

The Olivet Discourse

Jesus had just finished telling his disciples plainly that he was going away and would return to judge the world at the end of the age. When he described the destruction of the temple a short time later, they quite naturally assumed that this would occur as part of the Day of Judgment foretold by the prophets. The disciples asked him: “*Tell us, when shall these things be? And what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?*” The way they joined the two issues gives the impression they believed both events would occur in close proximity to each other. Because Jesus’ response covered the signs of both the fall of Jerusalem and of his second coming, this has led to some confusion.

Part of the difficulty in examining the Olivet discourse therefore is determining which of Jesus’ statements apply to the fall of Jerusalem, which to his return, and those that may relate to both, since prophecy can have a dual fulfillment. Of the three synoptic accounts, Matthew’s is the most comprehensive, while Luke’s is the most straightforward. A side-by-side comparison provides the most effective means of analyzing Jesus’ response. This approach allows for a thematic ordering of the passage, graphically revealing important details. One such work, *Gospel Parallels*,¹ divides the Olivet discourse into six discrete sections: The Signs of the *Parousia*; The Beginnings of Troubles; The Desolating Sacrilege; The Culmination of Troubles; The Day of the Son of Man; and, The *Parousia* (arrival) of the Son of Man.

1. The Signs of the Parousia: (Mt. 24: 4-8; Mk. 13: 5-8; Lk. 21: 8-11) *And Jesus... said unto them, “Take heed that no man deceive you. For many shall come in my name, saying, ‘I am Christ’; and shall deceive many. And ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars: see that ye be not troubled: for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in divers places. All these are the beginning of sorrows.” Mt. 24: 4-8*

The focus of this section is not on Jesus’ return, but on the signs that would precede it, a direct response to the disciples’ question, “*And what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?*” While these signs will indeed occur before Jesus’ second coming, history records their initial fulfillment preceding the fall of Jerusalem. This included several individuals claiming to be the Messiah, an insurrection against Herod Agrippa and a conflict between Judea and Samaria, a severe famine in which some living in Jerusalem died, and a large destructive earthquake in Judea accompanied by a violent thunderstorm. Similar signs have continued during the last two millennia, with an increase in their occurrence over the past few decades. These are therefore *seasonal* signs of both events; they have a dual fulfillment, as prophetic signs often do. A better title for this section might therefore be “Signs of the destruction of the temple and of Jesus’ return.”

2. The Beginnings of Troubles: (Mt. 24: 9-14; Mk. 13: 9-13; Lk. 21: 12-19) *Then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you: and ye shall be hated of all nations for my name’s sake. And then shall many be offended, and shall betray one another, and shall hate one another. And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many. And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold. But he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved. (But there shall not an hair of your head perish. In your patience possess ye your souls. –*

Luke 21: 18-19) And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come. Mt. 24: 9-14

The signs of false prophets and of Jesus' followers being hated by all nations, betrayed, and delivered to the authorities are often perceived as describing conditions only at the end of the church age. However, they were partially fulfilled before the fall of Jerusalem. In the first century, the term 'all nations' was equated with those bordering the Mediterranean Sea, as this was considered "the inhabited earth" at the time. All other lands belonged to the Barbarians, which were considered wild tribes rather than civilized nations. Throughout the Roman Empire, Jews as well as Christians were viewed by many as being subversive elements comprised of fanatics who did not believe in the Roman gods. Israel was perceived as being particularly troublesome, with repeated riots and outright rebellions led by religious zealots. On several occasions, pseudo-religious leaders claiming to be the Jewish Messiah had lured thousands of people into the desert, and had once even taken over the outer temple rooms to meet the coming Messiah. Each time this happened these groups were hunted down and killed by Roman troops. The reputation of Jews as religious zealots caused them to be distrusted throughout the empire.

While Jews were distrusted and watched, Christians came under active persecution. Spreading eastward from the provinces, The Way of Christianity had reached Rome, where its teaching was drawing the lower classes astray from the worship of Roman deities. Christianity was for many years viewed throughout the empire as a Jewish sect rather than a separate religion. Many believed the rumor that its followers practiced cannibalism in secret Communion ceremonies, eating flesh and drinking blood. Intense religious persecution of the Christian sect broke out under Nero in AD 64, six years before the destruction of Jerusalem.

For nearly two millennia, Jews and Christians have been the world's most hated and persecuted people, as God's enemies have tried to eclipse the light of truth. Jesus' promise in Lk. 21: 18 that *not a hair of your head shall "perish"* (Gr. – *apollymi*) is a reference to eternal destruction, not a guarantee against tribulation, suffering or even death. In fact, Jesus' point here is that the most important thing is not our physical suffering for the sake of the kingdom, but our eternal salvation, which is ensured by enduring the trials and tribulation of the age in which we live. This section might be better described as: "The Beginning and Continuation of Troubles."

3. The Desolating Sacrilege: (Mt. 24: 15-22; Mk. 13: 14-20; Lk. 21: 20-24) And when ye shall see Jerusalem compassed with armies, then know that the desolation thereof is nigh. Then let them which are in Judaea flee to the mountains; and let them which are in the midst of it depart out; and let not them that are in the countries enter thereinto. For these be the days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled. But woe unto them that are with child, and to them that give suck, in those days! for there shall be great distress in the land, and wrath upon this people. (For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be. – Mt. 24: 21) And they shall fall by the edge of the sword, and shall be led away captive into all nations: and Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled. Lk. 21: 20-24

In this section Jesus describes the sign that foretells the *imminent* fall of Jerusalem. Matthew and Mark describe it as the "abomination of desolation," the desolating sacrilege prophesied in Daniel 9. Luke specifies the exact nature of this desolation for his Gentile readers as *Jerusalem compassed with (surrounded by) armies*. Since the ground was considered holy for several hundred feet around the temple (Ezek. 43: 12), the presence of the Roman legions and

their eagle insignia just outside the city walls fulfilled Daniel's prophecy. Jesus warned that this would be the signal for an immediate evacuation of Jerusalem and the surrounding countryside.

Jesus' used the term "great tribulation" (Gr. – *thlipsis megale*) to describe Jerusalem's coming suffering, but promised a reprieve for "the elect," a Greek term for believers. "... *for the elect's sake those days shall be shortened.*" (Mt. 24: 22) Although the "shortening" of the days sounds like an early termination of them, this is not the exact meaning. The Greek word in this verse, *koloboō*, does not mean to shorten, but "to dock," or have a portion of the total reduced, as in having a paycheck docked by deducting money from one's regular wages. In this case, it can be said that 'tribulation time' was docked during the siege of Jerusalem rather than shortened at the end of it, during a Roman interregnum that opened a window of escape for believers.

Josephus and Eusebius both record that the Roman siege of Jerusalem was actually initiated by Cestius Gallus, not Vespasian. For some inexplicable reason Gallus terminated the siege before Vespasian arrived in Jerusalem, leaving the city residents free to come and go. Additionally, when the siege resumed, it was not fully prosecuted for some time due to developments in Rome, with Vespasian being recalled to the capital to become emperor. Christians took these opportunities to leave, so the elect were able to escape the siege and destruction of Jerusalem. (This fulfilled Jesus words recorded in the Gospel of Luke to "pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen." – See the [Parable of the Fig Tree](#) at Lk. 21:29-36) Most Jews believed that Jerusalem's fortifications, completed only a few years earlier, could withstand any assault. The majority chose to stay, thinking Cestius Gallus had lifted the siege due to the impregnability of the city. Those that remained were caught inside when Titus erected a siege wall that cut off the food supply and eliminated any chance of escape. Josephus offers a first hand account of the incredible suffering that occurred during the siege and fall of Jerusalem as God's wrath was poured out on Israel for the blood of the righteous. (Lk. 21:22)

4. The Culmination of Troubles: (Mt. 24: 23-25; Mk. 13: 21-23) *Then if any man shall say unto you, Lo, here is Christ, or there; believe it not. For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall show great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect. Behold, I have told you before.* (Mt. 24: 23-25) Still focusing on the fall of Jerusalem, Jesus emphasizes that he would not return at that time. For purposes of clarification, the title of this section could be amended to: "The Culmination of Israel's Troubles: Not the Day of the Son of Man."

5. The Day of the Son of Man: (Mt. 24: 26-28; Lk. 17: 23-24, 37) *Wherefore if they shall say unto you, Behold, he is in the desert; go not forth: behold, he is in the secret chambers; believe it not. For as the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be. For wheresoever the carcase is, there will the eagles be gathered together.* Mt. 24: 26-28

The most prominent aspect of Jesus' coming will be its "shock and awe" factor. When Jesus does return he will not be found sojourning in some remote desert location so that believers should have to go out and search for him, nor will his whereabouts be known only to the privileged elect. Jesus warns believers here to disregard any teaching that his coming would be a secret one by comparing his arrival to a bolt of lightning flashing from one end of heaven to the other. Along with 1 Thessalonians 4: 13 to 5: 3, which states the dead will be resurrected before the living are raptured, these verses and the ones in the sixth section following, indicate that both events will occur in quick succession in full view of every nation, "*on the day the Son of Man is*

revealed.” (Luke 17:30) This is in opposition to one of the main tenets of a pre-tribulation rapture, which is by definition a secret one. (On the other hand, any belief that leads to believers living each day as if the rapture might happen tomorrow is not something that should be discouraged. Better to be a disappointed but suffering pre-tribber than a post-tribber caught unaware!)

In verse 28, Jesus describes the actual location of his return, presenting it as a riddle: “*For wheresoever the carcass is, there will the eagles be gathered together.*” There were times in his ministry that Jesus spoke plainly instead of using his usual parable form of teaching. However, this direct approach sometimes had the unwanted effect of detracting from his listeners’ ability to receive his message, and had even caused riots. More than once, crowds attempted to stone Jesus when he spoke plainly of spiritual realities. Even his disciples had stumbled at clearly stated spiritual truth that contradicted reason. (Jn. 6: 48-60) Some truths were so incredible that they were best presented as a parable or riddle, as Jesus did here.

Luke 17: 20-37 provides a fuller, parallel account describing the rapture on the day the Son of Man is revealed. After Jesus compares his return to lightning that lights up the sky from one end to the other, he warns that his return would bring judgment, likening it to God’s judgment on Sodom and the destruction of most of mankind in the Flood. When he was asked where people would be taken on that day (or night) he replied in the riddle noted above, which is easily understood when phrased in a question-answer format:

Question: Where do eagles (vultures) gather when there is a dead body?

Answer: *In the air.*

Much later, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Paul states this truth in plain language.

For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. 1 Thess. 4: 16, 17

The word used for this ‘meeting’ in the air is *apantēsis*, with the prefix *apo* meaning “away.” Its literal translation is “to meet away,” and it is always used to describe a meeting in which people go out a short distance to meet someone coming from afar. The literal meaning is that the people who go out (usually from a city) to meet someone then return, escorting him back into the city. The same word is used in Acts 28: 15 to describe Paul’s arrival in Rome, where several believers went out to meet Paul south of Rome and traveled with him back to the city.

6. The Parousia of the Son of man: (Mt. 24: 29-31; Mk. 13: 28-29; Lk. 21: 29-31)
Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken: And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other. (Mt. 24: 29-31)

In the first two sections of the Olivet discourse, Jesus foretold the signs that would indicate that the *season* of Jerusalem’s destruction and of his return was drawing near. In the third section, he described the sign that would *immediately* precede the siege of Jerusalem,

warning his followers to leave before its destruction. In the fourth and fifth sections, Jesus interrupts his discourse on signs to warn his followers about being deceived by those who would teach that he would return at the destruction of Jerusalem or that his coming would be a secret one. In this last section, Jesus relates the signs that will *immediately* precede his return at the end of the age. Not surprisingly, they match four of the six signs that appear with the opening of the sixth seal.

The introductory wording of this section of the Olivet discourse creates some confusion. Matthew 24: 29 starts with the words “Immediately after the tribulation of those days,” while Mark 13: 24 states “In those days, after that tribulation...” Both accounts *appear* to refer back to the tribulation attending the destruction of Jerusalem, giving the impression that Jesus’ return occurs soon, or immediately afterwards. However, this is not the case, as history has proven. The parallel account in Luke 21: 24 provides a chronology that clarifies the issue. Luke presents a timeline of the tribulation that Matthew and Mark omit. After the fall of Jerusalem, and before the signs of Jesus’ imminent return, Luke describes the Diaspora, the scattering of the Jews among the nations and the trampling of Jerusalem during the times of the Gentiles. “*And they shall fall by the edge of the sword, and shall be led away captive into all nations: and Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled.*” On incorporating Luke’s account it becomes clear that “the tribulation of those days” in Matthew and Mark does not refer just to the days of Jerusalem’s tribulation, but to the continuing tribulation of the times of the Gentiles, the “great tribulation” that continues to the end of the age. (See [Days of Vengeance](#))

1. Thomas Nelson, *Gospel Parallels*, NY 1936 p. 154-157

More information on the end of the age and the book of Revelation is available at:
<http://www.thefirsttrumpet.com>