

Dzerzhinsky was responsible for the deaths of thousands of Russians. He formed the Cheka, the original secret police force. It is thought that his agents killed around half a million people during the first six years of Communist rule. He was also responsible for setting up the first labour camps. His organisation was later inherited by Stalin, who used it to terrorise his people. That the memory of such a man should now be once more invoked, apparently with Mr Putin's approval, provides a chilling insight into the way in which Russia is developing.

In his writings Brother Thomas referred to Gog as the "Autocrat of all the Russias".⁷ The term 'autocrat' may seem a little extreme, but its use reflects the way Gog is depicted in the Scriptures. Furthermore, the way in which President Putin is developing his presidency is indeed causing him to become autocratic. This is seen, for example, in the way in which the BBC corre-

spondent Humphrey Hawksley wrote of the initial muted political response to the Beslan crisis. He said it was "in line with the increasingly autocratic style of President Putin's government".⁸

The current changes taking place in Russia, together with the invoking of its Soviet past, show that Russia is becoming more and more like the ruthless Chaldean and Assyrian powers of old. The time will soon come when the "Autocrat of all the Russias", whoever he might be, will be drawn down into the Middle East to invade Israel.

7. For example see Thomas, J. (1924, 11th edition), *Elpis Israel*, Birmingham, C. C. Walker, p. 432. The point I make in this paragraph derives from a similar point made by Brother Don Pearce in a talk given at the Prophecy Day in Rugby, UK, on 28 February 2004.

8. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/3627722.stm>

The Olivet Prophecy

5. The appearance of the Son of man

Stephen Hughes

WE NOW TURN our attention to the section of the Olivet Prophecy that deals with the return of Jesus to establish the Kingdom. It begins: "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" (Mt. 24:29).

In prophecy, the sun, moon and stars are symbolic of rulership, as we see, for example, in Isaiah 1:1,2: "The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth: for the LORD hath spoken".

A.D. 70 or latter days?

Initially, Matthew 24:29 appears to apply to A.D. 70. When Judea was destroyed, the sun, moon and stars of the Jewish political heavens were removed. However, when we think about it, this was not really the situation in A.D. 70. At that time Israel was part of the Roman Empire, and therefore, in the language of prophecy, the na-

tion was under the rule of the Roman heaven. We could, of course, envisage there being two heavens in A.D. 70, the Roman heaven and a Judean sub-heaven underneath the Roman heaven—like a kind of false ceiling. Is the two-heaven interpretation a reasonable one? Let us explore further.

We saw in the previous article that the political death of Judea is aptly symbolised by a carcase in Matthew 24:28. If a nation is politically dead then clearly the political heavens have been removed, or rolled up like a scroll, to use the language of Scripture, as for example Isaiah 34:4: "And all the host of heaven shall be dissolved, and the heavens shall be rolled together as a scroll: and all their host shall fall down, as the leaf falleth off from the vine, and as a falling fig from the fig tree". In Revelation 6:14 similar language is used of the fall of the pagan Roman Empire but also typifies the fall of the kingdom of men at the return of Jesus.

By the time we reach verse 28, in our interpretation of the prophecy any Jewish leadership, such as it was, had already been removed. Assuming this to be the case, then the heavens that we read of in verse 29 are different from the

Jewish heavens, as these had already passed off the scene. A parallel verse to Matthew 24:29 is Luke 21:26. Here we find a description of “the powers of heaven” being “shaken” after the end of a period called “the times of the Gentiles” (v. 24). In 1967 the Jews gained control of all Jerusalem; that is, Jerusalem was no longer “trodden down of the Gentiles”. Therefore it would seem reasonable to assume that the period in which the powers of heaven are shaken occurs after 1967, that is, a long time after the initial removal of the Jewish heavens in A.D. 70.

A passage of Scripture highly relevant to the current discussion is 2 Peter 3:10-13:

“But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up. Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness, looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat? Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness”.

Does this passage refer to A.D. 70 or the return of Jesus? There are a number of strong indications that it is the latter. For example, in verse 10 we read, “the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night”, words similar to 1 Thessalonians 5:2, which definitely refers to the second coming of Jesus. Regarding verse 12, “looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God”, would the destruction of Judea in A.D. 70 really be something to look forward to, in the same way that we would look forward to the return of Jesus and the establishment of the Kingdom? In verse 13 Peter goes on to say: “we . . . look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness”. After A.D. 70 no righteous kingdom was set up, therefore this verse must point forward to the Kingdom.

“Immediately after the tribulation of those days”

We might well ask the question, If the events symbolised by Matthew 24:29 do not refer to A.D. 70 but rather to the return of Jesus, how can we explain the fact that the events are said to occur “immediately after the tribulation”? If

verse 28 refers to A.D. 70 and verse 29 refers to the return of Jesus, we have 1,900 years or so between verses 28 and 29. As we have seen, this is the period of the Diaspora, although the period of the Diaspora appears to be collapsed down to almost nothing in the Olivet Prophecy. Why is this?

Maybe one way of making sense of this is to note that Israel as a nation state lay politically dead during the 1,900 years of the Diaspora and were then nationally resurrected. A dead person is not conscious of the passage of time. It is interesting to think for a moment about the experience of a saint who died just after A.D. 70. They will have witnessed (or heard of) the destruction of Israel followed by the Diaspora. At the resurrection, they will be quite unaware of the passage of time and so will naturally assume that Jesus has returned immediately after A.D. 70.

“The sign of the Son of man in heaven”

Another verse of the Olivet Prophecy that is difficult to understand is Matthew 24:30: “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”. Again we ask the question, Does this refer to A.D. 70 or the return of Jesus?

The fact that *all* the tribes of earth mourn, rather than just Israel, suggests that this verse refers to the return of Jesus. The phrase “the sign of the Son of man in heaven” is unique to the Matthew record of the Olivet Prophecy. It appears to be significantly different from the expression, “signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars” in Luke 21:25 (see below).

We can either take the sign literally—that it is some kind of astronomical phenomenon—or symbolically—that it is some political event in the world. It is possible that there may be some kind of astronomical phenomenon associated with the return of Jesus to the earth, a very bright nova or supernova, for example. We should bear in mind that Jesus’s first coming was heralded by an astronomical phenomenon, the star of Bethlehem. Maybe it is significant that the only record of the star of Bethlehem is in Matthew, which also contains the only Olivet Prophecy reference to this special sign.

Elsewhere in the Olivet Prophecy, celestial phenomena symbolise political events, for example the “signs in the sun, and in the moon,

and in the stars” of Luke 21:25. It would seem reasonable that the primary application of the references to the celestial bodies in the Olivet Prophecy is symbolic.

If this is the case, then a major event may take place in the political heavens which indicates beyond all doubt that Jesus is in the earth once again. Up until now, Jesus has been in the literal heaven for 2,000 years, and therefore it does not make sense that there should be a special sign indicating that Jesus is still in heaven 2,000 years after his ascension. However, when Jesus returns to the earth he will be very much in control of the political heavens. One possible interpretation is that the sign refers to the Russian invasion of Israel. The reference in Ezekiel 38:4 to God using “hooks” to drag Russia and her allies down to Israel indicates a Divinely orchestrated event.

The clouds of heaven

When Jesus ascended up into heaven, two angels standing by told the disciples that Jesus would return “in like manner” (Acts 1:11). As he went up in a literal cloud this means that he will return to the Mount of Olives enshrouded in a literal cloud. However, Jesus will also return in a symbolic cloud, a cloud of angels and immortalised saints (1 Thess. 4:17).

The gathering of the elect

In Matthew 24:31 we read that when Jesus comes he will gather the elect: “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”. To the best of my knowledge, three possibilities have been put forward as to the identity of the elect:

- Roman soldiers
- natural Israel
- spiritual Israel.

Can we ascertain from Scripture which of these is correct?

If we subscribe to the A.D. 70 interpretation of the Olivet Prophecy then the elect have to be the Roman armies. There are at least two problems with this interpretation. The first is that the term ‘elect’ is never used to describe an army anywhere in Scripture. The second is that, when Jerusalem was attacked, the Roman armies were not gathered from all over the Roman world since they were already stationed in Israel. The Romans had occupied Israel for a number of years. It is true that prior to the final destruction

the Roman army in Palestine was augmented with troops from the west, but this does not quite fit the description of the elect being gathered from all over the world.

In the New Testament, apart from the Gospels, the word ‘elect’ is most commonly used in relation to the ecclesia, for example in 2 John v. 1. So the question is, does Matthew 24:31 refer to the gathering of the saints to the judgement seat? The answer would appear to be no. As we have seen, when Jesus comes back he will not be alone, he will arrive with a vast company of angels and saints, symbolised by clouds. In Matthew 24:30 Jesus arrives in clouds *before* the elect are gathered. For Jesus to be surrounded by a cloud of saints at his return the calling of the saints to the judgement seat must have already occurred.

It seems therefore that the most reasonable interpretation is that the elect in the Olivet Prophecy are God’s people, the Jews. This interpretation is consistent with the chronology of this section of the Olivet Prophecy and is supported by other passages of Scripture. Israel are called the elect in the Old Testament, as we see in the following verses: “For Jacob My servant’s sake, and Israel Mine *elect*” (Isa. 45:4); “And I will bring forth a seed out of Jacob, and out of Judah an inheritor of My mountains: and Mine *elect* shall inherit it” (65:9). We might argue that, because the Hebrew word for ‘elect’ is different from the Greek word for ‘elect’, we should not use Old Testament passages to support an interpretation of a New Testament passage. However, when we look at *Strong’s Concordance*, we find that the respective words have exactly the same meaning. At a deeper level, natural and spiritual Israel are the elect of God in the sense that both have been chosen, or called out, by God.

In Matthew 24:31 we note that a trumpet is associated with the gathering of the elect. Isaiah associates a trumpet with the gathering of the Jews to Israel at the beginning of the Kingdom: “and ye shall be gathered one by one, O ye children of Israel. And it shall come to pass in that day, that the great trumpet shall be blown, and they shall come which were ready to perish in the land of Assyria, and the outcasts in the land of Egypt, and shall worship the LORD in the holy mount at Jerusalem” (27:12,13). In Isaiah 60:8,9 we are given some details of how the Jews are going to get back to Jerusalem: “Who are these that fly as a cloud, and as the doves to their windows? Surely the isles shall wait for Me,

and the ships of Tarshish first, to bring thy sons from far”.

The parable of the fig tree

The record of the Olivet Prophecy in Matthew 24 continues: “Now learn a parable of the fig tree; When his branch is yet tender, and putteth forth leaves, ye know that summer is nigh” (v. 32). What does the fig tree represent? In Jeremiah 24, figs are used as a symbol of Israel. To which era does the fig tree parable refer, A.D. 70 or the return?

We can ascertain the answer to this question from Luke’s record of the Olivet Prophecy: “And he spake to them a parable; Behold the fig tree, and all the trees; when they now shoot forth, ye see and know of your own selves that summer is now nigh at hand. So likewise ye, when ye see these things come to pass, know ye that the kingdom of God is nigh at hand” (21:29-31). We see from this passage that the sprouting of the fig tree is a sign that the Kingdom is at hand. The idea of summer coming soon gives a joyful feeling entirely consistent with establishment of the Kingdom. This could hardly be said of A.D. 70.

To understand fully the parable of the fig tree we need to go back a few days prior to the giving of the Olivet Prophecy. In Matthew 21:18-21 we have an account of the withering of a fig tree. Jesus and his disciples passed a fig tree somewhere between Bethany and Jerusalem. As he was hungry, Jesus searched the fig tree to see if there was any fruit left over from the previous season. Fig trees have big leaves (no doubt this is the reason why Adam and Eve chose them to cover themselves) which obscure the fruit, making it necessary to hunt through the leaves to find the figs. However, for some reason, Jesus could not find any figs amongst the leaves and so cursed the tree.

The next day, Jesus and his disciples walked past the fig tree again, and to the disciples’ great surprise it had withered. The disciples must have

wondered why Jesus would curse a fig tree. Of course, it would be quite out of character for Jesus to curse the tree just because he was upset by the absence of fruit. No doubt Jesus cursed the fig tree to teach his disciples a spiritual lesson. What was the lesson?

Luke 13:6-9 records Jesus’s parable of a fig tree growing in a vineyard. In this parable, the owner of the vineyard searches for fruit on the fig tree for three years, and, since he cannot find any, decides to cut it down. In a similar manner, since the Jewish fig tree had not produced any spiritual fruit during the three years of Jesus’s ministry, it was only good for cutting down. However, although the fig tree withered it was not cut down. This is a very appropriate symbol of the history of Israel post A.D. 70. Clearly the Jewish fig tree did not actually die in A.D. 70, as it revived in the twentieth century.

The lack of development of spiritual fruit throughout the duration of Jesus’s ministry is exemplified by Jesus’s visits to the temple at the beginning and end of his ministry. On both occasions he overturned the tables of the money-changers and drove out the sacrificial animals on sale. We can surmise from these two incidents that there was no improvement in the spiritual condition of the nation over a period of three-and-a-half years.

As we have seen previously ([Jun. 2004, p. 255](#)), Jesus’s inspections of the temple were analogous to the visits of a priest to a leprous house under the Law of Moses. A house with refractory leprosy had to be destroyed and the stones dumped outside the city. In type, this is exactly what happened to Israel in A.D. 70; the Roman armies dismantled the Jewish house and cast the stones out into the Roman world. Israel should have been “lively stones” (1 Pet. 2:5) but instead were infected by spiritual leprosy. Jesus cites the faith of a Roman centurion as being greater than any that he had found in all Israel (Mt. 8:10).

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