

Jacob's heritage

The Law of Moses was referred to by Stephen as "the living oracles" which Moses received "by the direction of angels" (Acts 7:38,53). These living oracles are described by Moses as "a heritage [inheritance, AV] of the congregation of Jacob" (Deut. 33:4). He uses the relatively uncommon Hebrew word *morasha*, which is also sometimes translated 'possession'.

The Apostle Paul pointed out that the Law was a blessing given to the nation of Israel, marking them out as a special people (Rom. 9:4). He also stated that it was a privilege for the Jews to have been appointed custodians of the "oracles of God" (3:2), which included the Law, though referring to the whole of the Old Testament scriptures.

Moses also set out very clearly to the Israelites the great privilege of this "heritage", describing their keeping of it as "your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the nations" (Deut. 4:6, AV). He then went on to say that this law contributed to their greatness as a nation:

"And what nation is there so great, that hath statutes and judgments so righteous as all this law . . . ?" (v. 8, AV).

He was king in Jeshurun

Jeshurun (33:5) means 'The Upright One'. We first meet this poetic title for Israel in the previous chapter, where Moses prophesied that Israel would fail to live up to the righteousness that Jeshurun implies: "Jeshurun grew fat and kicked . . . then he forsook God Who made him, and scornfully esteemed the Rock of his salvation" (32:15). The only other place the title is used, other than a further mention in Deuteronomy 33 (v. 26), is Isaiah 44: "Fear not, O Jacob my servant; and you, Jeshurun, whom I have chosen" (v. 2). Jeshurun is a perfect title for the saints, the myriads of holy ones, who are described by Isaiah as "the righteous nation that keeps [remains faithful to, mg.] the truth", and who will enter into the city of God (26:1,2).

(To be continued)

The Olivet Prophecy

2. The disciples' questions

Stephen Hughes

AS WE STRIVE to get to grips with the Olivet Prophecy, we need always to keep in mind that it is primarily Jesus's answer to a series of questions asked by his disciples. He spoke directly to his disciples, and in a sense we also stand there looking over their shoulders. However, we come from a different time and so we need to try to hear Jesus's words from a first-century perspective. So let us put ourselves in the position of the disciples as they stood with Jesus overlooking the temple.

The disciples clearly thought that the Kingdom was going to be established very soon, as we read in Luke 19:11: "And as they [the disciples] heard these things, he [Jesus] added and spake a parable, because he was nigh to Jerusalem, and because they thought that the kingdom of God should immediately appear". He then gave them a parable about a man who goes into a far country and entrusts each of his servants with a pound of money. This is clearly a parable about Jesus going away to heaven and then com-

ing back to the earth. The disciples thought that the reason Jesus had just arrived in Jerusalem was to establish God's Kingdom on the earth. They did not understand that the suffering had to come before the glory.

Even after Jesus's death and resurrection, the disciples still expected the imminent establishment of the Kingdom. Six weeks later, on the Mount of Olives, possibly at the same place where Jesus gave the Olivet Prophecy, the disciples asked him: "Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6).

So how are we to interpret the disciples' questions to Jesus at the beginning of the Olivet Prophecy? According to Matthew 24:3 there were three questions:

- When shall these things be?
- And what shall be the sign of thy coming?
- And of the end of the world (age)?

Let us have a look at each of these questions in more detail.

“When shall these things be?”

The first question clearly relates to the destruction of the temple, certainly appropriate, as Jesus and his disciples had just come from the temple and were now surveying it from the vantage point of the Mount of Olives.

“And what shall be the sign of thy coming . . . ?”

The word “sign” is a translation of the Greek word *sēmeion*, which is the word used in relation to the miracles in John’s Gospel, hence we often refer to the ‘eight signs of John’s Gospel’. The signs in John were, of course, miracles in the usual sense; for example, the turning of water into wine. However, there was also a deeper meaning behind each sign; we can consider the signs in John to be enacted parables.

Sēmeion also occurs in the first verse of the Apocalypse: “The Revelation [Apocalypse] of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to shew unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass; and he sent and signified [*sēmmainō*] it by his angel unto his servant John”. Here the signs were the visions given to John, which represented the events that were to unfold between the time of writing (A.D. 96) and the return of Jesus. (It is interesting to note that the English word semaphore, a sign language based on flag waving, is derived from the Greek word *sēmeion*.) Since the word *sēmeion* occurs in the Olivet Prophecy, we might expect to find prophetic symbols in a similar fashion to those in the Apocalypse, and, as we shall see, we do.

The word “coming” in the disciples’ second question is a translation of the Greek word *parousia*. One interpretation is that this refers to Jesus coming in A.D. 70. This interpretation is partially based on the assumption that *parousia* can mean ‘invisible presence’. The idea is that the arrival of the Roman legions in A.D. 70 was the sign of Jesus’s invisible presence at that time. At this point, it would be useful to explore the use of *parousia* in the New Testament.

The word is often used to describe the coming of a person, for example, the coming of three brethren to see Paul: “I am glad of the coming [*parousia*] of Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus: for that which was lacking on your part they have supplied” (1 Cor. 16:17). There was nothing invisible about these three brethren. *Parousia* is also used to describe the second coming of Jesus: “But every man in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that

are Christ’s at his coming [*parousia*]” (15:23). The reader is invited to look at the following passages: 2 Corinthians 7:6; 10:10; Philippians 1:26; 1 Thessalonians 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23; 2 Thessalonians 2:1,8. All these references deal with a real, visible coming, either of people in the first century or of the second coming of Jesus. Therefore it would appear difficult to justify an ‘invisible’ meaning of *parousia* in Matthew 24.

Did Jesus come in A.D. 70?

This is a key question of the Olivet Prophecy. At one extreme we have the view that Jesus was on the earth directing the Roman armies. Sometimes we are almost presented with a vision of Jesus sitting on the lead horse of the Roman army. At the other extreme we have the view that Jesus had no involvement in the events of A.D. 70. It would appear from Scripture that the truth is somewhere in between.

A verse relevant to this discussion is Hebrews 9:28: “so Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation”. This is clearly a reference to the second coming of Jesus, when the resurrection takes place. Therefore any coming that occurred in A.D. 70 cannot have been a real physical coming, otherwise this would have been the second coming, and the coming of Jesus to establish the Kingdom would technically be the third coming.

It is clear from the above discussion of the word *parousia* that the disciples would not have used it to mean ‘invisible presence’. We could conceivably argue that, when Jesus returns to the earth to establish the Kingdom of God, he will initially be invisible to the world. However, Jesus clearly will not be invisible to the saints.

The strongest evidence for what we might call a ‘virtual’ coming of Jesus in A.D. 70 is the parallel between Jesus’s inspection of the temple and the inspection of a leprous house under the Law, as we touched on in the first article. Under the Law, a leprous house was to be inspected by a priest up to three times. If the leprosy was still there on the third inspection, the house was to be pulled down and the material dumped. Jesus inspected the temple twice during his ministry, and therefore, according to this pattern, the third inspection occurred in A.D. 70.

The ‘virtual’ coming of Jesus in A.D. 70 is possibly referred to in Daniel 9:26: “And after threescore and two weeks shall Messiah be cut

off, but not for himself: and the people of the prince that shall come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary; and the end thereof shall be with a flood, and unto the end of the war desolations are determined". It is not difficult to see that this verse applies to A.D. 70.

We might object to the idea of Jesus directing the Roman army to destroy Jerusalem in A.D. 70. However, we need to bear in mind that in the past God used heathen kings to perform his purpose, the most obvious example being Cyrus in Isaiah 45:1: "Thus saith the LORD to His anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have holden, to subdue nations before him; and I will loose the loins of kings, to open before him the two leaved gates; and the gates shall not be shut". If we were to remove the name Cyrus from this verse we would think that the person referred to was the Lord Jesus Christ. It is almost certain that Cyrus had absolutely no idea that God was using him. In the same way, the Roman leadership would have no idea that they were being used in A.D. 70 to perform God's purpose.

We must also bear in mind that God and Jesus are one in purpose. It cannot be that Jesus would be unwilling to do something that God would do. God brought the Babylonians against Judah in the days of Zedekiah. This was in many ways similar to A.D. 70; for example, the temple was destroyed by fire and many Jews were deported. If Jesus had been in charge of events in the time of Zedekiah he would have made the same decisions as his Father.

Did Jesus have to be physically present to control the events of A.D. 70? No more so than he had to be physically present on the earth when he walked amongst the seven ecclesias of Asia Minor: "Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write; These things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks" (Rev. 2:1). Jesus went on to say: "Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent" (v. 5). We know from history that at some stage the ecclesial candlesticks were removed. Did Jesus have to be physically present on seven occasions in Asia Minor to do that?

Various references indicate that Jesus's power was not limited to overseeing the affairs of the seven ecclesias in Asia Minor, as demonstrated, for example, by the following passages:

"And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth" (Mt. 28:18);

"[Jesus Christ] who is gone into heaven, and is on the right hand of God; angels and authorities and powers being made subject unto him" (1 Pet. 3:22);

"He [God] raised him [Jesus] from the dead, and set him at His own right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come: and hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church [ecclesia]" (Eph. 1:20-22).

These verses indicate that Jesus would have had some involvement in the affairs of A.D. 70, even though not physically present.

"And of the end of the world?"

What about the last of the disciples' questions, about "the end of the world"? This hinges on what the disciples meant by the Greek word *aiōn*, translated as "world". In the New Testament *aiōn* is often used to refer to the then current era, the first century A.D., as we see, for example, from Luke 20:34,35: "And Jesus answering said unto them [the Sadducees], The children of this world [*aiōn*] marry, and are given in marriage: but they which shall be accounted worthy to obtain that world [*aiōn*], and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry, nor are given in marriage". From this it seems clear that the disciples meant the end of the current Jewish age when they spoke to Jesus. This is consistent with Hebrews 9:26: "but now once in the end of the world [*aiōn*] hath he [Jesus] appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself".

If the Olivet Prophecy describes both the events surrounding A.D. 70 and the return of Jesus, a question that arises is how the disciples knew when Jesus was talking about A.D. 70 and when he was talking about his return. One possibility is that Jesus could have been looking at Jerusalem when he was talking about A.D. 70 and directly at his disciples when he was talking about his return. It was, of course, highly appropriate that Jesus should talk about his second coming on the Mount of Olives, because that is where he is destined to return with his disciples and all the saints (Acts 1:11,12; Zech. 14:4).

Assuming that, in answering the disciples' questions, Jesus spoke about both A.D. 70 and

his return to establish the Kingdom, we need to consider how the disciples would have viewed the timing. As we have seen from Acts 1:6, the disciples were expecting Jesus to set up the Kingdom there and then. Even after Jesus's answer, "It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in His own power" (v. 7), they probably never imagined that the Kingdom would not be established for another 2,000 years. So what did they expect? It is clear from the epistles of the New Testament that the return of Jesus was expected at any time in the first century. Consider, for example, Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians; at the end of every chapter there is a reference to the return of Jesus.

Therefore, working backwards to consider what might have been in the minds of the disciples on the Mount of Olives as they listened to Jesus, it is probable that the disciples expected the destruction of Jerusalem to occur soon after Jesus's ascension into heaven, but that this would be a prerequisite to his early return and the establishment of the Kingdom. Brother John Thomas uses the analogy of two fence posts, one representing A.D. 70 and the other the return.

| The disciples' questions matched to A.D. 70 and the return of Jesus | |
|---|-----------------|
| Question | Event |
| When shall these things be? | A.D. 70 |
| And what shall be the sign of thy coming? | Return of Jesus |
| And of the end of the age? | A.D. 70 |

When two posts are in perfect alignment, one post is obscured behind the other. It is only when we move past the first post that we see the second post beyond.

There are indications within the three accounts that suggest a change of scene within the narrative. For example, in Luke 21:12 Jesus says: "But before all these, they shall lay their hands on you, and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues". This suggests that verses 8-11 refer to a time beyond A.D. 70, that is, the time of Jesus's return to the earth. However, the reference to synagogues in verse 12 clearly indicates the first century A.D. The [table](#) above matches the disciples' questions to A.D. 70 and the second coming.

[\(To be continued\)](#)

Two-part article

"Unto Caesar shalt thou go"

Paul's voyage to Rome

1. The voyage that went wrong

Malcolm Edwards

PAUL'S JOURNEY to Rome is a favourite story with Bible readers of all ages. It is an account that rings true in every detail; the historical and geographical details easily check out, and it is clear that Luke, the narrator and Paul's personal physician, was a man with much nautical experience, suggesting that he had been at one time a ship's doctor.

They left from Caesarea, with Julius, a Roman centurion, in charge of the prisoners. He was a soldier of the elite Augustus cohort, a section of

the Roman army that bore Caesar's name (Acts 27:1). It is suggested that, with a small detachment of his troop, he had accompanied Herod Agrippa from Rome, and that he was actually present when Paul appeared before Agrippa.

Besides Luke himself, Paul's other companion in travel was Aristarchus of Thessalonica. They remained with him throughout the journey and were with him in prison at Rome, where the latter, if not both, eventually shared Paul's imprisonment (Col. 4:10).