrin, our Lord’s claims (made during His ministry) were rejected as lacking proof. Christ, therefore, tells the wicked leaders who now stand in judgment over Him that they will see with unmistakable clarity that Jesus is seated at God’s right hand, invested with power and majesty. Many Christians jump to the conclusion that our Lord is referring here to the distant future when Jesus will return bodily to judge the living and the dead. The meaning (it is supposed) is that those who stand in judgment over the Messiah will one day stand before Him as the judge on the day of judgment. This view (which is very common) is obviated by the parallel account in Matthew 24:64 where the evangelist recorded the additional words “from now on” (“hereafter [lit. ‘from now on’ or ‘forward from now’] you will see the Son of Man...”). The phrase means that Christ’s vindication is in the immediate future.<sup>11</sup> Our Lord’s reference to the coming on the clouds and the enthronement at God’s side points not to the second bodily coming but to the resurrection, ascension and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The destruction of Jerusalem is a consequence of the mediator’s enthronement.

The Jewish leaders who rejected the Messiah will live to see their decision overturned when the Father vindicates the Son by the resurrection, ascension and enthronement of Jesus.

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<sup>11</sup> R. V. G. Tasker writes, “*Hereafter* is a rather loose translation of *ap’ arti*, which does not mean ‘at some time in the future’ but ‘from now onwards.’ So RV ‘henceforth.’ It is therefore probable that the first clause in this saying of Jesus addressed to the Sanhedrin should be regarded as a reference to His entering fully into His kingdom after the resurrection, and that only the second clause should be taken as a reference to the Parousia which is not necessarily thought of as imminent” (*The Gospel According to St. Matthew* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961], 256). Given the fact that the second clause is a reference to Daniel 7:13 and the ascension of Christ up into heaven to receive all power, there is no need to arbitrarily declare the second clause as applying to the distant future, second bodily coming. At least Tasker, unlike many other commentators, acknowledges the plain meaning of the Greek passage.

These men of course will not personally witness these great redemptive events. But they will, however, witness the very public, tangible effects of the enthronement. They were witnesses of Pentecost and the great events associated with it: speaking in tongues, signs and wonders, massive revival (i.e. many thousands were converted to Christ in Jerusalem in a short period of time). They would also be witnesses of the Messiah's demonstration of kingship and power in the destruction of Jerusalem. Remember that Peter connects the outpouring of the Spirit and the coming wrath of God in his Pentecost sermon. The exaltation of Christ, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the power to destroy enemy kingdoms are all organically connected. The coming of the kingdom *in power* has two sides. The Holy Spirit is poured out by the enthroned Mediator to save and sanctify as well as to judge and destroy. This point is reflected in the words of John the Baptist. "But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, 'Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ...And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire'" (Mt. 3:7, 10-12).

This point is even clearer as we examine the full context of Psalm 110:1 which our Lord quoted to the Sanhedrin. "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool.' The Lord shall send the rod of Your strength out of Zion. Rule in the midst of Your enemies! ...The Lord is at Your right hand; He shall execute kings in the day of His wrath. He shall judge among the nations, He shall fill the places with dead bodies, He shall execute the heads of many countries" (Ps. 110:1-2, 5-6). The Priest-King's enthronement (as in Psalm 2) is but the beginning of a worldwide conquest. The white horse rider conquers by the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit as well as by the rod of judgment. The first nation to be crushed by the Messiah was Israel. This was to be expected given the fact that Jesus rules for the sake of His church and apostate Israel was the first great persecutor of Christians. Note Paul's words: God "raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places....And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church" (Eph. 1:20, 22). This coming in judgment was one of many that would occur throughout history. This coming receives a lot of attention in the New Testament because the end of the Jewish age was significant. It marked the turning point in history when the covenant transfer from Israel to the church was completed.

Furthermore, this interpretation is supported by the Old Testament prophets who described Jehovah as "coming in the clouds" to indicate His sovereign power over the nations to judge and destroy. "The burden against Egypt. Behold, the Lord rides on a swift cloud, and will come into Egypt; the idols of Egypt will totter at His presence, and the heart of Egypt will melt in its midst" (Isa. 19:1). Does this poetic imagery teach that God will literally come down out of heaven floating on a cloud? No, obviously not. It is simply a dramatic way of describing the coming wrath upon Egypt. Young writes, "God must show that He is sovereign, that His own people may know the folly of trusting in their enemy. Isaiah molds his description with a figure taken from the storm, and depicts the Lord riding upon a light cloud, that He may speedily execute His work of judgment. The scene does not necessarily suggest that the Lord comes from the temple at Jerusalem nor from heaven, but merely that He comes as a judge....Isaiah's figure

prepares for the vision of Daniel in which the Son of Man is associated with the clouds of heaven (cf. Dan. 7:13; note also Mt. 24:30, 26:64; Acts 1:7; 14:14 ff.).”<sup>12</sup>

There are other passages that speak of clouds as God’s vehicle. Psalm 104 says that Jehovah makes “the clouds His chariot” (v. 3; cf. Ps. 18:9 ff.). Clouds (as noted) are often associated with God’s power or sovereignty that enables and/or leads to the destruction of the wicked. “Clouds and darkness surround Him; Righteousness and justice are the foundation of His throne. A fire goes before Him, and burns up His enemies round about” (Ps. 97:2-3). “The LORD is slow to anger and great in power, and will not at all acquit the wicked. The LORD has His way in the whirlwind and in the storm, and the clouds are the dust of His feet” (Nah. 1:3). Clouds also are often associated with God’s special presence (e.g., Ex. 13:21; 14:24; 19:9; 20:21; 24:15; 33:9; 34:5; 1 Ki. 8:12).

Lastly, the idea that our Lord is referring to a coming in judgment and not a literal bodily judgment is supported by Christ’s reference to Zechariah in Matthew 24:30: “...[T]hen all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.” Although most believers today would argue that the reference to all the tribes of earth mourning and seeing the Son of Man coming is proof positive that this verse is a reference to the second bodily coming, there are solid exegetical reasons for applying this verse to the generation of Jews who killed the Messiah. For instance, the Greek word (*ges*), usually translated earth in English Bibles, can also be translated as land. This would remove the idea of a worldwide event and limit the coming to the *land* of Judea or Israel. The phrase “the tribes of Israel” is a common biblical expression for the covenant people. This translation is greatly favored by the fact that Matthew 24:30b is an explicit reference to Zechariah 12:12, which virtually everyone acknowledges refers to the tribes of Israel and not the tribes of the whole earth. Gill writes, “*And then shall the tribes of the earth, or land, mourn*, that is the land of Judea; for other lands and countries were not usually divided into tribes, as that was; neither were they affected with the calamities and desolations of it, and the vengeance of the Son of Man upon it; at least not so as to mourn on that account, but rather were glad and rejoiced.”<sup>13</sup>

In addition, the context clearly points to a localized event, not a worldwide catastrophe. Jesus warned the disciples to flee Judea to the mountains when the abomination of desolation took place (Mt. 24:15-16; Mk. 13:14-15). Luke defines the abomination that leads to desolation as “Jerusalem surrounded by armies” (Lk. 21:20). “The Olivet discourse was clearly not a message to the world, but rather a warning to the tribes of Israel of the first century. The tribes of Israel mourned because they understood that judgment was near *for them*. They must embrace the Messiah or perish in the soon coming conflagration.”<sup>14</sup>

Finally, in Matthew 24:30 Jesus conflates Daniel 7:13 and Zechariah 12:12 for a specific reason. We have already noted the significance of Daniel 7:13 where the Messiah ascends to heaven to be enthroned at the right hand of Power. We also have examined how Peter connects the exaltation of Christ (cf. Ac. 2:33-37) with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and the apocalyptic imagery of judgment. (Paul, writing later, will connect the sign of tongues to the destruction of Israel [cf. 1 Cor. 14:21-22]). The Bible organically connects the enthronement of Christ, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the judgment of Israel.

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<sup>12</sup> Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 2:13-14.

<sup>13</sup> John Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament* (Streamwood, IL: Primitive Baptist Library, 1979 [1809]), 1:294-295.

<sup>14</sup> Gary De Mar, *Is Jesus Coming Soon?* (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 1999), 43.

As we examine Zechariah 12:12 we will see that it also applies both to Pentecost and the destruction of Israel. In context the passage reads, “And I will pour on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem the Spirit of grace and supplication; then they will look on Me whom they pierced. Yes, they will mourn for Him as one mourns for his only son, and grieve for Him as one grieves for a firstborn. In that day there shall be a great mourning in Jerusalem, like the mourning at Hadad Rimmon in the plain of Megiddo. And the land shall mourn, every family by itself: the family of the house of David by itself, and their wives by themselves; the family of the house of Nathan by itself...” (Zech. 12:10-12). This passage discusses a great mourning that occurs in Jerusalem. Is this grieving the mourning of true repentance or the mourning brought about by severe judgment? Zechariah is describing a great mourning that results from a pouring out of the Holy Spirit. This prophecy refers to the great revival that occurred after Pentecost (cf. Ac. 2:33-37). When the Holy Spirit was poured out Peter preached the gospel and thousands repented. Note, that Luke emphasizes the sorrow of true repentance in his account. “Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Men and brethren, what shall we do?’” (Ac.2:37). When the exalted King poured out the Spirit of grace and supplication, thousands in Jerusalem looked upon Him whom they pierced with the eyes of faith and were saved.

If Zechariah 12:10 ff. applies to the events at Pentecost, why then does Christ couple this passage with Daniel 7:13 and apply it to His coming in judgment upon Jerusalem? The reason that Jesus applies this mourning to His coming in wrath is identical to Peter’s coupling of the outpouring of the Spirit with the apocalyptic imagery of judgment (cf. Joel 2:28-32). The Mediator’s enthronement at God’s right hand and the coming of the kingdom *with power* leads directly to an exercise of power for both salvation and judgment. The enthroned Messianic King wields the Spirit for both the restoration and destruction of Israel. As we noted earlier when the Messiah is about to come upon the scene, John the Baptist speaks to the people of: “the wrath to come” (Mt. 3:7); “the axe that is laid at the root of the trees” (Mt. 3:10; Lk. 3:9); the One “whose fan is in His hand to thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (Mt. 3:12; Lk. 3:17). While all of this points to the final, worldwide judgment, there is a sense of urgency and immediacy to these words that indicate that the coming of Christ will have a two-fold effect upon Israel. The coming of the kingdom with power means that the King will give an overpowering measure of the Holy Spirit to the elect causing repentance unto life as well as abandonment to destruction and perdition for the non-elect. The consequence of Jesus’ enthronement is first exhibited upon the covenant nation of Israel. The covenant nation, however, is only a localized “day of the Lord” that portends the universal, cosmic day of the Lord at the end of history. “Salvation and perdition are the two stages into which the tremendous future will diverge according to the prophecies: first the descent of the Holy Spirit, and then the day of judgment (cf. Joel 2:28:32; Ezek. 36:26 ff.; Zech. 12:9, 10).”<sup>15</sup>

The obvious objection to all the points enumerated above is that the passage says “they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds” (Mt. 24:30). Doesn’t this mean that people will look up and see Jesus descending from heaven in bodily form? To anyone unfamiliar with the poetic and often metaphorical method of Old Testament prophetic language, it does seem to be the obvious meaning. However, there are a number of reasons why (by way of summary and review), this verse does not describe the Jews observing a literal bodily coming (a descending) but rather a coming in judgment (i.e. they will observe the Messianic King’s glory and power).

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<sup>15</sup> Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1963), 33.

(1) Matthew 24:30 says that the sign indicates the Son of Man is in heaven. Jesus is seated at the right hand of Power when this coming occurs. (2) The coming on the clouds terminology taken directly from Daniel 7:13 refers to our Lord's ascension and enthronement. The Jews will observe the visible effect of this enthronement. "[T]he son of man in the clouds means no more on the lips of Jesus than in the writings of Daniel. It denotes in both places a sublime and glorious reality...the son of man came in heavenly power to supplant Judaism by a better covenant, and to make the kingdoms of the world his own, and that parousia [coming] dates from the fall of Judaism and its temple."<sup>16</sup> (3) The prophetic coming on the clouds terminology in the Old Testament which speaks of Jehovah coming with clouds (e.g., Isa. 19:1; Ps. 97:1-3; Nah. 1:3; etc.) referred to divine visitations of judgment not to literal theophanies floating down out of the clouds. "None of these passages suggest that God came in a visible and personal form to dwell upon the earth at that time; neither is that suggested by Matthew 24:30."<sup>17</sup> (4) Christ's reference to Zachariah 12:11-12 refers to the events at Pentecost which both Peter (Ac. 2:20) and Paul (1 Cor. 14:21-22) connect to the destruction of Israel. Given this fact, one is justified in concluding that the mourning of Zechariah 12:12 has a double fulfillment-the mourning of repentance and the mourning as a result of judgment. The coming of Christ that occurred after His death and resurrection in the first century was not a bodily coming but a coming of His Holy Spirit to convict and convert or to destroy. The glorified King employs the sword of the Spirit and the rod of His anger. (5) The Greek word for "see" in this passage (*eido*) does not always mean to observe with one's eyes. It can mean to know, perceive or understand (e.g., LXX. Isa. 6:10; Jn. 12:40; Mk. 1:44; Lk. 17:22; Ac. 26:18; Rom. 15:21; etc.). In the Gospel of John Jesus told the disciples, "A little while, and you will not see Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me, because I go to the Father" (Jn. 16:16). In this passage Christ equates the disciples observing the spiritual power exhibited at Pentecost as seeing Him. The coming of the Holy Spirit is a coming of the Spirit of Christ. The generation of Jews who crucified the Messiah would not literally see Jesus' body but they would observe the power of Jesus' Spirit. "[T]hey would *understand* that His coming would mean wrath upon the land."<sup>18</sup> (6) In Matthew 26:64 Jesus says directly to the high priest at His trial, "hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power, and coming on the clouds of heaven." The word "hereafter" means that Jewish leaders would in the near future (while they were still alive) witness the visible effects of the Messiah's enthronement. These wicked unbelieving men would see the events of Pentecost and its aftermath as well as the destruction of their beloved city and temple. (7) The time indicator of Matthew 24:34 place this "coming on the clouds" within the life time of the Jews alive when our Lord spoke these words. This rules out a visible, literal, *bodily* coming to earth. The second *bodily* coming is still future.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 447 as quoted in John L. Bray, *Matthew 24 Fulfilled*, 158.

<sup>17</sup> George L. Murray, *Millennial Studies*, 124 as quoted in John L. Bray, 160.

<sup>18</sup> David Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance: An Exposition of the Book of Revelation*, (Tyler, TX: Dominion Press, 1987), 66.

<sup>19</sup> It is rather ironic that the Olivet Discourse is an excellent section of Scripture to use to disprove full preterism. Hyper-preterists insist that there can be only two comings of Christ and that Matthew 24 describes the second coming. But as we have examined Matthew 24 we have seen that Jesus did not literally or bodily return in A.D. 70. His coming was a coming in judgment; a spiritual coming that is a sign that He is at the right hand of God ruling the nations. When the Westminster Standards refer to the two comings of Christ (e.g., Larger Catechism answer to question number 53) it is speaking of His two *bodily-literal* comings. Both dispensationalists and hyper-preterists make the mistake of either ignoring comings that are divine visitations of judgment in history or of confounding a divine visitation with the second bodily coming. Contrary to hyper-preterism the Bible teaches *very clearly* that: (1) There is a future second *bodily* coming of Christ (e.g., Ac. 1:11; 1 Th. 4:16; 1 Cor. 15:23-24; 1 Jn. 3:2, etc.). (2)

## Gathering the Elect

After Jesus comes in judgment, the elect are gathered together at the command of the Son of Man. “And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other” (Mt. 24:31). Once again we come to a passage that is often associated with the second *bodily* coming of Christ. Many believe that the angels float about gathering the resurrected saints to one place to stand before the judgment seat of Christ. If one has repeatedly been taught that this is what this particular passage means, then any attempt to apply it to something else will usually be viewed as ludicrous. There are two reasons, however, as to why our Lord’s statement does not apply to the final advent but rather applies to the ingathering of the elect throughout history by the preaching of the gospel.

First, the Greek word *angelos* translated angels (in virtually all English translations) can be, and in this passage, should be translated as messengers. In the New Testament this word is frequently used to describe preachers of the gospel. John the Baptist is called a messenger (*angelos*) three times (Mk. 1:2; Mt. 11:10; Lk. 7:24, 27). Jesus’ disciples are referred to as messengers in Luke 9:52. Paul uses the word *angelos* to describe the messenger of Satan that came to buffet him. James calls the Jewish spies hidden by Rahab messengers (Ja. 2:25). In the book of Revelation, John is to write down the prophecy of Jesus Christ and send it to the angels of the seven churches in Asia Minor. The letters to the seven churches are not to be given to seven spirit beings but to the seven ministers or preachers of the gospel. It is the preachers that have been given the task of gathering the elect from the four corners of the earth. They are Christ’s messengers. The world-wide mission of preaching the gospel to all nations given to the apostles at the great commission (Mt. 28:18) is empowered at Pentecost and then forever separated from Judaism and the old covenant order at the destruction of Jerusalem. Christ’s enthronement leads directly to two important events that further the worldwide expansion of the kingdom of God: the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the destruction of the Jewish nation (the Old Testament expression of God’s kingdom). In the last section we noted that both Pentecost and the destruction of Jerusalem are organically connected to the coming of the kingdom with power.

Second, Jesus’ language of gathering the elect from the four winds is an allusion to a phrase from the Old Testament prophets (e.g., Isa. 11:12; Zech. 2:6). If we examine the manner in which this gathering phraseology is used and how it is applied to the new covenant era by the prophets, will we see that the gathering of the elect refers not to people being gathered for the judgment at the second *bodily* coming but to a progressive gathering by preaching the gospel throughout history. Before we consider the prophetic passages we should consider the background of the gathering idea in the law.

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There is a future universal, public judgment (e.g., Mt. 11:23-24; 12:41; 13:30 ff.; 25:32 ff.; Jn. 5:28-29; Rom. 2:16; Rev. 20:11-15; etc.) (3) There is a future time when everyone is literally resurrected from the dead (Dan. 12:2-3; Jn. 5:28-29; 1 Cor. 15:12 ff.; Phil. 3:21; etc.). (4) There is a future time when the whole created order is *fully* redeemed and restored to perfection (e.g., Rom. 8:21; 2 Pet. 3:7, 10-13; Rev. 22:3; Col. 1:18-20; Ac. 3:21). (5) There is a future time when death itself is completely abolished (1 Cor. 15:26, 54). (6) There is a future time when believers who are alive at Christ’s coming are caught up in the air to forever be with Him (1 Th. 4:17). (7) There is a future time when Jesus Christ hands the kingdom over to the Father (1 Cor. 15:24, 28). None of these events occurred in A.D. 70 and all of these events are still in our future in the twenty-first century. Full, hyper or radical preterism is a *dangerous* and *heretical* teaching.

The first discussion of a gathering of Israel comes after a long section dealing with the blessings and curses of violating the covenant in Deuteronomy 28 to 30. God tells the covenant people what will happen if they repent and return to the Lord. “[T]he Lord your God will bring you back from captivity, and have compassion on you, and gather you again from all the nations where the Lord your God has scattered you. If any of you are driven out to the farthest parts under heaven, from there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there He will bring you” (Dt. 30:3-4). Note, that gathering the covenant people in this passage has nothing to do with the final judgment. It refers to a restoration of covenant blessings in the promised land. The phrase from “the farthest parts under heaven” is virtually identical to Jesus’ statement in Matthew 24:31. Given the Old Testament usage of this phrase one should not argue that it refers to gathering up saints that are in heaven.

The theme of gathering together the people of God who are dispersed is used by the prophets with a new twist. In the book of Isaiah in the very chapter which depicts the Messiah as ruling (chapter 11) the gathering of the remnant of Israel and Judah in the new covenant era is merged with the gathering of the Gentiles. Isaiah 11:11-12 reads, “It shall come to pass in that day that the Lord shall set His hand again the second time to recover the remnant of His people who are left, from Assyria and Egypt, from Pathros and Cush, from Elam and Shinar, from Hamath and the islands of the sea. He will set up a banner for the nations, and will assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth.” Young writes,

The Messiah would be a standard to which the Gentiles might rally. Here also we learn that the Lord will lift up a sign for the benefit of Israel. The Messiah will be a drawing point for the heathen, and through the work of Christian preaching and Christian missionaries He will draw them unto Himself. How important, particularly in this day and age, therefore, that the church send forth to the four corners of the earth missionaries who are aflame with the truth that apart from the true Messiah, Jesus, there is no salvation!...Isaiah does not intend us to understand that the earth actually has four corners. He is merely employing a manner of speaking taken from the idea of referring to the four corners of a garment as indicating the entirety of the garment. Our Lord was reflecting upon this passage when He said, “And he shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other” (Matt. 24:31).<sup>20</sup>

With Isaiah’s prophecy regarding the messianic kingdom in mind, note the prophecy of the high priest regarding Jesus. “[H]e prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for that nation only, but also that He would gather together in one the children of God who were scattered abroad” (Jn. 11:51-52). In the new covenant, Christ has made both Jews and Gentiles into one body (1 Cor. 12:12; Eph. 4:4), one temple (Eph. 2:21), the church. As Paul says, “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” (Eph. 2:19-21; cf. 14-22; 3:6).

Another passage that speaks of a gathering together of God’s people is Isaiah 27:12-13: “And it shall come to pass in that day that the Lord will thresh, from the channel of the River to the Brook of Egypt; and you will be gathered one by one, O you children of Israel. So it shall be in that day: The great trumpet will be blown; they will come, who are about to perish in the land

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<sup>20</sup> E. J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 1:396-397.

of Assyria, and they who are outcasts in the land of Egypt.” Note that this gathering is preceded by the trumpet blast as in Matthew 24:31. The trumpet blast is a call to gather together. This passage (like Matthew 24:31) does not refer to a gathering together on the day of judgment. The imagery of threshing grain is used to describe the gathering of God's people out of heathen and hostile nations. The phrase “one by one” indicates a progressive gathering. Although this passage is not as clear as the one considered above, it is likely that Isaiah speaks of a new covenant gathering. Young writes, “It is necessary to state the purpose of the re-gathering. It is that the dispersed ones may worship the Lord; it is for the purpose of accomplishing something spiritual, not that the Jews may establish a political state in Palestine. This worship is to be conducted in the mount of holiness in Jerusalem. Isaiah reflects upon his earlier usages, in 24:23, and 25:6, 7 and 10. This is the great and central purpose of the return. The first thing to be accomplished, indeed, the purpose of the entire ingathering, is that the dispersed ones may worship the Lord in Jerusalem. In the light of this description it would seem that the verse refers, not primarily to the exile, but to the return of sinners in Jesus Christ. It is in Him that God has gathered into one His people scattered throughout the earth. 'That in the dispensation of the fullness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him' (Eph. 1:10).”<sup>21</sup> This theme is continued in Isaiah chapter sixty. “The Gentiles shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising. Lift up your eyes all around, and see: they all gather together, they come to you” (vs. 3-4; cf. 60:1-16).

The gathering of the elect from the four winds of heaven and the bringing in of the Gentiles to make one unified people in the kingdom of God is especially clear in Zechariah 2. “‘Up, up! Flee from the land of the north,’ says the Lord; ‘for I have spread you abroad like the four winds of heaven,’ says the Lord.... ‘Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion! For behold, I am coming and I will dwell in your midst,’ says the Lord. ‘Many nations shall be joined to the Lord in that day, and they shall become My people. And I will dwell in your midst. Then you will know that the Lord of hosts has sent Me to you’” (vs. 6, 10-11). In the new covenant era the elect of all nations will be gathered together with the penitents of Israel that are scattered throughout the nations. This will be accompanied by God coming and dwelling in the midst of His people. This coming should not be understood as the incarnation of Christ in which He dwelt physically in the land of Israel but rather as the coming of His Spirit at Pentecost.

The gathering of the elect from the four corners under heaven by messengers (i.e. gospel preachers) began in earnest at Pentecost when Christ sent His Holy Spirit to empower the church for victory. In Acts chapter 2 it is emphasized that “Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven” (v. 5) are present to hear the manifestation of the baptism in the Holy Spirit and the gospel message. Peter told them, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call” (Ac. 2:38). After Peter's sermon three thousand souls were added to Christ's church. John Gill writes,

The Gospel will be preached in all nations, and multitudes will be converted, and embrace and profess the Christian religion, and join themselves to the churches of Christ, which, in the New Testament, is expressed by being joined to the Lord, Acts v. 13, 14, see Jer. 1.5. and Isa. lvi. 3, 6: and shall be my people; shall appear to be so, who before were not the people of God; did not profess themselves, and were not known to be, the people of God, though they secretly

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:252-253.

were in the counsel and covenant of God; but now, being called by grace, they become openly and manifestatively his people, 1 Pet. ii. 10: and I will dwell in the midst of thee; in the church, consisting of people of many nations, as well as Jews: and thou shalt know that the Lord of hosts hath sent me unto thee; to the Jews, as well as to the Gentiles.<sup>22</sup>

As the gospel went forth unto the Gentile nations the first Christian churches were usually composed of converted Jews of the diaspora as well as converted Gentiles. The gathering of the Gentiles is so intimately combined with the gathering of the Jewish remnant in the minds of the apostles that James referred to Paul's ministry among the Gentiles as a rebuilding of "the tabernacle of David which has fallen down" (Ac. 15:16). Christ's resurrection and enthronement leads to the gathering of the elect from all nations. "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations" (Mt. 28:18-19).

There is no question that the gathering of the elect is connected by Scripture to the Messiah's enthronement and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. The question that naturally arises regarding Matthew 24:31 is: "why is this ingathering connected to our Lord's coming in judgment on Jerusalem?" The answer to this question is twofold. First, as we noted earlier Jesus' ascension, enthronement, the pouring out of the Holy Spirit and the destruction of Jerusalem are all organically connected in Scripture. The empowerment to disciple the nations and the ability to destroy enemy nations are manifestations of Christ's kingship. Indeed, Pentecost and the destruction of Jerusalem were the two great signs of the Messiah's kingship and reign to that generation. Second, the destruction of Jerusalem brings to a full and complete end the covenant transfer from Israel to the multi-national church of Jesus Christ. The whole period from Pentecost to the destruction of Israel was unique in salvation history in that there was a brief overlap of two covenantal administrations. Even though the old order was brought to an end at Calvary when our Savior died as a blood sacrifice, God still gave a special priority to the Jewish nation and people in the preaching of the gospel for a whole generation. Not only was a major portion of missionary activity directed to Israel, but even the Jews of the diaspora throughout the Roman Empire received top priority. This apostolic practice explains why the apostle Paul as a set policy always presented the gospel to the Jews before turning to the Gentiles. "Then Paul and Barnabas grew bold and said, 'It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles'" (Ac. 13:46). When Paul and Barnabas say it was necessary, they mean the necessity of executing the divine plan and purpose with respect to preaching the gospel in that first generation. This was Paul's practice in Corinth (Ac. 18:6), Ephesus (Ac. 19:9) and Rome (Ac. 28:28). After preaching to the Jews of the diaspora in Rome in which only "some were persuaded" (Ac. 28:24) Paul quotes Isaiah's prophecy regarding the Jews' rejection of the gospel and says, "Therefore let it be known to you that the salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will hear it!" (Ac. 28:28). "*To the Gentiles*, literally, *the nations*, i.e. other nations."<sup>23</sup> The rejection of the gospel on the part of the Jews which led to the destruction of the Jewish nation led to a wider and more rapid spread of the gospel among the Gentile nations. The

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<sup>22</sup> John Gill, *An Exposition of the Books of the Prophets* (Streamwood, IL: Primitive Baptist Library, 1979), 2:686.

<sup>23</sup> J. A. Alexander, *Acts* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1963 [1857]), 494. In the generation from Pentecost to the destruction of Jerusalem even Jewish Christians were treated differently. They were given one generation to become accustomed to the new covenant order. This point explains why Paul gave Jewish believers the liberty of keeping old covenant holy days (cf. Rom. 14:5 ff.) Even Paul himself went to the temple to fulfill a vow apparently made before he was a Christian (cf. Ac. 21:26). When Israel was destroyed in A.D. 70 by the Romans, the transitional period was over.

destruction of Israel was a blessing for the whole world. Paul declared, "...their fall is riches for the world, their failure riches for the Gentiles....their being cast away is the reconciling of the world" (Rom. 11:12, 15). Charles Hodge writes,

The Jews, even those who were professors of Christianity, were, in the first place, very slow to allow the gospel to be preached to the Gentiles; and in the second, they appear almost uniformly to have desired to clog the gospel with the ceremonial observances of the law. This was one of the greatest hindrances to the progress of the cause of Christ during the apostolic age, and would, in all probability, have been a thousand-fold greater, had the Jews, as a nation, embraced the Christian faith. On both these accounts, the rejection of the Jews was incidentally a means of facilitating the progress of the gospel. Besides this, the punishment which befell them on account of their unbelief, involving the destruction of their nation and power, of course, prevented their being able to forbid the general preaching of the gospel, which they earnestly desired to do. 1 Thess. ii. 15, 16, "They please not God, and are contrary to all men; forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles, that they might be saved."<sup>24</sup>

Further, after the destruction of Israel Christianity was forever separated from its ties to the land of Israel and could now be seen as a true multi-national, pan-ethnic religion. Tasker writes, "It was in fact only after the old order ended with the destruction of the Temple that world evangelism by the Christian Church, now entirely separate from Judaism, could be conducted in earnest. Not till then could the *trumpet* of the gospel be sounded throughout the world. Not till then could the Son of man, having 'visited' the old Israel in judgment, *send his angels* (i.e. His messengers) *to gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other*, a result which could be obtained only when the gospel had been preached to the whole world (29-31)."<sup>25</sup>

After considering the Old Testament background of this passage and its theological import in the book of Acts and Romans, it is clear that Jesus is speaking figuratively of the great advance of the gospel through His messengers after Israel is destroyed. In that sense it was a procedure that followed His coming in judgment and still continues until the second bodily coming at the end of history.

## The Parable of the Fig Tree

After describing the manner (like lightning), the sign (the smoking ruins of Jerusalem) and the result (the Jews will mourn and the gospel will go forth to the whole world) of His coming in judgment. Jesus returns to the nearness of the fulfillment of His prophecy and the urgency of the matter by giving the disciples a parable. "Now learn this parable from the fig tree: when its branch has already become tender and puts forth leaves, you know that summer is near. So you also, when you see all these things, know that it is near-at the doors" (Mt.24:33)! Our Lord uttered these words on the Mount of Olives in the spring (near the Passover) at the time that fig trees were beginning to sprout new leaves. Unlike almond trees, which come to life in early spring, the fig tree becomes green in late spring, closer to summer. The disciples were likely sitting within sight of fig trees given the fact that the Mount of Olives at that time was noted for its fig trees. The point of this parable is that certain events (i.e. the signs or more specifically the

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<sup>24</sup> Charles Hodge, *Romans* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1972 [1835]), 361-362.

<sup>25</sup> R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 227.

immediate signs) are to convey the unmistakable message that the climax to Jesus' prophecy is about to take place. As the appearance of new leaves on a fig tree are a sign that summer is right around the corner, the signs of Jesus' coming indicate the city and temple are about to be destroyed.

This interpretation is supported in a number of ways. First, there is audience relevance. Christ says, "...when you see all these things." Our Lord is speaking to the disciples of His own generation not to a group of Christians living 2,000 years in the future. This is supported by the parallel account in Luke. "Now when these things begin to happen, look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption draws near" (Lk. 21:28). Gill writes, "...not the redemption of their souls from sin, Satan, the law, the world, death, and hell; for that was to be obtained, and was obtained, before any of these signs took place; nor the redemption of their bodies at the last day, in the resurrection, called the day of redemption; for this respects something that was to be, in the present generation..., but the deliverance of the apostles and other Christians, from the persecution of the Jews, which were very violent and held till these times, and then they were freed from them: or by *redemption* it is meant, the redeemer, the Son of man, who shall now come in power and glory, to destroy the Jews, and deliver his people...."<sup>26</sup>

Second, Christ uses the phrase "all these things" which hearkens back to the disciples' question in verse 3 as well as verse 8. The phrase "all these things" refers to events that portend the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, not the distant future second bodily coming of our Lord. "Jesus is here saying in effect that it will be certain that Jerusalem will fall when *all these things* (i.e. the appearance of the abomination of desolation, and the advent of false Messiahs, etc.) have become apparent, as it is certain that summer will follow when the first leaves are seen on the fig tree's tender branches."<sup>27</sup> Morison writes,

To what then does the expression "all these things" refer? The probability is that it is the echo and resumption of certain "things" which had kept afloat on the surface of the minds of the disciples, all through the Savior's apocalyptic conversation and inquiry, before He had given utterance to the general prophetic disclosures of the preceding context. They were the "things" indeed which had given occasion to that apocalypse...When then He here presumptively says, *When ye shall see "all these things,"* the reference is, as we apprehend, to the following effect, *When the woes which I had to utter in reference to the "scribes and Pharisees, hypocrite" (chap. xxiii. 13-36, 38, 39), begin to thicken upon the doomed people; when the temple itself shall be invaded, and its walls, massive though they be and apparently indestructible, become shattered; when the abomination of the desolation gets a footing within its sacred enclosure; and when all the natural accompaniments of such a tragedy are in progress; when ye shall see 'all these things,' then mark what follows.*<sup>28</sup>

Third, there is the time indicator given in the immediate context. "This generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place" (Mt. 24:34; cf. Mk. 13:30; Lk. 21:32). Jesus said to the disciples in plain, unambiguous speech, "this present generation will not die before all these things come to pass." Kik writes, "Here the Lord definitely limits 'all these things' to the contemporary generation. Previously he had employed the phrase in reference to the woes upon the scribes and Pharisees of his generation and in reference to the destruction of the Temple. Here there can be no question as to its reference to the predicted events and especially to the

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<sup>26</sup> John Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament* (Streamwood, IL: Primitive Baptist Library, 1979 [1809]), 1:701.

<sup>27</sup> R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 227.

<sup>28</sup> James Morison, *A Practical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 482-484.

destruction of the Temple for Jesus used the phrase (“See ye not all these things?”) when the disciples showed him the buildings of the Temple. Furthermore, when Jesus prophesied that not one stone would be left upon another, the disciples asked, ‘When shall these things be?’ within the context ‘all these things’ employed in the parable of the Fig Tree and the time text include all the events enumerated by Christ in answering the question of the disciples. If he meant something entirely different Jesus would have indicated it or else there would be utter confusion in the minds of the disciples.”<sup>29</sup> Further, after examining how our Lord’s apocalyptic speech (i.e. His use of the Old Testament prophetic imagery of judgment) fits in perfectly with the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, there is no need to torture, twist and convolute the plain contextual meaning of “this generation.”

Fourth, the parallel passage in Luke clarifies the punch line of this parable. Matthew and Mark both say “when you see all these things, know that it is near-at the doors” (Mt. 24:33; Mk. 13:29b). Luke, however, writing for a Gentile audience says, “when you see these things happening, know that the kingdom of God is near” (Lk. 21:31). Does Luke mean that when you see these things the second bodily coming of Christ is near? No. The coming of the kingdom of God in Luke refers to the ascended enthroned Messiah’s exercise of power in the destruction of Jerusalem. Note how the *identical* phrase is used in Luke 9:27: “But I tell you truly, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the kingdom of God.” The parallel in Matthew says, “the Son of Man coming in His kingdom” (Mt. 16:28) while Mark reads, “till they see the kingdom of God present with power” (Mk. 9:1). As we noted earlier in this study, Luke is referring to something far enough off into the future that many disciples would be dead while some would still be alive to witness the kingdom present with power. This rules out the transfiguration and resurrection, which were in the immediate future, as well as the second bodily coming when all the disciples would be long dead and buried. The kingdom of God was present while Jesus walked the earth (Mt. 12:28; Lk. 16:16, 17:21). However, the kingdom was not present with power until the resurrection (Mt. 28:19; Rom. 1:4), ascension and enthronement of the Messiah (Dan. 7:13-14; Ps. 2:6 ff.; 110; etc.). Since Jesus Himself connects His ascension and enthronement to the right hand of Power with the destruction of Jerusalem (Mt. 24:30; 26:64) the nearness of the kingdom of God in Luke refers to a manifestation of kingdom power (i.e. the destruction of Israel by the enthroned Mediator). “The destruction of Jerusalem, witnessed by S. John and perhaps a few of those present, swept away the remains of the Old Dispensation and left the Gospel in possession of the field.”<sup>30</sup>

Before turning our attention to the time text we need to briefly consider an erroneous yet extremely popular modern interpretation of the parable of the fig tree. Various dispensational authors and some television preachers (e.g., Hal Lindsey, Jack Van Impe, Chuck Smith, etc.) have argued that the parable of the fig tree teaches that the great sign of the second *bodily* coming of Christ is Israel’s re-establishment as a nation in 1948. The fig tree we are told is a “historic symbol of national Israel.” The budding and setting forth of new leaves (according to this view) represents the rebirth of national Israel. Therefore, the generation alive in 1948 when Israel became a nation will not pass away before the second bodily coming of Christ occurs.

Although this interpretation is very popular today, there are many reasons why we must reject it as unscriptural. First, there is not a shred of evidence within the immediate or broader context that our Lord has the rebirth of Israel in mind. Jesus is using the fig tree getting leaves in the spring as a simple illustration of the fact that when the signs that *He has already discussed*

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<sup>29</sup> J. Marcellus Kik, *An Eschatology of Victory*, 155.

<sup>30</sup> Alfred Plummer, *The Gospel According to S. Luke* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1981 [1896]), 250.

come to pass, His coming in judgment will occur very soon. The Hal Lindsey interpretation wrenches the fig tree parable out of its context and assumes the fig tree's new leaves represent something *completely new* that will occur in the distant future. The idea that Christ is bringing in a new and separate sign is disproved by the immediate context where our Lord says, "when you see all these things [plural], know that it is near-at the doors!" (Mt. 24:33; cf. Mk. 13:28; Lk. 21:31 reads, "when you see all these things [plural] coming to pass...").<sup>31</sup> The fig tree parable has reference to *a number of things* coming to pass, *not just one thing*--the rebirth of Israel. This point also proves that the fig tree does not represent the nation of Israel in this passage. Further, in the Olivet discourse, Jesus had already identified the central sign of the nearness of His coming in judgment as "the abomination of desolation."

Second, the Hal Lindsay interpretation of the fig tree assumes the radical, futurist, dispensational understanding of the Olivet Discourse. We have already seen that all the things discussed by our Lord up to verse 34 refer to the contemporary generation that will be alive to witness the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. Jesus is describing events that took place prior to A.D. 70. Hal Lindsay's contention that verse 34 ("Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place") refers to a generation alive over nineteen centuries in the future, completely ignores the plain grammatical meaning of Christ's words, audience relevance and the context of the passage. His interpretation is completely arbitrary because he is forcing the passage into an erroneous system of eschatology.

Third, that Jesus is just using the budding fig tree as an analogy of the closeness of summer (i.e. the destruction of Israel) and not as a symbol of the rebirth of Israel is proved by the parallel account in Luke. The evangelist writes, "Look at the fig tree, *and all the trees*. When *they* are already budding, you see and know for yourselves that summer is now near" (21:29-30). If our Lord is making a cryptic prediction regarding the future rebirth of Israel in Matthew 24:32 then what, we ask, does the rebudding of these other trees (plural) refer? Are there several other nations that must be reborn before the second coming of Christ? No, of course not! The fact that Jesus includes trees in general proves that this passage has nothing to do with the formation of the secular, heathen, anti-Christian state called Israel in 1948.

Fourth, the phrase "it is near-at the doors" means that the event to which Christ refers will occur in *the immediate future*. That is it will likely happen in a few months at the most. When Jesus says "this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place" (Mt. 24:34), He means the generation alive at the time He uttered the prophecy, *not* the generation to witness the budding of the fig tree. The Olivet discourse was spoken some time in or around A.D. 30. Thus, a person who heard this prophecy could expect its fulfillment by A.D. 70, which is precisely what occurred. The budding of the fig tree, however, refers to the disciples seeing the signs come to pass. This places the fulfillment of the fig tree analogy, at the most, only months away from the complete destruction of Jerusalem. Of the account in Mark 13:29, Lane writes, "The application of the parable in verse 29 places the accent on proximity more vigorously: 'it is near, at the door.' The catastrophe of sacrilege that will profane the Temple (verse 14) will enable the disciples to know that the destruction of the Temple is imminent in the same manner that the coming of summer is imminent to the moment when the fig tree covers

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<sup>31</sup> Why do most translations say "it is near" rather than "He is near"? Ralph Earle offers an excellent explanation. He writes, "[verse] 33 **It** in Greek, no pronoun expressed-as in Latin, it is included in the verb-so *estin* can be translated either 'it is' (KJV, NIV) or 'He is' (NASB). But since the parallel passage in Luke (21:31) says 'the kingdom of God is near,' it would seem best to use 'it' rather than 'He'" (*Word Meanings in the New Testament* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1974], 22).

itself with leaves. In verse 29 the words ‘when you see these things happening’ appear to be an intentional echo of the beginning of verse 14, ‘when you see the appalling sacrilege.’ That catastrophe, which will take place in the Temple, will be the signal for flight from unheard of distress. The parable and its applications invite the reader of the Gospel to see in the misfortunes which will overtake Jerusalem the evidence that its devastation and ruin is near.”<sup>32</sup> But, according to Hal Lindsay the statement “it is near-at the doors” does not teach immediate proximity but can and does refer to several decades. Such an interpretation, however, violates the plain meaning of Jesus’ words. “A single reason is in view, not forty or fifty seasons.”<sup>33</sup> According to Hal Lindsey the prophetic time clock that is counting down toward the day of our Lord’s second bodily coming began in May 1949, 53 years ago! It ought to be obvious to any unbiased interpreter that the Hal Lindsey interpretation of the budding fig tree is totally off the mark.

Fifth, the idea that the fig tree represents the restoration of the Jewish nation cannot be demonstrated from any place in Scripture. Interestingly, if one compares every place in the Bible where figs or a fig tree is used to illustrate something regarding the nation of Israel, every instance is associated with judgment (cf. Jer. 8:13; 24:1-10; 29:17; Joel 1:7; Hos. 9:10, 16; cf. Mic. 7:1-6. There are good figs in Jeremiah 24:2-5. However the good figs merely represent those captives taken to Babylon who will be allowed to return after 70 years.) In Mark 11:12-14, 20-21, Israel is compared to a barren fruit tree. “In this context the fig tree symbolizes Israel in Jesus’ day, and what happens to the tree-the terrible fate that inevitably awaited Jerusalem.”<sup>34</sup> Similarly, Luke 13:6-9 (the parable of the unfruitful fig tree) compares Israel in the days of our Lord to a barren fig tree. The barren fruit tree illustration makes it abundantly clear that *as a special covenant nation* Israel would *never* bear the fruits of righteousness again. “Jesus said to it, ‘Let no one eat fruit from you ever again’” (Mk. 11:14). Using the symbolism of the barren fig tree Christ spoke of God’s judicial action against the covenant nation that would forever remove her covenant status as Jehovah’s special nation. The means of grace (the word and sacraments) as well as discipline and government passed completely to the church of Jesus Christ. If Jews are to minister fruits of righteousness they can only do so by joining the multinational, pan-ethnic body of Christ. The nation of modern Israel has no more significance in God’s eyes than Japan or Brazil. The church is the true Israel of God (Eph. 2:14, 19, 21; 3:6; Ac. 10:47; 15:14-17; Mt. 21:43; Rom. 3:29, 30; 4:13; 9:6-8, 23-33; Gal. 3:7, 28-29; 5:6; 6:15, 16; 1 Pet. 1:1-2; Rev. 3:9; etc.). Further, the “New Testament makes it very clear that the preferred symbols for spiritual Israel are the vine (John 15:1-11), the olive tree (Rom. 11:16-24), the lump of dough (11:16), and the flock (Isa. 40:11; Jer. 23:2; Mt. 26:31; Lk. 12:32; Jn. 10:16; 1 Pet. 5:2).”<sup>35</sup> If Jesus wanted to tell the disciples about something as dramatic and important as the rebirth of national Israel, one

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<sup>32</sup> William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, 479.

<sup>33</sup> Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness*, 179.

<sup>34</sup> William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, 400. Lane writes, “The explanation was already put forth by Victor of Antioch, in the oldest existing commentary on Mark, that Jesus had ‘used the fig tree to set forth the judgment that was about to fall on Jerusalem.’ This is certainly the evangelist’s understanding of the episode, for in the Gospel of Mark Jesus’ action in the Temple is firmly embedded within the fig tree incident. The a-b-a structure of Ch. 11:12-21 (fig tree-cleansing the Temple-fig tree) serves to provide a mutual commentary on these two events. Just as the leaves of the fig tree concealed the fact that there was no fruit to enjoy, so the magnificence of the Temple and its ceremony conceals the fact that Israel has not brought forth the fruit of righteousness demanded by God. Both incidents have the character of a prophetic sign which warns of judgment to fall upon Israel for honoring God with their lips when their heart was far from him (cf. Ch. &:6) (*Ibid.*).

<sup>35</sup> Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness*, 179.

could expect Him to do so in a manner that would be clear enough to be understood by the disciples. (This author consulted over 40 commentaries on the synoptic gospels from the 1600s to the 1980s from Reformed, Lutheran, Baptist and Modernist scholars and *not one* saw a connection between the new leaves on the fig tree and the rebirth of national Israel.)

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