

The Olivet Prophecy

4. Lightning and eagles—A.D. 70 or second coming?

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A PARTICULAR PROBLEM with the Olivet Prophecy, if we take on board the continuous-historic interpretation, is where to place the dividing line between the first century and the time of the end. The best place to see most clearly where the division lies is in Luke 21:24: “And they shall fall by the edge of the sword, and shall be led away captive into all nations; and Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled”.

The first part of this verse clearly applies to A.D. 70 and the latter part to the return. The section in the middle, a kind of bridge, refers to the Diaspora, when the Jewish nation was dispersed amongst the nations. The Olivet Prophecy does not give any details about this period, although some details are given elsewhere in Scripture, for example in Deuteronomy 28. A breakdown of this verse into time periods is shown in the table.

And they shall fall by the edge of the sword, and shall be led away captive into all nations . . .	A.D. 70
. . . and Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles . . .	Diaspora
. . . until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled	Return

Lightning from east to west

In the Olivet Prophecy Jesus’s coming is likened to lightning: “For as the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be” (Mt. 24:27). A similar verse is found in Luke 17: “For as the lightning, that lighteneth out of the one part under heaven, shineth unto the other part under heaven; so shall also the Son of man be in his day” (v. 24). This verse is very similar to Matthew 24:27 except that the lightning does not shine from a specific direction as it does in the Olivet Prophecy. We ask the question, Does this refer to A.D. 70 or to the second coming?

An interpretation that has been put forward is that the lightning of Matthew 24:27 refers to the weapons of Titus’s army gleaming in the sunlight. This interpretation also assumes that the Roman armies entered Jerusalem from the east. According to *The Times Atlas of the Bible*, the Roman army invaded Jerusalem not only from the east but also from the west and the north. Therefore movement from east to west was not the only movement in the invasion.

We saw in the first article ([June, p. 251](#)) that, as Jesus left Jerusalem by travelling eastwards to the Mount of Olives, as prefigured in Ezekiel 11:22,23, so he will return to the city from the east. This east-west motion is a unique feature of Jesus’s return to Jerusalem. It is interesting to note that verses in the Old Testament about the journey of Jesus and the saints from Sinai to Jerusalem speak of a shining light: “The LORD came from Sinai, and rose up from Seir unto them; He shined forth from mount Paran” (Deut. 33:2); “His brightness was as the light; He had horns [beams of light] coming out of His hand” (Hab. 3:4).

In the light of this evidence, it would appear that Matthew 24:27 can best be applied to the second coming of Jesus. Other passages tell us that the return of Jesus will be highly visible, not necessarily in a literal sense but in the sense that eventually the whole world will know that he has returned: “Behold, he cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced him: and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him. Even so, Amen” (Rev. 1:7).

Clouds and armies

Two verses put forward in support of an A.D. 70 presence of Jesus are Matthew 26:64, “Jesus saith unto him [Caiaphas], Thou hast said: nevertheless I say unto you, Hereafter shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven”, and Mark 14:62, which is more or less identical.

The fact that Jesus refers to himself sitting on the right hand of power is clearly a reference to his presence in heaven. What about the clouds?

Are clouds ever used to symbolise armies? Yes, see for example Jeremiah 4:13: "Behold, he shall come up as clouds, and his chariots shall be as a whirlwind: his horses are swifter than eagles. Woe unto us! for we are spoiled". Another passage is Ezekiel 38:9: "Thou shalt ascend and come like a storm, thou shalt be like a cloud to cover the land, thou, and all thy bands, and many people with thee". The first of these references clearly relates to the invasion of Israel by Babylon and the second to the invasion of Israel by Russia and allies just prior to Armageddon.

Most of us are probably more familiar with Ezekiel 38 than Jeremiah 4, so maybe to broaden the expository foundation we should make the case for the Babylonian application of 'clouds' from the Jeremiah reference. Jeremiah prophesied in the lead-up to the demise of the kingdom of Judah at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar. He addressed only Judah and Jerusalem, as the northern kingdom had come to an end over a hundred years before at the hands of the Assyrians. In Jeremiah 4, Jeremiah tells the people that, although "The lion is come up from his thicket" (v. 7), a clear reference to Babylon (see Daniel 7:4), it was not too late for the people to repent of their ways and avert disaster (Jer. 4:1).

Coming in clouds

In both these cases we have clouds symbolising the invasion of armies from the north. In the case of Babylon they came down and then went back, similar to a bank of clouds coming in and then dissipating. Note also that in both these cases the invading armies are described as being *like* a cloud, not an actual cloud. The Gospel references we are looking at speak of Jesus actually coming *in* clouds.

The end of Judah's commonwealth at the hands of the Romans in A.D. 70 was a different situation from the time when Babylon invaded Judah. In A.D. 70, Judah had been part of the Roman Empire for about a century. When the end came in A.D. 70, the Roman forces were already stationed in the Land, although they were supplemented with extra forces from Rome. This situation is accurately reflected by the words in Luke 21:20: "Jerusalem compassed with armies".

In many passages, Jesus is described as coming in clouds at his second coming; see Daniel 7:13; Acts 1:9-11; 1 Thessalonians 4:17 and Revelation 1:7, and, in the Olivet Prophecy itself, Matthew 24:30; Mark 13:26 and Luke 21:27. So the question that we now have to address is,

What did Jesus mean by the words he spoke to Caiaphas in Matthew 26:64 and Mark 14:62?

The judgement of Caiaphas

Caiaphas was the high priest between A.D. 18 and A.D. 36. If Jesus meant that Caiaphas's judgement was to occur in A.D. 70 then we need to ask the question, Was Caiaphas still around in A.D. 70? The answer is that we cannot be sure, but it is unlikely that he would still have been alive at this time. If we assume that Caiaphas was at least thirty when he became high priest in A.D. 18, then he would have been at least forty-three at the time of Jesus's trial in A.D. 33, and in A.D. 70 at least eighty years old. Most of those present at the trial would have been elders, and therefore it is virtually certain that a large number of those who heard Jesus speak these words at his trial were not around thirty-seven years later in A.D. 70.

For the moment, let us suppose that Caiaphas survived until A.D. 70. If Jesus was referring to an invisible coming in A.D. 70 when he spoke to Caiaphas, would Caiaphas have made the connection thirty-seven years later? Would he have looked at the Roman armies and thought, "This is Jesus coming in judgement"? It is difficult to see how this could have been the case. However, Jesus's words are very easy to understand if Caiaphas is to be resurrected to face him at the judgement seat at his return.

We might think, How can this be?—Caiaphas was not baptized. Whether or not someone appears at the judgement seat of Christ is a question of responsibility rather than baptism, as is indicated by the following passage: "For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God: and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God? And if the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?" (1 Pet. 4:17, 18). This passage strongly suggests that, since judgement *begins* at the house of God, or the ecclesia, it continues on to include others who are not part of God's house.

There are clearly three categories of people mentioned in the above passage: the righteous, the ungodly and sinners. The most reasonable explanation is that the righteous (who are obviously godly) are saints who are accepted, the ungodly are saints who are rejected and the sinners are those who knew the Truth but did not do anything about it. Another interesting passage is Matthew 12:41,42, which suggests the

possibility that people from Nineveh and even the Queen of Sheba will be accepted at the judgment seat.

Caiaphas as a representative of the Jewish nation

Another possibility is that when Jesus spoke to Caiaphas he was speaking to him as the representative of the Jewish nation. There are other examples of this kind of thing; for example, Zechariah 14:5: "And ye shall flee to the valley of the mountains; for the valley of the mountains shall reach unto Azal: yea, ye shall flee, like as ye fled from before the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah". This earthquake occurred at least 220 years before Zechariah's time, but Zechariah clearly considered his audience to be representative of those who fled the earthquake 220 years before, and also representative of those who will flee when the Mount of Olives splits in two in the future.

Another relevant passage is Luke 13:34,35: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem . . . Behold, your house is left unto you desolate: and verily I say unto you, Ye shall not see me, until the time come when ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord". Jesus is clearly considering his audience to be representative of the whole nation, but is he referring to A.D. 70 or to his return? It is difficult to see how this could be A.D. 70. How could the Roman armies be a blessing from God? Another example is Deuteronomy 28, where God takes the current generation as being representative of future generations; the section about the nation like an eagle (vv. 49-57) is a prophecy of the Roman armies coming against Judah in A.D. 70 about 1,500 years after the prophecy was given.

"Ye shall not have gone over the cities of Israel, till the son of man be come"

Another passage that is used to suggest an A.D. 70 coming of Jesus is Matthew 10:23: "But when they persecute you in this city, flee ye into another: for verily I say unto you, Ye shall not have gone over the cities of Israel, till the Son of man be come". The destruction of Judea by the Romans in A.D. 70 brought the preaching of the disciples in Judea to an end. However, their preaching work continued after A.D. 70 beyond the borders of Judea; for example, John ended up in Patmos, and Peter is reputed to have been crucified in Rome. Whether or not we take this passage as referring to A.D. 70 or the second

coming, the fact is that the preaching of the gospel *in Israel* stopped in A.D. 70.

A very interesting event in relation to Matthew 10:23 is the transfiguration. Prior to his transfiguration, Jesus said to his disciples: "Verily I say unto you, There be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom" (16:28). Maybe the initial thought of the disciples was that Jesus meant that the Kingdom was going to be established very soon, as we gather from the disciples' question to Jesus just prior to his ascension (Acts 1:6).

We often wonder about what actually happened at the transfiguration. The fact of the matter is that it was a vision, since Jesus told his disciples, "Tell the vision to no man" (Mt. 17:9). It is possible that the disciples were able to look down a 'time-tunnel' into the future to see an event that will actually take place in the Kingdom. After all, it is not difficult to imagine that there will be a number of occasions when Jesus, Moses and Elijah will converse with each other in the Kingdom.

How can we apply this to an understanding of the Olivet Prophecy? In the Olivet Prophecy the destruction of Jerusalem and the return of Jesus both appear to be part of the same event, hence the difficulty in working out where to place the dividing line between A.D. 70 and the return. This apparent lack of separation between the events of A.D. 70 and the return is in some ways analogous to the connection between the resurrection of Jesus and the resurrection of the saints. Paul informs us in 1 Corinthians 15:13: "But if there be no resurrection of the dead, then is Christ not risen". It follows from this that, since Jesus rose from the dead, it is absolutely certain that there will be a future resurrection of the saints. In a sense, we can consider the resurrection of Jesus and the saints to be a single event, albeit with about 2,000 years between the two parts of the event. So it might be possible to consider the virtual coming of Jesus in A.D. 70 and his return to establish the Kingdom as being two components of a single event which are separated by about 2,000 years. Here we are back at the fence-post analogy of Brother John Thomas ([July, p. 292](#)).

Eagles gathered together

We now move on to consider the eagles in Matthew 24:28: "For wheresoever the carcass is, there will the eagles be gathered together". We might

think that, since this verse directly follows verse 27, it must refer to the return of Jesus. However, it does not seem appropriate that the gathering of the saints to Jesus should be compared to eagles flocking to a carcass! This verse evokes the image of death and decay, not glorious life associated with the return of Jesus.

So can we apply this verse to A.D. 70? We begin by noting that Matthew 24:28 is a confirmation of Deuteronomy 28:49: "The LORD shall bring a nation against thee from far, from the end of the earth, as swift as the eagle flieth; a nation whose tongue thou shalt not understand". This very accurately describes the situation in A.D. 70. The eagle was a military ensign of the Roman army (Fig. 1). Latin, the language spoken by the Romans, derives from the Indo-European group of languages and is quite different from Hebrew, which is one of the Semitic languages.

However, there is something slightly anomalous about the symbol of the eagle in the Olivet Prophecy; eagles do not naturally feed on carrion. In the context of the prophecy, we might think that a vulture would be a more appropriate symbol. The use of the eagle as a symbol



Figure 1. Roman eagle on a thunderbolt portrayed on the obverse of a Roman coin dating from 43 B.C. Image courtesy of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, UK.

indicates that we should interpret Matthew 24:28 symbolically. Symbolically, we have a picture of the Roman legions descending on the political carcass of Judea and leaving a valley full of dry bones, as described in Ezekiel 37 and predicted in Deuteronomy 28:26: "And thy carcass shall be meat unto all fowls of the air, and unto the beasts of the earth".

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

From the Editor's postbag

Comments on items received from readers

Mary the mother goddess

In response to my article of the above title (Jun. 2004, p. 246), a reader has written to me referring to a statement by Louis Charpentier in his book *The Mysteries of Chartres Cathedral* regarding French cathedrals dedicated to Notre Dame (Our Lady). Apparently, if their locations are plotted on a piece of paper and then joined up, the resulting shape is approximately that of the constellation of Virgo, the Virgin, one of the twelve constellations of the Zodiac.

The symbol of Virgo is that of a woman holding a sheaf of grain, an ancient fertility or harvest symbol. My article pointed out that Mary is sometimes depicted the same way. The fact

that Mary has a constellation linked with her fits another point made in the article, that Mary is designated 'Queen of Heaven', the name given to Ashtaroth in Old Testament times, who became an object of worship by apostate Judah (Jer. 7:18; 44:17-19,25). The link between being a fertility goddess and queen of heaven is, of course, that the fertility of the earth depends on rain and sunshine from heaven. The links between Catholicism, ancient paganism and astrology are indeed deep-rooted.

The Huguenots

A recent 'Norwich Scenes' depicted a church used in former times by Huguenots, and I

commented on the persecution these Protestants suffered at the hands of Catholic France (Jul. 2004, p. XIV). A reader has sent me a copy of an article about the Huguenots published in *The Truth Gleaner* (a Christadelphian magazine published in the USA) for July-August 2004.

The article, as well as covering the history of the Huguenots in France, also has a section dealing with the Huguenots in America. In the period 1618 to 1725, between 5,000 and 7,000 of them emigrated to America to find the freedom of conscience they lacked in their native land. Virginia and Carolina seem to have been the most popular areas for settlement, and in Charleston, South Caro