

Historical Jesus 13: Olivet Discourse

Matthew 24:1-3

1 Jesus left the temple and was going away, when his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. 2 But he answered them, "You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down." 3 As he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"

Jesus' prophecy of the Temple's destruction caused the disciples to ask for more information. For them the destruction of the Temple would be even worse than someone demolishing the White House in America today. The Temple was the symbol of God's presence among His people. It was the center of national and religious pride. It was a gorgeous structure overlaid with gold so that it gleamed in the sunlight. The courtyards surrounding this decadent marble Temple were the size of six football fields. Jesus' prophecy was extreme, and the disciples wanted to know more about it.

The disciples' questions kicked off one of Jesus' longest discourses. Since it occurs on the Mount of Olives, we call it the Olivet Discourse (found in Matthew 24-25; Mark 13; Luke 21).⁶⁶ Bible students have quite a few different views on how to interpret Jesus' statements. Some say everything saw its fulfillment in the year a.d. 70 when the Romans besieged Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple. Others say Jesus' prophesy pertains to a future Temple and the coming of the Son of Man to establish God's eternal Kingdom on earth. A third option is that Jesus shaped his teaching in such a way that it would encompass both of these events. In what follows I briefly consider some of the benefits and detriments of each.

First off, they asked for a sign when the Temple would fall. Jesus answered this question first negatively and then positively. He explained what events do not qualify as signs: wars, earthquakes, famines, pestilences, political turbulence, and persecution. These, he said, are merely the beginnings of birth pangs, the contractions before labor intensifies. Then he gave two signs: the abomination of desolation and the Son of Man coming in the clouds.

According to Jesus, the abomination of desolation is a sign that kicks off the great persecution. Jesus, furthermore, linked his understanding to what Daniel had predicted. Some Jews thought Daniel's prophecy about abomination of desolation found fulfillment more than a century before Christ when Antiochus IV, the Seleucid king, erected his own altar in the Temple area and sacrificed a pig to Zeus.

⁶⁶ Since Matthew is the longest and most detailed, I will focus most of my attention on Matthew 24-25.

1 Maccabees 1.44-47, 54-55, 59

44 And the king sent letters by messengers to Jerusalem and the towns of Judah; he directed them to follow customs strange to the land, 45 to forbid burnt offerings and sacrifices and drink offerings in the sanctuary, to profane sabbaths and festivals, 46 to defile the sanctuary and the priests, 47 to build altars and sacred precincts and shrines for idols, to sacrifice swine and other unclean animals... 54 Now on the fifteenth day of Chisleu, in the one hundred forty-fifth year, they erected a desolating sacrilege on the altar of burnt offering. They also built altars in the surrounding towns of Judah, 55 and offered incense at the doors of the houses and in the streets...59 On the twenty-fifth day of the month they offered sacrifice on the altar that was on top of the altar of burnt offering.

If we look for signs prior to the surrounding of the city of Jerusalem by Roman soldiers, we find an incident when the Zealots overtook the Temple. R. T. France explains:

Josephus (*War* 4.150-57) records tha[t] in the winter of 67/8 the Zealots under John of Gischala took over the temple itself as their headquarters and μεμιασμένοις τοῖς ποσὶ παρήεσαν εἰς τὸ ἅγιον [with the feet being defiled they entered into the sanctuary], appointing their own mock high priest to carry out a travesty of temple ritual; popular outrage led to fighting within the temple itself (4.196-207) with Zealot blood defiling the sanctuary (201)...[I]t took place just before the first major campaign of [the Roman emperor] Vespasian in Judea, when it was still possible to escape into the hills.⁶⁷

Josephus records several other signs that he believed portended the coming destruction.⁶⁸ Some early Christians found the connection between Jesus' prophecy and Josephus' description of Jerusalem's defeat irresistible. Eusebius, the 4th century historian, said, "Anyone comparing our Savior's words with the rest of the historian's record of the war cannot fail to be astonished or to confess the divine character of the Savior's prediction."⁶⁹ He then went on to quote Josephus at length. Of course, the abomination of desolation could also refer to a future event, as seems to be the case in this Scripture:

2 Thessalonians 2:1-4, 8

Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, 2 not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a

⁶⁷ R. T. France, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002), p. 525.

⁶⁸ See Josephus' *The Wars of the Jews* 6.5.3-4 in which he describes a star resembling a sword, a comet, a great light shining on the Temple, a cow that gave birth to a lamb in the temple courtyard, a heavy gate that opened by itself, a vision of chariots and troops in the clouds surrounding the cities, and an earthquake accompanied by a multitude saying, "We are departing from here." Last of all Josephus mentions a certain Jesus of Ananus who unceasingly prophesied "A voice from the east, a voice from the west, a voice from the four winds, a voice against Jerusalem and the holy house, a voice against the bridegroom and the bride, and a voice against this whole people!" for four years prior to the war. The Roman proconsul captured and severely beat him but then let him go, concluding the man was deranged.

⁶⁹ Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 3.7

spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. 3 Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, 4 who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God...8 And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming.⁷⁰

Whether past, future, or both, what Jesus said is clear, the abomination of desolation initiates a period of intense persecution followed by the sign of the Son of Man in the clouds. Jesus repeatedly warned his disciples not to fall for false prophets and messiahs, even if they perform mighty miracles. They need not sneak away to an inner room or to an obscure place to find the Christ, rather he will come visibly like lightning flashing across the sky, lighting it up for all to see, or vultures circling above a corpse. When he comes, all the tribes of the earth will mourn and they see the sign of the Son of Man coming on the clouds. Those who think this already occurred explain it thusly:

This language [the darkening of the sun and moon and falling of the stars] was well known, regular code for talking about what we would call huge social and political convulsions. When we say that empires ‘fall,’ or that kingdoms ‘rise,’ we don’t normally envisage any actual downward or upward physical movement. Matthew intends us to understand that the time of the coming of the son of man will be a time when the whole world seems to be in turmoil.

But what will this ‘coming’ itself actually *be*? What will Jesus’ ‘royal appearing’ consist of? Matthew takes us back, in line with so much in Jesus’ teaching, to the prophet Daniel again, and this time to the crucial passage in 7.13. They will see, he says, ‘the son of man coming on the clouds of heaven.’ Now in Daniel this certainly refers, not to a *downward* movement of this strange human figure, but to an *upward* movement. The son of man ‘comes’ from the point of view of the heavenly world, that is, he comes *from* earth *to* heaven. His ‘coming’ in this sense, in other words, is not his ‘return’ to earth after a sojourn in heaven. It is his ascension, his vindication, the thing which demonstrates that his suffering has not been in vain.⁷¹

However, with respect to those who hold this view, many other texts that refer to the Son of Man’s coming with angels make it sound much more like an actual coming—what we typically call ‘the second coming.’ Here are the relevant Scriptures:

Mark 8:38

For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation,

⁷⁰ See also Revelation 13 about the antichrist figure, there called the beast.

⁷¹ N. T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone: Part Two* (London: SPCK, 2004), p. 122-3.

of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

Matthew 16:27

For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done.⁷²

Matthew 24:27

For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.

Matthew 24:30-31

30 Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. 31 And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

Matthew 24:37-44

37 For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. 38 For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, 39 and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. 40 Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. 41 Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left. 42 Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. 43 But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. 44 Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

Matthew 25:31-34

31 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. 32 Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. 33 And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. 34 Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.

⁷² In the next verse (Mt 16:28), Jesus prophesies that some standing there will not die until they "see the Son of Man coming his kingdom." Immediately following this, we find the account of the transfiguration when Peter, James, and John see Jesus glorified with Moses and Elijah. Presumably this is a vision of the age to come when all are resurrected and glorified.

Matthew 26:64

Jesus said to him, "You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven."⁷³

1 Thessalonians 4:16-17

16 For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.

2 Thessalonians 1:6-10

6 ...God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, 7 and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels 8 in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. 9 They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, 10 when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.

Jude 1:14-15

14 It was also about these that Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied, saying, "Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of his holy ones, 15 to execute judgment on all and to convict all the ungodly of all their deeds of ungodliness that they have committed in such an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things that ungodly sinners have spoken against him."

Revelation 1:7

Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.

Revelation 22:12

Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done.

In the face of so much overwhelming evidence, I find it hard to interpret Jesus' coming as going. Jesus does go, but it is not in a.d. 70, it is forty days after his resurrection when he ascends to heaven to take his seat at the right hand of God. Writing before the Temple fell, Paul spoke of Christ in the past tense as one whom God had already raised and seated at his right hand "far

⁷³ This may be the best evidence for interpreting "coming on the clouds of heaven" as coming to the Ancient of Days rather than coming to the earth. Though, it is hard for me to imagine that Jesus ascended into heaven in the a.d. 30s and did not actually experience exaltation until a.d. 70 when the Temple fell. Presumably, Jesus comes to God who gives him the authority to rule earth and THEN returns to earth to establish his dominion.

above all rule and authority and power and dominion...and he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church” (Ephesians 1:20-22).

Even if Jesus’ statement about the coming of the Son of Man pulls us towards a future view, his next statement about “this generation” yanks us back the other way. He tells the parable of the fig tree: when the leaves grow one knows that summer is near. “So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place” (Matthew 24:33-34). Here are three options for understanding “this generation.”⁷⁴

1. This generation refers to the generation of his original disciples.
2. Generation really means a race. The Jewish race will not pass away before the end.
3. This generation is the future generation that sees the abomination of desolation. Once these signs come, the end will occur within a generation.

Although modern interpreters understand “this generation” in a number of different ways, Jesus’ original hearers, Peter, James, John, and Andrew would have thought he was talking about their generation (Mark 13:3). Could both be right? Could it be that Jesus spoke in such a way that it related both to his immediate audience as well as his ultimate audience way off in the future? Perhaps this is too much like eating my cake and having it too, but is God so limited that he couldn’t give Jesus words capable of multiple layers of meaning? Perhaps Jesus grouped the two events—the Temple’s destruction and the coming of the Son of Man— together because of their similarities not their timing. Craig Keener put it this way:

Old Testament prophets often grouped events together by their topic rather than their chronology, and in this discourse Jesus does the same. He addresses what are grammatically two separate questions: the time of the temple’s destruction and the time of the end.⁷⁵

Next Jesus went on to give parable after parable about preparedness:

- 24:42-44 The unpredictable thief: be ready for an unexpected arrival
- 24:45-51 The faithful servant: remain vigilant in your faithful service
- 25:1-13 The ten bridesmaids: when the day comes, it will be too late to prepare
- 25:14-30 The servants and the talents: work hard with what you have to further his affairs
- 25:31-46 The sheep and the goats: judgment will focus on deeds done to the least

⁷⁴ I culled these options from Darrell Bock’s list of six possibilities in his *Baker Exegetical Commentary of the New Testament: Luke 9:51-24:53* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), pp. 1688-92.

⁷⁵ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), pp. 111-2.

We do well to take these to heart. It is so easy to get caught up in questions of interpretation and chronology and miss our Lord's earnest practical warnings. He has already told us the criteria he will use on the day of judgment (Matthew 7:21-23; 25:34-36). We ignore these at our own peril.