

The Olivet Prophecy

3. The A.D. 70 fulfilment

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IN THIS ARTICLE we want to look at the section of the Olivet Prophecy that appears in the following passages:

Matthew 24:4-22

Mark 13:5-20

Luke 21:8-23.¹

Jesus warned his disciples that there would be many false notifications of his return: "And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many" (Mt. 24:11). According to the Jewish historian Josephus, a number of people arose in first-century Judea claiming to have supernatural powers. For example, a character called Theudas in about A.D. 44 promised to liberate Judea from the Romans by supernatural means.² Therefore this section of the Olivet Prophecy would appear to have particular reference to the first century A.D.

The beginning of sorrows

All of the conditions described in Matthew 24:6-8 have occurred down through history and so are not a particular sign of the imminent return of Jesus. All of the events and conditions spoken of in these verses occurred prior to A.D. 70. For example, Josephus speaks of a famine in Judea.³ War and famines have also existed all over the world since Jesus uttered these words nearly 2,000 years ago. War and famine will continue until the return of Jesus and the establishment of the Kingdom.

The words spoken by the angels on the occasion of the birth of Jesus are sung every Christmas time as part of Handel's *Messiah*: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men" (Lk. 2:14). However, it is not commonly known that these words have yet to be fulfilled and will not be fulfilled until the Kingdom.

The gospel preached in all the world

We read in Matthew 24:14: "this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come". Does this refer to the preaching of the gospel prior to the close of the Jewish age in

A.D. 70 or prior to the close of the Gentile age? Was the end of the Jewish age contingent upon the gospel being preached to the whole world? Is the return of Jesus contingent upon the gospel being preached throughout the world now?

In some ways, the answer to these questions is academic. In the first century, Jesus's disciples followed his command to preach the gospel: "And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mk. 16:15). We read that, after Jesus went up into heaven, the disciples "went forth, and preached every where, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following" (v. 20). As disciples of Jesus, we too should, of course, follow his command to preach.

Maybe we should take Jesus's command as applying to the ecclesia collectively; we cannot all go overseas to preach. In the first century ecclesia, as today, a mother with young children would not have been in a position to do much long-range preaching work, but she would have been able to talk to those with whom she came into contact at the market, etc. Today, we can all help the ecclesial preaching effort in some way or other, for example by speaking to neighbours and work colleagues, by putting money in collections for preaching the gospel, or by marking Bible correspondence courses.

We should also bear in mind that the gospel message does not necessarily have to be preached physically in another country. Philip baptized the eunuch in Palestine, who then went on to take the gospel down into Africa. On the day of Pentecost the disciples preached the gospel to people from a whole array of nations: "And there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven" (Acts 2:5). Today we preach the gospel to people of different nationalities in our own countries. Also, the

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1. Table 2 in the first article ([Jun. 2004, p. 253](#)) shows which parts of the prophecy apply to which time.
 2. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book XX, chapter V.
 3. *Ibid.*

Internet has made it possible to preach the gospel in other countries, initially without a physical presence.

The apostles suffered persecutions as they preached the gospel throughout the Roman world. It would seem that this section of the Olivet Prophecy relates to the preaching of the gospel throughout the Roman Empire prior to A.D. 70. This is not to say that this will not happen again before the return of Jesus. It so happens that the gospel has been preached in many countries. It has been estimated that between 1998 and 2000 the number of ecclesias in the world increased by around twenty-five per cent. This was, of course, mostly in the developing world. At the time of writing there is tremendous interest in Asia.

Before A.D. 70

Jesus's words in the Olivet Prophecy are, of course, primarily directed to his disciples. Jesus obviously loved and cared for his disciples very deeply and wanted to tell them what was going to happen. It was they who were to initiate the spread of the gospel throughout the Roman Empire.

The mention of "synagogues" in the Olivet Prophecy records in Mark and Luke suggests that the preaching work referred to there occurred at the end of the Jewish age: "But take heed to yourselves: for they shall deliver you up to councils; and in the synagogues ye shall be beaten: and ye shall be brought before rulers and kings for my sake, for a testimony against them. And the gospel must first be published among all nations" (Mk. 13:9,10; cf. Lk. 21:12). Later on in the New Testament we read about the persecutions foretold by Jesus in the Olivet Prophecy, for example in 2 Corinthians 11:23-27, which again suggests that the preaching mentioned in the Olivet Prophecy occurred in the first century A.D.

There are other clues that we are dealing with the lead-up to A.D. 70. The word for "world" in Matthew 24:14 is a translation of the Greek word *oikoumenē*, which means 'the habitable'. The word occurs in Luke 2:1: "And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world [*oikoumenē*] should be taxed". This clearly does not mean that the whole world as we know it today was taxed, but rather the inhabitants of the Roman Empire under the jurisdiction of the emperor. So in the Olivet Prophecy it seems reasonable that Jesus

should use *oikoumenē* with the same meaning as in Luke 2:1, that is, as referring to the Roman world of the first century A.D.

We find that the gospel was in fact preached throughout the Roman world prior to A.D. 70. Paul refers to "the hope which is laid up for you in heaven, whereof ye heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel; which is come unto you, as it is in all the world [*kosmos*]" (Col 1:5,6). These words were probably written in A.D. 62. Therefore it is clear from this record that the gospel was considered to have been preached to "all the world" eight years prior to A.D. 70.

This is reinforced later in the chapter: "... if ye continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel, which ye have heard, and which was preached to every creature which is under heaven; whereof I Paul am made a minister" (v. 23). Paul is using the past tense here, and so he considers the gospel to have been preached throughout the Roman world in the first century A.D. However, this cannot be used as an argument for not preaching today. The gospel was preached before and after A.D. 70. If anything, the preaching of the gospel has been far more extensive since A.D. 70.

The abomination of desolation

"When ye therefore shall see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, stand in the holy place . . ." (Mt. 24:15). This verse (and the corresponding verses in Mark and Luke) clearly connects the Olivet Prophecy to the Seventy Weeks Prophecy of Daniel 9. Again we ask the question, Does this refer to A.D. 70 or to the return? We could conceivably apply this verse to the time of the end. In Zechariah 14:2-4 we read that Jerusalem will be besieged by armies, Jesus will descend onto the Mount of Olives, which will split in two triggering a huge earthquake. A few people will escape eastwards from Jerusalem down the ravine created by this earthquake.

However, there is a clue in the record in Matthew 24 that shows us clearly that this narrative applies primarily to A.D. 70. Those who escape Jerusalem at the time of the end will not be believers. If they were, they would not be in Jerusalem at this particular time, they would be with Jesus and the rest of the saints who have been called to judgement by this time. The reference to fleeing on the sabbath day (v. 20) also strongly suggests A.D. 70.

The flight from Jerusalem

“Then let them which be in Judea flee into the mountains” (v. 16). We are able to ascertain from history when this happened. The Roman general Vespasian led the expeditionary force against Judea in A.D. 67. Vespasian subdued Galilee, Perea, the trans-Jordan east of Jerusalem, and all of Judea. In particular, the Romans captured Jericho, Hebron, Emmaus and Bethel. Inspection of a map shows that these towns completely encircle Jerusalem. This demonstrates the amazing accuracy of Luke 21:20: “And when ye shall see Jerusalem compassed with armies, then know that the desolation thereof is nigh”. (In the author’s opinion this exemplifies the sheer elegance and economy of expression used in Scripture to describe historical events.)

In June 68 Vespasian was in Caesarea preparing the assault on Jerusalem when word came through that the Emperor Nero had died. Vespasian immediately ceased all military activity while he awaited the outcome of the power struggle in Rome. The wait went on for about a year, until 1 July 69, when Vespasian himself was proclaimed emperor. Why did the wait go on for so long? Between the death of Nero and the start of the reign of Vespasian there was a period of instability in Rome, as shown in the [table](#). Surely we see the hand of God at work here. God gave believers time to get out of Jerusalem. Normally, if armies surrounded a city, it would be too late to escape, but in this case God made sure that there was time.

Emperors at the time of A.D. 70	
Emperor	Reign
Nero	13 October 54 – 9 June 68
Galba	10 June 68 – 15 January 69
Otho	15 January 69 – 20 December 69
Vespasian	1 July 69 – 24 June 79

The great tribulation

“For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world [*kosmos*] to this time, no, nor ever shall be. And except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved: but for the elect’s sake those days shall be shortened” (Mt. 24:21,22). The tribulation re-

ferred to in the Olivet Prophecy is described as being the worst of all time. Did this occur at A.D. 70, or does it still lie in the future? Are there any other passages of Scripture which might enable us to work out when the great tribulation spoken of in the Olivet Prophecy will occur?

An obvious passage to look at is Daniel 12:1: “And at that time shall Michael stand up, the great prince which standeth for the children of thy people: and there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation even to that same time”. This period of trouble clearly occurs at the time of the end, and is paralleled in Zechariah 13:8; 14:2. This time of trouble is also cited as being the worst of all time. Therefore we have a problem if the two times of trouble—that in the Olivet Prophecy and that in Daniel 12—refer to different periods. Clearly only one time of trouble can be the worst of all time.

A possible solution to this problem is to say that the time of trouble in A.D. 70 was the worst seen in the Mosaic age, and therefore could not be repeated after the Mosaic age came to an end, as it did in A.D. 70. However, the simplest solution is to assign the time of trouble in the Olivet Prophecy to the time of the end.

What about the next verse in Matthew 24, which talks about no flesh being saved unless the days were shortened? This is reminiscent of the situation at the time of the Flood. At the time of the Flood, we are given the clear implication that, if God had not intervened to save Noah and his family, eventually there would have been no one worth saving. In Luke 17 Jesus informs us that the time of the end will be similar to the time just prior to the Flood and just before Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed. On both these occasions the behaviour of people had degenerated to such an extent that God had no choice but to intervene.

It is quite possible that if God were not to intervene in the future in sending Jesus then eventually the same situation will be reached as at the time of the Flood, that is, the moral condition of mankind would decline irrecoverably so that there would be no one left with whom God could work. Another possible explanation of Matthew 24:22 is that, if mankind were left to his own devices, he would eventually destroy himself. No doubt both these scenarios are possible.

(To be continued)