

# Chapter Twenty-Four

## Commentary

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Our pericope continues the fifth and final discourse of Yeshua in Matthew's Gospel, begun in chapter 23.<sup>1</sup> Chapters 24 and 25 are often called "The Olivet Discourse," since 24:3 gives the setting as on the Mt. of Olives. Similarly, since the subject of these chapters is eschatology, they are sometimes called the "mini-apocalypse" of Yeshua, a description which is, perhaps, less than precise. For even though Yeshua uses language akin to that of the apocalyptic literature (both of the Bible, e.g., Daniel, and of the non-canonical works, e.g., Enoch), we find some aspects of these chapters to be distinctive. Looking particularly at chapter 24, we encounter the frequent use of imperatives ("Watch out that no one deceives you," v. 4; "See to it that you are not alarmed," v. 6; "Let no one in the field go back," v. 18), find that parts appear to be more prophetic than apocalyptic, and that the dualism customary in apocalyptic literature (contrasting what is "above" with what is "below") is hardly emphasized. It would seem, therefore, that these chapters could better be classed as "prophetic-apocalyptic," as suggested by G. E. Ladd.<sup>2</sup>

It would seem that few chapters in the Apostolic Scriptures have engendered more disagreements among interpreters than Matthew 24 and its parallels in Mark 13 and Luke 21.<sup>3</sup> Beside the vast amount of writing on the literary nature of Matthew 24 and 25, scholars have differed significantly over the sources used by the Synoptic authors for these chapters. Did all of the Synoptic writers use a single literary source for this material or did they merge together sayings of Yeshua from various sources, both written and oral? Some have argued that Luke's rendition is sufficiently distinct from Matthew and Mark to warrant the existence of a separate source tradition. As would be expected, liberal scholars generally take these chapters to be *post eventum* "prophecy," that is, written after the events they describe and surreptitiously ascribed to Yeshua by the post-destruction Church in order to bolster the image of Yeshua as a true prophet. But there is not only good evidence in Matthew's text itself to show its pre-destruction origin,<sup>4</sup> but the Olivet Discourse also seems clearly to be the source for Paul's Epistles to the Thessalonians. This would substantiate its pre-destruction provenance and require that it had sufficiently been known in order to function as Paul's source.<sup>5</sup>

Among the aspects of our chapter which are difficult to understand and therefore give rise to divergent interpretations are: [1] the meaning of "the abomination that causes desolation" (v. 15) and the added phrase "let the reader understand;" [2] how to understand the "coming of the Son of Man (vv. 27, 30), whether this refers to His return at the end of days or to some-

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1 See the outline in the Introduction of the commentary, pp. 9–11.

2 G. E. Ladd, "Why Not Prophetic-Apocalyptic?" *JBL* 76 (1957), pp. 192–200.

3 See the very good introduction by D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, pp. 488–95.

4 Bo Reicke, "Synoptic Prophecies on the Destruction of Jerusalem" in D. E. Aune, ed., *Studies in New Testament and Early Christian Literature* (Brill, 1972), pp. 121–34.

5 See G. Henry Waterman, "The Sources of Paul's Teaching on the 2nd Coming of Christ in 1 and 2 Thessalonians," *JETS* 18 (1975), pp. 105–13.

thing else, such as Yeshua's resurrection, Shavuot (Acts 2), the Fall of Jerusalem (all of which have been suggested by commentators and scholars); [3] what is meant by "this generation" (v. 34) and how this phrase can be reconciled with the various events described in our chapter.

This whole matter of the sequence of events which Yeshua describes in the Olivet Discourse brings to the table the idea of His "imminent" return, and how the word "imminent" is variously understood, primarily by evangelicals.<sup>1</sup> Generally, the English word "imminent" means "impending," and if applied to the return of Yeshua would mean that His coming was near, impending. But that is not generally how evangelical theologians use the word in connection with return of Yeshua (also commonly called the Parousia, a Greek word [παρουσία] meaning "presence, coming, advent"). In eschatological discussions, "imminent" has the sense of "at any time," meaning that the return of Yeshua could happen at any time. Those who hold that nothing else in world history needs to occur before His return take the concept of "imminent" to mean "at any second," that is, His coming could take place right now. Other evangelicals understand "the imminent return of Yeshua" to mean "at any period" or "in any generation," opening the door to the possibility that there may still be events prophesied in Scripture which must take place before the Parousia.

This brings up the question of the "signs" pointing to the return of Yeshua, and particularly the "signs" about which Yeshua speaks in Matthew 24. Various systems of eschatology (or more correctly, hermeneutics) have been formulated to answer this question. Well known among many evangelical groups is classic dispensationalism, which postulates three comings of Yeshua (the first of which they describe as "one coming in two stages"). The first coming, according to the Dispensationalists, was the birth of Yeshua and His incarnate life upon the earth culminating in His ascension back to the Father. His "second coming" is in two stages: the "rapture," which takes place before any of the "signs" Yeshua describes in our text, removes only the "church" out of the world, and could take place at any second. It is therefore referred to as the "secret rapture." The "second phase" is Yeshua's return at the end of the Millennium to consummate earth's history. Thus, in classic Dispensationalism, there are actually three comings of Yeshua. But the fact that no passage of Scripture unambiguously teaches a "two-stage" understanding of Yeshua's return weakens the Dispensational system so significantly so as to render it unuseable. Dispensationalism is commendable in its attempts to harmonize texts which appear contradictory, but it does so only by forcing an interpretation upon biblical passages which, when understood in their clear, grammatical-historical sense, cannot bear.

A better approach is to understand the "signs" given by Yeshua in our passage as having a progressive sense rather than as being singular in their focus. This is commonly seen in the prophetic method of the prophets. For instance, Daniel describes events that take place only centuries from his time, but which also describe and are patterns for events in the last days. Antiochus IV (Epiphanes) thus becomes a portend of the anti-Messiah in the eschaton. In the same way, the "signs" that would signal the coming destruction of the Temple in 70 CE may be viewed as describing similar "signs" marking the events in the eschaton. Given this perspective, the sense of the "imminent" return of Yeshua is taken to mean "at any period" or "in any generation."

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<sup>1</sup> See Carson, *Matthew*, p. 490.

It seems clear that the Olivet Discourse concerns two primary subjects: the Fall of Jerusalem and the return of the Son of Man. This is evident from the disciples' statements or questions and the manner in which Yeshua's discourse responds to their inquiries. But the fact that these two subjects, the Fall of Jerusalem and the return of the Son of Man, are so tightly woven together gives the impression that He promised His return *in connection with* the destruction. That is, the discourse seems to indicate that those living at the time of the Fall of Jerusalem would also experience the return of the Son of Man.

This difficulty has given rise to a number of different interpretations. Some modern scholars have simply presumed that Yeshua was mistaken about His return, or that Matthew (as well as Mark and Luke) mistakenly interwove two disparate themes.

Some have tried to find an explanation by suggesting that Yeshua's prophecy of the Fall of Jerusalem was like Jonah's prophecy against Ninevah (Jonah 3:4), that is, a promise contingent upon the people's subsequent actions. In this view, had the followers of Yeshua successfully completed their mission to make disciples of the nations, and had the people of Israel repented of their rejection of Yeshua, the eschaton would have been ushered in with the return of Yeshua in that same generation. That neither contingency was met caused the Parousia to be postponed. But the Parousia finds little if any similarity to the contingent prophecy of Jonah, for everywhere the coming of the Son of Man is taught as the final divine visitation which alone marks the end of human history upon the earth. Moreover, this proposal suffers from the fact that nowhere in the Apostolic Scriptures is it taught that the Parousia was delayed due to the sin of the "church" or that had the nation of Israel suddenly repented the return of Yeshua would have taken place. Clearly Paul did not consider this as possible, for he states that the salvation of Israel occurs only when the "fulness of the Gentiles has come in." Even in our current text, the coming of the Son of Man follows the proclamation of the Gospel in "the whole world as a testimony to the nations" (v. 14), which could not have been thought possible to be accomplished in one generation.

Perhaps the best approach to our text is to see that Yeshua's words, and the understanding of His words by His disciples, intertwine the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple with the eschatological coming of the Son of Man as contiguous but encompassing a longer period of time than one generation. Carson describes this approach:

In my understanding of the Olivet Discourse, the *disciples* think of Jerusalem's destruction and the eschatological end as a single complex web of events. This accounts for the form of their questions. Jesus warns that there will be delay *before* the End—a delay characterized by persecution and tribulation for his followers (vv.4–28), but with one particularly violent display of judgment in the Fall of Jerusalem (vv. 15–21); Mark 13:14–20; Luke 21:20–24). Immediately after the days of that sustained persecution characterizing the interadvent period comes the Second Advent (vv. 29–31 ... ). The warning of vv. 32–35 describes the whole tribulation period, from the Ascension to the Second Advent. The tribulation period will certainly come, and the generation to which Jesus is speaking will experience all its features that point to the Lord's return. But the exact time of that return no one but the Father knows (vv. 36–44).<sup>1</sup>

1 Carson, *Matthew*, p. 495.

We may then outline the eschatological discourse of our chapter as follows:

- I. Opening Questions of the Disciples, vv. 1–3
- II. Period of Tribulation & Delay before His Coming, vv. 4–28
  - A. Tribulation will begin & end with severe violence
  - B. Exhortation to wait (delay of Yeshua’s return)
  - C. False messiahs will come and lead many astray
- III. Final Tribulation will Signal the Return of Yeshua, vv. 29–31
- IV. Living Faithfully during Tribulation, vv. 32–35
- V. No One Knows the Exact Time of the End, vv. 36–44

I think this approach has particular value in that it views the “tribulation period” as the entire period between Yeshua’s ascension and His return, a period which begins and ends with a significantly violent time of tribulation. That is, the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE is at its beginning, and an even worse tribulation at its end. The destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman general Titus describes the *kind* of devastation that will come at the end, but the final tribulation is even worse, not in kind but in *extent*, for it extends beyond the Holy City to the nations as well.

We should approach one other issue by way of introduction before we begin our exposition of the text itself. This is the question of the theological ramifications of the destruction of Jerusalem, and specifically the Temple, in 70 CE. It is not uncommon in the history of interpretation of our text to see it used as a basis for supersessionism or replacement theology. The destruction of the Temple is taken to signal God’s final and concluding judgment upon Israel and their replacement by the Church as His “new people.” Not only does this theology find no basis in the Bible generally, but it is clearly controverted in the Olivet Discourse as well, for Yeshua’s words are directed to the disciples, the very ones He sent to preach the Gospel of the Kingdom to the lost sheep of Israel. Moreover, the figure of the “trumpet” to signal Yeshua’s coming in the eschaton is most likely derived from Zech 9:14 (cp. Is 27:13), prophecies which speak of God’s saving power to the nation of Israel.

But even among Christian commentators who do not hold a supersessionist theology, the Olivet Discourse is often interpreted as a decisive, divine revelation that vindicated the later emerging Christian Church, even though such an interpretation does not fit Matthew 24 whatsoever. When we read that God allowed the destruction of the Temple in order to prove that Jesus is the true sacrifice and priest, and that the Church is now the true Temple, we wonder how this approach could be considered viable in light of Ezekiel’s prophecy of a rebuilt Temple (Ezek 40–48), or Isaiah’s prophecy that envisions the Jerusalem Temple as the house of prayer for all nations (Is 56:7), or Zechariah’s prophecy that in the last days the nations will celebrate Sukkot at the Jerusalem Temple (Zech 14:16ff). What needs to be kept in mind is that when Yeshua was giving His discourse to the disciples, there was no “Christian Church,” so if the disciples had any sense of something coming that was more authentic than what existed before them in the Temple and the Temple service, they surely would not have had in their mind’s eye the emerging Christian Church of the 2nd and 3rd Centuries. If they had indeed understood Yeshua’s words to promise something more authentic in the future, they doubtlessly would have thought of a repentant Israel who received Yeshua, and a Temple in which He was honored and praised.

Yet we must likewise emphasize that from Yeshua’s own words, the de-

struction of the Temple and the Holy City is clearly because of Israel's disobedience and their unwillingness to accept the message of the prophets whom God had sent to them (23:37–39). Though the surrounding nations viewed the destruction as proof that Israel's God was unable to defend His house, the truth is that it was Israel's God Himself Who brought about the destruction as a matter of His own divine justice upon His unfaithful, covenant people. In this regard, the destruction of the 2nd Temple was for precisely the same reasons that God allowed the destruction of the 1st Temple.

Yet though His justice requires that He administer the curses of the covenant when Israel rebels against Him, that same justice and faithfulness will restore Israel to her rightful place, in Jerusalem, in the Land, in a Temple where His praises will be offered by Israel and all those joined to her—all who have received His Messiah Yeshua and by Him, have been reconciled forever to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In our chapter, then, we come face to face with the servity of God's mercy, for whom the Father loves, He chastens.

Finally, we must always remember this important aspect of the study of prophecy: the primary reason that God has given us prophecy in the Scriptures is not to inform us about what will take place in the future, but to instruct us how we are to live in the present. Therefore, as we study the words of our Messiah in the Olivet Discourse, we must take as our top priority how the instruct us to live faithfully unto God now as we await "the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Messiah Yeshua" (Tit 2:13).

**1–3 Yeshua came out from the temple and was going away when His disciples came up to point out the temple buildings to Him. And He said to them, "Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, not one stone here will be left upon another, which will not be torn down." As He was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things happen, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?"**

Yeshua entered the Temple complex in 21:23, and thus the teaching contained from that point until our text is seen by Matthew as taking place in that location. Whether this intervening material represents several visits of Yeshua to the Temple on subsequent days is not important as far as Matthew is concerned. What is important is that having been rejected by the scribes and Pharisees, who in one sense represent the people the teach and who follow them, Yeshua now leaves the Temple not to return until He comes in His glory to a Temple restored both physically and spiritually. His leaving here parallels the departure of the Shekinah in Ezekiel's prophecy (Ezek 10–11).<sup>1</sup> Though the Matthew does not mention it, all who are acquainted with the Jerusalem temple know that when departing its precincts, one descends through the triple gate and continues down the steps at the south of the temple mount. Throughout Scripture, physical descent (whether Abraham to Egypt, Gen 13; Jacob and his sons to Egypt, Gen 42ff; Jonah goes down to Tarshish, Jonah 1:3; etc.) often signals some kind of pending woe. So Yeshua's descent from the temple mount may be seen as His final descent to the cross. As Paul describes it in the ancient hymn contained in his epistle to the Philip-

1 See the comments above on 23:39.

prians (Phil 2:5-8) –

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Messiah Yeshua, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

From the heights of glory to the cross may thus be illustrated in Yeshua descent from the Temple, the place where God's glory should reside, to the coming days when He would face death on the cross.

It is within this situation that He delivers what we know as the Olivet Discourse. We must not lose sight of this fact, that He speaks of the coming destruction and His glorious return, all the while having the cross well in view.