

Understanding the Olivet Discourse

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The great eschatological discourse of our Lord Jesus Messiah — found in Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21 — has been the occasion of much discussion throughout the centuries, resulting in many varied interpretations. After almost two thousand years of history since his prophecy was given, one would think that we should be in a better position to understand what information he was seeking to impart to his disciples. But even now we find ourselves divided over the meaning of many things he prophesied. It is likely that many who read these words believe — as does the writer — that we are living in the “last days” of this age. Therefore it would seem to be of great importance for us to know which parts of the prophecy apply to present and future events and which parts are already fulfilled. The present article is not designed to be a detailed commentary on the discourse, or even to cover the entire contents of it. We shall simply seek to point out some salient aspects of it that may help in its general interpretation.

This writer believes that the prophecy itself has a direct and integral connection with what Jesus had said just a few days earlier, as recorded in Luke 19:41-46:

As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, “If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace — but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within you. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God’s coming to you [literally, ‘your visitation’].” Then he entered the temple area and began driving out those who were selling. “It is written,” he said to them, ‘My house will be a house of prayer’ but you have made it ‘a den of robbers.’”

Even sometime earlier than this warning, he had uttered a similar prophecy against the Holy City and its inhabitants and “house” (temple):

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" (Luke 13:34, 35).

The ominous words of these prophecies must be seen as directly connected to the fearful crisis soon to face the Jewish nation and capital city, with its temple dedicated to the service of YHWH, the God of Israel. Jesus knew that his being rejected by them as the promised and long-expected Messiah could bring only disaster, the destruction of their city and temple, to be followed by age-long exile of the Jewish people unto the ends of the earth! This knowledge caused him to weep in sorrow over what he knew was coming upon his beloved people, for whom he would die, unappreciated and hated without cause.

History confirms that these were precisely the horrendous results of that rejection — a rejection foretold centuries earlier by the prophets Isaiah (53:3) and Daniel (9:25, 26)! The writer of Hebrews, analyzing the chronological significance of Christ's sacrifice, the result of that rejection, described it as having taken place "once for all at the consummation of the ages" (9:26) — a time notation that deserves greater scrutiny than it often gets!

The celebrated prophecy of the seventy weeks, in Daniel 9, had shown that the Messiah was scheduled to appear at a specific time and that he would subsequently be "cut off" (v. 26). Jesus appeared at the designated time and carried out his miraculous ministry to the nation of Israel — its crisis then manifested in his solemn testimony to the highest Jewish authorities that he was, in fact, the Messiah (Mark 14:61, 62). Their possession of Daniel's prophecy, and that of Isaiah 53, could only ensure that Israel would be left "without excuse" for their rejection of Messiah. As a nation, they would have to bear the responsibility for the disasters that would inexorably come upon them for rejecting him! Because they dared to "smite the Judge of Israel [Messiah] with a rod upon the cheek" they were going to be "given up" until a time in the far distant future (Micah 5:1-4).

Stephen, the "first Christian martyr," told the rulers of Israel that they were guilty of killing the Righteous One (Acts 7:52, 53). They had received God's holy Law, but had not obeyed it. Filled with wrath, they did to Stephen what their forefathers had done to the Old Testament prophets. Jesus had denounced them in advance for just such a crime, pronouncing God's verdict against them:

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous. And you say, "If we had lived in the days of our forefathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets." So you

testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of the sin of your forefathers! You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned in hell? Therefore I am sending you prophets and wise men and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah...I tell you the truth, all this will come upon *this generation* (Matt. 23:29-36).

These religious leaders of Israel, to whom Jesus was speaking directly, were members of that specific generation, and it was that generation which would bear the brunt of God's wrath. Paul later wrote of the same generation: "the wrath of God has come upon them at last" (or "to the utmost," NASB, 1 Thess. 2:16). His wrath was even then poised to be decisively unleashed shortly afterwards, when in AD 70 the Roman legions were to destroy Jerusalem and the temple, forcing most of the survivors into what was to become a worldwide exile.

All of these factors must be seen as the background for the Olivet discourse, and any failure to give them due weight can only result in an incorrect or inadequate interpretation of that great prophecy! Further, all three accounts of the discourse must be taken into consideration, and a careful comparison of the parallel passages must be made.¹

The Opening of the Discourse

The discourse begins, in effect, with a look at the temple and its imposing buildings. The disciples express their appreciation for its massive stones and many adornments. Jewish people felt they could be justly proud of this beautiful earthly center of worship of their God! But Jesus immediately warns them that this very temple which they behold is going to be destroyed — all those impressive stones will be thrown down! He knows Daniel's prophecy that "the city and the sanctuary will be destroyed" (9:26), and as Messiah he knows that this disaster is coming because his Messiahship is being rejected by the Jewish nation and he is about to die at their hands. He had told his disciples earlier about his coming death (Matt. 16:21). In a parable, he had even warned the very leaders who were going to kill him what would be the terrible results for *them!* (Luke 20:9-18).

It is essential to the understanding of this discourse that the interpreter take into account all these preliminary factors, since they provide the foundation for understanding the discourse as a whole!

¹ The writer recommends Burton and Goodspeed's *Harmony of the Synoptic Gospels*, in both the English and Greek versions, to help in doing this.

When Jesus and the disciples leave the temple area and cross over to the Mount of Olives, they begin to ask him questions. Evidently, during the walk to Olivet his dire warning had been on their minds, and they wanted to know more. “When is all this going to happen? Will there be a sign to show it is about to occur?” Matthew’s account adds a question about Christ’s coming — his *parousia* — and the “consummation of the age.” A comparison of these questions reveals that in their minds there was no clear distinction as to the time periods involved. Would his *parousia* occur at the same time as the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, or would there be a long period of time between these events? If the latter were true, would “the consummation of the age” be the time for his *parousia*?

We who live almost 2000 years after the prophecy was given have the advantage of history to help us understand what Christ was talking about. We must not be surprised that the matter was not clear to them, knowing that even today, after such a long period of history, Christians still disagree on the meaning of certain things in the discourse.

In reply to their questions, Jesus proceeded to foretell a number of things that would characterize the coming years, even to the very end of the age. He speaks of deceivers and impostors who will arise to lead his people astray. Some will claim to come in the name of Christ or even to *be* the Christ. There will be wars and rumors of wars, but such are not necessarily a sign of the end. This agrees with Daniel’s prophecy that “war will continue until the end” (9:26). The present age, in other words, was to be a time of constant wars or threats of war — a prophecy sadly fulfilled throughout the past 2000 years!

The fulfillment began during the very lifetime of those who listened to his words, as he knew it would when he addressed them personally as the “you” who would see some of these things. This “you,” of course, can include later believers; but we must not ignore the fact that it cannot be understood to refer only to future generations, so as to omit those present who heard the discourse in person! This fact sets the stage for understanding that the discourse is meant to discuss matters over *a long period of time*. Christ is in effect foretelling history in advance, beginning with events that will take place in the near future — in the personal experience of his hearers — and then going on to tell of events to take place long after their time.

After speaking about the “wars and rumors of wars” that will characterize the entire age, Jesus briefly summarizes the events that he calls “the beginning of travail” (Matt. 24:7, 8; Mark 13:8; Luke 21:10, 11). This “travail” is known in Jewish literature as “the birth pangs of the Messiah,” the time involving Israel’s final distress and the establishment of God’s Kingdom on earth. This, of course, is in the distant future to the lifetime of his hearers.

At this point Luke inserts a chronological note: “but *before* all these things” (v. 12). Mark puts it this way: “Take ye heed to *yourselves*” (v. 9, ASV). The

scene has now shifted back to the lifetime of the apostles. This means that the paragraph about the time of travail must be seen as *parenthetical*, a brief glance into the far future before returning to the theme of present realities. In parallel with Mark and Luke, therefore, Matthew's "then" (τότε, v. 9) must be understood as related to the material in verse 6, not to the material in the parenthesis (verses 7 and 8).

Jesus describes now the tribulation and persecution that will befall his disciples. They will be arrested, brought before councils and synagogues, governors and kings, beaten and even killed. This, of course, began during the Acts period and continued throughout the ensuing centuries. Paul warned the early Christians that "we must through much tribulation enter into the Kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22, KJV). While the church age would be one of "wars and rumors of wars" for the world in general, for Christians it would be a time of tribulation and persecution. Paul sees this tribulation on believers as continuing right up to the time "when Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels" (2 Thess. 1:4-10). But during all this time of persecution, they must continue to proclaim the gospel of the Kingdom to all nations, until the very end of the age (Mark 13:10; Matt. 24:14). Jesus warns that his true followers will be hated by all men — even their own families will turn against them and betray them to the authorities. Despite all that, he will be with them and God's Spirit will speak through them and on their behalf (Matt. 24:9-14; Mark 13:9-13; Luke 21:12-19). Again, history makes clear that Jesus' words have been fulfilled to the letter throughout the church age, even to this very day in various parts of the world. And that tribulation will not end until he returns!

The Abomination of Desolation

At this point Jesus issues his specific warning about that very century, the lifetime of the apostles. They had asked him for a sign that would show them when the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple was about to occur. Luke's account provides, in plain language, the answer to their question: "When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then you will know that its desolation is at hand" (21:20). He continues, "Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those in the city get out, and let those in the country not enter the city" (v. 21). History tells the story of how the Roman armies destroyed Jerusalem and the temple in AD 70, some forty years after the apostles asked their question and when some of them were still alive to see the prophecy fulfilled. While those armies were in the process of setting up their siege around the city, the Christians in and near Jerusalem saw this as the "sign" and fled from the area. Eusebius, "the father of church history," writes that "the whole body of the church at Jerusalem, having been commanded by a divine revelation, removed from the city and dwelt at a certain town beyond the Jordan, called

Pella.”² The prophecy regarding the “sign” contained, therefore, a very practical purpose, since it saved the lives of many of Christ’s followers living in Jerusalem and Judea, while the Jews as a whole were either slaughtered, sold into slavery, or exiled by the victorious Romans.

In Matthew and Mark’s parallel to this account by Luke, they use the mysterious phrase “the abomination of desolation” and say that it will stand “in the holy place” (Matthew) or “where it does not belong” (Mark). Moreover, Matthew’s account reminds the reader that this “abomination” is mentioned in the book of Daniel. We have already noticed that Daniel 9:26 predicts the destruction of “the city and the sanctuary,” presumably (in context) the very sites that were to be rebuilt after the Jews returned home from the Babylonian captivity. The entire ninth chapter of Daniel has to do with the prophet’s prayer regarding this return (because he saw this event [9:2] as being implied in Jeremiah 25:12) and God’s reply through the angel Gabriel.

This reply contains the warning that with the future destruction of the city and temple that were going to be rebuilt after the Jews returned, there would also — later on — be future “desolations [that] have been decreed” (9:26). In addition, “one who causes desolation will place abominations” (v. 27). It appears, therefore, that Matthew and Mark have based their phrase “the abomination of desolation” on Daniel 9:26, 27, while Luke has given us the divinely inspired interpretation of that phrase. He tells us that it means the coming of the besieging armies, the abominations they will perpetrate, and the desolations they will inflict on God’s Holy City and temple. Those desolations will last “even until the consummation” (v. 27), while the ones prophesied by Jeremiah lasted only 70 years.

There is no reason, either contextually or logically, to interpret Matthew and Mark’s “abomination of desolation” in any different fashion than Luke has explained it for us. The effort by some interpreters to assign this phrase to a fulfillment at the end of the age cannot be justified hermeneutically, when the parallel texts show that all three of the Synoptics are describing the same event. Even less defensible is the attempt by a few to make even Luke — in 21:20-24 — refer to Jerusalem at the end of this age, dismissing the obvious fulfillment in AD 70 and placing “the times of the Gentiles” as not having begun even yet today! Further, such an interpretation will not harmonize with Zechariah’s clear description of events yet future with regard to Jerusalem (chapters 12, 13, 14). The total destruction that Daniel and Luke described for the city did take place in AD 70, but such will not take place at the end of this age, as Zechariah reveals. Besides this, all the coloring within the verses surrounding the phrase “abomination of desolation” is strictly characteristic of first-century Judea, not of the modern society or state of Israel!

² Quoted in *The New Bible Commentary*, 860.

Luke describes the disaster that came on Jerusalem in AD 70 as “days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled...For there shall be great distress upon the land, and wrath unto this people” (21:22, 23; cf. 1 Thess. 2:16). Matthew and Mark, for their part, describe the catastrophe as the beginning of “great tribulation,” with awful suffering and woe. Luke goes on to describe the fate of the Jews as involving death by the sword for some and exile unto all nations for others (21:24). The result for Jerusalem will be the loss of Jewish sovereignty while the city languishes under Gentile domination — the situation ever since AD 70 until our own times. Even now, the holiest site in Jerusalem, the holy temple mount, is in Gentile hands and must remain so until the windup of Gentile times.

When great tribulation came upon the Jews with the loss of their city, their temple, and their national life, much tribulation came also upon the Christians as the Roman government imposed a series of frightful persecutions, accusing Christ’s followers of being disloyal to the emperor and his worship. Church historians document ten specific periods of such persecution before the year 312, when Emperor Constantine was “converted” and decided to make Christianity the state religion, creating the union of church and state. But the persecution against Bible Christians started afresh a few years later, as the state church — by now apostate from true Biblical faith — inflicted tribulation on all who would not accept her false doctrines and hierarchical leadership. This tribulation upon Bible Christians and upon Jews continued in an intense form in Europe and Latin America until the 1800s, and still continues today in parts of the world — promising to become worse again as we draw near the end of the age. But God says He will shorten the time of tribulation, for the sake of His elect, or else no one would survive (Matt. 24:22; Mark 13:20).

Matthew and Mark’s account go on to warn of false Christs and false prophets who will appear, producing miraculous signs and wonders (Matt. 24:23-25; Mark 13:21-23). Such persons have already appeared on the scene over the centuries, but will probably become even more evident as the age draws to a close. Matthew then explains that the real Christ will come, not in some hidden or private way, but with a very public manifestation (vv. 26-28).

The Coming of the Son of Man

All three Synoptics join at this point to describe the signs that will precede and accompany the return of Christ. The great age-long tribulation ends when those signs occur. They involve a darkening of the sun and moon and an impressive shower of stars or meteorites (the ancients did not distinguish the names of such heavenly bodies). Such phenomena have occurred before and have presaged the Day of the Lord for those who knew and believed such Bible prophecies as Joel 2:31. But such events will occur again, when the Day of the Lord actually arrives, as Joel also reveals (3:14-16). These signs in the heavens

will be accompanied on earth by distress of nations, perplexity (literally, “no way out”), people overcome with fear at the terrible things taking place, with expectation of even worse disasters (Luke 21:25, 26).

This brings the Olivet prophecy to the very coming of Christ. His coming will cause sorrow to “all the tribes of the earth” (Matt. 24:30), as they realize they are not ready to meet him (cf. Rev. 1:7; Zech. 12:10-14). His elect, on the other hand, will be gathered together by the angels, to be with him forever (1 Thess. 4:17). His return to the earth will make possible the fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham and to David, establishing the Kingdom of God and the millennial age. These are not mentioned as such in the Olivet discourse, but they form an essential part of the gospel of the Kingdom.

Luke’s account in this section closes by encouraging disciples to take heart when they see all these signs begin to appear, because such signs mean that the promised day of redemption, our eternal salvation, is at hand! (Luke 21:28). The remainder of the Olivet discourse provides further details and exhortations, but these are beyond the scope of the present article.