

An Interpretation of Matthew 24—25

Part II

by Thomas Ice

The disciples question in Matthew 24:3 is divided into two parts. The first question relates to the destruction of the Temple, which took place in A.D. 70. The second question, composed of two parts but related to one another, refers to events that are still yet to come. The disciples apparently thought that all three items, destruction of the Temple, the sign of Christ's coming, and the end of the age would occur at the same time. Yet this is not the case.

THE DISCIPLES MISUNDERSTANDING

It was a common thing for Jesus to correct the misunderstandings of the disciples that usually represent popular belief of their day.¹ Dr. J. Dwight Pentecost tells us the following:

The questions showed that they had arrived at certain conclusions. . . . To these men Christ's words concerning the destruction of Jerusalem was the destruction predicted by Zechariah that would precede the advent of the Messiah. In Jewish eschatology two ages were recognized: the first was this present age, the age in which Israel was waiting for the coming of the Messiah; the second was the age to come, the age in which all of Israel's covenants would be fulfilled and Israel would enter into her promised blessings as a result of Messiah's coming.²

Dr. Stanley Toussaint echoes this notion.

This sequence is so clearly in view that Luke records the question concerning the destruction of Jerusalem only (Luke 21:7). That is, the disciples took the destruction of Jerusalem to be completely eschatological. Therefore, Luke records this question only, as though Jerusalem's destruction would mark the coming of the King to reign. Bruce is correct when he asserts, "The questioners took for granted that all three things went together: destruction of temple, advent of Son of Man, end of the current age."^{3 4}

Even though the disciples merged these events, Christ did not merge these events into a single time period. In fact, Matthew and Mark do not deal with the destruction of Jerusalem in their accounts of the Olivet Discourse. Their focus is upon the future days of tribulation leading up to Christ's return. Only in Luke's account does Christ deal with the issue (21:20-24). But Luke also deals with future days of tribulation and Christ's return as well (21:25-36). For whatever reason, Matthew and Mark's entire focus is upon the last question that speaks of "the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age."

THE FIRST QUESTION

The first question by the disciples is "Tell us, when will these things be" (Matt. 24:3)? Since Christ had been speaking about the Temple and a time when "not one stone here shall be left upon another, which will not be torn down" (Matt. 24:2), it is clear that Jesus prophesied the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans in A.D. 70. Jesus had predicted the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple earlier in His ministry.

Jesus had just earlier spoken of Israel's "house [Temple] is being left to you desolate" (Matt. 23:38). Luke records another prediction of judgment upon Israel, as in Matthew 23:37-39, preceded by Christ weeping over the city of Jerusalem (Luke 19:41). This prophecy occurred at the time of Christ's triumphal entry on Palm Sunday, based upon Israel rejection of Jesus as their Messiah (Luke 19:42). Jesus prophesied in Luke 19:43-44 as follows:

“For the days shall come upon you when your enemies will throw up a bank before you, and surround you, and hem you in on every side, and will level you to the ground and your children within you, and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation.”

We learn a number of things from this prophecy. First, “your enemies” undoubtedly refers to the Romans who destroyed the city in A.D. 70. Second, “will throw up a bank before you, and surround you, and hem you in on every side,” is a clear description of the Roman siege used to defeat Jerusalem. Third, the Roman siege resulted in a total destruction of the city and of life within the city. Usually in a war time situation, if anyone is spared it will be the children, but even most of them were killed. Fourth, the very words of Christ from Matthew 24:2 were used by Him earlier in this passage when He said, “they will not leave in you one stone upon another.” Fifth, the reason for the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans will be because “you did not recognize the time of your visitation.”

FULFILLMENT OF THE FIRST QUESTION

Since I will not be dealing specifically with Luke’s version of the Olivet Discourse throughout my exposition, I will now look at Luke 21:20-24, since it records the prophecy about the first question of the disciples. The passage reads as follows:

“But when you see *Jerusalem surrounded by armies*, then recognize that *her desolation is at hand*. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are in the midst of the city depart, and let not those who are in the country enter the city; because *these are days of vengeance*, in order that all things which are written may be fulfilled. Woe to those who are with child and to those who nurse babes in those days; for *there will be great distress upon the land, and wrath to this people, and they will fall by the edge of the sword, and will be led captive into all the nations; and Jerusalem will be trampled under foot by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled.*” (Luke 21:20-24)

Preterist and futurists do not agree on much when it comes to the Olivet Discourse. However, when it comes to the interpretation of Luke 21:20-24, we both agree that it is a literal prophecy of the A.D. 70 judgment. Preterist Dr. Kenneth Gentry says, “The context of Luke demands a literal Jerusalem (Luke 21:20) besieged by literal armies (Luke 21:20) in literal Judea (Luke 21:21)—which as a matter of indisputable historical record occurred in the events leading up to A.D. 70.”⁵ However, when expounding on Luke 21:25–28, preterists resort to massive doses of *symbolic* interpretation in their attempt to give these verses a first-century fulfillment. The futurist does not need to make such adjustments and continues a *plain* or literal reading of the text. I believe that Luke 21:25-28 is a brief prophecy that parallels Matthew 24 and Mark 13, as I will expound upon in the future.

Luke 21:20-24 demonstrates that preterists take prophecy literal when it is alleged to support their view, but if a passage would lead to a non-preterist view, if interpreted literally, they allegorize. On the other hand, futurists are able to take all parts of Christ’s Olivet Discourse, and all prophecy literally.

It is clear that Luke 21:20-24 is spoke of the first-century Roman invasion of Jerusalem. Note that I have placed in italics the key phrases from Luke 21:20-24 above, that supports the A.D. 70 fulfillment. The entire passage speaks over and over again of judgment and wrath upon the Jewish people and their city, just as Christ prophesied in Matthew 24:2 and the other passages noted above. Yet, when one searches prophecies of Matthew 24 and Mark 13 this language is missing. Instead of “great distress upon the land, and wrath to this people,” Matthew 24 speaks of rescuing the Jewish people who are under great distress (Matt. 24:29-31).

CONTRASTS BETWEEN A.D. 70 AND A FUTURE TEMPLE

Preterists like to misuse Luke 21:20-24 and say that all of Matthew 24 was a prophecy of the Roman conquest in A.D. 70. Dr. Randall Price has noted six major differences between the A.D. 70 Temple and the Temple of the future tribulation period spoken of in Matthew 24.

During this time Jesus speaks of a signal event connected with the Temple—its desecration by an abomination which was prophesied by the Prophet Daniel (Matthew 24:15; Mark 13:14). What Temple is being spoken of here by Jesus? Was the Temple that was to be desecrated the same Temple as the one predicted to be destroyed? There are a number of contrasts within this text that indicate that Jesus was talking about *two different* Temples:

(1) The Temple described in Matthew 24:15 is not said to be destroyed, only desecrated (see Revelation 11:2). By contrast, the Temple in Jesus' day (or Matthew 24:2) was to be completely leveled: "not one stone would be left standing on another" (Matthew 24:2; Mark 13:2; Luke 19:44).

(2) The Temple's desecration would be a signal for Jews to escape destruction (Matthew 24:16-18), "be saved" (Matthew 24:22) and experience the promised "redemption" (Luke 21:28). By contrast the destruction of the Temple in Matthew 24:2 was a judgment "because you did not recognize the time of your visitation [Messiah's first advent]" (Luke 19:44b) and resulted in the Temple being level[ed] to the ground and your children [the Jews] within you" (Luke 19:44a).

(3) The generation of Jews that are alive at the time that the Temple is desecrated will expect Messiah's coming "immediately after" (Matthew 24:29), and are predicted to not pass away until they have experienced it (Matthew 24:34). By contrast, the generation of Jews who saw the Temple destroyed would pass away and 2,000 years (to date) would pass without redemption.

(4) The text Jesus cited concerning the Temple's desecration, Daniel 9:27, predicts that the one who desecrates this Temple will himself be destroyed. By contrast, those who destroyed the Temple in A.D. 70 (in fulfillment of Jesus' prediction)—the Roman emperor Vespasian and his son Titus—were not destroyed but returned to Rome in triumph carrying vessels from the destroyed Temple.

(5) The time "immediately after" (Matthew 24:29) the time of the Temple's desecration would see Israel's repentance (Matthew 24:30), followed by, as Matthew 23:29 implies, a restoration of the Temple. By contrast, the time following the destruction of the Temple only saw a "hardening" happen "to Israel," which is to last "until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in" (Romans 11:25)—still 2,000 years and counting.

(6) For the Temple that is desecrated, the scope is of a worldwide tribulation "coming upon the world" (Luke 21:26; compare Matthew 24:21-22; Mark 13:19-20), a global regathering of the Jewish people "from one end of the sky to the other" (Matthew 24:31; Mark 13:27), and a universal revelation of the Messiah at Israel's rescue (Matthew 24:30-31; Mark 13:26; Luke 21:26-27). This scope accords with the prophesied end-time battle for Jerusalem recorded in Zechariah 12-14, where "all nations of the earth will be gathered against it"

(Zechariah 12:3). By contrast the A.D. 70 assault on Jerusalem predicted in Luke 21:20 is by the armies of one empire (Rome). Therefore, if there are two different attacks on Jerusalem, separated by more than 2,000 years, then two distinct Temples are considered in Matthew 24:1–2 and Matthew 24:15.⁶

The above points demonstrate preterist problems that have no resolution in their attempt to cram still future prophecy into a past mold. Details of Matthew 24 cannot be made to fit into a first century fulfillment. Maranatha!

(To Be Continued . . .)

ENDNOTES

¹ See the following passages for examples of Christ correcting the disciples beliefs: Matthew 5—7; 9:1-8; 12:1-8, 46-50; 13:10-23; 15:1-20; 16:13-26; 17:1-9; 18:1-6, 21-35; 19:3-12, 13-15, 27-30; 20:20-28; 21:33-46.

² J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ: A Study of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), p. 398.

³ Alexander Balmain Bruce, "The Synoptic Gospels" in W. Robertson Nicoll, editor, *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1976), vol. I, p. 289.

⁴ Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold The King: A Study of Matthew* (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1980), pp. 269-70.

⁵ Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *Before Jerusalem Fell: Dating the Book of Revelation* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989), p. 176.

⁶ Randall Price *Jerusalem in Prophecy: God's Stage for the Final Drama* (Eugene, OR.: Harvest House, 1998), pp. 251–55