

An Interpretation of Matthew 24—25

Part III

by Thomas Ice

As I continue to deal with the questions of the disciples in the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24-25; Mark 13; Luke 21), I want to look more closely at the first question. After observing the Temple, Christ said to the disciples, “Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, not one stone here shall be left upon another, which will not be torn down” (Matt. 24:2). The disciples ask Jesus, “Tell us, when will these things be, . . .” (Matt. 24:3). Thus, the first question relates to the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70.

PRETERIST LITERALISM

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.”¹ This demonstrates that preterists take Scripture literally, unless it contradicts their presupposed system of theology, at which time they usually come up with a more pliable, deeply spiritual meaning of the text. But since both preterist and futurists, like myself, believe that Luke 21:20-24 literally refers to Jerusalem in A.D. 70, then this can be used as a template as to how Scripture speaks of the destruction of Jerusalem in the first century.

CHRIST’S PROPHECY OF A.D. 70

Before we look at Luke 21:20-24, I will examine the prophecies that Jesus gave specifically referring to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple that were indeed fulfilled in the first century. Note the following prophecies by Christ:

“Truly I say to you, all these things shall come upon this generation. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling. Behold, your house is being left to you desolate!” (Matt. 23:36-38; see Luke 13:34-35 for parallel passage).

And when He approached, He saw the city and wept over it, saying, “If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace! But now they have been hidden from your eyes. 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” (Luke 19:41-44).

Christ speaks clearly about the coming Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in this prediction. Jesus clearly describes a siege in verses 43 and 44 because the nation of Israel “did not recognize the time of your visitation.” They rejected Jesus as their Messiah. Notice that not once does Jesus describe this as a “judgment coming” as do preterists². In fact, coming is not used in any of these prophecies relating to A.D. 70, as it is used of Christ’s future return.

LUKE 21:20-24 AND A.D. 70

When we look at the words of Jesus’ prophecy about the destruction of Jerusalem and the second temple, He uses words and phrases that clearly denote what the Romans did in A.D. 70.

“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).

Note how the following words and phrases support the notion of judgment upon Israel in the first century:

- 1) Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then recognize that her desolation is at hand
- 2) flee to the mountains (The admonition to flee would indicate that Jerusalem will be destroyed. If the Jews were to defeat the Romans, then the safe place to be would be inside the walled city.)
- 3) these are days of vengeance
- 4) there will be great distress upon the land
- 5) wrath to this people (Israel)
- 6) they (Israel) will fall by the edge of the sword
- 7) (Israel) will be led captive into all the nations
- 8) Jerusalem will be trampled under foot by the Gentiles

There is not a single phrase in the above passage that suggests a future understanding because the A.D. 70 destruction of Jerusalem was clearly a judgment upon the Jewish people for their national rejection of Jesus as their Messiah (Luke 19:44; Matt. 23:38). This passage is our Lord’s undisputed answer to the disciples’ first question about when there will not be one stone of the Temple left upon another. Yet when compared with other sections of the Olivet Discourse, this kind of language referenced above is totally missing (see Matt. 24:4-31; Mark 13:5-27; Luke 21:25-28). Instead, in general, the language of the Olivet Discourse, except for Luke 21:20-24, does not speak of Israel under God’s judgment, but of Israel under threat from the Gentile nations and God’s intervention that rescues the Jewish people. This overall thrust of the passage is even clearly when one looks at the parallel passage of Zechariah 12–14.

UNTIL

Luke 21:24 ends by saying that Jerusalem will be under Gentile domination “until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled.” The little word “until” clearly denotes that there will be a time when the current domination of Jerusalem by the Gentiles will come to an end. The current “times of the Gentiles” in which we currently live will indeed come to an end in the future. Thus, the end of verse 24 serves as a transitional period between the prophecy that refers to the past A.D. 70 event (Luke 21:20-24) and the prophecy that looks to a future fulfillment at Christ second coming (Luke 21:25-28). We now live in the “times of the Gentiles.”

A clear connection is established between Luke 21:24 which speaks of the current era of “the times of the Gentiles” being fulfilled and coming to an end and Romans 11:25 which speaks of “the fullness of the Gentiles” having “come in.” Both passages speak of Israel’s redemption (Luke 21:28; Romans 11:26–27). When we consider that the Old Testament pattern which says that Israel will pass through the tribulation, repent toward the end when they recognize Jesus as the Messiah, experience conversion, and then the second coming will occur to rescue them from their enemies, it follows that “all Israel will be saved” (Romans 11:26) in connection with the tribulation. This is exactly the pattern of Luke 21:25–28. Preterist Ken Gentry believes Romans teaches a future conversion of Israel, yet he does not associate it with the tribulation as Scripture repeatedly does. Dr. Gentry declares, “The future conversion of the Jews will conclude the fulfillment (Rom. 11:12–25).”³ Yet only a

futurist interpretation does justice to a harmonization of these passages that are clearly connected.

LUKE 21:25-28 AND THE FUTURE

“And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and upon the earth dismay among nations, in perplexity at the roaring of the sea and the waves, men fainting from fear and the expectation of the things which are coming upon the world; for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. But when these things begin to take place, straighten up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near” (Luke 21:25-28).

J. C. Ryle says of this passage the following:

The subject of this portion of our Lord’s great prophecy is His own second coming to judge the world. The strong expressions of the passage appear inapplicable to any event less important than this. To confine the words before us, to the taking of Jerusalem by the Romans, is an unnatural straining of Scripture language.⁴

The focus of Luke 21:25–28 reveals a distinct shift from the first century description of 21:20–24. The differences include the local focus of Jerusalem in the first century judgment verses the global perspective of the future tribulation. The tribulation will involve heavenly and global events that did not literally occur in A.D. 70. If preterists like Dr. Gentry would interpret verses 25–28 in the same way they did verses 20–24 then the events of 25–28 would be understood to be clearly global and if global then they did not occur in the first century. Since they did not occur in the first century then they must take place in the future. These are future tribulation events that are prophesied by our Lord in this section of the passage.

The basic thrust of Luke 21:25-28 is the opposite of God’s judgment upon Israel as stated in Luke 21:20-24. Instead verse 28 tells Israel that, “your redemption is drawing near.” This is all the difference of night (judgment) in verses 20-24 and day (salvation and deliverance) in verses 25-28. William Kelly describes some aspects of the differences in the following:

Hence, to, the reader may notice that, in spite of a considerable measure of analogy (for there will be a future siege, and even a twofold attack, one of which will be partially successful, the other to the ruin of their enemies, as we learn from Isaiah xxviii, xxix, and Zechariah xiv.), there are the strangest contrasts in the issue; for the future siege will be closed by Jehovah’s deliverance and reign, as the past was in capture and destruction of the people dispersed ever since till the times of the Gentiles are full. Accordingly we hear nothing in this Gospel of the abomination of desolation, nor of the time of tribulation beyond all that was or shall be; we hear of both in Matthew and Mark, where the Spirit contemplates the last days.⁵

CONCLUSION

When one examines the entire Olivet Discourse as recorded in Matthew 24 and Mark 13, there is no reference to wrath or judgment upon the nation of Israel. Instead, Israel is delivered from its invader as noted in Matthew 24:31, “And He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other” (see also Mark 13:27). The question arises, “When was Israel

rescued in A.D. 70?" They were not! The events of Matthew 24 and Mark 13 (also Luke 21:25-28) will all be fulfilled in the tribulation, which will take place in the future.

So the first question of the disciples to Christ in the Olivet Discourse relates to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. The record of its fulfillment is recorded only in Luke 21. Matthew 24—25 and Mark 13 deal only with the last question, which are a prophecy of events that are still future to our day. Maranatha!

(To Be Continued . . .)

ENDNOTES

¹ Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *Before Jerusalem Fell: Dating the Book of Revelation* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989), p. 176.

² Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness: Obsession of the Modern Church* (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 1999), p. 72.

³ Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *He Shall Have Dominion: A Postmillennial Eschatology* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1992), p. 206.

⁴ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: Luke*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., [1858] n. d.), vol. II, p. 374.

⁵ William Kelly, *An Exposition of the Gospel of Luke* (Oak Park, IL: Bible Truth Publishers, 1971), pp. 332–333.