

CONSISTENT BIBLICAL FUTURISM
Part VI
by Thomas Ice

The Olivet Discourse, I believe, is Christ's message about the 70th-week of Daniel or the tribulation period. Jesus begins His discourse in verse 4 when He warns about the possibility of being deceived by false Messiahs. Does this warning refer to the inter-advent age or does it a parallel to the first seal judgement of Revelation 6:1–2 as a reference to a false Messiah—the antichrist?

INTER-ADVENT AGE VIEW

Many futurist interpreters of the Olivet Discourse believe that verses 4–14 describe the general signs of the inter-advent age. Dr. John F. Walvoord, an advocate of this view says that verses 4–14 are “describing the general characteristics of the age leading up to the end, while at the same time recognizing that the prediction of difficulties, which will characterized the entire period between the first and second coming of Christ, are fulfilled in an intensified form as the age moves on to its conclusion.”ⁱ Dr. Walvoord believes that verses 15–26 are specific signs that describe the tribulation, while verses 27–31 relate to the second coming.ⁱⁱ Thus, according to this view the entire church age and the tribulation is the period in which the signs of the second coming are gradually increasing, as Dr. Walvoord contends. The birth pangs began 2,000 years ago and have become very intense in our day.

Within the inter-advent age view is a variation of this perspective. Some think that verses 4–8 are general signs of the inter-advent age leading up to the tribulation. While verses 9–14 reference the first half of the tribulation. “The events concerning the first half of the tribulation are recorded in Matthew 24:9–14,” says Dr. Arnold Fruchtenbaum. This “passage begins with the word *then*, pointing out that what Christ is describing now will come *after* the event of nation rising against nation and kingdom against kingdom.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Hal Lindsey popularized another variation of the inter-advent age view by teaching that the birth pangs began when Israel became a nation.^{iv} Since that occurred in 1948, the signs of verses 4–8 are currently and increasingly being fulfilled, according to this view.^v

If the inter-advent age view is the correct interpretation, then it would mean that wars, earthquakes, famines, and the appearance of false Christs would be constantly on the increase as we approach the tribulation period. However, if these items are references to the first half of the tribulation, then wars, earthquakes, famines, and false Christs during any part of the church age would not constitute prophetic signs. This explains why some futurists believe that increasing wars, earthquakes, famines, etc. are prophetically significant, while others, like myself, do not think that they are prophetically significant, since these verses refer to global events during the seven-year tribulation.

TRIBULATION VIEW

I believe that Matthew 24:4–41 refers to the seven-year period (Dan. 9:24–27) that many commonly call the tribulation. The tribulation is divided in half by the abomination of desolation, mentioned by Jesus in Matthew 24:15. Thus, verses 4–14 refer to the first half of the tribulation and are parallel to the first five seal judgments

found in Revelation 6. I have already made the case for this view in a previous installment. How do I explain the popularity of the inter advent age view's popularity among some futurists?

First, it would appear to me that the burden of proof concerning this matter would be with the futurist-historicist, who holds to the inter advent age view to show that Christ's prophecy of events in Matthew 24:4–14 differ from those in Revelation six. That is the outcome if the inter advent age view is taken. The events of Matthew 24:4–14 and Revelation six are in reality parallel to each other. Seeing these passages as parallel and in the same sequence makes the most sense and provides a framework for understanding similar passages throughout the Old Testament within the context of the tribulation, not our current Church Age.

Next, a general observation about the development of modern futurism comes into play at this point. While it is true that the early church took a futurist view of Bible prophecy, futurism died out by the fourth and fifth centuries in conjunction with the suppression of premillennialism. When premillennialism began to be revived by Protestantism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it was linked to historicism, not futurism. In fact, historicism became such an entrenched view within Protestantism from the early 1600's until about 1800, that it earned the label "the Protestant view." During this period, it did not matter whether you were an Amillennialist, Premillennialist, or Postmillennialist, virtually all held to a historicist view of Revelation and prophetic interpretation within Protestantism.

Since the key feature of historicism's view of Revelation is to equate the events of the tribulation (chapters 4–19) with the current Church Age, it is not surprising that these same interpreters tended to view the events of the Olivet Discourse in the same way. The shift away from the historicist understanding of the Book of Revelation began to take place in the mid-1800s in Great Britain and after the Civil War in America. However, applying a futurist interpretation to Christ's Olivet Discourse proceeded more slowly than the shift to a futurist view of Revelation. I believe that this is what led to the popularity of a futurist-historicist view of the Olivet Discourse by otherwise futurist interpreters. As with any interpretative paradigm shift, it has taken some time to apply consistent literal interpretation to the Olivet Discourse, which yields a consistent futurism in relation to the passage.

THE HISTORICIST ATTRACTION

The attraction of the historicist interpretative approach for historicists is that they can say: "prophecy is being fulfilled today." However, prophecy is not being fulfilled today!^{vi} After about 250 years of trying to make that work, people finally got tired of failed prophecy after failed prophecy. Historian Ernest Sandeen has noted the following about the failures of historicism:

Sooner or later these timetables failed to predict a great world event (such as the defeat and exile of Napoleon III in 1870, which confounded many scholars' expectations that the emperor would prove to be the Antichrist) or predicted one that failed to appear on schedule. After 1844 the historicist's position began to lose the almost undisputed position that it held during the first generation of the millenarian revival.^{vii}

Since the Bible cannot be wrong and has proven to be correct in relation to the fulfillment of prophecy in regards to the first coming of the Messiah (Jesus), when taken

literally, it will be proven true in relation to His second advent when taken literally. However, just like historicists, futurists who import elements of historicism into their prophetic frameworks too often prove to be failures, just like the historicists of bygone years.

Frankly, it is the historicist elements that some dispensational futurists incorporate into their systems that appear attractive to those who want to be able to say, “Bible prophecy is being fulfilled in our own day.” Yet, it is these same historicist elements that are seen by our critics, who use them to say that dispensationalists are date-setters and prognosticators who have been proven wrong. And many of these historicist-based elements have been proven wrong. The critics then claim that dispensationalism has been proven wrong, when in fact it is the historicist elements that do not belong to futurist dispensationalism. Sandeen tells us concerning Darby and dispensationalism the following:

Unlike the historicist millenarians, Darby taught that the prophetic timetable had been interrupted at the founding of the church and that the unfulfilled biblical prophecies must all wait upon the rapture of the church. . . . Darby avoided the pitfalls both of attempting to predict a time for Christ’s second advent and of trying to make sense out of the contemporary alarms of European politics with the Revelation as the guidebook.^{viii}

Further problems with blending elements of historicism with futurism is that such a mix destroys imminency, which is the fact that Christ could come at any moment to rapture His Bride, before any of the events of the tribulation can occur. Thus, to say that the events of Matthew 24:4–8, for example, are taking place today, before the rapture has taken place, is destructive of a true doctrine of imminency (1 Cor. 1:7; Phil. 3:20; 4:5; 1 Thess. 1:10; 5:9; Titus 2:13; James 5: 7–9; 1 Pet. 1:13; Jude 21). If these events must take place during the current Church Age, then they would need to take place before the rapture could occur. We can see that the more one looks at the details of the view that Matthew 24:4–14 or 4–8 refers to the inter advent age, the more we see that such a view undermines consistent futurism. Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

ⁱ John F. Walvoord, *Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), p. 183.

ⁱⁱ Walvoord, *Matthew*, p. 183.

ⁱⁱⁱ Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *The Footsteps of the Messiah: A Study of the Sequence of Prophetic Events*, 2nd ed. (Tustin, CA: Ariel Press, 2003), pp. 632-35. For the most exhaustive presentation of this view that I have found so far, see David L. Cooper, *Future Events Revealed: According to Matthew 24 and 25* (Los Angeles: David L. Cooper, 1935).

^{iv} Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970), pp. 53–54.

^v Some have tried to make the case that killer earthquakes are on the rise over the last few decades, which is disputed by others. Even if killer quakes are on the rise, it does not impact my thinking on this issue since my view is formulated by my understanding of the biblical text, not a perception of current events.

^{vi} However, it is clear that today God is in the process of bringing Israel back to her land in preparation for the events of the tribulation. There can also be no doubt that God is preparing or setting the stage for a time of future fulfillment, after the rapture and during the tribulation.

^{vii} Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800–1930* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), p. 60.

^{viii} Sandeen, *Roots of Fundamentalism*, pp. 62–64.