

The Olivet Discourse: Mostly Fulfilled or Mostly Unfulfilled?

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The Olivet discourse has given rise to very different interpretations. Broadly, the difference lies in how we understand the great tribulation mentioned in Matthew 24:21, Mark 13:19 and Luke 21:23. Is this great tribulation a period of suffering lasting (now) for some 2000 years? Or is it a brief time of exceptional world suffering and turmoil shortly before the second coming of Jesus?

This writer finds the former of these views simply incredible. In the interests of clarity I must state that the “great tribulation,” as distinct from tribulation in general (Acts 14:22, etc.), cannot possibly refer to a period of time spanning millennia. Jesus’ discourse works out of Daniel (Matt. 24:15) and Daniel describes the same unprecedented “great tribulation” as a period of intense suffering in connection with a final king of the North, and just before the resurrection (Dan. 12:1-2). Revelation likewise speaks of “the great tribulation” as a future period of distress (Rev. 7:14). To disconnect these three references to the “great tribulation” seems to me to be an improper exegetical move.

I think that there is a systematic error at work in the view which supposes that Jesus announced the great tribulation as the period of suffering initiated by the fall of the temple in AD 70, making the great tribulation a continuous period to be ended by the future cosmic signs of Matthew 24:29 and the arrival of Jesus. The most basic of all principles of hermeneutics is that parallel passages — passages marked by the same distinctive key terms — must be connected, not disconnected. When Jesus in Matthew 24:21 cites verbatim the words of Daniel 12:1, and when Jesus in the immediate context stresses his dependence on Daniel (Matt. 24:15; Dan. 9:27; 11:31; 12:11), it appears to me to be an impossible hermeneutical strategy to *disconnect* Jesus’ words about the “great tribulation” from the reference to Daniel 12:1. But this is what historicism has to do. That disconnection strikes me as being rather similar to the preterist technique of positing two completely different parousias — one in the teaching of Jesus in

Matthew 24 as a reference to AD 70 and an entirely different event in Paul's writings, as the future visible arrival of Jesus to raise the dead.

The "problem" for exegetes has been to try to sort out, in the answer of Jesus to his disciples, what elements refer to the events of AD 70 (if any) and what to the parousia of Jesus in the future. One attempt to solve this problem is to say that the abomination of desolation, which all agree triggers the time of great tribulation, was the presence of Roman soldiers in the temple in AD 70. This event, the abomination, would on this theory initiate the time of great tribulation in AD 70. Matthew clearly states that the appearance of cosmic signs and the arrival of Jesus will follow that great tribulation "*immediately*" (Matt. 24:29). This all-important time marker — "immediately after" — allows for no gap between the end of the great tribulation and the arrival of Jesus in glory. If then, the abomination of desolation and great tribulation describe the invasion of AD 70, then it must follow logically that the great tribulation has been unceasing since that date, since the text expressly states that Jesus will arrive "immediately after the *tribulation of those days*" (Matt. 24:29), referring to the great tribulation which begins in Matthew 24:21, triggered by the abomination of verse 15.

The difficulty of imagining the great tribulation as an unbroken period of nearly two millennia (so far) has troubled others, who hold nevertheless to the idea that the abomination appeared in AD 70. The great tribulation, they have felt, is rather obviously not an extended period, certainly not thousands of years. How then to fill the gap between AD 70 and the future parousia? This other school has had to posit that the *heavenly signs* of Matthew 24:29 are a figurative description of the various political upheavals which have characterized the long interval between AD 70 and the present. These heavenly signs will continue until Jesus appears at his parousia, immediately after the AD 70 tribulation and the centuries-long supposed political disturbances described, as they think, by the darkening of the sun, etc.

I find entirely unsatisfactory the idea that the heavenly signs are not to be taken literally. It is quite unconvincing that heavenly signs have lasted for nearly two thousand years. Equally problematic is the extension of the great tribulation over that span of time, beginning in AD 70.

I propose that if well-established hermeneutical procedures are followed we will conclude that Jesus spoke of a brief episode of unprecedented worldwide suffering just before the cosmic signs, which are to be taken literally, and his parousia which will likewise be visible — and will lead, as all premillenarians agree, to the established rule of the Messiah on earth on the restored throne of David (Acts 1:6; 3:21) in the Kingdom of God. I think that Jesus supported what we now call a classical premillennial view of eschatology but certainly never spoke of any *pre-tribulation* rapture of the saints, which is a very modern idea, since the 1830s. Jesus advised flight to the hills by the Christian elect when the abomination was sighted (Matt. 24:15, 16). This would make no sense at all if he

envisaged a pre-tribulation departure to heaven. Furthermore, the gathering of the elect to be with Christ happens *after* the tribulation, not before (Matt. 24:29-31).

The introduction to the Olivet discourse — and above all the question of the disciples to which Jesus responded — are all-important as the *context* to Jesus' discourse. Equally important are the exegetical links to the book of Daniel to which Jesus directs us expressly. Failure to follow the Master's interpretative instructions in regard to the abomination has been a major factor in confusing Jesus' point of view on the future. The abomination is to be read not out of the history book but out of the Bible, and this means taking with utmost seriousness the priceless interpretative clues given by Jesus, who said: "When you see the abomination of desolation standing where he³ ought not to (let the reader understand)..." (Mark 13:14). "When you see the abomination of desolation which was spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in a holy place (let the reader understand)..." (Matt. 24:15).

It would be a major mistake to "cherry pick" the data here and opt for *only one* of Daniel's references to the abomination, and in fact the least obvious and direct of them, rather than taking in the full range of Danielic reference to the abomination. When Jesus referred in Matthew 24:15 to the Danielic abomination he did not say, "Now I mean the event in Daniel 9:27 but not the event of 11:31 and 12:11"! But commentators have made a choice to disregard Jesus' verbatim reference to 11:31 and 12:11. They have thus discarded the keys to understanding Jesus' mind on this point.

The exact phrase to which Jesus referred is in Daniel 12:11 where the angel gives important information about the lapse of time foreseen between the setting up of the abomination (Dan. 11:31) and the completion of all the events (12:7) of those chapters, i.e., the death of the final king of the North (11:45), the tribulation and the resurrection of the dead (12:1-2). Daniel 11:31 combined with 12:11 gives us the chronological data which we need in order to place the abomination in the right place in prophecy. The abomination according to this information appears some 3½ years before the end of the age. This rules out all possibility of its application to AD 70. (AD 70 may in retrospect be viewed as some sort of similar event, but certainly not the event described expressly by Jesus or Daniel.)

J.J. Prasch in *The Final Words of Jesus* writes:

Western hermeneutics misunderstand the end-time prophecy, seeing it merely in terms of prediction and fulfillment. The ancient Jewish concept of prophecy saw it as a pattern being recapitulated. The idea is crucial in understanding the errors of dominionism [the notion that the church is to establish the Kingdom before the parousia] and restorationism [a similar view that Christians can take over the world in the absence of the coming

³ Note the masculine participle describing the abomination and a reference thus to a *person*.

Messiah], which argue that the last days are over, having all happened in a literal sense in AD 70.⁴

Though AD 70 saw a destruction of the temple, the pattern of events outlined by Daniel, from which Jesus worked, expects a future and final end-time period of trouble and destruction of the temple which do not correspond with the events of AD 70.

The less direct reference to the abomination is found in Daniel 9:27 and it occurs within the span of the last heptad or seven-year period in that prophecy. The fact that 11:31 and 12:11 have established where the abomination belongs chronologically helps us to read the Daniel 9:27 description of the abomination correctly. It fills the last half of the last seven-year period, thus harmonizing exactly with the time period provided by Daniel 11:31 and 12:11. Daniel 8:13 likewise speaks of “the abomination of rebellion” and the event is connected with a leader who arises from the final form of the Greek/Syrian empire. Daniel 8 is formally a prediction of the “time of the end” (vv. 17, 19) and cannot therefore have been fulfilled in BC times. The relegation of Daniel 8 to BC times we consider to be a major mistake in the interpretation of prophecy. The “time of the end” in Daniel and other apocalyptic literature is a well-known phrase for the supreme period of distress preceding the arrival of the Kingdom of God in power. Volz’s compendium of Jewish eschatological teachings has collected a mass of information relative to the “letzte böse Zeit” (the final evil time).⁵ By no means can this describe a period lasting centuries or two millennia.

The abomination of desolation of Jesus and Daniel will not fit in AD 70. There was no lapse of 1290 days (Dan. 12:11) between the appearance of the abomination in AD 70 (interpreters of the “historical” school differ as to exactly what the abomination was in AD 70) and the coming of Christ in the future.

Confirmation of this scheme is found in Jesus’ reference to the absolutely unprecedented period of extreme suffering in which, were those days not cut short, no flesh would be saved alive. I cannot believe that a period which God cuts short in view of its extreme agony, and to spare the extermination of humanity, can refer to 2000 years! This is a distress which threatens to destroy mankind. The great tribulation is defined by Mark as “those days in which there will be such tribulation as has not been from the beginning of creation which God created until now and never will be” (Mark 13:19). In “those days” it will be distressful in the extreme for “those who are with child and are nursing babies” (Mark 13:17). Mark says that those days taken as a whole, not just their initiation, will be days of appalling distress. Such language is strikingly inappropriate for the condition of the world over 2000 years!

⁴ St. Matthew Publishing, 1999, 20.

⁵ Volz, *Judische Eschatologie* von Daniel bis Akiba, Verlag J.C.B. Mohr, 1903, 173-187.

The great tribulation is hardly fulfilled by the invasion and destruction of Jerusalem by Romans in AD 70 when certainly not “all flesh” was threatened. Furthermore God will “shorten those days,” the days of the great tribulation. This can hardly be a description of the condition of the world since AD 70 until the present time. Such conditions have certainly not been ongoing all these years. Jesus promised to return “*immediately after* the tribulation of those days,” the days described as times of appalling difficulty (Matt. 24:29).

There can be no doubt at all that Jesus was not speaking of a millennia-long tribulation initiated in AD 70. Once again Jesus’ Old Testament references must supply the right understanding. He has been referring to Daniel (Matt. 24:15), and now he cites verbatim a text which likewise describes the time of unparalleled suffering. The text is found in Daniel 12:1, and once again the period described fits perfectly in the final end of the age events. It is a brief period in connection with the *resurrection of the dead* (Dan. 12:2), which as the New Testament makes clear everywhere follows the tribulation and the heavenly signs.

Taking seriously the directed links to Daniel we establish the fact that the great tribulation belongs at the very end of the present age. It is that tribulation which Jesus sees as the climax of the present wicked world system, to be relieved only by his appearance in power and glory “immediately after the tribulation of those days” (Matt. 24:29).

The Question of the Disciples as the Logical Basis for Jesus’ Reply

If next we consider the question which prompted this magnificent discourse of Jesus on the events which would signal his second coming, we find our thesis confirmed.

All three Synoptic Gospels, as we know, report the very same discourse. It was given as all say on the Mount of Olives, just before the Lord’s death. There are minor differences between the accounts (Luke differs in vocabulary from Mark and Matthew at certain points). But the structure and substance of the discourse is given by all three confirming witnesses. This is true, naturally enough, also of the report of the disciples’ opening question.

Matthew records it like this: “As he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, ‘Tell us, when will this be, and what will be *the sign* of your coming and the end of the age?’” Mark words the same question as follows: “And as he sat on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter and James and John and Andrew asked him privately, ‘Tell us, when will this be, and what will be *the sign* when all these things are to be accomplished?’” Luke 21:5-7: “As some spoke of the temple, how it was adorned with noble stones and offerings, he said, ‘As for these things which you see, the days will come when there shall not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.’”

And they asked him, "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be *the sign* when this is about to take place?"

It would be an extraordinary "pulling apart" of the information to suppose that *only Matthew* has included a question about the second coming. As all agree, large sections of Jesus' answer in all three accounts describe the second coming. Jesus' answer corresponds beautifully to the question posed. We must therefore reject the suggestion that Luke and Mark omitted any mention of a question relative to the second coming and had only a fall of the temple in Jerusalem in AD 70 in mind. If Mark and Luke omit a question about the parousia, they certainly do not omit reference in the response of Jesus to the parousia. The natural way to read the question as reported by Matthew, Mark and Luke is to see it as a question about the fall of the temple in connection with the second coming. All three versions of the question speak of a *sign*. They seek information about clear evidence of the impending parousia. This, as we know, did not happen in AD 70.

Matthew has defined this as a sign of the parousia (Matt. 24:3). The disciples imply that the fall of the temple and the second coming are parts of the same event. Their supposition is based on a common understanding of Daniel's prophecy. It was Daniel who spoke of the abomination and the great tribulation as contained within the last 1290 days of the present age (Dan. 11:31; 12:7-11). Jesus does nothing at all to disturb the disciples' assumption. Nowhere in the discourse does he indicate a huge lapse of time between the fall of the temple and his appearance in glory at his parousia. The attempts of expositors to create a break in Jesus' reply have failed. There is no agreement as to where that break should be. The fact is that there is no such break. Jesus concentrates on his parousia and the events immediately preceding it. The events of AD 70 obviously do not (as we now know) provide any kind of indication of an impending parousia. Unless the "great tribulation" is an identifiable period of time, rather than just a statement about trouble over 2000 years, Jesus will have given no certain sign that the parousia is near. Historicism thus deprives the Olivet discourse of any meaning in terms of a definite warning that the second coming is close. From a historicist's point of view, if the great tribulation has been in progress since AD 70, any point of time in the past 2000 years could be taken as evidence of the immediate arrival of Jesus. Thus a "sign" of his coming would be no sign at all, and the prophecy would be emptied of its whole point.

It is in harmony with the united testimony of the whole discourse and its introductory question that the same question was implied by all three accounts. This means that when Mark and Luke record the question "What will be *the sign* when all these things are to be accomplished?" (Mark) and "What will be *the sign* when all this is about to take place?" (Luke), they are simply providing a variant on Matthew's "What will be *the sign of your coming* and of the end of the age?" The question, therefore, "When will all these things be accomplished?" is a

question about the final fulfillment of prophecy. The words are cited, in fact, almost verbatim from Daniel 12:7, where as we have seen the data about the abomination is also found (12:11; cp. 11:31). Daniel's "all these things are to be fulfilled" is echoed exactly in the words of Mark, showing that the question about "all these things being fulfilled" (Mark 13:4) is a question not about AD 70 (as it turns out) but about the end of the age and the parousia, just as Matthew says (Matt. 24:3).⁶

It is a mistake to charge the disciples with ignorance or misunderstanding unless the text does this. The question therefore, as also their final question about the restoration of the Kingdom to Israel (Acts 1:6), was a well-informed question which is nowhere corrected by Jesus. Thus the question assumes that the fall of the temple will accompany the events of the second coming. There is no separation of these events by millennia. The reason for this is that in Daniel there was no such chronological separation. Daniel 11:31, 12:11 had spoken of trouble in the temple in close connection with the great tribulation and the resurrection. This general outline was known to the inner circle of disciples. And there is no hint of such separation in the answer as Jesus constructed it.

Attempts by expositors to find a separation in the interests of applying the prophecy fully or partially to AD 70 show extraordinary confusion and disagreement, suggesting that the method is flawed. AD 70 may certainly be seen as a "type" of end-time events, allowing for a final recapitulation just before the parousia.

Prior to his final sermon, and leading up to the discourse, Jesus had already turned his mind to his reappearance at the parousia: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often I wanted to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! Behold your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again *until* you say: 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord'" (Matt. 23:37-39). Jesus here gives a quotation from Psalm 118 which foresees a remnant of Jews welcoming him at his return. The mind of the Messiah stretches forward to the parousia.

It should be carefully noted that Jesus speaks of the actual persons standing before him as the "you" who will welcome him at this return in the future. A similar all-embracing form of language is found in Matthew 23:35 where Jesus said that "you" the Pharisees, the ones alive in Jesus' day, had murdered a prophet who died many years before those Pharisees had been born. How can this be? Simply because the Hebrew mind "grasps a totality" and the Messiah is able to speak of his *contemporaries* as still living long after (as it now turns out) they themselves have died. The "you" is corporate and is not confined to the men

⁶ For a full examination of the dependence of the Olivet discourse on the words of Daniel, see Lars Hartman, *Prophecy Interpreted*, Sweden: Gleerup Lund, 1960.

standing in Jesus' presence. His mind extends itself to include Pharisees, or their equivalent, who would appear much later.

It may of course be that Jesus did not know the length of time to elapse before the parousia. But there are hints that it would be "after a long time" (Matt. 25:19). The point is not significant as to the exact limitations of Jesus' knowledge of chronology. He is able to address persons — and things — present before his eyes as though they would still be extant just before the second coming.

There is also the famous saying: "All this will come upon this generation" (Matt. 23:36). It is essential that the word "generation" be taken in the light of his later parallel statement in Matthew 24:34: "Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place." The "all these things" has included a detailed description of the great tribulation, the heavenly signs *and the parousia*. If by "generation" is meant period of forty years, Jesus was clearly mistaken. But he was not. By "generation" is meant in this context the present evil "brood," humanity organized in opposition to God until the parousia, when society will be radically changed. Jesus' statement that all the catastrophes predicted would come on "this generation" is no proof that he meant to predict events only until the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. It is true that there was a destruction of the temple in that year but the final events of the present evil age did not happen then (against partial preterism). The prophecy is not exhausted, since Jesus went on to speak of a desolation of the temple and great tribulation followed *immediately* by his parousia.

This parousia did not occur immediately after the tribulation of AD 70. It follows that the abomination and tribulation in Jesus' prophetic forecast lie yet in the future. Extending the great tribulation to cover the events of world history or Jewish history for 2000 years we do not accept as a reasonable solution. The logic of the discourse, with its essential roots in Daniel, requires a future great tribulation, heavenly signs and parousia.

There is a further difficulty in supposing that Jesus was speaking of the AD 70 events. In Luke 21:28, 31 Jesus said: "When these things begin to take place, straighten up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near...When you see these things happening recognize that the Kingdom of God is near." It would be impossible to exclude from "these things" Jerusalem surrounded by armies and its desolation (v. 20) mentioned in the immediate context. If that desolation pertains only to AD 70 it could not possibly be a sign of the near approach of the Kingdom of God. Thus again, the mind of Jesus is directed to the final events of this age. The whole discourse is a response to a question about the end of the age, a single event, and a prophecy of the world events which will signal the arrival of the Kingdom. Events in AD 70 did not (as it turns out) signal the arrival of the parousia.

Similarly in Matthew 24 the predictions related to the abomination of desolation are seen as a single complex of events which will indicate that the parousia is about to happen. At the end of his prediction Jesus announces: "When you see *all* these things, recognize that he is near, right at the doors. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass before all these things take place" (Matt. 24:33, 34). It is perhaps understandable that preterism (the view that Jesus came back in AD 70) insists on the basis of the word "generation" that the discourse does not extend beyond AD 70. However, in Acts 1:7 Jesus gives no indication of how long it will be until the parousia. It would be most odd for him to have said "the parousia will happen within 40 years" and then to deny later that the disciples were to know anything of the "times and seasons."

A perfectly satisfactory solution to the problem of the "generation" is found in the meaning of *genea* as descriptive of the whole wicked inter-advent period. *Genea* in this passage does not mean race, but rather "age" or "extended period of time," and it denotes society as organized against God during the period before the parousia. *Genea* is found in the LXX as equivalent to the Hebrew *dor*, which means "age." *Genea* in Proverbs 30:11-14 denotes a "kind" of human being, a collection of individuals united by a common wicked character. Thus also in Luke 16:8: "The sons of this age [*aion*] are more shrewd in relation to their own kind [*genea*] than the sons of light" (the sons of the future age of the Kingdom). Here *genea* means a particular brood of evil people sharing a common evil quality. Thus Jesus in Matthew 24:34 declares in effect: "This present age of society will not come to an end until all the events I have described have taken place." To insist on *genea* as meaning strictly 40 or 70 years turns Jesus into a preterist with the impossible idea that the resurrection of the dead happened in AD 70, a false prophet, or hopelessly confused when he announced in Acts 1:7 that the times and seasons which must elapse before the parousia were not revealed.

Many exegetes have noticed that in the New Testament *genea* can have the sense of "age" or "indefinite period of time":

Genea — expresses the idea of kinship, those of the same lineage who are born about the same time...or more generally an "age" or lengthened period of time...Finally (d) the word is used, as often in the OT (Deut. 32:5, 20; Ps. 12:7; 24:6, etc.), with a moral connection as in Phil. 2:15 and Acts 2:40. In the latter passage the word has an eschatological coloring. "This crooked generation" is the present, swiftly transient period of the world's history, which is leading up to the day of judgment and the New Age.⁷

⁷ *Dictionary of the Apostolic Church*, T&T Clark, 1916, 1:444. See also Neil D. Nelson, Jr., "This Generation in Matthew 24:34: A Literary Critical Perspective," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 38:3, Sept. 1996, 369-385.

That *genea* (rendered generation) does express “the current age” of “the world period” is obvious in the Gospels (Luke 16:8, Matt. 24:34 and less clearly Matt. 23:36).⁸

Note also the sensible comment of Cranfield. He points out that *genea* renders the Hebrew *dor*, seed, family and people:

Probably here — “whoever is ashamed of me in this adulterous and sinful generation” (Mark 8:38) — generation means “age,” “period of time,” which is the primary meaning of the Hebrew *dor*, the word it most often represents in the LXX, and a possible meaning of *genea*. The whole phrase, “this generation,” is contrasted with “when he shall come with his holy angels” and so is roughly equivalent to “in this time” (10:30) which is contrasted with “in the coming age.” The time meant is *the time before the parousia*. But it is not thought of simply as a period of time; the thought of the men living in it and of their character is also present and prominent — hence the adjectives adulterous and sinful.⁹

Note also Psalm 102:18: “This will be written for the *genea* to come, that a people who will be created may praise the Lord.” This contrasts the present time with the “generation to come,” millennial in this passage. Note also Psalms of Solomon 18:6: “Blessed are those born in those [future Messianic] days, to see the good things of the Lord which He will do for the coming generation...a good generation living in the fear of the Lord.” This shows that generation can mean a “group of people with common characteristics.”

When Proverbs 30:11-14 says that “there is a generation [*genea*] of those who curse their fathers...There is a generation who are pure in their own eyes...There is a generation whose teeth are as swords,” the meaning is “a class of people identified by a common characteristic.” So also in Psalm 24:6, “the generation of those who seek God.”

In Luke 16:8 Jesus remarked that “the children of this *age* are wiser in regard to their *generation* [people belonging to the same class and age as they] than the children of light.” The contrast is between two groups of people, those touched by the Kingdom Gospel and those not. It is clear that “generation,” used generally in a pejorative sense in the New Testament as “wicked society this side

⁸ *Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels*, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1917, 1:639.

⁹ *Gospel of Mark*, Cambridge University Press, 1972, 284.

of the second coming,” does not have to be restricted to a period of 40 years.¹⁰ In an eschatological setting such as Matthew 24 Jesus contrasts the two ages.

Looking out on the temple buildings Jesus knew (based on Daniel) that they must be destroyed *in connection with* his glorious arrival to establish the Kingdom of God on earth. He himself did not know the times and seasons. What he knows from Daniel is that any temple built on that site will be destroyed. The question of the disciples, to which Jesus responds with no hint of correction, implies the fall of the temple in connection with the parousia and the end of the age. Jesus answers the question on that basis. It is impossible to divide the discourse, and attempts to do so have led to a hopeless confusion as expositors have disagreed with each other as to where a break in the narrative is to be found. The fact is that there is no such break. The chronological markers are quite distinct. The end of the age will come when the Gospel of the Kingdom has been announced in all the world (Matt. 24:14). The abomination is a sign of that coming end. AD 70 was not in any sense a sign of the impending parousia: “When you therefore see the abomination...then flee...for those days will be a great tribulation...immediately after the tribulation of those days, the sun will be darkened...and they will see the Son of Man coming in glory” (Matt. 24:15-30).

Just as Jesus could address his disciples as persons who would live to see the parousia, so he can speak of the temple as existing in the end-time. This is a Hebrew way of thinking “corporately.” The disciples did not of course live to see the events which Jesus said “they” would see. Nor was the temple they were looking at the temple which will fall just before the end. In a similar manner the “this temple” of Haggai 2:3 is not the actual building they were looking at, but a former building which had been destroyed. And it is “this temple” which has not yet appeared but will appear in its “latter glory” (2:9). The buildings which Jesus was looking at can therefore stand for any temple on that site and it is the final temple which must be invaded and destroyed at the parousia.

We note in conclusion that the *Word Biblical Commentary* on Matthew surveys in detail the attempts of expositors to solve “the problem” of the time elements of Jesus’ famous discourse. The author, Dr. Donald A. Hagner, grapples with the text and finds no exegetical way to avoid the conclusion that Matthew reports Jesus as describing *a future and final invasion of the temple followed immediately by cosmic signs and the parousia*. “Therefore, it would seem that what is referred to in the verses preceding Matthew 24:29 must concern an end-time tribulation that yet lies in the future just prior to the parousia.”¹¹

¹⁰ Cp. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (single volume, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985, 114), which defines *genea* as “manner” in Luke 16:8 and as “age” in Matt. 1:17.

¹¹ *Matthew 14-28, Word Biblical Commentary*, Dallas: Word Books, 1995, 699.

We agree entirely with his analysis. Not finding this “futurist” solution congenial the writer then suggests that Matthew has misunderstood and wrongly edited (!) Jesus’ words by including the “complicating” word “immediately after” in Matthew 24:29. Dr. Hagner would prefer to think of the great tribulation as the event of AD 70 “were it not for the decidedly complicating presence of Matthew’s added *eutheos*, ‘immediately.’” He adds: “In my opinion the evangelist uses material from Jesus that is not finally compatible with the association of the parousia with the fall of Jerusalem [in AD 70].”¹² In other words, Matthew associates the parousia with another and future crisis in Jerusalem. Our reading of Matthew 24 and its parallels leads us to the same conclusion: the words of Jesus as reported by Matthew do not present a prophecy of the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. Rather they describe a future crisis in Jerusalem, the great tribulation, followed immediately by the second coming. If there is no future identifiable crisis, then the entire point of the discourse is lost. Jesus will have given no certain sign of his impending arrival and the disciples’ question will remain unanswered.

The conclusion to which we have come was seen also by Dr. Oliver Buswell. In his *Systematic Theology* under the section “Immediately following” he says:

In Matthew and Mark it is recorded that Jesus explicitly predicted great upheaval in the physical world “immediately following the tribulation of those days” (Matt. 24:29; cp. Mark 13:24, 25). The chronological transition is so sharp and clear and forceful that to ignore it would be a major error in hermeneutics. The abomination will be the signal for flight because of an intense tribulation, which will be shortened for the sake of the elect. “Immediately after that tribulation” (Mark 13:24; cp. Matt. 24:29) there will be great signs and portents in nature...The *brief* tribulation is to take place at the time of the abomination.¹³

Dr. Buswell nowhere imagines that the great tribulation which will be followed by the parousia could be anything but “brief.” It will in fact, mercifully, be “shortened for the sake of the elect.” Such a “great tribulation” cannot possibly have begun nearly two thousand years ago.

¹² *Ibid*, 712.

¹³ *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962, 396, 397.