

## THE OLIVET DISCOURSE

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Two related questions may be asked regarding Matthew's account of the Olivet Discourse. (1) Who or what is the "*abomination of desolation*" in **24:14**? (2) If some events are still future, where is the dividing line between the ones now fulfilled and the ones still to come? All three synoptists record this sermon: Matthew **24-25**; Mark **13**; and Luke **21**.

Since answering the second question determines the answer to the first, we need to establish the dividing line between past and future events first. A harmony of the accounts helps track the progress of thought.

<u>Matthew 24:1-54</u>	<u>Mark 13:1-37</u>	<u>Luke 21:5-36</u>
1	1	5
2	2	6
3	3-4	7
4-9a	4-9a	8-12a
	9b	12b
	10	
		13
	11-12	14-16
9b	13a	17
10-12		
13	13b	
		18-19
14	10	
		20
15-16	14	21a
		21b
17-18	15-16	
		22
19	17	23
20-21	18-19	
22-25	20-23	
26-28		

29	24-25	24-25a 25b-26
30a		
30b	26	27 28
31	27	
32-35	28-31	29-33
36	32	
37-41		
		34-35
42a	33	36
	34-36	
43-50		
	37	

Luke seems to present the clearest break between past and future events. Beginning with his account sets a method for analyzing the discourse. At **21:24** he says,

*“[The inhabitants of Jerusalem and Judaea] will fall by the sword and be led away captive into all the nations, and Jerusalem will be trodden down by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.”*

From Jesus’ point in time, the destruction of Jerusalem plus its consequences provides the nearest adequate fulfillment; so referring to that cluster of events is the preferable interpretation unless contextual considerations dictate otherwise. From A.D. 70 onward, the Jewish people were literally carried captive into all nations, and Jerusalem was in the hands of Gentiles until the Six-Day War in June 1967.

If Luke **21:24** is the chronological dividing line, then **21:20** speaks of A.D. 70 when it says armies would surround Jerusalem. Comparing the accounts at this point shows that Luke **21:24** parallels Matthew **24:15** and Mark **13:14**. Matthew and Mark’s accounts use the expression “*abomination of desolation standing in the holy place*” (Matthew), or “*standing where it shouldn’t*” (Mark). “*Holy place*” evidently means Jerusalem, not the Holy of Holies, because the parallelism aligns it with “*Jerusalem*” in Luke’s account. It would be too late anyway for the residents in Jerusalem to flee to the hills after the Roman army had made it all the way in to the temple area. By metonymy, the Holy Place gave name to the city in which God promised to put his presence.

Matthew adds that Daniel the prophet had referred to the “*abomination of desolation*” (24:15). Daniel speaks four times about an abomination that makes desolate: 8:13; 9:27; 11:31; 12:11. Daniel 11:31 is not the reference since that part of Daniel’s prophecy was fulfilled by the desecrations of the temple by Antiochus Epiphanes over 160 years before Christ. Daniel 9:24-27 apparently predicted the Roman destruction of Jerusalem, so this reference must be the one Jesus meant. The Daniel 12:11 reference may also refer to this destruction, although many interpreters believe it refers to the end times or to the 11:31 reference. So far, the data fits the requirements of having an adequate fulfillment that we can identify with a prophecy of Daniel about an abomination of desolation.

Several points confirm identifying the abomination of desolation with A.D. 70. Matthew 24:21 speaks of “*such anguish as has not been since the world until now.*” “*Now*” implies that the desolation Jesus meant was relatively soon.

Secondly, Jesus continues, “. . . *no, nor will ever be,*” as if subsequently there would be a long period of time when such could occur but would not. If these earlier verses of Matthew 24 refer to a premillennial tribulation, we wonder whether that comment would be an understatement. During a millennial reign of Christ on earth, no such opposition to God’s people could occur. The post-millennial, Gog-and-Magog conflict does not seem to involve much anguish for the saints, because fire from heaven devours the forces of evil when they encamp against the saints and surround Jerusalem (Revelation 20:7-10). The miseries of the Roman destruction that Josephus records suffice as the worst ever (Matthew 24:21).

Those events after Luke 21:24 are broadscale while the abomination of desolation is localized in Judaea and Jerusalem, a fact that may be accounted for by the events of A.D. 70 as distinguished from a great tribulation before the millennium. Mark 13:27 (“*whole earth*”) contrasts with Luke 21:23: “*great distress on the land* (γῆ [gē] = γῆ) and wrath to this people (ὁ λαός [ho laos] = οὗτος; ὁ λαός τῆς γῆς [ho laos tēs gēs] = τῆς γῆς).” Γῆ [gē] does not mean “*earth*” in this case since the context is limited to Palestine.

Although (1) the division in Luke is clearly after 21:24, the division in Mark and Matthew is not as obvious. Whatever is done, however, must fit with, and be governed by, Luke’s more simplified account since the parallel passages are so obviously identical in expression with his. The second step is (2) to notice that Matthew 24:29 (= Mark 13:24; Luke 24:25a) says “*immediately.*” At least part of the preceding context, which has no parallel in Luke, must refer to events still future. As far back as 24:27 the references seem to be identified with events still future since nothing is known of a coming of Christ in A.D. 70 that was comparable to lightning visible from one horizon to the other. Since verse 27 is introduced by *for*, it explains the previous verse, which denies a private return. In turn, 24:26 begins with the

word *therefore*, falling back on verses 23-25. As we move back from Matthew 24:28, there is no break until the beginning of verse 23.

Working from the other direction, we find Matthew 24:21 connecting with 24:20 and 24:22 falling back on 24:21 in that it mentions “*those days*.” In Matthew’s account, the break between events associated with the destruction of Jerusalem and those still unfulfilled seems to occur before 23. *Then* (τότε [*tote*]) may mean simultaneous with, or after, what precedes. Here it means “*at that time*.”

Verses 26-28 can speak of the end time with 23-25 introducing the subject because Jesus predicted that false messiahs would arise at the A.D. 70 destruction. These messiahs would try to fulfill the Old Testament as understood in current Messianic expectancy. Jesus tells his disciples not to be deceived into thinking that any of these claimants was Jesus returning to “*restore the kingdom to Israel*.” His return would be visible in the sky, not like his first coming. The claim of a private return is common both to the end of the Jewish age and the end times. Since Matthew 24:21 identifies an element common to both times, that element bridges between A.D. 70 materials and the latter days. That common element enables Jesus to pass from one time to the other without indicating a time distinction. Immediately after the tribulation of those days refers to the tribulation days when the Son of Man does come visibly from east to west.

Therefore, *immediately* forms no problem of Christ’s coming immediately after the destruction of Jerusalem because *those days* identifies the time of his actual coming, which is later, visible to all the earth, and accompanied by heavenly disturbances. Christ’s second coming will involve a stupendous display of divine intervention, not only in the worldwide visibility of the returning Christ, but in the astronomical disturbances that will accompany it. No one should have any difficulty distinguishing the actual return from anything that would go on at the destruction of Jerusalem. *Those* indicates a more distant time (cp. *that* vs. *this* in 24:37 + 34) at the end times in contrast to *these*, which fall within the apostles’ generation and include the destruction of Jerusalem, only forty years away.

“*Look, here is Christ*” does occur twice in this discourse, but the two occurrences need not be the same so as to contest the above division point in the text. Jesus moves temporarily to the subject of his actual personal return so the disciples will not be misled by claims about Messiah coming when they see the fall of Jerusalem drawing near. It would be natural for political-military messiahs to arise at such an obvious threat to Israel as the advancing Roman armies would signal. The destruction of Jerusalem may be viewed as similar to, and typical of, the Great Tribulation to come, because both events share some features. Having a common feature—false messiahs—makes it all the more possible for Jesus to move from speaking about the near destruction to speaking about his return. As the destruction of Jerusalem removed the formal Jewish religious opposition to the church, so the end of the tribulation removes the anti-

Christian opposition to the kingdom of God, and the Magog destruction is prelude to the full reign of God in the eternal state.

In summary, Jesus seems to be talking about the destruction of Jerusalem up through Matthew 24:22. Since a time of anguish accompanies Christ's second coming—a fact known before A.D. 70, someone might say at the fall of Jerusalem that Messiah had come privately. To preclude such a suggestion, Jesus introduces verses 23-28 to explain the actual manner of his real return. He continues in 24:29ff talking about events when he does return. Consequently, "*the tribulation of those days*" is the tribulation of those days when he does come—a tribulation (24:28) followed by cosmological disturbances (24:29) and his actual appearance (24:30-31). Furthermore, the destruction of Jerusalem would seem to be the most prominent, or at least the initial, topic of discussion. The questions asked by the apostles came in response to Jesus' comment about the destruction of Jerusalem.

At least three questions come up under this interpretation of the Olivet Discourse. **First** is the fact that the *immediately* of Matthew 24:29 is "*immediately after the tribulation of those days*." A reader's first impulse is to take the reference back to 24:21, but under the above arrangement the tribulation of 24:21 refers to A.D. 70. How can Jesus be speaking of events two thousand years hence as "*immediately after*"? Εὐθέως (*eutheōs*) might mean "*suddenly*" (cp. Mark 13:36, ἐξαίφνης [*exaiphnais*]) rather than "*immediately*." But lexicons do not attest such a meaning though it might fit in Revelation 4:2 and Matthew 8:3. Nevertheless, we hesitate to justify an interpretation by a rare meaning even when examples occur.

"*Immediately*" could be relative, but that also seems strained. A better alternative takes 24:29 as a reference to a tribulation implicit in the coming of false Christs and the Son of Man, a tribulation known from elsewhere to precede Christ's second coming, which brings to an end the "*Great Tribulation*" consummated in the battle of Harmagedon. Matthew 24:28 says, "*The vultures will gather where the carcass is.*" A negative connotation attaches to this cryptic aphorism, and the idea of dead bodies and vultures suggests a conflict. (Ἀετοί, *aetoi* is better translated "*vultures*" here than "*eagles*" because they are gathering around corpses. "*Eagles*" might still work here because the eagle was the mascot for the Roman army.)

Mark 13:24 parallels Matthew 24:29, but Mark does not say *immediately*. Neither does he parallel Matthew 24:26-28. Mark simply says "*in the days after that tribulation*," that is, the future tribulation of 13:21-22, the only one he mentions. Matthew interjects another tribulation like in kind but different in time. Whereas the cosmological disturbances are immediately after that interjected "*great tribulation*," they are merely after the "*Jerusalem tribulation*," Matthew and Mark thus referring to different tribulation at this point.

One confirmation of the above construction comes from Luke 17:22-37, because in Luke 17:37 Jesus uses the same expression about vultures gathering. It appears in a section that equals parts of the Olivet Discourse. Luke 17:23-24 matches Matthew 24:23-27; Luke 17:26-27 parallels Matthew 24:37-39. Luke 17:28-30, 32 adds the example of Lot to the example of Noah. Luke 17:31, 33-35 is comparable to Matthew 24:40-41. The upshot of all this is that Luke 17 places the “vultures” statement in the context of the second coming and in a series of parallels with the latter section of Matthew 24. That portion has already been connected in this study with the second coming, the dividing line having been placed at Matthew 24:29. In the Olivet Discourse, Luke omitted the parallel to Matthew 24:27-28, because he had already included it in a statement to the Pharisees. Between the parallel to Matthew 24:27 and 24:28, Luke 17 inserts a whole statement about when in a context about where (“Look, here” + “the vultures”). In Matthew 24:23-28 the writer inserts a statement about where in a context about when (“beginning until now” + “immediately after”). The reason this can happen is that the where of both the Jerusalem destruction and the second coming is the same, though the times differ.

Another confirmation for inferring a tribulation from Matthew 24:28 comes from Ezekiel 39:1-7. Ravenous birds have a similar role at the overthrow of Gog and Magog (cp. Revelation 19:17-18, clearly premillennial). Gog and Magog show up in Revelation 20:7-10 at the final conflict before and after the millennium. Perhaps the conflicts before and after the millennium are of the same sort and are blurred together in Matthew, who does not interject the millennium period.

The **second problem** with this approach is that Matthew says in 24:34, “*This generation will not pass away till all these things will be accomplished.*” Unless we spiritualize 24:23-31 beyond recognition, a lot in these verses seem not to have happened in A.D. 70.

Several solutions have been suggested, including the idea that all the previous things would be accomplished before (1) the generation at the second coming would pass away. Generation has been taken in its extended meaning, “family,” that is, (2) the Jewish people. These do not seem natural.

Luke 21:35 says, “. . . *it will come on all of them that live all over the earth.*” Nothing during that generation seems to have affected people the world over. Luke 21:32 says, “*All things be accomplished,*” which may mean that during (3) that generation everything would be accomplished for establishing the basis for the full reign of God in fellowship with mankind and in eliminating the previous ineffectual system in A.D. 70.

Matthew 24:32 (+ Mark’s parallel) begins with a short parable about a fig tree, primarily applicable to the destruction of Jerusalem, although there are also signs of his coming as well.

Matthew 24:34-35 becomes a reference to the part about the destruction. Christ's words would not pass away, even though Jerusalem would.

*"Heaven and earth will pass away . . . but of that day and hour"* is taken with the second coming. Although Jesus did not know the time of his return, he did know at least generally when Jerusalem would be destroyed. After all, it was only forty years away. His knowledge of it—as soon—is implied in Matthew 23:36 and Luke 23:28-29. Consequently, in the expression *"of that day and hour"* the emphasis is on that day and hour as opposed to this generation—far as opposed to near—rather than on "day-and-hour" (exact time) to "generation" (general time). The rest of the discourse consists primarily of parables dealing with the uncertainty of the time of his return (24:42, 44, 50; 25:13). The Parable of the Talents also includes a lengthy time before the master's return, perhaps even in contrast to one generation.

The **third question** for the above interpretation is how to understand the prophecy in Matthew 24:14 (= Mark 13:10): the gospel would be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations before the end would come—if "end" means the A.D. 70 destruction. The answer lies in statements that Paul makes in Romans 1:8; Colossians 1:6, 23; and 1 Timothy 3:16. He affirms that the gospel had already been preached in all the "world" (κόσμος or κτίσις) by that time. In Acts 24:5 οἰκουμένη (*oikoumenē*) appears in Tertullus' oration against Paul before Felix regarding Paul's *"insurrections among Jews throughout the world."* Οἰκουμένη appears in Acts 11:28 regarding a famine over the whole world. (See Romans 16:25-26 as well.) The sense in which these four references say the gospel was already preached throughout the world is the sense in which we may understand it in the Olivet Discourse.

The reason for the gospel's being preached to the whole then-known world before the destruction of Jerusalem was to show that Jesus was not another fly-by-night Messianic claimant whose movement died with him. The disintegration of false Messiah's movements is what anyone would expect because *"Messiah abides forever"* (Psalm 110:4; 89; Isaiah 9:7; Ezekiel 37:25; Daniel 7:14; John 12:34; 1 Corinthians 1:23; Galatians 5:11; cp. Isaiah 8:14; 28:16 + Luke 2:34; Romans 9:32; 1 Peter 2:8). The fact that the enemies of a *"Messiah"* could kill him meant to them that he was a pseudo-Messiah. The apostles' claim that Jesus Messiah had resurrected does make sense of the fact that his movement spread rather than collapsed after his death. That is Gamaliel's argument in Acts 5:33-41. When previous leaders like Judas and Theudas were killed, their movements died; but the pattern did not hold for the followers of Jesus Messiah. That is the reason Gamaliel cautioned his fellow Pharisees to be careful lest they be working against God.

Since the Olivet Discourse is given from the Jews' perspective, it testifies not only to the Gentile nations to whom the gospel is preached, but to the Jewish nation as well. Christianity is

here to stay. Preaching the gospel to the whole world made it clear that Jesus was the legitimate Messiah and therefore gave rationale to God's allowing the Jewish state to fall permanently. Practically speaking, that political nation was no longer the agent of light and salt to the rest of the nations—the "*Gentiles*." Preaching the gospel to all the nations is not then a sign of the second coming, but a sign of the validity of the first coming. That process was to antedate the destruction of Jerusalem, not the return of Christ.

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