

New series

# The Olivet Prophecy

## 1. Introduction

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**A**BOUT 2,000 YEARS ago Jesus stood on the Mount of Olives with his disciples and looked across the Kidron Valley to the Temple Mount and the city of Jerusalem. He told his disciples that a time was coming when not one stone of the temple would be left standing on another. The disciples asked Jesus when this was going to happen and what signs would herald his return to the earth. In answer, Jesus in effect gave his disciples a potted history of Israel over the next 2,000 years—except, of course, that the disciples did not know that 2,000 years were to elapse before his return.

### Links with the Seventy Weeks Prophecy

In this study we intend to explore the Olivet Prophecy in some detail and try to solve some of the problems that arise from time to time in relation to its interpretation. This study follows on from two studies previously published in *The Testimony*. The first dealt with the Seventy Years Prophecy of Jeremiah<sup>1</sup> and the second with the Seventy Weeks Prophecy of Daniel.<sup>2</sup> A study of the Olivet Prophecy naturally follows on from these two prophecies. Before considering the prophecy in detail we will briefly review the Seventy Years and Seventy Weeks Prophecies to demonstrate the link with the Olivet Prophecy.

Through reading the prophecy of Jeremiah, and 2 Chronicles, Daniel came to understand that the seventy-year captivity of Judah in Babylon was about to come to an end (Dan. 9:2). Daniel's response was to pray to God on behalf of himself and his fellow countrymen in Babylon. God responded to his prayer by sending the Angel Gabriel to deliver the Seventy Weeks Prophecy. In Hebrew the term 'seventy weeks' is 'seventy sevens', that is, 490, which we take to represent 490 years of real time on the basis of the day-for-a-year principle. When we explore the history of the period in relation to the prophecy we discover that there is an exact period of 490 years between the day that Ezra set out for Jerusalem and the day that Jesus gave the Olivet Prophecy.

Jesus himself makes the connection between the Seventy Weeks Prophecy and the Olivet

Prophecy in Matthew 24:15,16: "When ye therefore shall see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, stand in the holy place, (whoso readeth, let him understand:) then let them which be in Judæa flee into the mountains". Jesus is here clearly quoting from Daniel 9:27: "And he shall confirm the covenant with many for one week: and in the midst of the week he shall cause the sacrifice and the oblation to cease, and for the overspreading of abominations he shall make it desolate, even until the consummation, and that determined shall be poured upon the desolate". Hence we have a link between the Seventy Years and the Seventy Weeks Prophecies and the Olivet Prophecy. Altogether these prophecies span a time period of about 2,500 years.

The purpose of the studies on the Seventy Years and Seventy Weeks Prophecies was to try to find a clear, consistent interpretation of the prophetic time periods, based on the historical dates that are readily available in common reference books such as *The Times Atlas of the Bible*. The purpose of this particular study is slightly different from these previous studies in that no specific time periods are mentioned in the Olivet Prophecy. Traditionally, the difficulty with the Olivet Prophecy is sorting out which verses apply to A.D. 70 and which to the return of Jesus. There is broad agreement that the Olivet Prophecy applies to the time period between the giving of the prophecy (A.D. 33) and the return of Jesus. However, there is considerable debate over which verses apply to which period, and so in this study we set out to try to resolve some of these difficulties.

In this study we are going to take the viewpoint that, although we have three accounts of the Olivet Prophecy in the synoptic Gospels, Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21, these are in

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1. "The Seventy-Year Prophecy of Jeremiah", Sept. 1992, p. 340; Oct. 1992, p. 373.
  2. "The Seventy Weeks Prophecy", Jun. 1998, p. 248; Jul. 1998, p. 284; Aug. 1998, p. 321; Sept. 1998, p. 358; Oct. 1998, p. 394; Nov. 1998, p. 429.

fact three versions of a single account that Jesus gave to his disciples. Therefore, our exposition should be consistent across all three records.

### Overview of interpretations of the Olivet Prophecy

Before embarking on our detailed study we will briefly review the various interpretations of the Olivet Prophecy that have been put forward, as known to me. One view is that the entire prophecy refers to Jesus 'coming' in A.D. 70 at the head of the Roman legions to destroy the Jewish nation.<sup>3</sup> Another view is that it all deals with A.D. 70 with the exception of one or two verses that refer to the second coming of Jesus.

Yet another view is that the entire Olivet Prophecy refers to the second coming. A further view is what we might term the *dual application* one: the prophecy refers to both A.D. 70 and the second coming. Another view is what we might term the *continuous historic*, that is, the prophecy covers all the period from A.D. 70 to the second coming of Jesus. The interpretation presented in this study is in essence a continuous-historic interpretation. However, it is probably different from others in that the prophecy is not considered to deal with the time period between A.D. 70 and the return in chronological sequence.

Maybe there is a similarity here with the Apocalypse. Although the Apocalypse is a continuous-historic prophecy, the period covered is not dealt with in chronological order. We might call the interpretation presented here an 'interleaved' interpretation, in which Jesus alternates between A.D. 70 and the return, following the structure of the disciples' questions. In the author's opinion, this interpretation solves many of the problems associated with trying to divide the Olivet Prophecy neatly into two sections, the first dealing with A.D. 70 and the second with the return. The various interpretations, including the new one presented in this study, are

summarised in [Table 1](#). (There could of course be other interpretations that have been omitted.)

### The background to the Olivet Prophecy

A useful way of setting the background to the Olivet Prophecy is by looking at the chapters on either side of the account in Matthew 24. In Matthew 23 Jesus uses very strong language against the scribes and Pharisees, concluding with: "Behold, your house is left unto you desolate. For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord" (vv. 38,39). The desolation of the temple and the whole house of Israel in A.D. 70 occurred because of the degenerate spiritual state of the nation.

In Matthew 25 Jesus talks about the Kingdom of heaven using three parables: the Ten Virgins, the Talents and the Sheep and Goats. The Parable of the Ten Virgins, five of whom were wise and five foolish, is clearly about our readiness or otherwise for the return of Jesus. So, on one side of the Matthew 24 record Jesus berates the spiritual leaders of the day, and on the other side he gives three parables concerning his second coming. This is consistent with the content of the Olivet Prophecy dealing with both the events of A.D. 70 and the return of Jesus.

**The overall structure of the Olivet Prophecy** [Table 2](#) opposite gives the overall structure of the Olivet Prophecy. The structure has been taken from the account in Matthew 24, with the accounts in Mark and Luke harmonised with this. The structure contains sections about both A.D. 70 and the return of Jesus, and is bounded by sections applicable to both eras.

Note that there is a slight difference in the emphasis of the three accounts, which reflects

3. "The Olivet Prophecy", Eric Cave, *The Testimony*, Sept. 1995, p. 363.





**Table 1 Various interpretations of the Olivet Prophecy**





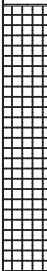

1	All about A.D. 70
2	All about the second coming of Jesus
3	Dual application—the entire prophecy can be applied to both A.D. 70 and the return
4	Continuous historic—chronological A.D. 70 to the return of Jesus
5	Continuous historic—non-chronological

**Table 2 Harmonisation of the Olivet Prophecy in the synoptic Gospels**

The Olivet Prophecy has been split up into different eras as shown in the key below. The boxes are shaded in accordance with the era that they apply to. Numbers indicate verses in the Gospel accounts.

**Key:**

<b>Introduction</b>	
<b>A.D. 70</b>	
<b>Diaspora</b>	
<b>The return</b>	
<b>A.D. 70 and the return</b>	

	<b>Event</b>	<b>Matt</b>	<b>Mark</b>	<b>Luke</b>
	Jesus leaves the temple	1	1	-
	Disciples come to Jesus	1	1	-
	Temple to be destroyed	2	2	6
	On the Mount of Olives	3	3	-
	Disciples question Jesus	3	4	7
	Beware of false Christs	4-5	5-6	8
	Beginning of sorrows	6-8	7-8	9-11
	Persecution	9-13	9-13	12-19
	The gospel preached	14	10	-
	End of the Jewish age	14	13	-
	Abomination of desolation	15	14	20
	Flight from Jerusalem	16-20	14-18	21-23
	Great tribulation	21-22	19-20	-
	False Christs and prophets	23-26	21-23	-
	East-west lightning	27	-	-
	Eagles gathered together	28	-	-
	Diaspora	29	24	24
	Trouble at the time of the end	29	25	25-26
	Appearance of the Son of man	30	26	27
	Gathering of natural Israel	31	27	-
	Fig tree parable	32-33	28-29	29-31
	This generation shall not pass	34-35	30-31	32-33
	No one knows the precise time	36	32	-
	As it was in the days of Noah	37-39	-	-
	One of two taken	40-41	-	-
	Watch!	42-51	33-37	34-38

the different characters of the Gospel records. We know, for example, that Matthew's Gospel focuses on the kingship of Jesus, Mark on the servant aspect of Jesus's ministry and Luke on Jesus as the Son of man. The kingship aspect of Matthew comes out in the very first verse: "The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham". Jesus's destiny is to reign on the re-established throne of David. At the start of chapter 2 the wise men say: "Where is he that is born King of the Jews?" (v. 2).

Mark relates more to the servant aspect of Jesus's ministry. At the opening of Mark's Gospel we read: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the son of God". Immediately after these words we go into Jesus's ministry, with no mention of his early life.

The beginning of Luke's record is quite different again. Luke addresses his record to a specific person called Theophilus with the purpose of increasing his faith. Without discussing whether Theophilus was an actual person or representative of a group of people, we can see right from the beginning that Luke's account is 'people' oriented. Later on we are given a fair amount of information about the announcement of the conception and birth of Jesus, which gives us an insight into the personal lives of the people involved. The 'people' aspect of Luke comes out again in Luke 2:52: "And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man".

We notice that the Olivet Prophecy in Matthew 24 contains more detail than either Mark 13 or Luke 21. We find that Matthew 24 contains the most detail concerning natural Israel, which is commensurate with the kingly character of the Gospel of Matthew. Luke's account does not have so much detail about the Jews. For example, we have no mention of Jesus leaving the

temple and going to the Mount of Olives, nor to the end of the Jewish age, nor to the regathering of the Jews. This lack of 'Jewishness' gives Luke's account a more Gentile flavour, which again is in keeping with the character of Luke.

Mark's account is generally in between the other two accounts—we might call it the 'vanilla' Olivet Prophecy. As we see in [Table 2](#), although the three accounts of the Olivet Prophecy are different, they are in a sense parallel accounts.

### Jesus leaves the temple

Just two days before he was crucified, Jesus visited the temple for the last time and then went across to the Mount of Olives with his disciples. Jesus's exit from the temple is reminiscent of God's glory leaving the temple in Ezekiel's time. In the years preceding the destruction of the temple at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar in 587 B.C., Ezekiel prophesied that the glory of God would depart from the temple in stages ([Table 3](#)). However, after the temple was destroyed Ezekiel turned his attention to the future and prophesied of the return of God's glory to the temple.

Note in particular Ezekiel 11:23: "And the glory of the LORD went up from the midst of the city, and stood upon the mountain which is on the east side of the city". This is strongly reminiscent of Jesus leaving the temple and the city and going to the Mount of Olives. When Jesus arrived on the Mount of Olives he prophesied of the impending destruction of the temple, which actually occurred in A.D. 70, after his ascension. Also, recall the words of Jesus in Luke 21:27 when he told his disciples that one day he would return in "power and great glory". In the future, Jesus will be the centre of God's glory that returns to Jerusalem.

Stage	Movement of the glory	Verses
1	Moves from the cherub to the threshold of the house	9:3
2	Lifts up above the threshold, court filled with brightness	10:4
3	Departs from the threshold of the house	10:18
4	Goes from the city to the Mount of Olives	11:23
5	Returns from the east	43:2

**Table 4 The parallel between the departure of the glory in Ezekiel's day and the departure and return of Jesus to Jerusalem. The date column gives the date of the writing of the vision.**

Ezekiel	Glory	Date (B.C.)	Jesus	Date (A.D.)
9:3–11:23	The glory departs	591–588	Jesus leaves the temple	33
24:1–26:1	Solomon's temple destroyed	588–586 (587)	Herod's temple destroyed	70
43:2	Glory returns	573	Jesus returns	20??

When Jesus went up into heaven from the Mount of Olives, two angels told his disciples that he would return in like manner, that is, he would come back to the Mount of Olives in a cloud. (We also read about this in Zechariah 14:4.) At some point in the future, Jesus will retrace his steps from the Mount of Olives back into the city and temple, although of course in the Kingdom both the city and the temple will be quite different. The parallel between the departure and return of the glory in Ezekiel's time and the departure and return of Jesus is summarised in [Table 4](#).

#### The temple to be destroyed

The day before Jesus gave the Olivet Prophecy he overthrew the tables of the moneychangers in the temple (Mt. 21:12; Mk. 11:15; Lk. 19:45). This was effectively a repeat of what happened at the beginning of his ministry (Jno. 2:13-16), probably about three years or so earlier. The two accounts of Jesus's visits to the temple are so similar that we can sometimes miss the fact that there were two separate visits to the temple, one at the beginning of Jesus's ministry and one at the end. How do Jesus's visits to the temple

relate to the Olivet Prophecy? At the beginning of the Olivet Prophecy Jesus told his disciples that every stone of the temple was to be thrown down. Under the Law of Moses this was to be the fate of a leprous house (Lev. 14:33-53).

The Law stated that if a house was found to be leprous it was to be shut up, and inspected by a priest seven days later. If the house was still leprous after the seven days, the infected stones were to be extracted from the walls, and all the plaster in the house scraped off and the material dumped outside the city. The house was then to be repaired with new stones and mortar. If leprosy broke out again, the whole house had to be broken down and everything dumped outside the city. When Jesus inspected the temple the second time there was no improvement since the first time. Symbolically, Israel had an advanced state of leprosy and so the only course of action was to 'dump' the stones of the house of Israel out amongst the nations, which was effected by the Romans in A.D. 70. We can see, therefore, that there is a clear connection between Jesus's words at the beginning of the Olivet Prophecy and the events of A.D. 70.

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

It is . . . evident that the discourse privately addressed to his disciples on this occasion, as they sat together on the Mount of Olives overlooking the city and temple, covers the entire interval from the moment of its utterance to the time when Jesus should be manifested in glory to his people at his return from heaven. The discourse having this scope is noticeable on two points, as affecting the popular conception of the mission of Christ. First, that it deals with political events and occurrences on earth as calling for the attention of his disciples, whereas popular theology, in proportion as it is earnestly worked out in a man's life, pushes all such matters out of sight; and, second, that it concentrates attention on his second appearing, as the culminating point of the believer's hope ("When ye see these things begin to come to pass, then look up and lift up your heads; for *your redemption draweth nigh*"): whereas popular theology leads men to fix their attention on the day of death when the believer is supposed to fly to Christ in heaven.

Robert Roberts, *Nazareth Revisited*, p. 435