

CONSISTENT BIBLICAL FUTURISM
Part V
by Thomas Ice

In my previous installment, I noted that there are not specific prophecies relating to the current church age in which we live. There are only general trends that characterize the church age. Therefore, if my portrayal of the church age is correct, then it would follow that there would not be signs of the end of this age, which would amount to signs for the rapture since it is that event which we all agree terminates this dispensation. In order to examine this notion, I want to begin an appraisal of whether signs of the first section in the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24:3–14) relate to the church age or the tribulation.

PRELIMINARY ISSUES

First of all, we must identify the specific texts that contain the Olivet Discourse and its various accounts in the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The Olivet Discourse is found in Matthew 24 and 25, Mark 13, and Luke 21:5–36. Some also believe that elements of the discourse are found in Luke 17:37, however, this discourse appears to be set within a different context related to the coming of the kingdom, even though some of the same statements are used. The Matthew and Mark accounts have many parallels and I believe relate totally to the future time of the tribulation. However, Luke 21 is the only account that has some elements that relate to A.D. 70 and the destruction of Jerusalem (especially 21: 20–24) but also some that relate to the future tribulation (especially 21:25–28). How does the fact that some of Luke 21 relates to the destruction of Jerusalem in the first century, which occurred in the church age?

Primarily Luke 21:20–24 was fulfilled during the early part of the church age because there was a transition needed from Israel to the church. Since the church began in Acts 2, it was not immediately obvious what was unfolding. Only after the Apostle Paul was converted a few years after Acts 2, then taken to heaven and given revelation (2 Cor. 12:1–10; Gal. 1:11–2:2) about the nature and purpose of the church age (Eph. 3:1–13), were members of the body of Christ able to begin to understand what was taking place (2 Pet. 3:15–16). However, there is not a similar body of prophecy relating to the end of the church age as there was for Israel, since Israel greatly differs from the church age by having extensive prophetic activity, while the church does not, as noted in my previous installment.

The church age began suddenly and unexpected in Acts 2 and it will end suddenly and unexpected at the rapture, because the church age is said to be a mystery (Rom. 16:25–27; Eph. 3:1–13; Col. 1:24–2:3), a secret not revealed in the Old Testament Scriptures. Jesus unveiled “church age truth” in the Upper Room Discourse (John 13–16) that He gave just a few hours before His death. Three times during this discourse, Jesus tells his disciples that He is going away and will send them the Holy Spirit who will guide them into all truth (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:7). These promises were fulfilled by the new ministries of the Holy Spirit related to the current Church Age and the revelation of the New Testament through the Apostles, which includes the disclosure of Church Age mysteries. These “church age truths” are given within the context of Israel’s rejection of Jesus as their Messiah and explain what God is doing during the time of Israel’s apostasy as I have noted previously.

The implications of the above factors support the notion that the Olivet Discourse relates to Israel and not the church. The Olivet Discourse is given at least three days

before Christ's death in a context of discussing the Temple. The Upper Room Discourse is given just a few hours before his death in the context of His going away and introduces new truth for the yet to be revealed Church Age. The Olivet Discourse is our Lord's outline of the seventieth week of Daniel or the tribulation period in light of a couple of questions ask by the disciples (Matt. 24:1-3; Mark 13:1-4; Luke 21:5-7) and is paralleled by Revelation 4-19 in relation to later Revelation. On the other hand, the Upper Room Discourse is related to the later revelation, which is the New Testament, especially the Epistles, that the Holy Spirit would provide after Christ's departure.

THE HISTORICAL SETTING

Matthew 24:1-3 provides us with the setting for which Christ delivers His prophetic sermon. We see that Jesus is making His way from the Temple (24:1) to the Mount of Olives (24:3), which would mean that He most likely would travel down the Kidron Valley and on up to Olivet. As He was going from the Temple "His disciples came up to point out the temple buildings to Him" (24:1). This statement leads us to believe that they were talking to Jesus about how beautiful the Temple complex was that Herod was still in the process of remodeling and refurbishing. Such an emphasis is borne out in the parallel references in Mark 13:1-2 and Luke 21:5-6 as the disciples speak of the beauty of the Temple buildings. The Lord must have startled His disciples by His response to their gloating over the beauty of the Temple complex when He said, "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" (24:2).

As 24:2 is completed with Christ's statement, there is a break in the narrative. The narrative resumes in 24:3 when it says, "the disciples came to Him privately." Mark 13:3 tells us that the disciples who came to Him privately were Peter, James, John and Andrew, and that they were sitting on the Mount of Olives looking at the Temple. This would be the same vista that many have seen today when a pilgrim goes to the viewing point in modern Jerusalem on the Mount of Olives that overlooks the Temple Mount with the Dome of the Rock currently perched upon it.

When the disciples came to Jesus privately, it fits the pattern that Jesus practices and Matthew records of teaching only His believing disciples once the nation rejected Him as their prophesied Messiah in Matthew 12. From Matthew 13 on, Jesus speaks publicly to the rejecting nation only in parables (Matt. 13:10-17). "Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand" (Matt. 13:13). However, many times He would later explain a public parable privately to His disciples (for example, Matt. 13:10-23). In the Olivet Discourse, we see Christ following this pattern. This private explanation, which is the Olivet Discourse, means that Christ will provide His explanation of future history for the benefit of Jewish believers.

THE DISCIPLES QUESTIONS

While sitting on the Mount of Olives these four disciples ask Jesus the following questions: "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age" (24:3)? Immediately debate rises over whether these are two questions or three. If one takes the first option, then there is no doubt that the second question contains two parts to it. I believe that there are two basic questions because of the grammar of the passage as explained by Dr. Craig Blomberg as follows:

“The sign of your coming and of the end of the age” in Greek reads, more literally, *the sign of your coming and end of the age*. By not repeating the definite article (“the”) before “end of the age,” Matthew’s rendering of Jesus’ words is most likely linking the coming of Christ and the end of the age together as one event (Granville Sharp’s rule).ⁱ

This means that the two phrases are closely related to one another in the mind of the disciples, who formulated the question. This relationship in their question indicates that the disciples likely thought they would be fulfilled during the same event.

Clearly the first question relates to the destruction of the Temple, which was fulfilled in the Roman invasion and destruction of A.D. 70. It is equally clear that the two aspects of the second question have yet to occur in history, even though some want to see in this passage Christ’s second coming.

It appears likely to me that the disciples believed that all three aspects of their two questions would occur around the same event—the coming of Messiah. Why would they have thought this way? Dr. Toussaint is correct to note that the disciples were most likely influenced by the prophet Zechariah as follows:

In their minds they had developed a chronology of events in the following sequence: (1) the departure of the King, (2) after a period of time the destruction of Jerusalem, and (3) immediately after Jerusalem’s devastation the presence of the Messiah. They had good scriptural ground for this since Zechariah 14:1-2 describes the razing of Jerusalem. The same passage goes on to describe the coming of the Lord to destroy the nations which warred against Jerusalem (Zechariah 14:3-8). Following this the millennial kingdom is established (Zechariah 14:9-11).ⁱⁱ

In other words, the disciples thought that all three events were related to a single event—the return of the Messiah as taught in Zechariah 14:4. They were right to think of Zechariah 12—14 and his teaching about Messiah’s return. However, they were wrong to relate the impending judgment of Jerusalem and the temple with the second coming of Messiah. In the course of His Discourse, Jesus will separate these events and place them into their proper contexts. Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

ⁱ Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, Vol. 22 of *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), p. 353, f.n. 37.

ⁱⁱ Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold The King: A Study of Matthew* (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1980), p. 269.