

AN INTERPRETATION OF MATTHEW 24—25

Part XIII

by Thomas Ice

“Therefore when you see the abomination of desolation which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand),”

—Matthew 24:15

We have now reached the midpoint of the tribulation in the chronological progress of this passage. Christ mentions the key event upon which the entire passage turns when He speaks of the abomination of desolation. What is He speaking about?

THE ABOMINATION OF DESOLATION

The key passages in Daniel that mention the term “abomination of desolation” are Daniel 9:27, 11:31 and 12:11. This is a technical term, which means that it has a precise and consistent meaning in all three passages. The phrase refers to an act of abomination that renders, in this case, the Temple, something unclean. Daniel 11:31 speaks of an act that was fulfilled in history before the first coming of Christ. Dr. John Walvoord explains:

In Daniel 11:31, a prophecy was written by Daniel in the sixth century B. C. about a future Syrian ruler by name of Antiochus Epiphanes who reigned over Syria 175-164 B. C., about 400 years after Daniel. History, of course, has recorded the reign of this man. In verse 31, Daniel prophesied about his activity: “. . . they shall pollute the sanctuary of strength, and shall take away the daily sacrifice, and they shall place the abomination that maketh desolate.” This would be very difficult to understand if it were not for the fact that it has already been fulfilled. Anyone can go back to the history of Antiochus Epiphanes and discover what he did as recorded in the apocryphal books of 1 and 2 Maccabees. He was a great persecutor of the children of Israel and did his best to stamp out the Jewish religion and wanted to place in its stead a worship of Greek pagan gods.

... One of the things he did was to stop animal sacrifices in the temple. He offered a sow, an unclean animal, on the altar in a deliberate attempt to desecrate and render it unholy for Jewish worship (cf. 1 Macc. 1:48). First Maccabees 1:54 specifically records that the abomination of desolation was set up, fulfilling Daniel 11:31. In the holy of holies Antiochus set up a statue of a Greek god. . . . In keeping with the prophecy the daily sacrifices were stopped, the sanctuary was polluted, desolated and made an abomination.¹

Dr. Randall Price agrees: “In my own study of the phrase in the context of Temple desecration I discovered the phrase served as a technical reference to the introduction of an idolatrous image or an act of pagan sacrilege within the Sanctuary that produces the highest level a of ceremonial impurity, Temple profanation.”²

This passage sets the pattern and provides details about what the abomination of desolation consists of. The Daniel 9:27 passage says that this abomination is to take place in the middle of a seven year period. The passage says, “in the middle of the week he will put a stop to sacrifice and grain offering; and on the wing of abominations will come one who makes desolate.” “In other words, the future prince will do at that time exactly what Antiochus did in the second century B.C.”³ But Daniel goes on to say that the one who commits this act will be destroyed three and a half years later. Daniel 12:11 provides “the precise chronology.”⁴ The text says, “And from the time that the regular sacrifice is abolished, and the abomination of desolation is *set up*, there will be 1,290 days.”

In addition to the three passages in Daniel, the two references by our Lord in Matthew and Luke, 2 Thessalonians 2:4 and Revelation 13:14-15 also have this event in view. Therefore, the abomination of desolation, which the reader is to understand, includes the following elements:

1. It occurs in the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem (Daniel 11:31; 2 Thessalonians 2:4).
2. It involves a person setting up a statue in place of the regular sacrifice in the holy of holies (Daniel 11:31; 12:11; Revelation 13:14-14).
3. This results in the cessation of the regular sacrifice (Daniel 9:27; 11:31; 12:11).
4. There will be a time of about three-and-a-half years between this event and another event and the end of the time period (Daniel 9:27; 12:11).
5. It involves an individual setting up a statue or image of himself so that he may be worshipped in place of God (Daniel 11:31; 2 Thessalonians 2:4; Revelation 13:14-15).
6. The image is made to come to life (Revelation 13:14).
7. A worship system of this false god is thus inaugurated (2 Thessalonians 2:4; Revelation 13:14-15).
8. At the end of this time period the individual who commits the act will himself be cut off (Daniel 9:27).

PRETERIST MISINTERPRETATION

Predictably, Dr. Kenneth Gentry believes that the famous “abomination of desolation” in Matthew 24:15 (cf. Mark 13:14) was fulfilled in the first century destruction of Jerusalem.⁵ Even though there are similarities between the past destruction of Jerusalem and a future siege, there are enough differences to distinguish the two events.

Despite this specific information about the abomination of desolation, Dr. Gentry identifies it as simply the Roman invasion and destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in A.D. 70.⁶ Rather than going to Daniel for an understanding of what our Lord wanted the reader to understand, Gentry goes to Luke 21:20-22, with a little help from Josephus, to conclude that Christ is warning of Jerusalem’s devastation by military assault, not just the temple’s desecration by profane acts”.⁷ Let’s see if this interpretation measures up to the Biblical explanation concerning the abomination of desolation.

AN ANSWER TO PRETERISM

Luke 21:20-24 does refer to the A. D. 70 destruction of Jerusalem. Therefore, when verse 20 says, “when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then recognize that her desolation is at hand,” it is describing in clear language the destruction of Jerusalem. This is vindicated by the language of the rest of the passage, especially verse 24: “and they will fall by the edge of the sword, and will be led captive into all the nations; and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot.” In context, the desolation is the destruction of Jerusalem; it is not a technical term relating to the Temple, as Dr. Gentry suggests.

In contrast, the Matthew 24:15 passage has a context of its own which differs from the Luke account. Matthew says, “when you see the abomination of desolation which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet (not Luke), *standing in the holy place.*” Comparison of the description in Matthew and Daniel with the passage in Luke yields differences, which prove that they are two separate events. In the A.D. 70 destruction of Jerusalem there was . . .

- no image set up in the holy place.
- no worship of the image was required.
- no three-and-a-half year period of time between that event and the coming of Christ. This is especially true since the destruction of Jerusalem occurred at the end of the siege by Rome. It was over in a matter of days. D. A. Carson notes,

“By the time the Romans had actually desecrated the temple in A.D. 70, it was too late for anyone in the city to flee.”⁸

- no image came to life and beckoned men to worship it.

Josephus tells us that Titus did not want the Temple burned. However, the Roman soldiers were so upset with the Jews that they disobeyed his orders and burned the temple anyway. All Titus was able to do was to go in and tour the holy place shortly before it burned.⁹ This does not comport with the biblical picture of the image to be set up on the altar in the middle of Daniel's seventieth week, resulting in cessation of the regular sacrifice and a rival worship system set up in its place for three-and-a-half years. Dr. Stanley Toussaint says,

Because Christ specifically related the prophecy of the abomination of desolation to Daniel's prophecy, it seems best to see some correspondence between the abomination of desolation committed by Antiochus Epiphanes and that predicted by Christ. If this is so it would entail not only defilement on the altar by sacrifices offered with impure hearts, but also an actual worship of another god using the Temple as a means for such a dastardly act. Those preterists who agree with this take it to be the worship of the Roman standards in the Temple precincts. However, if this interpretation is taken, Matthew 24:16-20 is difficult if not impossible to explain. By then it would be too late for the followers of the Lord Jesus to escape; the Romans had already taken the city by this time.

If the abomination of desolation spoken of by Daniel 9:27 and 12:11 is foreshadowed by Antiochus Epiphanes (11:31), it would be best to say it is a desecration carried out by a person who sacrilegiously uses the Temple to promote the worship of a god other than Jehovah. This is what is anticipated in 2 Thessalonians 2.¹⁰

Another major dissimilarity between Gentry's preterism and Matthew 24 is that according to Matthew “neither the city nor the temple are destroyed, and thus the two situations stand in sharp contrast.”¹¹ The Luke 21:20-24 reference does record the “days of vengeance” which befell Jerusalem. Let us look at some other details related to the fact that the future fulfillment of Matthew 24 is one in which Christ delivers the Jews, rather than destroying them, as in A.D. 70.

First, as Luke shifts from the A.D. 70 destruction of Jerusalem in 21:20-24, to the second coming of Christ in 21:25-28, he tells them in verse 28 to “straighten up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” This is the language of deliverance from the threat of the nations, not destruction. This language of deliverance is reflected in Zechariah 12—14.¹² These three chapters include three important factors: 1) Jerusalem surrounded by the nations who are seeking to destroy it (12:2-9; 14:2-7); 2) the Lord will fight for Israel and Jerusalem and defeat the nations who have come up to lay siege against the city (14:1-8); 3) at this same time the Lord will also save Israel from her sins and she will be converted to Messiah—Jesus (12:9-14).

(To Be Continued . . .)

ENDNOTES

¹John F. Walvoord, “Christ's Olivet Discourse on the Time of the End: Signs of the End of the Age.” *Bibliotheca Sacra* (Vol. 128, Num. 512, Oct-Dec, 1971), pp. 318-19.

²J. Randall Price, “Historical Problems with a First-Century Fulfillment of the Olivet Discourse,” in Tim LaHaye and Thomas Ice, editors, *The End Times Controversy: The Second Coming Under Attack* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2003), p. 387.

³Walvoord., "Olivet Discourse," p. 319.

⁴Walvoord., "Olivet Discourse," p. 319.

⁵ Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *Perilous Times: A Study in Eschatological Evil* (Texarkana, AR: Covenant Media Press, 1999), pp. 22–26.

⁶ Gentry in Thomas Ice and Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *The Great Tribulation: Past or Future?* Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), pp. 47–48.

⁷ Gentry in Ice and Gentry, *Great Tribulation*, p. 47.

⁸D. A. Carson, "Matthew", *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), p. 500.

⁹See David Chilton, *Paradise Restored: An Eschatology of Dominion* (Tyler, TX: Reconstruction Press, 1985), pp. 274–6.

¹⁰Stanley D. Toussaint, "A Critique Of The Preterist View Of The Olivet Discourse," an unpublished paper presented to the Pre-Trib Study Group, Dallas, Texas, 1996, n.p.

¹¹Walvoord, "Olivet Discourse," p. 317.

¹² For more on Zechariah 12—14 and the fact that it will be fulfilled in the future see Arnold G Fruchtenbaum, "The Little Apocalypse," in LaHaye and Ice, editors, *The End Times Controversy*, pp. 251–81.