

ESCHATOLOGICAL CHRONOLOGY OF THE OLIVET DISCOURSE

by Chad Hendley

Hendley's study of Jesus's Olivet Discourse examining the prophetic timeline of end-times events as presented in Matthew 24-25, Mark 13, and Luke 21, analyzing the chronological framework of Christ's eschatological teaching.

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Matthew 24:3 As he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"

"These things" (τα■τα)—refers to the destruction of Jerusalem which was just predicted by Jesus (Matthew 24:1-2).

Chronology of items in question in 24:3

Destruction of Jerusalem ~ Sign of His Coming ~ Sign of End of the Age

Destruction of Jerusalem à Sign of His Coming ~ Sign of End of the Age

Destruction of Jerusalem à Sign of His Coming à Sign of End of the Age

Grammatically the destruction of Jerusalem is distinct from the latter two events in 24:3.

Given the nature of the events, it makes sense for his coming and the end of the age be grouped. His coming and the end of the age generally seem to be synonymous. But this is not at all certain (e.g. Matthew 10:23; Matthew 16:27-28). Whether Jesus' "coming" and "end of the age" mean "the end of human history" is TBD (see ■9.c). It is even possible we may conceive of his coming in stages or something of the sort.

The chronological order of these events cannot be more reliable than our ability even to determine what these events refer to, that is, what is meant by his "coming" and by the "end of the age."

If this entire question was prompted by nothing more than Jesus prediction of Jerusalem's destruction, it seems the question assumes the events are simultaneous.

The parallel in Mark 13:4, reads "Tell us, when will these things (τα■τα) be, and what will be the sign when all these things (τα■τα) are about to be accomplished?" This strongly points to ■2.a above as assumed in the question. The parallel in Luke 21:7 is very similar: "When will these things be, and what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?" On this point (the simultaneity of the events), however, they may be mistaken in their question. We must analyze Jesus' response.

Further, considering ■2.c.v above we should consider the possibility that Matthew's distinct phrasing of their question in 24:3 in comparison to Mark and Luke might be a clarification he

intends to contribute to this Jesus tradition. Regardless, we should take his word choice as a clue from Matthew to help us examine how Jesus describes each event in his response.

The significant difference is that he defines the second “these things” of Mark and Luke as “the sign of your coming and of the end of the age.”

So, we may tentatively conclude that the disciples assumed all “these things” would be roughly simultaneous in their occurrence (c.f. Acts 1:6). As clarified by Matthew, “these things” includes the destruction of Jerusalem, the sign of his coming, and the end of the age. As we will see, there is evidence against this chronology they’ve assumed in the question.

When are the events of Matthew 24:4-14?

Jesus response begins with warnings about false christs (v4-5), and wars, famines, and earthquakes (v6-7). When they see these things, Jesus wants them to know “the end is not yet” (v6). These are just the “beginning of the birth pains” (v8).

When verse 6 says, “See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet,” we get a glimpse into Jesus’ motivation in answering their question. They will assume in the coming distresses that the end is here, but they would be mistaken—it is not yet.

Then (Τ■τε), persecution and betrayal among the saints will occur (v9) which then (τ■τε) leads to many falling away (v10).

Τ■τε is a bothersome connector in this passage which can mean either “at that time” (i.e. roughly simultaneously) or “then” (i.e. temporally [Matthew 5:24] or logically following). It often carries the idea that the τ■τε clause proceeds in some sense from that which it follows.

In the case of verse 9, it almost certainly means “at that time” in a general sense, since we know persecution of the early church was intermingled with the general tribulations of humanity leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem. Jesus is not intending to say such persecutions will happen only after the prior signs.

Since τ■τε in verse 9 isn’t introducing a different time frame but referring to further birthpains of verse 8, the chronological statement, “the end is not yet” of verse 6 is still in force. That is, even when persecution and lovelessness occur within the church, they should still know the end is not yet. This is reinforced by verse 14 which again states that “the end” will not come until the gospel has gone to all nations (on verse 14ff see ■7 below).

Further, the second person plural addresses of verses 4, 6 and 9 affirm that Jesus believes these things will be witnessed by the disciples themselves. The use of the second person plural is even more abundant in Luke. Therefore, the signs of Matthew 24:4-14 are best taken as that which the disciples themselves will experience leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem. Jesus is only indirectly, then, giving signs for the modern church to be “on the lookout for” in our present day. In context, he is preparing the expectations of the disciples for the delay of the consummate establishment of the kingdom and the difficulty they will face in the intervening period. But, they should not assume that the end is yet.

If we are correct in seeing verses 4-14 as Jesus' way of emphasizing the things they will see, but the end is not yet, then it is, however, implied that these verses also describe what the general course of history will be until the end of the age (the most likely referent of "end" in verse 6 and 14. For more on "end of the age", see ■9 below.).

The destruction of Jerusalem (Matthew 24:15-21)

That Jesus is speaking of the destruction of Jerusalem here is abundantly clear. Luke's parallel reads, "But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near." (Luke 21:20)

The use of the second person plural (■δητε) in Matthew 24:15 (and paralleled in all the synoptics) again points us to an event at least some of the disciples would live to see.

That 24:21 speaks of the destruction of Jerusalem and not some future great tribulation, we adduce:

"For" (γ■ρ) means that the reason for prayer that it might not happen in winter or on a sabbath (24:20; which implies sabbath rules to be in effect), is that it will be a very great tribulation (suffering/affliction/distress). This points to the specific tribulation of the siege of Jerusalem. Sabbath rules do not affect the world generally.

Some would say we've certainly seen greater tribulations than the destruction of Jerusalem, so this verse can't refer to that. But Jesus commonly uses hyperbole and he is imminently concerned in context with Israel as a nation. This event effectively obliterated Israel as a nation in a way unlike that of the Babylonian destruction. In that sense it is unparalleled.

Further it would be strange to say nothing worse "will be" if he is already referring to the very end of age in which case there would be no opportunity for anything else "to be" beyond it.

A key hinge on which the remaining interpretation hangs is that verse 21 concludes Jesus' remarks concerning the destruction of Jerusalem and verse 22 then speaks broadly once again of the entire "church age" leading up to the end of the age. We'll reserve the reasons for this interpretation for ■5 below.

Matthew 24:22—a crucial hinge verse

Matthew 24:22 And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved (■σ■θη). But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short.

I've been persuaded by Carson that Matthew 24:22 refers not to the days of the destruction of Jerusalem but rather to the entire period leading up to the end of age described in Matthew 24:4-14. Reasons for this interpretation are as follows:

"no human being" (ο■κ ... π■σα σ■ρξ)--π■σα σ■ρξ (literally, "all flesh") in most of its uses, refers to "all humanity" (John 17:2, Acts 2:17, Romans 3:20, 1 Corinthians 1:29, Galatians 2:16, 1 Peter 1:24). It would be unnatural here for it to refer to only "all flesh" in Jerusalem.

The "elect" most naturally refers to all those chosen by God for salvation. In its two other uses in this passage the word almost certainly refers to all the elect (24:24, and especially 31). We have

little reason, then, to restrict its meaning here to “those elect in Jerusalem” especially when it is used in conjunction with “all flesh.”

The verse picks up the same language used earlier of the precariousness of being saved “in the end”: Matthew 24:13—“But the one who endures to the end will be saved (σωθησειται).” Verse 22 explains why we need the strong warning/encouragement of verse 13—because in the last days it will be so severe that if it wasn’t cut short, no one would be saved (σθηθη).

From a structural perspective, Matthew 24:15-21, which concerns Jerusalem, answers their question of “when will these things be (24:3).” But he does so only after he has emphasized that such calamities (24:4-14) are to be expected all the way up to the end (v6, 14) (see ■7 below). That is, he answers their question of when the destruction of Jerusalem will be in the context of telling them that when it does happen, it will not be the end.

So the “those days” of 24:22 is best taken not to refer to those days of the destruction of Jerusalem, but to all “those days” leading up to the end within which the destruction of Jerusalem is one severe example of calamity (but does not itself mark the end). The birth pains will grow and increase, and right near the end of the age they will grow terribly severe—but will be cut short for the elect’s sake.

Warning of False Christs (Matthew 24:23-28)

Matthew 24:23-26 Then (τε) if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or ‘There he is!’ do not believe it. [24] For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. [25] See, I have told you beforehand. [26] So, if they say to you, ‘Look, he is in the wilderness,’ do not go out. If they say, ‘Look, he is in the inner rooms,’ do not believe it. [27] For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.

Τε in verse 23 is probably a general “at time time” or merely marks the conclusion to the logic of the verse—“if someone says, “Look here”, then don’t believe it.

Here we are pointed back to Jesus’ very first warning in 24:4-5, forming an inclusio. Jesus is especially concerned in the intervening time period before the end about the allure of false messiahs. Don’t worry about them because when Jesus returns it will be evident (Matthew 24:27). Verse 27 serves at yet another example that shows Jesus’ burden is to correct their temptation to think the end will be soon. Even when they hear of false messiahs, they shouldn’t be concerned because when Jesus shows up, everyone will know it. The inclusio gives us another pointer that Jesus has returned to talking about the entire intervening period before the 2nd coming (as we discussed concerning verse 22, ■5 above), not just the destruction of Jerusalem.

It’s now important to reflect on the flow of logic from 24:4-28 we’ve seen thus far.

We have to jump back to at least verse 6. When they begin to see these signs, they should know “the end is not yet” (v6) because that will be the temptation. The significant distance of the end is again picked up in verse 14 (see argument made in ■3.d). All this so far is natural since their question concerns the timing of the end and assumes (as we’ve argued) a false chronology which Jesus intends to correct.

Verse 14 reads “And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations (πιστευτω το εθνος), and then the end will come.”

The question is, is this worldwide gospel proclamation to be considered accomplished (1) before the destruction of Jerusalem (cf. Romans 16:26, Colossians 1:5-6)?

Or (2) is Jesus taking an aside before he transitions to the siege of Jerusalem to inform them of the long frame of reference they should have concerning the “end”. “End” here in verse 14 most likely refers to the “end of the age” in their question (24:3). (2) is probably correct because...

His concern from verse 6 to ensure they understand “the end is not yet” is carried forward to verse 14. The end will only come after the gospel is proclaimed throughout the whole world.

Verse 13 provides a solemn conclusion to the preceding verses about suffering and lovelessness even among the community faith.

So, verse 14 more likely serves as a transitional verse concluding the former section and connecting to the latter. It does, in fact, inform verse 15ff (see discussion of οτι, below).

Most significantly, the Great Commission of making disciples of all nations (πιστευτω τα εθνη; cf. Matthew 28:18-20, clearly connected to this verse) is empowered by Jesus’ presence “to the end of the age”—most likely the end of human history (see 9.d.ii).

Although the case is made that 24:14 was fulfilled before the destruction of Jerusalem as indicated by Paul (Romans 16:26, Colossians 1:5-6), in understanding 24:14 evidence from within Matthew itself carries much greater interpretive weight than parallels from a different author in a different context. The parallel of 24:14 with the Great Commission of 28:18-20 is undeniable, and the end of age there almost certainly refers not to the destruction of Jerusalem but the end of human history.

If we are correct that Jesus is preparing them for a long time before his coming, then in verse 14 he is correcting their false assumption in the question (2.c.vii). This correction has an application as shown by the οτι in verse 15 below.

Matthew 24:15 “So (οτι) when (ταυ) you see the abomination of desolation ... Οτι (granted it is a weaker particle) often draws a conclusion, inference, or consequence from the prior statement. If the above reading is correct (long time frame before the end), the οτι of verse 15 (following the statement in 14) tells them that since all nations must hear the gospel before the end, when you see Jerusalem’s destruction coming, then (ταυ) flee (v16) (because the end is not yet) (i.e. the two events are not simultaneous). That is, the destruction of Jerusalem is a significant example (with important theological implications) of the general tribulations of humanity, but don’t think it’s the end.

To paraphrase the logic that flows from v14 to v28—The gospel must go to all nations before the end (v14), so when you see Jerusalem’s demise coming (v15) then flee (because the gospel hasn’t gone to all nations yet, so it’s not the end). Be especially concerned when you hear reports about false christs, and don’t believe them (v26), for the coming will painfully obvious (v27).

So through verse 28 Jesus has answered their question by telling them (1) what they will see leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem (and by extension, in the whole intervening period), (2)

the sign by which they will know when the destruction of Jerusalem is at hand (abomination of desolation; Luke: “Jerusalem surrounded by armies” [21:20]), and (3) he has warned them from thinking the end is simultaneous with Jerusalem’s demise. This is highlighted by the emphasis not to believe the false reports concerning the Christ, because when he comes, you’ll know it (24:27).

Next we look at “sign of your coming” and the “end of the age.”

What/when is “sign of your coming” (24:3)?

Matthew 24:29 “Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

Consider “immediately after the tribulation of those days” in 24:29.

Matthew reads Ε■θ■ω■ς δ■ μετ■ τ■ν θλ■ψιν τ■ν ■μερ■ν ■κε■νων—“immediately after the tribulation of those days”

Mark reads ■λλ■ ■ν ■κε■νωις τα■ς ■μ■ραις μετ■ τ■ν θλ■ψιν ■κε■νην—“but in those days, after that tribulation.”

Matthew’s use of ε■υ■θε■ω■ς tends to carry more of its normative force of immediately/directly contra Mark’s use of ε■θ■ω■ς as a looser connector. But given Mark’s usage, we should at least entertain the possibility that these closely related words may have some flexibility in their meaning. That is, the nature of the “immediacy” intended in each usage should be evaluated within its own context.

Mark, interestingly, neglects using this favorite connector of his. If we accept Markan priority, Matthew has gently reworded Mark, but ε■υ■θε■ω■ς is Matthew’s addition.

Note Mark uses two demonstratives—“in those days after that tribulation.” Matthew just uses one—“immediately after the tribulation of those days.” Matthew’s ε■υ■θε■ω■ς, then, may just be his way of granting the clarity of Mark’s two demonstratives.

We contend that τ■ν ■μερ■ν ■κε■νων of 24:29 parallels α■ ■μ■ραι ■κε■νωι found twice 24:22 which we argued there refers to the whole intervening period before the coming of the Son of Man (see ■5). Thus, 24:29 is saying that the celestial signs occur immediately after the climax of the “birth pains” of the intervening period before the 2nd coming—i.e. right at the coming itself.

Further, θλ■ψις of 24:29, then, refers to the distresses and afflictions of the entire intervening period before the second coming. That is, it refers to the tribulation of 24:9 rather than the specific tribulation of the siege of Jerusalem in 24:21 (see ■10.i).

We recognize that these celestial signs are stock OT imagery for divine visitation in judgment often upon nations (including Israel) for their sin and rebellion. This judgment is often effected by destruction at the hands of another nation (e.g. Isaiah 13:10 where the imagery is used in the judgment of Babylon by the Medes; Ezekiel 32:7 concerning Egypt; Joel 2:10 against Israel; Joel 2:31) But the language is also used of the judgment of all nations (Joel 3:15).

Thus, it is fitting that final climactic judgment of all the world by God in the coming of the Son would be prophesied of in this OT symbolism.

So, on this interpretation, these celestial signs occur immediately after the climaxing tribulation (sufferings/affliction/distress) of the intervening period.

Luke affirms a break between the destruction of Jerusalem of the coming of the Son of man.

Luke 21:24-27 They will fall by the edge of the sword and be led captive among all nations, and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled (■χρι ο■ πληρωθ■σιν καιρο■ ■θν■ν). [25] “And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, [26] people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken. [27] And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.

If we took “tribulation of those days” in 24:29 to refer to that of 24:21 (the destruction of Jerusalem), Jesus’ coming would have had to have taken place in AD 70. Luke, however, much more clearly states that Jerusalem will be out of Jewish hands “until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.” That is, a significant amount of time will take place in which Jerusalem is “trampled underfoot by the Gentiles” before the end.

Like Mark, Luke (even more so) is ambiguous concerning the timing of the coming of the Son of man. In 21:25 he gives no temporal relation to “tribulation” like Matthew and Mark. He merely says these signs “will be” (■σονται). Just as vague is 21:27—“and then (τ■τε) they will see the Son of Man.” Interestingly, Luke doesn’t mention the angelic gathering of the elect.

“and then” (Κα■ τ■τε) they will see the ... Son of Man (Matthew 24:30, Mark 13:26, Luke 21:27).

All three Synoptics connect the celestial signs (sun and moon darkening, stars falling, etc) to the coming of the Son of man with a “and then” (Κα■ τ■τε). In most cases, τ■τε carries a sense of immediacy, and on this view, we are able to maintain this sense.

The celestial signs are a prophetic way to speak of divine judgment which is manifested by the coming of the Son of Man to judge the world and gather his elect.

What/When is the “End of Age”

One option is to take it as the destruction of the Jerusalem (preterist/partial preterist view)

Though not espoused here, we admit this helps to rather simply resolve many of the chronological problems in the text. It deals with the Matthew’s troublesome use of “immediately” and addresses the challenging statement coming later: Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. (Matthew 24:34)

The “age” which is ending, then, would have to be the age of the Old Covenant. Jesus inaugurated the New Covenant, and there was something of an overlap of the ages where the Jews were granted ample opportunity to receive their Messiah. But rejection of Christ proved their greatest rebellion of all resulting in a destruction of Jerusalem more severe and permanent than that of the Babylonians. With the temple destroyed, Jewish worship as such is eliminated in its mosaically

prescribed form. The new covenant is allowed to fully blossom in the church distinct from Judaism altogether.

The second option is to take the end of the age as the end of human history.

“End of the age” (συντελεσ■ας ... α■νος) is used 6 times in the NT. 5 of them are in Matthew. The first three are in the parables of the weeds and net identifying it with the separation of righteous and unrighteous by his angels (■γγελο■) and the expulsion of the unrighteous into hell. And the other use, aside from 24:3, is Matthew 28:20, where Jesus is affirming that he would be with them “always, to the end of age.”

Note that in the parables of the weeds/net, the end of age is tied directly to the separation of the righteous and unrighteous in judgment.

Verbal parallels between the parable of the weeds and Jesus’ return in Matthew 24 concerning angels gathering the elect are strong.

Matthew 24:31—he will send out his angels (■ποστελε■ το■ς ■γγ■λους α■το■)

Matthew 13:41—the Son of man will send his angels (■ποστελε■ ... το■ς ■γγ■λους α■το■)

The above argues quite strongly that the end of the age in Matthew should be taken to mean the final judgment—the separation of the righteous and unrighteous and the casting of the latter into hell (but see ■9.c below).

Next, we should consider that one may argue that the evidence adduced for ■9.b above need not demand the conclusion that the end of human history is in view. This would allow one to maintain that the whole of Matthew 24 is fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem, and thus support ■9.a. Such a view, however, would demand...

That the “sign in heaven of the Son of Man” (24:30)

the sighting of the “Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven” (24:30)

and the sending out of his “angels with a loud trumpet call” to gather his elect from the four winds (24:31) all occurred in the events surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem.

Some evidence in support of this are some historical reports of unusual heavenly/celestial sightings during the time of the Jewish War (AD 66-70).

The “angels” gathering the elect could be translated “messengers” i.e. those who preach the gospel or leaders within the churches (cf. Revelation 1:20; Revelation 2:1; Revelation 2:8, etc.) OR it could refer to angelic activity involved in the spread of the gospel during the church age.

■9.c above, however, doesn’t account for

the strong connection in Matthew between the end of the age and the casting of the unrighteous into hell made in Jesus’ parables of the weeds/net (Matthew 13:42; Matthew 13:50),

Nor does it account for the “always” (π■σας τ■ς ■μ■ρας, literally “all the days”) set in parallel with “to the end of the age” (■ως τ■ς συντελε■ας το■ α■νος) in 28:20. This implies that the end of the age is equivalent to the end of (literally) “all days”. Given this, it is difficult to suppose that “end

of the age” could mean “all the days until the destruction of Jerusalem.”

Both of these clues point strongly to the idea that the end of the age refers to the end of human history as we know it by the final judgment of humanity.

Jesus’ following parables and their clear references to hell from 24:36 to the end of chapter 25—endings which parallel the judgments of the parables of the weeds and the net—seem to confirm that such an end of the age is in view.

Lesson from the Fig Tree

Matthew 24:32-36 “From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. [33] So also, when you see all these things (π■ντα τα■τα), you know that he is near, at the very gates. [34] Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things (π■ντα τα■τα) take place. [35] Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. [36] “But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.

Verse 34 above is notably the most difficult verse to account for if we accept any kind of futurist view of any part of the Olivet discourse. A closer reading, however, may help reconcile the seemingly divergent directions various parts of this passage takes.

Verse 33 says that when the disciples see all “these things” (π■ντα τα■τα), they should know that he is near. It is this “these things” that is the most immediate antecedent to the “these things” mentioned in the troublesome verse 34.

But note that in verse 33, the “these things” spoken of are those that will occur before the coming of the Son of man. They are signs by which they may know he is “near, at the very gates.”

So when Jesus affirms that this generation (best taken as the generation of the disciples to whom he’s speaking) will not pass away until all “these things” take place, he must be speaking of the things leading up to but not including the final judgment (i.e. the end of the age, the coming of Son of man). By referring to his entire prior discussion as “these things” (leading up to the end) we are given another pointer that throughout this passage, he most often is referring to the entire intervening period leading up to the 2nd coming—not merely the isolated period surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem.

“These things,” spoken of as general tribulations, strife even within the church, and the destruction of Jerusalem would in fact be experienced before that generation passed away.” And they would indeed all occur before the 2nd coming.

This, then, helps us make sense of verse 36 often put under a different section heading but which is deeply connected to the lesson of from fig tree--“But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.

“But” (δ■) is best taken as a weak adversative but shows that this statement is connected to what’s just been said. Jesus, it appears is trying to thread a needle of sorts in explaining the complexities of the times of “these things” from the disciples’ question.

If we try to follow the logic of 24:32-36, the disciples ought to know (just as they can interpret the fig tree) that when “these things” take place, Jesus is near. Then, verse 36 says, “But concerning that day and hour (τῆς ἡμέρας καὶ ὥρας), no one knows.” What is “that day and hour”? It must be the day and hour of Jesus’ coming. The contrast in this analogy is that they may know he is “near, at the very gates” by the signs, but the actual time of his coming unknown. This is confirmed by the conclusions drawn from the comparison to Noah in 24:39 and 42.

If “immediately after the tribulation of those days” of 24:29 refers the tribulation surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem, then it would be strange for Jesus to say just a few verses later that no one actually knows the day or hour of the coming of the Son of Man. At that point we would know it—it would be right after the destruction of Jerusalem. But Jesus is emphatic that we don’t know it. So “the tribulation of those days” of 24:29 best refers to the distresses (birth pains, 24:8) of the entire intervening period that will reach a fever pitch just before the end.

Clues from the parables of 24:36-25:46.

The strong and repeated emphasis of the ignorance of all—even Jesus himself (Matthew 24:36)—concerning the timing of the second coming give us warrant to see a time period of unknown length between the destruction of Jerusalem and the 2nd Coming.

Other pointers in the parables give further warrant that a long time period may be what to expect.

The servants will be tempted to think the master’s delayed (Matthew 24:48).

The bridegroom delayed (Matthew 25:5).

Now after a long time the master came (Matthew 25:19).

So the parables provide further evidence that there is a time gap between Jerusalem’s demise and the coming of the Son of Man.

Tentative Summary before some other considerations are made.

Thus far, our analysis has pointed to the following understanding of how Jesus is answering the disciples’ question in 24:3:

They assumed that the destruction of Jerusalem, coming of the Son of Man, and end of the age would be roughly simultaneous. Jesus answers their question concerning the signs they will see and the sign by which they will know Jerusalem is about to be destroyed, but he also corrects their false assumption about the simultaneity of the events.

Matthew 24:4-13 refer to things that the disciples themselves will witness leading up to the tribulation of the siege of Jerusalem described in Matthew 24:15-22, but should not be mistaken for signs of the end.

In verse 6, Jesus tells them that they will see these “birth pains” (v8), but the “end is not yet.”

Further, the birth pains include persecution of the saints and a falling away even within the believing community (v9-13), but the gospel must go to all nations before the end will come (v14). By implication, these birth-pain distresses will characterize all human history till the end.

So, when they see the “abomination of desolation”—the sign of Jerusalem’s demise—then flee (because the end is not yet) (v15-16).

And when all this takes place, they may be especially tempted by false christs (v23), but don’t believe them (v26), because (the end is not yet and) when he comes, you’ll know it (v27).

To summarize the chronology,

They will see these birth pains leading up to Jerusalem’s destruction.

The abomination of desolation marks the destruction of Jerusalem.

The intervening time period will be characterized by such distresses, reaching a fever pitch near the end in which the days will be cut short.

Divine judgment symbolized by the celestial signs will come in the form of the coming of the Son of Man (and the end of the age) will then occur—but the precise time, no one knows.

Two other conundrums to untangle: Matthew 10:23; Matthew 16:28.

Matthew 10:16-25 “Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. [17] Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, [18] and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles. [19] When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. [20] For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. [21] Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, [22] and you will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. [23] When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next, for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes. [24] “A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. [25] It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household.

Matthew 16:24-28 Then Jesus told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. [25] For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. [26] For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? [27] For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done. [28] Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

Both of these passages reference the coming of the Son of Man in the context of the sufferings believers will face in the future—not unlike Matthew 24 which we’ve been discussing. While Matthew 10:23 is more opaque, Matthew 16:27-28 more clearly places the coming in the context final judgment, mentioning the attending angels and all. Thus, 16:27-28 poses the greatest challenge to what we’ve argued so far concerning the distant time frame of the coming of the Son of Man.

How are we to reconcile this discrepancy? The explanation, I believe, is to see the comings of 10:23 and 16:28 as referring to the destruction of Jerusalem. While this seems to go against what has been argued above, I think the “coming of the Son of Man” in judgment is best seen as inaugurated in the destruction of Jerusalem and consummated at the final judgment. This would help us account for the Jesus’ varied usage of “coming of the Son of Man”.

Additionally, Matthew’s phrasing of the disciples’ question (Matthew 24:3) may help us see the relationship in Jesus’ mind. The question reads: Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (Επιμὲν πότε ταῦτα σταί καὶ τὸ σημεῖον τῆς σῆς παρουσίας (gen) καὶ συντελεῖας (gen) τοῦ αἰῶνος.)

The initial question concerning “these things” is separated from the other two by “and” (καί). The two latter events are also separated by καί (the sign of your coming and the end of the age), but they are governed by one, singular interrogative pronoun (τί) (i.e. what is the sign of (1) your coming and (2) the end of the age). This points us to two closely related but distinguishable events. In fact, this seems to say the disciples thought one sign would mark both events. The inaugurated-consummated scheme helps account for this connection.

Salvation came first for the Jews (Romans 1:16). Because of this judgment would also come to them first: Romans 2:9-10 There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, [10] but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek.

Christ, having come first to the Jews, gave them the first chance to be saved. But climactically revealing their stiff-necks before their own Messiah was the height of their rebellion against God. After a season of patience and apostolic witness, they would be finally judged as a nation because they did not know the time of their visitation (Luke 19:41-44).

In this light Joel 2:28-32 (in the context of judging Israel) takes on new meaning: Joel 2:28-32 “And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. [29] Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit. [30] “And I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. [31] The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. [32] And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved. For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the LORD has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the LORD calls.

Peter declared this text fulfilled in Acts two. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the apostolic proclamation of the gospel marks this fulfillment. In that time period, everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved (Acts 2:32, cf Romans 10:13). Many will escape the judgment of Zion and Jerusalem (judgment on them as nation in the destruction of Jerusalem, consummated in the final judgment?), namely, the survivors will be those whom the Lord calls (2:32). But those who don’t call on the Lord will be carried away in the Day of the Lord (2:1).

We can see how the destruction of Jerusalem serves as “the Day of the Lord in miniature” for the Jews anticipating the consummated judgment upon the whole world at the end of the age.

The “day of the Lord” in the OT is essentially identified with the coming of Christ in the NT (1 Corinthians 1:8, 1 Thessalonians 5:2, 2 Thessalonians 2:2, 2 Peter 3:10). The “day of the Lord” in the OT is variously used to describe divine judgment upon both individual nations (Isaiah 13:16) and the whole world (Isaiah 24:21).

Given the connection between the day of the Lord and the coming of the Son of Man, we’re not surprised to see that the latter can also refer to Christ enacting his judgment on a single nation (the Jews) and later on the whole world.

To see the coming of the Son as Man as the destruction of Jerusalem is appropriate in both these contexts of suffering for Christ. Most of the suffering they would face (as did Jesus) was opposition from the Jews themselves—this is clear in the Matthew 10 passage. References to the coming (as the destruction of Jerusalem) in these contexts provides motivation for them to endure for they will be vindicated for their sufferings. Those who persecuted them will be judged—they will be judged ultimately at the final judgment (Matthew 16:27), but in the case of the Jews, they will be judged as a rebellious nation first in the destruction of Jerusalem (Matthew 16:28), which some of the disciples would live to see.

And the teaching in 10:23 and 16:27-28 helps account for the disciples’ confusion concerning the coming and end of the age. Thus, it was necessary for Jesus to explain these things in greater detail. We see it is common in the gospels for disciples to be initially confused or confounded, and only later does clarity come. They only can bear so much pre-resurrection and pre-pentecost (John 16:12).

Conclusion

From this analysis, we conclude the following:

The disciples wanted to know when the temple would be destroyed and the timing of Jesus’ coming and the end of the age.

Jesus informs them of what they will see in the intervening period leading up before the end, but even when they see these things, they must not think the end is yet. The end will not come until the gospel is proclaimed to all nations.

So, when they see Jerusalem on the verge of desolation, they should then flee. And when they see false christs arrive afterwards, they should not believe them, because the coming will be inescapably obvious—the end is not yet.

But right as the distresses of the intervening period reach their fever pitch, the days will be cut short, and divine judgment will come upon the whole world—punishing the wicked and vindicating his people.

All the signs mentioned by Jesus leading up to the end would occur in the disciples’ generation. And when they had all happened they could know that the end was near. But of that day and hour, no one—not even Jesus—knows.

It indeed may be a long time—but stay awake and be ready because you know not when it will come.

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