

The Olivet Discourse: A Bifocal Approach

Brian C. Collins | BJU Press | Bible Faculty Summit, Faith Baptist Bible College and Theological Seminary, July 27-29, 2021

Abstract: This paper will briefly survey four common approaches to the Olivet Discourse: preterist, exclusively eschatological, historical (covering the period from AD 70 to the Second Advent), and bifocal (referring to the events surrounding AD 70 as a typological Day of the Lord and to the final, anti-typical Day of the Lord). The body of this paper will argue that the bifocal view is the best interpretive approach, especially in view of inter-textual connections.

The Olivet Discourse is difficult to understand due to the complexity of its preservation within all three of the Synoptic Gospels as well as its intertextual to many other passages in the Old and New testaments. As a result, four main interpretations have been proposed in the history of the church. The best of these understands the Olivet Discourse to instruct believers about the Day of the Lord judgments in both the first century and at the coming of Christ in the second advent.

Interpretive Approaches

Interpreters have understood the Olivet Discourse in at least four major ways. Some limit the referent of Jesus's teaching exclusively to the Fall of Jerusalem in AD 70¹ or almost exclusively to the Fall of Jerusalem (with the *parousia* entering only after Matthew 24:36 || Mark 13:32).² The validity of this view hangs on an interpretation of Matthew 24:29-31 || Mark 13:24-27 || Luke 21:15-27 which the exposition below will show to be untenable. In addition, this view does not fully account for the disciple's question regarding the "end of the age" (Matt. 24:3).

¹ John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*. Volume 9. Edited by William H. Goold (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1812), 138-39; N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*. Christian Origins and the Question of God (London: SPCK, 1996), 339-66.

² R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*. New International Greek Testament Commentary, ed. I. Howard Marshall and Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 500-46; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*. New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007): 890-947.

At the opposite extreme are interpreters who hold the discourse to be entirely eschatological. Schlatter and Zahn both held this view.³ But it is difficult to exclude the destruction of the temple in AD 70 from Jesus's teaching in these chapters, since his statement about the temple's destruction gave rise to the discourse.⁴

A common view takes part of the discourse to be historical (covering the entire era from the destruction of Jerusalem to the return of Christ) and part of the discourse to be eschatological. Adherents to this view differ on where to draw the line between the historical and eschatological sections. The patristic author of the *Incomplete Commentary on Matthew* said he knew of an interpreter who divided the sermon at the abomination of desolation. What happened before that verse referred to the events of AD 70, but what occurred after referred to the eschatological coming of Christ.⁵ For Calvin, Matthew 24:1–8 and 24:15–22 referred to the events of AD 70, Matthew 24:9–14, 23–28 referred to the entire period from the fall of Jerusalem to the end, and Matthew 24:29–31 referred to the eschatological tribulation and coming of Christ.⁶ Lange proposed that the first part of the discourse unfolded in three cycles: from the apostles to the eschaton (Matt. 24:4–14), from “the approaching destruction of Jerusalem” to the final judgment (Matt. 24:15–28), and a final cycle restricted to the end (Matt. 24:29–44).⁷ Carson and Blomberg both take Matthew 24:4–28 to refer to the whole inter-advent period with verses 15–21 focusing on the fall of Jerusalem. Verses 29–31 concern the eschatological coming.⁸ This approach, in its various

³ Noted in Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, ed. Raymond O. Zorn, trans. H de Jongste (Philadelphia: P&R 1962), 489–91; D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1984), 492.

⁴ Mark L. Strauss, *Mark*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Clinton E. Arnold (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 565.

⁵ Thomas C. Oden and Gerald L. Bray, eds., *Incomplete Commentary on Matthew* (Opus Imperfectum), Ancient Christian Texts, trans. James A. Kellerman (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity 2010), 381.

⁶ John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, vol. 3, trans. William Pringle (n.d., repr.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 118–51.

⁷ John Peter Lange, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, ed. and trans. Philip Schaff (n.d., repr., Bellingham, WA: Logos, 2008), 418.

⁸ Carson, “Matthew,” 495; Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, New American Commentary, ed. David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 353–64.

forms, is superior to the preceding two, but it too suffers from several defects. First, the lack of agreement as to what refers to AD 70, what refers to the inter-advent, and what is future casts some doubt on this approach. Second, the disciples' questions focused on the destruction of the temple and the Second Coming. But on this reading, much of the discourse deals with neither. In fact, on some readings Jesus brings his disciples all the way through the inter-advent period to the end (v. 14), before suddenly thrusting them back to AD 70.

The fourth approach is summarized well by the author of the *Incomplete Commentary on Matthew*:

the Lord does not say distinctly which signs pertain to the destruction of Jerusalem and which to the end of the world, namely, so that the same signs may seem to pertain [to] both the manifestation of the destruction of Jerusalem and to the manifestation of the end of the world because he did not explain to them in order like a history how the things were to be done, but in a prophetic manner he predicted to them the things that were to be done.⁹

This view has commended itself to other interpreters throughout the ages. It was noted by Thomas Aquinas in his commentary on Matthew (and may have been his view).¹⁰ Jonathan Edwards seems to have held a version of this view.¹¹ It was also the view of nineteenth-century commentator John Broadus, who observed,

Every attempt to assign a definite point of division between the two topics has proved a failure. Place it after v. 28, saying that up to that point only the former topic is meant, and after that point only the latter, and at once we see that v. 34 must refer to the destruction of Jerusalem. Place it after v. 34 or 36 or 42, and we cannot resist the persuasion that v. 30f. (and v. 36) must refer to the final coming for judgment (comp. 12:41-43; 2 Thess. 1:7-10). But if the destruction of Jerusalem was itself in one sense

⁹ Oden and Bray, *Matthew*, 372-73.

¹⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. Matthew*, trans Paul M. Kimball (Camillus, NY: Dolorosa, 2012), 764-90. Thomas lists various interpretations without specifying his preference, so it is not entirely clear whether this is his view or not.

¹¹ Jonathan Edwards, *The "Blank Bible"*, The Works of Jonathan Edwards, ed. Harry S. Stout and Stephen J. Stein (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 864-66.

a coming of the Lord, why may we not suppose that the transition from this to the final coming is gradual?¹²

Theologians in the Dutch Reformed tradition, Geerhardus Vos, Herman Ridderbos, and Anthony Hoekema, also take this view. Vos said with regard to the first century and end-time referents in the discourse, “In the answer of the Savior a sharp division is not made between what belongs to the one and what belongs to the other, and it is very difficult for us to make the division.”¹³ Hoekema observed,

As we read the discourse, however, we find that aspects of these two topics are intermingled; matters concerning the destruction of Jerusalem (epitomized by the destruction of the temple) are mingled together with matters which concern the end of the world—so much so that it is sometimes hard to determine whether Jesus is referring to the one or the other or perhaps to both. Obviously the method of teaching used here by Jesus is that of prophetic foreshortening, in which events far removed in time and events in the near future are spoken of as if they were very close together.¹⁴

Craig Blaising, a theologian in the Dispensationalist tradition, also takes this position. He argues that since Jesus himself did not know when he would return (24:36), the typological day of the Lord which was fulfilled in AD 70 and the eschatological day of the Lord, which remains future, are conflated in the Discourse.¹⁵

This view is superior to the preceding three. It recognizes the subject of the discourse to be both the destruction of the temple in AD 70 *and* the coming of Christ at the end of the age. It does not bring in extraneous material from the rest of the inter-advent period but instead

¹² John A. Broadus, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (1886, repr.; Valley Forge, PA: Judson, n.d.), 480.

¹³ Geerhardus Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., Kim Batteau, Allan Janssen (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2016), 5:285. In a later writing Vos reiterated, “In answer to the time, however, the two things are not sharply distinguished, but united into one prophetic perspective, the parousia standing out more conspicuously.” However, he clarified that “in describing the *signs* Jesus discriminates between (a) the signs of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple (vss. 14–20); (b) the signs of the parousia (vss. 24–27).” Geerhardus Vos, “Eschatology of the New Testament,” in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001), 33.

¹⁴ Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 148; cf. Ridderbos, *Kingdom*, 477–95.

¹⁵ Craig Blaising, “A Case for the Pretribulation Rapture,” *Three Views on The Rapture*, Counterpoints, ed. Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 39.

allows Jesus to present his hearers (and readers) with a complex of events which describe the day of the Lord. Finally, this view allows the type to shed light on the anti-type. The destruction of the temple in a day of the Lord foreshadows the coming day of the Lord on the whole creation, which is made to be a temple for the Lord.

In the literature this view has been expressed briefly. What follows is an attempt to vindicate what may be called the “bifocal approach” through detailed exegesis. It does not attempt to merely repristinate what earlier adherents to this view have argued. Instead, it attempts a fresh and original defense of this venerable position.

Setting and Question (Matthew 24:1-3; Mark 13:1-4; Luke 21:5-7)

Jesus’s final departure from the temple may have implied a verdict of judgment upon it: as Yhwh left the temple prior to the exile (Eze. 10), so the Messiah left the temple prior to its destruction.¹⁶ All three Gospels note that Jesus had pronounced judgment on the Jewish leaders, and Matthew records that Jesus had proclaimed, “your house is left to you desolate” (23:38).¹⁷ Thus, the judgment aspect of Jesus’s departure may have been apparent to the disciples, and the disciples’ praise of the temple buildings may have been a response to Jesus’s pronouncement against the temple. Perhaps they wished Jesus to affirm their view of the temple’s splendor—a visible sign of God’s presence.¹⁸

Jesus responded to the disciples’ praise of the temple by predicting, “There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down” (24:2 || 13:2 || 21:6). This statement provoked the question from the disciples: “when will these things be?” (24:3 || 13:4 || 21:7). They were clearly asking Jesus when this temple destruction would take place.

¹⁶ Oden and Bray, *Matthew*, 370; Aquinas, *Matthew*, 762; Calvin, *Harmony*, 115; France, *Mark*, 495; Strauss, *Mark*, 568; O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Prophets* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004), 297.

¹⁷ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version.

¹⁸ Henry Barclay Swete, *The Gospel according to Saint Mark* (New York: Macmillan, 1898), 295; Peter G. Bolt, *The Cross from a Distance: Atonement in Mark’s Gospel*, New Studies in Biblical Theology, ed. D. A. Carson (Downers Grove, IL: InverVarsity, 2004), 92.

Matthew pairs this question with another, given in two parts: “and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (24:3). Here the disciples link the destruction of the temple with the eschatological advent of Christ. Mark records the disciples making the same link: “and what will be the sign when *all these things* are about to be *accomplished*?” (13:4).¹⁹ This phrase alludes to Daniel 12:6-7, a passage about bringing eschatological events to their completion.²⁰ According to Luke, as Jesus was leaving the temple, the disciples asked him, “and what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?” (Luke 21:7). The plural “things” may indicate that more than just the temple is in view,²¹ though it may merely indicate that Luke is more focused on the temple destruction in his account of the discourse.²²

Clearly the disciples linked the destruction of the temple and the Son of Man’s coming at the end of the age. Further, it was appropriate for Jesus to link the two events in his answer to the disciples: “the events accompanying those judgments upon the guilty city will be the foreshadowing of the Final Judgment at His second advent.”²³ Since the temple was a

¹⁹ C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel according to St. Mark*, Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1959), 393-94. The ***bold italics*** indicate where Mark’s wording parallels wording in the Greek text of Daniel.

²⁰ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, Pillar New Testament Commentary, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 390; Edward Adams, *The Stars of Heaven: Cosmic Catastrophe in the New Testament and Its World*, Library of New Testament Studies (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 140.

²¹ I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, New International Greek Testament Commentary, ed. I. Howard Marshall and Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 762; Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Moisés Silva (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 1663.

²² David E. Garland, *Luke*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Clinton E. Arnold (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 828; James B. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*, Pillar New Testament Commentary, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 595. When the Gospels are compared Luke’s presentation focuses the reader’s attention on the typological fulfillment in AD 70 whereas Matthew’s presentation focuses on that anti-typical fulfillment in the final day of the Lord. Bock, *Luke*, 206.

²³ Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed. F. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 523.

microcosm of the cosmos,²⁴ it was fitting for the judgment on the temple to symbolize the judgment on the cosmos.

The Beginning of Birth Pangs (Matthew 24:4-8; Mark 13:5-8; Luke 21:8-11)

These verses were clearly fulfilled typologically in the years between Christ's ascension and the destruction of the temple in AD 70. Blomberg summarizes these typological fulfillments:

Various messianic pretenders arose, most notably Theudas (Acts 5:36; Josephus, *Ant.* 20.97–99, 160–72, 188, who describes other false claimants as well). The war of Israel against Rome began in A.D. 66–67 and was preceded by the growing hostility incited by the Zealots. Famine ravaged Judea, as predicted in Acts 11:27–30, datable to ca. A.D. 45–47 by Josephus, *Ant.* 20.51–53. Earthquakes shook Laodicea in A.D. 60–61 and Pompeii in A.D. 62 (cf. also Acts 16:26).²⁵

However, Luz observes that, “we should understand their ‘I am the Christ’ as a way of identifying with Jesus Christ and not as a general messianic claim.”²⁶ Thus the first century shadows point toward a fuller, future fulfillment.

Many interpreters understand these verses to describe the entire inter-advent period.²⁷ They think that Jesus's statement “but the end is not yet/immediately” (24:6 || 13:7 || 21:9) indicates that this section cannot present the events of the day of the Lord.²⁸

²⁴ Vern S. Poythress, *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1991), 18–23; G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, New Studies in Biblical Theology, ed. D. A. Carson (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 31–36.

²⁵ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 356; cf. Aquinas *Matthew*, 764–65; Edwards, *Mark*, 2002: 391–92

²⁶ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 191.

²⁷ Carson *Matthew*, 497; Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 567; Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary, ed. Clinton E. Arnold (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 874. Even some who adopt a bifocal approach in subsequent verses, see these verses as exclusively focused on the entire inter-advent period. David L. Turner, *Matthew*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Robert W. Yarbrough and Robert H. Stein (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 565.

²⁸ Cranfield, *Mark*, 396; Blomberg, *Matthew*, 353–54.

However, it is best to understand these verses as referring typologically to the first century and ultimately to the final day of the Lord.²⁹ The first-century, typological referent to “the end” is the destruction of the temple.³⁰ The anti-typical end “must be taken as referring to the end of the *dolores Messiae*,” that is the end of Messianic pangs (see v. 8), which signify the time of great trouble that precedes the Son’s return to earth.³¹ Vos observed,

As an infant cannot be born without pains, so too the rebirth of the entire earthly creation, which coincides with the end, will occur under terrible labor pains. The beginning of those pains consists of wars, sicknesses, famines, and earthquakes. In itself all of this would not yet be something special, but Luke 21:11 tells us that this will be accompanied by “terrible things and great signs from heaven,” thus by something absolutely extraordinary, so that it will be easy to distinguish them from ordinary disasters and distresses.³²

The language of “birth pains” may allude Isaiah 13:8, another passage that intertwines a typological and eschatological day of the Lord.³³ Paul alludes back to the Olivet Discourse in his description of the onset of the day of the Lord in 1 Thessalonians 5:3.³⁴

Luz captures the meaning of this section of the discourse well when, while acknowledging first century applicability, he states, “Thus begin the ‘pangs’—that is, the tribulations of the

²⁹ Cf. Aquinas, *Matthew*, 764–65; Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Greek Testament Commentary, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 962–63.

³⁰ Garland, *Luke*, 829.

³¹ Heinrich August Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Gospel of Matthew*, Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, trans. Peter Christie (Edinburgh, T & T. Clark, 1884), 129.

³² Vos, *Dogmatics*, 285.

³³ Paul R. Raabe, “The Particularizing of Universal Judgment in Prophetic Discourse,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 64 (2002): 654–55; Adams, *Cosmic Catastrophe*, 43–44.

³⁴ George Milligan, *St. Paul’s Epistle to the Thessalonians* (London: Macmillan, 1908), 65; Ernest Best, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, Black’s New Testament Commentary (London: Continuum, 1986), 208; Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 234; G. K. Beale, *1–2 Thessalonians*, IVP New Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 137; W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, J. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel of Saint Matthew*, International Critical Commentary (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 3:340, 342.

last days.... Thus all of that is not yet the end, but it does deal with the beginnings of the end.”³⁵

Persecution (Matthew 24:9-14; Mark 13:9-13; Luke 21:12-19)

These verses turn to the issue of persecution. There is a seeming discrepancy between Matthew and Luke at this point. Mathew begins this section with “then,” whereas Luke begins with “But before all this.” Luke’s time reference is clearest. Before the false messiahs, wars, earthquakes, famines, and heavenly signs, Jesus’s followers would be persecuted by both Jews and Gentiles. Acts recounts that this persecution began as soon as the church was formed. Acts even uses the words of Jesus’s prophecy to describe this persecution:

“Lay hands on you” (Acts 4:3, 5:18; 12:1; 21:27); “persecute” (Acts 9:4–5; 22:7–8; 26:14–15); “hand over” (Acts 8:3; 12:4; 21:11; 22:4; 27:1; 28:17); “to synagogues” (Acts 6:9; 9:2; 19:8–9; 22:19; 26:11); “jails” (Acts 5:19–25; 8:3; 12:4–17; 16:23–40; 22:4, 19; 26:10); “kings” (Acts 9:15; 12:1; 25:23–28:28); “governors” (Acts 23:24, 26, 33; 24:1, 10; 26:30; see also 13:7; 18:12).³⁶

Luke’s account of the discourse affirms that this persecution will be an opportunity to bear witness to the gospel—which Acts also recounts (4:5–12, 33; 7:1–60; 23:11).³⁷ Divine empowering to present this witness without forethought may be exemplified by Stephen (Acts 7).³⁸ These verses, then, clearly describe the persecution of the church as described in Acts before the events leading up to the destruction of the temple in AD 70.³⁹

Matthew’s account is significantly different from Luke’s. In both Matthew and Luke, Jesus’s followers are delivered up, hated for his name’s sake, and put to death. But the wording is different, and Matthew doesn’t mention the Jewish features (sanhedrin/councils,

³⁵ Luz, *Matthew*, 192.

³⁶ Garland *Luke*, 830, n. 11; cf. Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H, 1992), 516–17.

³⁷ Garland, *Luke*, 831.

³⁸ Edwards, *Luke*, 600.

³⁹ Mark’s account is similar to Luke’s. He adds that the followers of Jesus would be beaten in synagogues, which also occurred in the earliest days of the church (Acts 5:40; 22:19; 2 Cor. 11:24). Strauss, *Mark*, 574.

synagogues) that Mark and Luke do. The Matthean parallel to Mark and Luke at this point occurs in Matthew 10:19–21, not in the Olivet Discourse.⁴⁰

In Matthew's account Jesus indicated that in conjunction with or following the initial birth pains, persecution will come.⁴¹ This persecution will be exacerbated as people "fall away" from the faith and then "betray" believers. Paul alludes to this part of the discourse as well: "In 2 Thess 2:3 (built on the Olivet Discourse) this becomes the 'apostasy' or 'rebellion' that accompanies the appearance of the 'man of lawlessness.'"⁴²

To close out this section, Jesus said, "And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (24:14; cf. 13:10). With regard to the type, this prophecy refers to the spread of the gospel

⁴⁰ The parallel between Matthew 10:19–21 and Mark and Luke's account of the Olivet Discourse can be accounted for by the fact that Jesus, as he traveled from place to place, probably often said similar things on different occasions (Carson, "Matthew," 248; N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God [London: SPCK, 1992], 422–23). It may be that because Matthew had already presented his readers with the content found in Mark and Luke's version of the Olivet Discourse, he omitted that material here. The omission allows Matthew to emphasize the eschatological aspect of the discourse. While Luke emphasized the first century aspect, Matthew presented readers with a part of the discourse not fully represented in Mark and Luke.

Interestingly, Matthew 10:17–22 has an eschatological element to it as well. By verse 17 Jesus looks beyond the initial mission given to the Twelve (Blomberg *Matthew*, 174; Davies and Allison *Matthew*, 179, 181–82; Luz *Matthew*, 89; Nolland, *Matthew*, 425). The phrase "you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes" is obviously not true if it refers to the Twelve's evangelistic mission during Jesus's earthly ministry. There are two plausible interpretations that both have a long pedigree. Hilary of Poitiers proposed that conversion of Israel would not take place until just before the Second Advent (Hilary of Poitiers, *Commentary on Matthew*, Fathers of the Church, trans. D. H. Williams [Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2012], 119). Many modern commentators have similarly concluded that these verses indicate that the "mission to Israel" will not be complete before the Second Coming. Blomberg *Matthew*, 176; Davies and Allison *Matthew*, 190.

Another option is that these words "do not denote the *mission* but the *flight* of the disciples. This is clear from the beginning of this verse, 'When they persecute you in this city, flee ye into another'" (Ridderbos, *Kingdom*, 509; cf. Nolland, *Matthew*, 2005: 427 and similarly, Oden and Bray, *Matthew*, 179).

The eschatological nature of Matthew 10 casts the parallels in Mark 13 and Luke 21 in another light. Though Luke certainly emphasizes the typological fulfillment in his presentation, the eschatological element should not be thought to be entirely absent in Luke and Mark. Mark in particular has two eschatologically oriented parallels with Matthew in this section: the gospel will be preached to all the nations (13:10), the one who endures to the end is the one who is saved (13:13).

⁴¹ Meyer, *Matthew*, 131–32.

⁴² Osborne, *Matthew*, 875–76.

throughout the known world of that day.⁴³ For instance, Paul could say that the gospel was prospering “in the world” (Col. 1:6) and even that it “has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven” (Col. 1:23).⁴⁴

However, the typological fulfillment of this saying does not exhaust its significance. Alford argues that despite the typological fulfillment, “in the wider sense, the words imply that the Gospel shall be preached *in all the world, literally taken*, before the great and final end come.”⁴⁵ The Old Testament prophets looked forward to the day when then nations would be gathered to worship God, and there may be an allusion to that here.⁴⁶ Hays says, “One suspects that Isaiah hovers somewhere in the background (passages such as Isa 2:2–4, 49:6, 57:6–8; 60:1–3; cf. Ps 22:27–28).”⁴⁷ Revelation also predicts the world-wide proclamation of the gospel (Rev. 5:9–10; 7:9; 14:6), and the ultimate fulfillment of this prophecy will come to pass during the Day of the Lord predicted by Revelation.



Many understand 24:4–14 || 13:5–13 || 21:8–19 to describe the entire inter-advent period. It is certainly true that false Christs, wars, famines, earthquakes, and persecution have existed since the church was established until the present. However, these verses are not giving a disjointed list of events that will happen in a scattered fashion over a lengthy period of time. The events in these verses occur together and form a pattern that was fulfilled first in AD 70 and which will be ultimately fulfilled in the eschatological day of the Lord.

⁴³ Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man*, trans. William Crookshank (London: Tegg & Son, 1837), 407–8 (4.15.13); Henry Alford, *Alford's Greek New Testament* (n.d., repr.; Grand Rapids: Guardian, 1976), 1:238; Blomberg, *Matthew*, 356.

⁴⁴ Paul was probably indicating, with expansive language, that the Gospel had gone to all the nations and was continuing to spread among them. John Davenant, *An Exposition of St. Paul to the Colossians*. (1627; repr., Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2005), 265. The expansive language was used because Paul was stating that “the gospel had *in principle* already been preached world-wide” even though in practice it is still in process of spreading worldwide. N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986), 89.

⁴⁵ Alford, *New Testament*, 1:238.

⁴⁶ Nolland, *Matthew*, 967.

⁴⁷ Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels*, (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), 95.

The Abomination of Desolation (Matthew 24:15-22; Mark 13:14-20; Luke 21:20-24)

Jesus then directed the disciples' attention to Daniel's prediction of the abomination of desolation (Daniel 8:13; 9:27; 11:31; 12:11).⁴⁸ Many have tried to identify a first century fulfillment for the abomination of desolation. Carson notes that some identify the installation of a false high priest as the abomination.⁴⁹ Keener observes that "Josephus indicated that the shedding of priestly blood in the sanctuary (Jos. *War* 4.147-201; 4.343; 5.17-18; cf. 2.424) was the desecration." Intriguingly, he observes, "Very close to three and a half years after the abomination (cf. *War* 6.93) the temple was destroyed and violated even more terribly."⁵⁰

However, Mark indicates that the abomination of desolation is a person: "when you see the abomination of desolation standing where *he* ought not to be" (13:14). Though some suggest that "he" is a reference to the one who does the desolating or to an inanimate idol,⁵¹ the referent is best understood to be the abomination. James Edwards suggests that the abomination "refers to 'the man of lawlessness' as conceived in 2 Thess 2:3-4, who will exalt himself in the temple as God."⁵² He observes the close correlation between 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4 and Mark 13:14:

The "man of lawlessness" corresponds to the man *standing* (masculine participle) in v. 14; and the description of him parodying God in the temple correlates with ""the abomination that causes desolation" standing where he *does not belong*." Both texts depict a blasphemous Antichrist who will do a scandalous deed that will trigger the return of the Lord. Both texts also warn disciples against mistaken eschatological assumptions, especially against being deceived by signs and wonders.⁵³

⁴⁸ The statement "let the reader understand" [24:15 || 13:14] is probably the Lord's. Ridderbos, *Kingdom*, 478. The Greek phrase used in Matthew and Mark appears in exactly the same form in Daniel 12:11 in at least one version of the Greek text.

⁴⁹ Carson, "Matthew," 501.

⁵⁰ Keener, *Matthew*, 576; cf. Osborne, *Matthew*, 883; Strauss, *Mark*, 579.

⁵¹ Strauss, *Mark*, 579.

⁵² Edwards, *Mark*, 398.

⁵³ Edwards, *Mark*, 398.

Davies and Allison propose that 2 Thessalonians 2:3–4 is based on this teaching of Jesus.⁵⁴

Thus Mark “indicates that Jesus foresaw the rise of a terrible antagonist, an Antichrist, who at some future time will unleash a severe tribulation on the people of God, which in turn will usher in the return of the Lord.”⁵⁵ This fits well with the eschatological context of Daniel 12:11, the Old Testament passage to which Jesus alluded.⁵⁶

The typical event which prefigures this eschatological abomination of desolation is the destruction of Jerusalem (with its temple) in AD 70 (Luke 21:20).⁵⁷ Some commentators on Matthew and Mark argue that the destruction of Jerusalem cannot be the abomination of desolation because there would be no time to flee as the text proposes (people needed to flee the city before it fell).⁵⁸ However, if the *abomination of desolation* is entirely future but the *desolation of Jerusalem* in AD 70 is the type of that desolation, the problem is resolved. The flight in Matthew and Mark is in reference to the far future event and the flight in Luke is to the AD 70 event.⁵⁹ In Matthew and Mark people flee when they see the abomination of desolation whereas in Luke they are to flee when Jerusalem is compassed with armies—before the desolation of Jerusalem.

Ridderbos, while granting that the events of AD 70 “are in a general way the partial fulfillment of the prophecy, as far as the destruction of the temple is concerned,” notes that the abomination of desolation in Matthew and Mark is eschatological: “It is even more striking that, both in Mark and Matthew, the tribulation with respect to this abomination is

⁵⁴ Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 346.

⁵⁵ Edwards, *Mark*, 399.

⁵⁶ Tremper Longman III, *Daniel*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 287.

⁵⁷ Ridderbos, *Kingdom*, 495; Garland, *Luke*, 832.

⁵⁸ Carson, “Matthew,” 500. France, *Mark*, 525.

⁵⁹ Stein, *Luke*, 519–20; Bock, *Luke*, 1675–78.

clearly connected with the last days.” The abomination is closely connection to a tribulation which is said to “immediately” precede the coming of Christ.⁶⁰

In the description of the days of vengeance and distress that follow the desolation, Luke’s focus remains on the events surrounding the AD 70 destruction of Jerusalem (21:21–24).⁶¹ This is most clearly indicated in the prediction that the Jews will be “led captive among all the nations, and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled” (21:24).⁶² This statement requires time to unfold. It certainly describes what happened after AD 70 until the present. The “times of the Gentiles” will persist until Christ returns to judge the nations.⁶³ Notably, Luke also omits the statements in Matthew and Mark that people should not turn back to retrieve forgotten items (24:17–18 || 13:15–16), though he does elsewhere include a record of Jesus giving this warning in the context of his eschatological coming (Luke 17:31).⁶⁴ Nor does Luke speak about an “unprecedented tribulation” the way Matthew and Mark do (24:21–22 || 13:19–20).⁶⁵

The details fit well with the fall of Jerusalem. Jews had fled to Jerusalem during the Jewish War,⁶⁶ but Jesus predicted that those who are in Jerusalem should leave it. Those in the country should not enter the city since God’s vengeance was being poured out on the city (21:22).⁶⁷ As Bock observes, “The focus of these remarks from the Lucan perspective is the

⁶⁰ Ridderbos, *Kingdom*, 494. Carson rejects the eschatological interpretation of 24:15–21 because “the details are too limited geographically and culturally to justify that view.” Carson, “Matthew,” 501. However, the focus of the entire passage is on Jerusalem. This does not entail a denial that the eschatological events have a wider scope. It is simply that this passage has a particular focus.

⁶¹ Ridderbos, *Kingdom*, 495.

⁶² Geldenhuys, *Luke*, 528–29.

⁶³ Geldenhuys, *Luke*, 528; Edwards, *Luke*, 605. The times of the Gentiles may have both a negative connotation (they trample on the city) and a positive one in the broader canonical context (the gospel goes to the nations during this period) (cf. Matt 24:14; Mark 13:10; Rom. 11:25). Garland, *Luke*, 834; Edwards, *Luke*, 605.

⁶⁴ Bock, *Luke*, 1678.

⁶⁵ Ridderbos, *Kingdom*, 495; Bock, *Luke*, 1679.

⁶⁶ Garland, *Luke*, 832.

⁶⁷ Or, possibly, should not enter Judea; cf. the Christians who “prior to the siege of Titus had fled from Jerusalem and Judea to Pella in Transjordan”. Edwards, *Luke*, 604.

events of A.D. 70, but it must be remembered that these remarks are part of a pattern of judgment, so that they apply to the latter period as well.”⁶⁸

Matthew and Mark focus on the eschatological tribulation, as interpreters from the patristic period onward have recognized. The author of the *Incomplete Commentary on Matthew* observed, “But this is more fitting to understand about the end of the world, which that tribulation [in AD 70] prefigured. Then there will truly be a tribulation as never was.”⁶⁹

Though some seek to restrict Matthew and Mark to AD 70, Peter Bolt observes:

Jesus’ language sounds rather excessive if this is what is being referred to—despite the fact that France (2002: 521) argues that it ‘does not outrun the detailed and lurid description of the siege in Josephus’ (Jewish War, e.g. 5.424–438, 512–518, 567–572; 6.193–213)’. Evans (2001: 322) is surely right when he says that “unless we view this statement as unbridled hyperbole, the warning that the period of tribulation will be so severe that unless shortened it will extinguish human life argues that the prophecy portends more than the Jewish war ... [At that time] the fate of the whole of humanity did not hang in the balance.”⁷⁰

This is not to minimize the events of AD 70, which truly foreshadowed the eschatological tribulation. Strauss’s summary of Josephus’s description of the terrors of AD 70 reveals the depth of suffering that occurred at the first-century destruction of Jerusalem:

Outside the city the Romans crucified so many Jews that they ran out of wood for crosses. Inside there was extreme infighting, murder, famine, disease, and even cannibalism. Thousands were slaughtered when Romans breached the walls (J.W. 6.3.3 §§193–195; 6.8.5 §§403–406). In all Josephus claims that 1,100,000 died during the siege and 97,000 were taken captive (J.W. 6.9.3 §§420–421). These numbers must surely be exaggerations, but they well illustrate the horrible sufferings the city experienced.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Bock, *Luke*, 1679.

⁶⁹ Oden and Bray, *Matthew*, 388.

⁷⁰ Bolt, *Cross*, 103, n. 4, brackets and ellipses Bolt’s; Cf. Nolland, *Matthew*, 975. (Bolt’s position, that the tribulation is a reference to the death of Christ, is not accepted.)

⁷¹ Strauss, *Mark*, 582.

Nonetheless Bolt's argument stands. It is bolstered by an allusion to Daniel 12:1, an eschatological text: "And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time" (in connection with Ex. 10:14; 11:6; Joel 2:1–2).⁷² Osborne argues that Matthew 24:21 is not exclusively eschatological but refers to "the destruction of Jerusalem as a foreshadowing of the final events of history."⁷³ This is surely correct, but the accent in Matthew and Mark is upon the future.

Beware False Christs (Matthew 24:23–28; Mark 13:21–23)

Matthew and Mark record Jesus's warnings against being led away by false Christs. Jesus's coming will be evident, not hidden. With regard to the time of these warnings' applicability, Alford observes, "These verses have but a faint reference (though an unmistakable one) to the time of the siege: their principal reference is to the latter days."⁷⁴ There is a parallel in Josephus to the near applicability and a parallel in 2 Thessalonians 2:9⁷⁵ that would apply to the period after the eschatological abomination of desolation:

Josephus echoes this language when he speaks of various messianic imposters in the first century who deceived the masses, pretending to do "wonders and signs" (τέρατα καὶ σημεῖα; *Ant.* 20.8.6–7 §§167–172). Paul similarly says that the "man of lawlessness," who sets himself up in God's temple as God, will use "all sorts of displays of power through signs and wonders" (ἐν πάσῃ δυνάμει καὶ σημείοις καὶ τέρασιν; 2 Thess 2:9). The impressive nature of these false miracles will be such to deceive, "if possible, [even] the elect."⁷⁶

In contrast to the deceptions, Christ's second coming will be visible—like lightening that flashes across the sky (24:26). There will be no mistaking it.

⁷² Nolland, *Matthew*, 975; Osborne, *Matthew*, 886.

⁷³ Osborne 2010: 886; cf. Strauss 2014: 582.

⁷⁴ Alford, *New Testament*, 241; cf. Osborne, *Matthew*, 887; with reference to the future alone Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark*, Black's New Testament Commentary (London: Continuum, 1991), 317; Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 351–52.

⁷⁵ Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 352.

⁷⁶ Strauss, *Mark*, 583.

Christ's coming will also be like vultures gathered over a corpse. Of the eight possible interpretations listed by Davies and Allison, the most likely are either, "The coming of the Son of man will be as public and obvious as eagles or vultures circling over carrion" or "The eschatological tribulation will be concluded by vultures destroying the flesh of the wicked dead, as in Ezek. 39:17; Sib. Or. 3:644-6 and Rev. 19:17-18)."⁷⁷ The former is more likely, but the similarity to Revelation 19:17-18 should not be dismissed.⁷⁸

The Coming of the Son of Man (Matthew 24:29-31; Mark 13:24-27; Luke 21:25-28)

With these verses, the sermon transitions from its bifocal vision of the already (AD 70) to an exclusive focus on the not-yet. For Luke, verse 24 functions as a hinge verse. The times of the Gentiles stretch from the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 until the coming of the Son of Man—the topic of 21:25-28. Matthew and Mark transition by describing the tribulation that follows the abomination of desolation in terms readers now know apply most directly to the final, eschatological tribulation (24:21-22 || 13:19-20). Matthew and Mark then locate these verses "immediately after the tribulation of those days" (24:29) and "in those days, after that tribulation (13:24)."⁷⁹

These verses are the most challenging for the preterist reading of the Olivet Discourse. France argues that Matthew 24:4-35 || Mark 13:5-31 is entirely focused on the disciples' questions regarding the destruction of the temple. The topic does not shift to the second coming of Christ until Matthew 24:36 || Mark 13:32. Thus the coming of the Son of Man in

⁷⁷ Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 355-56.

⁷⁸ Luke's version of the Olivet Discourse does not parallel Matthew and Mark at this point. However, Luke records that Jesus had taught some of these same things earlier in his ministry (Luke 17:23-24).

⁷⁹ William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, New International Commentary on the New Testament, 474. Keener helpfully states the matter in a way that identifies the ambiguities the original hearers and readers would have had in separating out the near and far fulfillments: "'Immediately' ties the tribulation of 'those days' to the unidentified final tribulation, a tribulation that may follow it by only a few years (as some of Matthew's audience could still have held) or, on a more modern reading, can only be identified as the final one by the fact that the parousia concludes it." Keener, *Matthew*, 583.

the clouds is not the return of Christ but his heavenly enthronement.⁸⁰ France argues that the cosmic language of Matthew 25:29 || Mark 13:24–26 (cf. Luke 21:27) is Old Testament language for “far-reaching political change” and that Daniel 7, in its original context, is about the enthronement of the Messiah in heaven, not his return to earth.⁸¹ What is seen is not the Son of Man literally returning in the clouds but the effects of his enthronement: “the destruction of the temple (expressed in the strongly ‘visual’ imagery of vv. 24b–25) and the gathering of the international people of God (v. 27).”⁸²

The difficulties of this view are manifold. First, the statement that the Son of Man will be seen coming in the clouds is best taken to refer to his being seen visibly by people rather than being “seen” in the events of AD 70 since Acts 1:11 sets the precedent for what coming in the clouds will be. It will be something visible. Second, for Jesus to come “with power and great glory” (24:30; cf. 13:26; 21:27) most likely indicates that this coming is visible. Third, the accompanying allusion to Zechariah 12:10–12 confirms the eschatological timing of this event. Fourth, this event is pictured as lightening that “comes from the east and shines as far as the west” (24:27), which indicates that the coming of Christ referred to is a visible and unmistakable coming.⁸³ Fifth, the singular “heaven” in Matthew is used to indicate “the visible (earthly) world” and the plural is used to indicate the “invisible (divine) realm.”⁸⁴ The use of the singular “heaven” in verse 30 indicates that the Son of man is appearing in the visible heaven.⁸⁵ Sixth, the imagery is derived from Old Testament passages about God’s end-time coming.⁸⁶ Seventh, Marshall rightly notes that “the cosmic signs cannot be interpreted as purely political events.”⁸⁷ Edward Adams’s survey of “cosmic catastrophe

⁸⁰ France, *Mark*, 498, 500–1; France, *Matthew*, 293–24; cf. R. T. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament* (1970, repr.; Vancouver, Canada: Regent College Publishing, 1998), 230–39.

⁸¹ France, *Mark*, 500–1, 534; cf. France, *Matthew*, 396, 923.

⁸² France, *Mark*, 535.

⁸³ These first four observations are all drawn from Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 807–9.

⁸⁴ Jonathan T. Pennington, *Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 132.

⁸⁵ Pennington, *Heaven*, 156.

⁸⁶ Adams, *Stars*, 150–52.

⁸⁷ Marshall, *Luke*, 777; cf. Adams, *Stars*, 156.

language” in Jewish apocalyptic literature demonstrated that “in all those texts [which “employ global and/or cosmic catastrophe language”], more than local socio-political change ... is in view. In many cases, the final judgment is envisaged.”⁸⁸ In some cases, the “heavenly disorders” are “preliminary,” but even so, “[i]n all cases, actual celestial abnormalities seem to be in view.”⁸⁹ Eighth, David Turner notes that the “global language” of Matthew 24 points toward an eschatological coming. Ninth, Turner also warns about the danger of minimizing the full scope of Jesus’s eschatological teaching:

One difficulty with preterism is its truncation of Jesus’s eschatology, which brings the reign of heaven to earth (6:10) and renews the world (19:28). If all this has already occurred, one wonders at the underwhelming denouement of the glorious future promised by the biblical prophets, John, and Jesus himself.⁹⁰

In light of these considerations, it is best to understand Matthew 24:30 || Mark 13:26 || Luke 21:27 as referring to the second coming of Christ.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Adams, *Stars*, 96

⁸⁹ Adams, *Stars*, 98.

⁹⁰ Turner, *Matthew*, 584.

⁹¹ Broadus *Matthew*, 490; Cranfield, *Mark*, 406; Carson, “Matthew,” 505–6; Blomberg, *Matthew*, 362–63; Bock, *Luke*, 1686; Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 361–62; Nolland, *Matthew*, 983; Luz, *Matthew*, 202; Keener, *Matthew*, 585–86. The strongest preterist counterargument is that Daniel 7:13 identifies the Son of Man’s coming in the clouds as the Son of Man’s coming up to the Father’s throne in heaven rather than his returning to earth. However, certain contextual factors in Daniel 7 make it more likely that an eschatological coming is primarily in view. Goldingay observes, that the perspective of Daniel 7 has been earth-focused, that “the opening phrase of v. 9 implies a continuity of perspective,” that the reference to the Ancient of Days “coming” (v. 22) implies an earthly setting for the thrones, and that final judgment scenes often have an earthly location (John Goldingay, *Daniel*, rev. ed., Word Biblical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 361. The fact that war is made on the saints until the Ancient of Days comes (to earth) implies that the timing of the coming is eschatological (Longman, *Daniel*, 198; Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 53; cf. 189–90; cf. E. J. Young, *Daniel* [1949; repr., Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1978], 158, 159). Thus, when the Son of Man comes with the clouds of heaven to the Ancient of Days, he is coming from heaven to earth. Daniel’s vision of the Son of Man coming with the clouds is a vision of the Second Coming. (cf. Andrew E. Steinmann, *Daniel*, Concordia Commentary [Saint Louis: Concordia, 2008], 359–60).

It is, however, likely that imagery from Daniel 7 is rightly applied to the ascension and current reign of Christ. Daniel 7 has numerous links with both Psalms 2 and 110. The beastly kingdoms of Daniel 7 correspond to the raging nations in Psalm 2. In all three passages the Son of Man is enthroned over the kings of earth, and the kings who oppose the Son are crushed. In Daniel 7 and Psalm 2 there is blessing for those who follow the Son (Ps. 2:12; Dan. 7:18, 22, 27) (Steinmann, *Daniel*, 360). Steinmann, however, notes a major difference between the two Psalms (2 and 110) and Daniel 7: in Daniel “the Messiah is not pictured as ruling until after the beasts are shorn of their power, whereas in these two psalms, the Messiah’s reign begins the process of defeating the



This marks the end of the first section of the Olivet Discourse. This section unfolds the pattern of the Day of the Lord, with an eye both to its type in AD 70 and its ultimate fulfillment. The next major section, Matthew 24:32-25:30 || Mark 13:28-37 || Luke 21:29-33, consists of instruction about how one should think of and live in light of the Day of the Lord just described.

Parousia Parables (Matthew 24:32-25:30; Mark 13:28-37; Luke 21:29-33)

The first reflective instruction comes in the form of a parable. When a fig tree (or any tree) puts it leaves out, it is clear that the summer is near. When all these things are seen, Jesus's disciples should know that Jesus is near, at the very door. This is straightforward enough, but it is complicated by Jesus's explanation: "Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place" (24:34 || 13:30 cf. 21:32).

Critical scholars have argued that since Christ did not return within the lifetimes of the generation then living, his prophecy proved false.⁹² This is an utterly impossible interpretation. As if to foreclose it in the most emphatic terms, Jesus followed the assertion of verse 24:34 || 13:30 with the assertion, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away" (24:35 || 13:31).

For preterists, this verse is the lynchpin of their interpretation:

The key to understanding the entire discourse is found in verse 34 which says, "Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place." . . . 1. Every other time the phrase "this generation" is used in Mathew (11:16; 12:41, 42, 45; 23:36), it clearly refers to the generation of Jews

nations" (Steinmann, *Daniel*, 360). The similarities and divergences of these passages point to the already-not yet nature of the kingdom. Psalms 2 and 110 include both the already (Ps. 2:1-7; 110:1-4) and the not yet (Ps. 2:6, 8-12; Ps. 110:5-7). Daniel 7:8-14, 20-27 is about the not yet, but some of its imagery can be applied to the enthronement of Christ which followed his resurrection and ascension. Indeed, God himself applied this imagery to Christ's current enthronement by having Christ ascend into a cloud (Acts 1:9).

⁹² Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 367-68; Luz, *Matthew*, 208.

to whom Jesus was speaking. 2. In the immediately preceding context, the same phrase clearly refers to the generation of Jews to whom Jesus is speaking (23:36). 3. The phrase is used in Matthew 24 in a discourse that is a response to a specific question by the disciples regarding the time of the temple's destruction. (24:1-3).⁹³

Mathison's arguments are aimed at those who would explain "this generation" to refer to "the nation of the Jews"⁹⁴ or to "the people of this particular disposition and frame of mind who are averse to Jesus and his words."⁹⁵ However, understanding "this generation" to refer to the generation of Jesus's day does not necessitate a preterist interpretation. Herman Bavinck explains:

The words "this generation" (ἡ γενεα αὐτή, *hē genea hautē*) cannot be understood to mean the Jewish people, but undoubtedly refer to the generation then living. On the other hand, it is clear that the words "all these things" (πάντα ταῦτα, *panta tauta*) do not include the parousia itself but only refer to the signs that precede and announce it. For after predicting the destruction of Jerusalem and the signs and his return and even the gathering of his elect by the angels, and therefore actually ending his eschatological discourse, Jesus proceeds in verse 32 to offer a practical application. Here he states that just as in the case of the fig tree the sprouting of leaves announces the summer, so "all these things" are signs that the end is near or that the Messiah is at the door. Here the expression *panta tauta* clearly refers to the signs of the coming parousia, not to the parousia itself, for else it would make no sense to say that when "these things" occur, the end is "near." In verse 34 the words "all these things" (*panta tauta*) have the same meaning. Jesus therefore does not say that his parousia will still occur within the time of the generation then living. What he says is that the signs and portents of it, as they would be visible in the destruction of Jerusalem and concomitant events, would begin to occur in the time of the generation then living. Of this Jesus is so sure that he says that while heaven and earth will pass away, his words will by no means pass away. For the rest, however, Jesus abstains from all attempts at further specifying the time.⁹⁶

⁹³ Keith A. Mathison, *Postmillennialism: An Eschatology of Hope* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1999), 111-12.

⁹⁴ Vos, *Dogmatics*, 287.

⁹⁵ Ridderbos, *Kingdom*, 502.

⁹⁶ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 4:687.

The generation that Jesus was speaking to would experience “all these things” in terms of the type. After AD 70 no further events must be fulfilled before the return of Christ. Christ is at the door and could step through at any time. The objection to this view is that some of the things mentioned clearly are eschatological.⁹⁷ Nonetheless, even the eschatological items have their typical counterparts. This remains a possible explanation.⁹⁸

It is also possible that “the generation that sees ‘all these things’” is “perhaps some future generation.”⁹⁹ The “this” refers not to the generation hearing Jesus speak but to the generation about whom Jesus was ultimately speaking. When they see these things take place, they know the return has drawn near. It is possible that both these interpretations are correct. This would fit with the mixture of type and anti-type in this discourse.

Then Jesus said something that seems in tension with the mention of signs throughout the discourse and in the preceding parable: “But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only” (24:36 || 13:32).

The subject has changed (indicated by “but concerning”)¹⁰⁰ from the coming narrowly conceived in its culmination to the entire complex event that the discourse has been about. The day referred to in these verses is the day of the Lord. Strauss observes, ““That day” often has eschatological significance, referring to judgment day—the eschatological “day of the Lord” (Joel 3:18; Amos 8:3, 9, 13; 9:11; Obad 1:8; Mic 4:6; Zeph 1:9–10; 3:11, 16; Zech 9:16; Matt 7:22; Luke 10:12; 1 Cor 3:13; 2 Tim 1:12, 18; 4:8). This meaning is likely here in light of the close parallel between the parable of the return of the owner of the house that follows (vv. 34–36) and the return of the Son of Man (vv. 26–27).”¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 367.

⁹⁸ Nolland, *Matthew*, 989; Osborne, *Matthew*, 899.

⁹⁹ Noted in Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 367.

¹⁰⁰ Strauss, *Mark*, 595.

¹⁰¹ Strauss, *Mark*, 595; cf. Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Mark*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 336–37.

There is thus no contradiction between 24:36 || 13:32 and the signs mentioned in the discourse. The signs are all interior to the day of the Lord, whether viewed typically or in its ultimate fulfillment. But these verses concern the commencement of the day of the Lord.

Matthew 24:36 || 13:32 also sets the theme for the following illustrations and parables. It is important to keep in mind while reading this section that “coming” here refers not simply to the climatic coming of the Son to earth but to the entire day of the Lord as a coming in judgment that culminates in the Son’s return to earth. Again, this accounts for the fact that earlier in the discourse certain very specific signs are mentioned whereas in this section the total unexpectedness of the coming is emphasized.

The remaining parables fall outside the scope of this study. It is sufficient to say that these parables all contain a warning about future judgment when the Son of Man returns. They thus prepare the way for the final section of Discourse, which focuses on that the judgment.

Conclusion

The bifocal approach to the Olivet Discourse best accounts for the different presentation of the Discourse in different Gospels. It is also the best interpretation in light of the Old Testament passages upon which it draws and the New Testament passages that draw on it. Finally, it also makes the best sense of the tension between signs preceding the coming of Christ and the unexpected timing of his coming.