

WHAT WILL BE THE SIGN OF JESUS' COMING?

THE DISCIPLES' QUESTIONS IN THE OLIVET DISCOURSE

After Jesus had made the statement that Israel's house would be abandoned and that the Jews would not see Jesus "until [they] say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord'" (Matt 23:38, 39) and further that the stones of the temple buildings would be torn down, the disciples ask:

- ❖ "When will *these things* be, and what will be **the sign** of **your coming** and of the **close of the age**?" (Matt. 24:3 ESV).
- ❖ "...when will *these things* be, and what will be **the sign** when *all these things* are about to be accomplished?" (Mark 13:4 ESV).
- ❖ "...when will *these things* be? And what will be **the sign** when *these things* are about to take place?" (Luke 21:7 ESV).

The disciples seem to have had two issues in mind, namely, the fall of the temple and Jesus' 'parousia' (return) at the close of the age. But did the disciples really pose questions regarding two distinct events to occur at widely different times? Many interpreters explain it this way and therefore consider Jesus' reply as a two fold prophecy with one part fulfilled in A.D 70 and with the rest yet to be fulfilled.

A SINGLE SIGN

Although only Matthew mentions the *parousia* directly, **the sign in all three synoptic Gospels is singular.** Evidently, to the disciples, the destruction of the temple would be such a dramatic event that it can only be associated with Messiah Jesus' return at the end of the age. This fits well with the fact that Jesus had only just commented on the judgment to be poured out on Jerusalem's temple and in the context of his return (Matthew 23:38, 39 "your house is left to you desolate...you will not see me again until..."). So the idea of a conflated prophecy fails if, when one comes to unravel the discourse, one attempts to separate the details into a two-fold prophecy. It is clearly a single prophecy dealing with a single complex of events, such that whatever is the sign for the destruction of the temple is the same sign for Jesus' return. The Word Biblical Commentary states regarding Matthew 24:3:

That the two parts of the question are asked in one breath indicates that the disciples could not dissociate the destruction of the temple from the end of the age...From their perspective the destruction of the temple must have meant the coming again of Jesus.

WARNING ABOUT DECEPTION

Before answering the disciples question Jesus warns them:

- ❖ "And he said, "See that you are not **led astray**. For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am he!' and, '**The time is at hand!**' *Do not go after them*. And when you hear of wars and tumults, do not be terrified, for these things must first take place, but the end will not be at once" (Luke 21:8, 9).
- ❖ "See that no one leads you astray. For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and they **will lead many astray**. And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but **the end is not yet**" (Matt. 24:4-8).

Bar Kochba, as a political saviour, was an example of this in AD 135, but such ones appear on the scene throughout the period before the end.

- ❖ “For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are but **the beginning of the birth pains**” (*Matt. 24:7, 8*). See also Mark 13:4-8.

WARS, FAMINES, PESTILENCE AND EARTHQUAKES ARE NOT THE SIGN

Jesus then elaborates by saying that: “Nation will **rise against nation** and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be great **earthquakes** and in various places **plagues** and **famines**” (**Luke 21:10,11a**).

A MIDDLE-EASTERN SCENARIO

Jesus draws upon the information provided by the ancient prophets concerning the wars of the King of the North (“disgusting thing that causes desolation”) in Daniel 11 when “**nation will rise against nation**” and these events will naturally be followed by **famines** and **pestilences** (Luke 21:11). Jesus also adds **earthquakes** (Joel 2:10; Isa. 29:6) as part of these characteristics of “*the beginning of the birth pains*” (verse 8). Because Jesus’ focus is on *Judea* (Matt 24:16) all these events are yet to occur in the middle-east in harmony with the general location detailed by all the ancient prophets. Yet, the fact that Jesus lists these details at this point and calls them *the beginning of the birth pains* indicates that he is excluding such events from the singular sign.

BAD CONDITIONS AS SUCH ARE NOT THE SIGN

Modern-day claims are often made that during particular times mankind has entered the last days. The various wars, famines, pestilences and earthquakes are pointed to as being the sign that Jesus is about to return. All these features are said to be much worse than in previous centuries. However, in overall terms the 14th century was the worst century for most people to have lived in. Other centuries, too, have been worse than the 19th or 20th in respect of the individual aspects:

WAR — There were more deaths caused by **World War II** than any other. However, in 1644 the **Manchu-Chinese war** claimed an estimated 25 million lives. From 1850 to 1864 the **Taiping Rebellion** claimed between 20-30 million lives. Wars earlier than 1914 were also considered by historians to be total or world wars e. g. the Napoleonic wars from 1793.

FAMINE — The resulting famine from the China flood of **1877-78** caused an estimated 9 to 13 million deaths. By contrast deaths from the famines of the 20th century range from 3 to 5 million. When providing statistics today the definition of ‘starvation’ concerns the lack of one or more essential nutrients. According to the older definition less than 1% (40 million) of mankind is actually now starving. This is not the extreme and contradictory figures of 12.5%, 25%, and 80% often quoted.

PESTILENCE — The black death of **1330-1350**, perhaps the worst disaster of all time, killed ¼ or more of the world’s population.

EARTHQUAKE — Perhaps the worst of all time (as of 1993) was on 1 November **1875**, centred in Lisbon, the shock of which was felt over much of the world. However, it is impossible to be certain regarding earthquakes because there were no true seismologists before the mid-1800s and therefore only few and poor records.

The real sign will be the fact of “the Abomination of Desolation” invading Jerusalem bringing about the Great Tribulation which is followed by the magnificent cosmic disturbances.

“BIRTH PANGS OF THE MESSIAH”

- ❖ “But all these are but the beginning of the birth pains” (*Matt. 24: 8*).

Jesus' choice of the metaphor of birth pains came from the Rabbinic writings of the time: "*birth pangs of the Messiah*." It was a technical phrase for **the time of tribulation immediately preceding the Messianic Age**. So this metaphor paints the picture of agony resulting in joy in the end. The close context shows this final short burst of pain to be the future fall of Jerusalem as a result of the appearance of "*the Abomination of Desolation*." Christians in Judea will then experience the Great Tribulation. The event that brings joy is the 'birth' itself—the return of Jesus. No doubt Jesus had both these climactic events in mind.

END-TIME PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS

In Matthew 24:9-13 Jesus forecasts murderous persecution in the midst of a major time-of-the-end deception and rebellion against God; hence his counsel in verse 13 to endure until the End. The passage in verses 9-14 seems to be a **synopsis of the persecution during the Great Tribulation**. "Then [or '**At that time**'] they will deliver you up to tribulation" *and that they are* "hated by **all nations** for my name's sake. And then (**at that time**) many will fall away." We also have the reminder from Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2:2, 3 that the day of the Lord: "...will not come unless the rebellion comes first." Although the apostles asked for a sign in the singular, Jesus answered by giving several events that will occur in the end-time. So *when does Christ answer the disciples question?*

- ❖ "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" (*Matt. 24:14*).

Summarizing: Jesus does not answer his disciples' question immediately. Rather, he first lists the early disturbing events of Antichrist's wars. He calls all of them, "**the beginning** of the birth pains."

THE SIGN IS "THE DESOLATING ABOMINATION"

After giving, in Matthew 24:9-13, his synopsis of the Great Tribulation Jesus, in Jewish literary fashion, goes into greater detail by now discussing firstly what causes the Great Tribulation, namely the Abomination that causes desolation," as the sign that they must watch out for and then he gives warnings concerning what they must do. The sign is recognized only by Christians who are watching. So when Jesus says in verse 14 "*and then the end will come*" he is speaking of the end of the age. The disciples question was:

- ❖ "...when will these things be and what will be *the sign* when all these things are going to be fulfilled" (*Mark 13:4*).

So Jesus answers their question with the statement:

- ❖ "So when you see **the abomination of desolation** spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand) ... 21 For then there will be **great tribulation**, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be" (*Matt. 24:15, 21*).
- ❖ "when you see **the desolating abomination** standing where **he** (*Also see REB and Weymouth*) should not" (**Mark 13:14** NAB).

So the sign—the advance warning—for Christian disciples to know **when** the temple buildings will come down and of **Jesus' coming** and of **the close of the age** would be when this individual *desolating abomination stands in Jerusalem's holy place*. This is the event they are told that they will see so that they can take action, namely to flee (*Matt. 24:16-20*). Luke gives the parallel account:

- ❖ "But when you see **Jerusalem surrounded** by armies, then recognize that her desolation is near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are inside the city depart ... these are days of vengeance ... for there will be great distress upon the land" (*Luke 21:20-23*).

By studying the book of Daniel, as Jesus encouraged (Matt.24:15), it becomes evident that Jesus is speaking of the time of the appearance of the Antichrist. It will be he who will be the desolator of Jerusalem and the instigator of an intense burst of persecution upon both Jews and Christians. This event begins in the middle of Daniel's 70th week and continues for about 3½ years. In foretelling the desecration of the Jerusalem temple (Matt. 24:15) Jesus quotes Daniel's reference to "*the abomination of desolation.*" This expression occurs twice in Daniel, (also note Daniel 8:11-13. which shows that this desecration would be triggered by *the Little Horn*—another term for the Antichrist). It would happen just before the time of the end and Jesus showed that it would occur immediately prior to his return.

THE GREAT TRIBULATION

❖ "For then there will be **great tribulation**, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no and never will be" (Matt. 24:21).

Jesus appeals to Daniel in foretelling the Great Tribulation. Daniel 12:1 warns about: "*a time of distress, such as never occurred since there was a nation until that time.*" The context of Daniel's statement indicates that this will happen in the end-time. Jesus quotes these words then adds, "*no, and never will.*" He therefore declares the event quite unique. There can be but one tribulation greater than all before or since.

WHEN THE END BECOMES EVIDENT TO THE WHOLE WORLD

The first time Jesus mentions 'signs' is in Luke 21:11, "*great signs from heaven.*" At first sight it may seem that these belong in his common events that are "*not yet.*" Yet this is a reference to the cosmic phenomena of:

❖ "**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, people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near" (Luke 21:25-28).

However, these are not the sign which Jesus gave to Christians to watch for. Here the word *signs* is used in the sense of miraculous events. This is also the case with "*the sign of the Son of man*" (Matt. 24:30).

NOTE: Moses' miracles are called *signs*. Also Jesus' miracles in John's gospel are called signs.

THE POST TRIBULATION EVENTS

❖ "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. Then will appear in heaven **the sign of the Son of Man**, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. ³¹And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other" (Matt. 24: 29-31). (Also see Mark 13:24-26).

Revelation 6:12-24 describes a great earthquake, sun blackened, moon like blood, stars fall, and the sky disappears. Some Historicists extend these cosmic phenomena over millennia while others turn them into a figurative meaning. So what did Jesus mean by these signs?

First, setting out Matthew 24:29 as it appears, in effect, in the original Greek, with supplied stress:

Immediately after the distress of those days—

1. the sun will be darkened **and**
2. the moon will not give its light **and**
3. the stars will fall from the sky **and**
4. the heavenly bodies will be shaken.

Clearly all four literal cosmic events occur at the same time, hard on the heels of the Great Tribulation. These are not a **series of widely scattered celestial events as Historicism proposes**. Secondly, the Scriptures identify these signs because the OT prophecies link the darkening of the sun and moon, and the falling of the stars with the judgment of the Day of Yahweh (Isa.13 and 34:4). Just as in Matthew 24:29 they are **always a cluster of portents**, not a sequence spanning the centuries.

THE CHRONOLOGY OF RAPID-FIRE ESCHATALOGICAL EVENTS

The striking change of pace in Jesus' forecast at Matthew 24:15 is signalled by the word "Therefore" at the beginning of this section which firmly binds the section to the preaching of the good news in the previous verse (14). In this second major section, the following events are listed in order:

- 1) The desecration of the temple, (verse 15), after Jerusalem is attacked (Luke 21:20);
- 2) The Christians escape to the mountains, (verses 16-18);
- 3) The Great tribulation (verses 20-22);
- 4) False christs and false prophets performing miracles, (verses 23-28);
- 5) Signs in sun, moon and stars, roaring of the sea and trouble on earth (Luke 21:25f).
- 6) The nations mourning. (Matt. 24:30).
- 7) **Christ's return** in power and glory and his gathering of the Christians (30, 31).

The return of Jesus is shown to follow relatively hard upon the heels of the desecration of the temple. All these events are tightly bound together by Jesus' repeated use of the Greek adverb *tote* with its meaning of *then* or 'at that time' and giving the thought of immediacy. By combining the accounts *tote* occurs 7 times in this part of the Olivet discourse:

1. "When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, **then** recognize that her desolation is near" (**Luke 21:20**).
2. "**then** those who are in Judea must flee to the mountains" (Matt. 24:16).
3. "for **then** there will be great tribulation" (vs. 21).
4. "**Then** if anyone says to you, 'Behold here is the Christ...'" (vs. 23).
5. "And **then** the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky" (vs. 30).
6. "**then** the tribes of the earth will mourn" (vs. 30).
7. "and **then** he will send forth his angels, and will gather together his elect from" (Mark 13:27)

A second temporal adverb, *eutheos*, also has an extremely forceful bearing upon the interpretation of this passage, even though it appears just once:

- ❖ "Immediately (*eutheos*) after the distress of those days..." (*Matt. 14:29*).

Jesus speaks of the Great Tribulation in verses 21ff as "those days" (19, 22). *Eutheos* serves two closely related, broad temporal functions. It confirms that *tote* expresses immediacy. And in reaching back over the false Christs and prophets, it identifies Jesus' second list as a sequence of rapid-fire eschatological events.

All this fits well with the data concerning 3½ years and 1290 days from Daniel. Therefore, the return of Jesus is about 3½ years after the Fall of Jerusalem and the desecrating abomination is set up. Additionally, "the times of the Gentiles" that Jesus mentions in Luke 21:24 likely have a specific duration of 42 months (Rev. 11:2).

THE LESSON OF THE FIG TREE

- ❖ “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. So also, when you see **all these things** you know that he is near, at the very gates”
(*Matt. 24:32, 33*).

What things? From the context the “all these things” is restricted to the sequence of rapid fire events of Matthew 24:15-29 with **the fall of Jerusalem** caused by Antichrist as the **first actual precursor** of Christ’s Return.

“THIS GENERATION” = A BLOCK OF MANKIND WITH CERTAIN CHARACTERISTICS IN COMMON

- ❖ “... **this generation** (*genea*) will not pass away until all these things take place” (*Matt. 24: 34, 35*).

The Greek term *genea* does not refer to any approximate period such as 40 or 70 years, but rather it refers to: “The crooked generation” of the present age. In Hebrew thinking it refers to the people that Jesus was speaking of at the time, but taken ‘corporately’ of the **entire wicked society** of mankind which is organized against God and *living throughout the present age* between the two advents. The Hebrew word *dor* is often translated *genea* in the LXX. An examination of the term ‘generation’ throughout the Scriptures reveals the meaning:

THE RIGHTEOUS AND THE WICKED GENERATIONS

- ❖ “For God is with **the righteous** generation” (*Ps. 14: 5*).
- ❖ “They are not his children because of their defect; but are a **perverse and crooked** generation”
(*Deut. 32: 5*).
- ❖ “There is a kind (Lit. *generation*) of man who curses his father...there is a kind (Lit. *generation*) who is **pure in his own eyes**” (*Prov. 30:11, 12*).
- ❖ “An **evil and adulterous** generation seeks a sign” (*Matt. 16: 4*).
Because they seek a sign in spite of all of Jesus’ proof, this generation is therefore unbelieving.
- ❖ “For whoever is ashamed of me and my words in this **adulterous and sinful** generation...”
(*Mark 8:38*).
- ❖ “...the sons of this age are more **shrewd** in relation to their own kind (Lit. *generation*) than the sons of light” (*Luke 16: 8*).

THE CONTEXT OF MATTHEW 24:34

The Journal of the evangelical Theological Society 38:3 (Sept 1996) states:

“In the context of the discourse it (*this generation*) refers to that type of consummately evil and unbelieving people who **deceive and persecute** the disciples of Christ until the time of the parousia...”

So the “*generation that will not pass away until all these things take place*” is the block of humanity that epitomizes “this age” in being evil, adulterous, sinful, perverse, crooked, unbelieving and pure in their own eyes. It therefore exists in opposition to God and exists right up to the time of Jesus’ return. So the term ‘generation’ cannot be narrowed down to some specific length of time such as 40 or 70 years. Such might be the meaning in 21st century Western thinking but not in 1st century or earlier Jewish thinking.

REVELATION—
THE OLIVET DISCOURSE BUT WITH FURTHER DETAILS

THE FIRST FOUR SEALS—ANTICHRIST RIDES FORTH

The first horse rider represents neither Christ nor the Gospel. To replace conquest with Gospel would ruin the clear pattern. If the first rider is an individual then so are the final three. There is no mixing of persons with concepts, such as world war or famine. Only one person (not 4) is shown throughout the Scriptures to be the physical arch-enemy of Christ and Paul calls him the “Man of Lawlessness” (2 Thess. 2). So we conclude, with A.W. Pink, that all four riders represent four phases of the final part of the career of Antichrist. In the booklet ‘Coming Events’ G.H. Lang states regarding the Antichrist: “His career will fulfill Seals 1-4 of Revelation 6.” Yet, the phases of Antichrist’s ride certainly **parallel the Olivet discourse** description in Matthew 24:7 of the wars and famines as seen as a fulfillment of the prophecy in Daniel 11 concerning Antichrist’s end-time wars.

But when does Antichrist “ride forth”? The first horse is apparent during the first half of Daniel’s 70th ‘seven’ with Antichrist appearing deceptively as a benefactor for the Jews and in making a covenant with them:

❖ “...there was a white horse and its rider had a bow. He was **given a crown**, and he rode forth victorious to further his victories” (*Rev. 6:2 NAB*).

This phase or aspect of the rider seems to concern his **lust for power**. The detail of a crown being given to Antichrist indicates that this is not at the very beginning of the 70th ‘seven’ when he is viewed as “a contemptible person to whom royal majesty has not been given” (Dan. 11: 21). For the timing of the **second horse rider** the key is Antichrist’s persecution to which the phrase: “*make war against the saints and to conquer them*” points in Revelation 13. The 42 months of affliction (verses 5 and 7) are a literal time period terminated by the return of Christ. They are the time of the Great Tribulation (7:14), through which the saints as a body survive. This emphasis arises from the decisive fact that it is **the** Great Tribulation. Additionally, Jesus stated that it would be the worst of all Tribulations ever (Matt. 24:21). Both Jesus and John had Daniel’s forecast in Daniel 12:1 in specific focus. So this breaking of the second seal likely marks the outbreak of the 3½ year Great Tribulation.

SUMMARY

- The sign is for the singular future return of Jesus.
- The answer to “*when will these things happen* (i.e. the temple buildings pulled down) *and what will be the sign of your coming and the end of the age*” is “***when you see the Abomination of desolation standing in the holy place.***” This occurs half way through the 70th week. STUDY 7 shows this to be the events concerning the “man of lawlessness.”
- In Matthew 24/Mark 13/Luke 21 Jesus is not speaking about the A.D.70 event. Christians did not then see the Abomination standing where he should not i.e. in the temple as with the Antiochus Epiphanes event in 167 B.C as a type. (Please see STUDY 2).

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