

The Structure of the Olivet Discourse

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All three synoptic gospels record part of the Olivet discourse of Jesus, but none reproduce the entire discourse. Each writer pulls out parts of it to enforce a specific emphasis. Consider the comment by the disciples reported in Matt. 24:1, Mark 13:1, and Luke 21:5. Most likely, a complete quote of what they said would consist of a compilation of the three versions and perhaps even additional observations about the temple.

This paper proposes to reconstruct the discourse, with special attention to its specific sections, using the excerpt from each of the synoptic gospels.¹ It argues that the key to the structure of the Olivet discourse is that in it Jesus refers to two distinct events: the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 and his own eschatological second advent.

The Comment of the Disciples and the Response of Jesus

As Jesus left the temple for the last time during his public ministry, the disciples made a rather strange comment about the temple.

Matthew	Mark	Luke
24:1	13:1	21:5
Jesus left the temple and was walking away when his disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings.	As he was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!"	Some of his disciples were remarking about how the temple was adorned with beautiful stones and with gifts dedicated to God.

What prompted the disciples to make these observations about the temple? The immediately preceding context provides a likely answer. Jesus had just finished perhaps his most scathing rebuke of the Jewish leaders. However, before leaving the temple, he concludes with these remarks:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'²

¹ I am indebted to James Oliver Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1962) for much help in the overall interpretation of the Olivet discourse.

² Matt. 23:37-39.

Most likely it was this startling statement by Jesus that prompted the response by the disciples.³ How could this magnificent structure ever become "desolate"? In any event, the response by Jesus to his disciples was even more astonishing than what he had told the Jewish leaders in the temple.

Matthew	Mark	Luke
24:2	13:2	21:6
"Do you see all these things?" he asked. "I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down."	"Do you see all these great buildings?" replied Jesus. "Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down."	"As for what you see here, the time will come when not one stone will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down."

Jesus quite plainly announces that this very temple, grand as it might be, will be destroyed. This, of course, did occur in A.D. 70 when the Romans under Titus destroyed not only the temple but the entire city of Jerusalem.

The Question of the Disciples

After leaving the temple and Jerusalem, Jesus headed east and climbed the steep path up the Mount of Olives in the direction of Bethany on the other side. At the summit he stopped and sat down facing Jerusalem to the west, just across the Kidron Valley (the Valley of Jehoshaphat) through which he had just passed. The Mount of Olives was about 150 feet higher than the temple mount, and this afforded Jesus and his disciples a magnificent view of the temple and the city of Jerusalem in all of their splendor.

It was in this setting that four of the disciples came up to him and asked their question, obviously prompted by his astonishing statement about the destruction of the temple.

Matthew	Mark	Luke
24:3	13:3-4	21:7
As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. "Tell us," they said, "when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"	3As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John and Andrew asked him privately, 4"Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?"	"Teacher," they asked, "when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are about to take place?"

³ D. Edmund Hiebert, *Mark: A Portrait of the Servant* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), p. 315.

The importance of determining precisely and exactly what the disciples asked cannot be overstated. The structure of the Olivet discourse is based on the components of their question.

Mark and Luke both abbreviate the question asked by the disciples. Nevertheless, there are clearly two parts to the question:

- When will the temple be destroyed?
- What will be the sign that indicates its destruction is imminent?

In Matthew's account, the request for a sign is different in two ways:

- It seems to request a sign for events different from those in Mark and Luke.
- Its seems to request a sign for two events: the coming (παρουσία) of Jesus and the end of the age (συντελίας του αιώνας).

It is difficult to determine how the disciples phrased their complete question. Nevertheless, the way Matthew, Mark, and Luke condense the question implies two conclusions.

First, from the fact that Matthew refers to "the end of the age," it seems clear that the disciples associated the destruction of the temple with the end of the age.

There can be little doubt but that the disciples thought of the destruction of the temple as one of the events accompanying the end of the age and the coming of the eschatological Kingdom of God.⁴

Second, from the construction in the Greek (της σης παρουσια και συντελίας του αιώνας), namely a single article for two nouns connected by "and," the disciples probably considered "your coming" and "the end of the age" as essentially the same event.

In the minds of the disciples, then, the destruction of the temple, the coming of Jesus, and the end of the age are coincident and constitute a single complex of events. Therefore, the sign they requested would, in their minds, be a sign for all three events.

...we should most probably regard the disciples as thinking of the destruction of the temple and the coming (παρουσία) as coincident, and the sign, in their esteem, would be the sign of all three events specified in Matthew 24:3--destruction of the temple, the coming, and the consummation of the age.⁵

However, the central thesis of this paper is that Jesus intentionally and explicitly distinguished between the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70 and his coming at the end of the age. This conclusion is based on the two distinct signs given, the one mentioned by Luke in 21:20 and the other mentioned by Matthew in 24:15 and Mark in 13:14.

⁴ George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), p. 196. Similarly, Hiebert, *Mark: A Portrait of the Servant*, pp. 316: "...but the question [of the disciples] assumes that the destruction will be part of complex events culminating in the consummation of the age and the inauguration of the Messianic kingdom."

⁵ John Murray, "The Interadventual Period and the Advent: Matthew 24 and 25," *Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol. 2: *Selected Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), p. 387.

From Jesus' reply, as we compare Luke's account with the account given in Matthew and Mark, it is my opinion that He intended to cause the disciples to distinguish between the destruction of the temple...and the still future eschatological complex.⁶

If this is correct, then the Olivet discourse as structured by Jesus breaks into two parts:

- The destruction of the temple and its sign
- The coming of Christ at the end of the age and its sign

The evidence for this thesis and the resulting structure is presented in extenso as this paper analyzes the details of the discourse. It is also argued that there is only one coming of Christ in Matt. 24:27-31 and Mark 13:24-27, namely, the παρουσία referred to by the disciples--the second advent--the physical, bodily return of Christ to this earth, and not some event during the lifetime of the disciples. Therefore, I propose the following divisions of the full Olivet discourse delivered by Jesus.

Part I of Discourse: The Intervening Time

Jesus begins his discourse by warning the disciples of what does *not* constitute a sign of either event. On the contrary, the events he relates here form a general description of the intervening time between the destruction of Jerusalem and the coming of Christ.

Matthew	Mark	Luke
24:4-14	13:5-13	21:8-19
<u>False Christs: 4-5</u>	<u>False Christs: 5-6</u>	<u>False Christs: 8</u>
4Jesus answered: "Watch out that no one deceives you. 5For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many.	5Jesus said to them: "Watch out that no one deceives you. 6Many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am he,' and will deceive many.	8He replied: "Watch out that you are not deceived. For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am he,' and, 'The time is near.' Do not follow them.
<u>Wars: 6-7</u>	<u>Wars: 7-8</u>	<u>Wars: 9-10</u>
6You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. 7Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom.	7When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. 8Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom.	9When you hear of wars and revolutions, do not be frightened. These things must happen first, but the end will not come right away." 10Then he said to them: "Nation will rise against nation, and

⁶ James Oliver Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, II:365.

<p><u>Natural Disasters: 7-8</u></p> <p>There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. 8All these are the beginning of birth pains.</p> <p><u>Persecutions: 9-13</u></p> <p>9"Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. 10At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, 11and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. 12Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, 13but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.</p>	<p><u>Natural Disasters: 8</u></p> <p>8There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains.</p> <p><u>Persecutions: 9-13</u></p> <p>9"You must be on your guard. You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues. On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them. 10And the gospel must first be preached to all nations. 11Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit. 12"Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child. Children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. 13All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved."</p>	<p>kingdom against kingdom.</p> <p><u>Natural Disasters: 11</u></p> <p>11There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven.</p> <p><u>Persecutions: 12-19</u></p> <p>12"But before all this, they will lay hands on you and persecute you. They will deliver you to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. 13This will result in your being witnesses to them. 14But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. 15For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict. 16You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. 17All men will hate you because of me. 18But not a hair of your head will perish. 19By standing firm you will gain life.</p>
<p><u>Evangelization of the World: 14</u></p> <p>14And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come."</p>	<p><u>Evangelization of the World</u></p> <p>[Given earlier in verse 10]</p>	<p><u>Evangelization of the World</u></p> <p>[Missing]</p>

During his description of wars and rumors of wars, Jesus adds, "but the end is not yet" (Matt. 24:6; Mark 13:7) and its equivalent, "the end will not come right away" (Luke 21:9). In the context of the question by the disciples, this "end" must mean

the end of the age.⁷ False Christs, wars, natural disasters, and persecutions are not unique to the end of the age only. They are but common characteristics of this present age.⁸ With regard to the question to which Jesus is responding, therefore, these are *false* signs of the end of the age.

In verse 14, Matthew concludes this section of the discourse by stating what will occur just before the end comes: the gospel will be preached to all nations.⁹ "Then shall the end come." Again, in light of the question of the disciples, and the negative statement in verse 6, this "end" must refer to the end of the age.¹⁰ On this basis Murray concludes, "So we are compelled to construe verses 4-14 as, in brief outline, a forecast of interadventual history."¹¹

Mark, for some reason, places the statement about world evangelization within the description of dire persecutions. Perhaps, while painting such a dismal picture, Mark thought it important to remind his readers that what they were suffering was, in fact, part of God's plan for world evangelization. He also leaves out the phrase, "and then the end will come." However, his use of the word "first" implies the same thing.¹²

Part II of the Discourse: The Sign of the Destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple

The first part of the Olivet discourse carried the disciples all the way from their present time to the end of the age. However, Jesus had not yet mentioned any legitimate sign of any event, and therefore, the next part of his answer must go back in time. This technique in prophetic discourse is not unusual. Concerning the transition from Matt. 24:14 to 24:15, Murray writes as follows:

This section [verses 15 and following] cannot be a continuation, because verse 14 had brought us up to the end. It must be, to some extent, recapitulation. Our Lord forecasts to the disciples certain additional features of the period that had been delineated in verses 4-14, and gives the

7 Hiebert, *Mark: A Portrait of the Servant*, p. 318: "'But the end is not yet'...*The end* is the eschatological goal of history, the final establishment of God's kingdom on earth."

8 Hiebert, *Mark: A Portrait of the Servant*, p. 317, calls these "perils from the character of the age."

9 Note that this verse says nothing about the result of such world-wide preaching. Regarding Mark 13:10, Ladd writes, "But the gospel is not to conquer the world and subdue all nations to itself. Hatred, conflict, and war will continue to characterize the age until the coming of the Son of Man. Not only that, but the age is hostile to the gospel and will persecute its emissaries" (*A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 202). Again, "The history of this age will be one of conflict, war, hatred, and persecution; only an act of God in the parousia of Christ can establish his Kingdom" (p. 204).

10 Some postmillenarians argue that the entirety of the Olivet discourse was fulfilled in the Apostolic age. Therefore, they must maintain that "the end" in Matt. 24:14 refers to the end of Jerusalem and its temple and that the gospel was indeed preached to all nations prior to A.D. 70. See, e.g., J. Marcellus Kik, *An Eschatology of Victory*, (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1975), pp. 98-100. This claim, of course, is ludicrous. Who prior to A.D. 70 preached to the Americas? Outer Mongolia? Scandinavia? In support of this claim, Acts 2:5 and Col. 1:5-6, 23 are cited. Regarding Colossians, "Clearly these references by Paul do not mean that he regarded the Gospel as having been preached *for a witness* to all the nations in all the world. The thought, as revealed in the context, is that the Gospel has been announced *in the world horizon*, but that he is on his way to tell those who have not yet heard" (Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, II:367). Similarly, on the day of Pentecost, the Gospel was not "preached in [Greek, εἰς] all the world" nor was it "preached in such a way as to constitute 'a witness to all nations'" (Buswell).

11 Murray, "The Interadventual Period and the Advent: Matthew 24 and 25," p. 388. Note that the phrase "to the end" in Matt. 24:13 and Mark 13:13 refers to persevering through the persecutions "to the point of death"; see Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 202, and Hiebert, *Mark: A Portrait of the Servant*, p. 322. It is the same Greek word (τελος) in both 24:6 and 24:14. However, this use of "end" in verse 13 does not alter the conclusion that verses 3, 6, and 14 refer to "the end of the age."

12 Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, II:366.

warning and exhortations appropriate to the events involved. Here we have a principle that must be applied in the interpretation of prophecy. Delineation of the eschatological drama is not always continuously progressive; it is often recapitulatory. But recapitulation is not repetition.¹³

But where does the recapitulation begin? This question brings into focus the pivotal point on which the correct interpretation of the Olivet discourse hangs. After warning the disciples of events that will characterize the interadvent period, but which do not constitute legitimate signs, Jesus then proceeds to give them a sign. On this, all interpreters agree. However, Matthew and Mark differ from Luke in the wording of what they report next:

- Luke: "When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those in the city get out, and let those in the country not enter the city..."
- Matthew/Mark: "So when you see standing in the holy place 'the abomination that causes desolation,' spoken of through the prophet Daniel--let the reader understand--then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains..."

Is this one and the same sign signaling the imminence of one and the same event? No. It is the thesis of this paper that these are two separate statements of Jesus from two different sections of the Olivet discourse. Further, if these are two distinct signs, then the events they signal are two distinct events.¹⁴

All interpreters agree that "Jerusalem surrounded by armies" in Luke's summary of the Olivet discourse is the sign that points to the imminent destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in A.D. 70.

Matthew	Mark	Luke
[Missing]	[Missing]	<p style="text-align: center;">21:20-24</p> <p><u>The Sign--Jerusalem Surrounded by Armies: 20</u></p> <p>20"When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near.</p> <p><u>The Flight and Its Distress: 21-24</u></p> <p>21Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those in the city get out, and let those in the country not enter the city. 22For this is the time of punishment in fulfillment of all that has been written. 23How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! There will be great distress in the land and wrath against this people. 24They will fall by the sword and will be taken as prisoners to all the nations.</p> <p><u>Jerusalem During the Interadvent Period: 24</u></p> <p>Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the</p>

¹³ Murray, "The Interadventual Period and the Advent: Matthew 24 and 25," p. 388.

¹⁴ Murray displays a gift for understatement when he says, "In verse 15 [of Matt. 24] it is not as apparent as it is in Luke 21:20 that Jesus is dealing with the destruction of Jerusalem" ("The Interadventual Period and the Advent: Matthew 24 and 25," p. 388).

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Note that verse 24 defines a specific period of time during which Jerusalem will be "trampled on by the Gentiles." This period extends from the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 to when "the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled." More on this below.

The arguments that "the abomination of desolation standing in the holy place" is a distinct sign signaling a different event are given in the next section of this paper. Suffice it to say here that though there is a similarity between the advice given by Jesus after each sign,¹⁵ there are two distinct differences.

First, after seeing the "abomination of desolation," the *immediate* necessity of flight is emphasized in Matthew and Mark.¹⁶ That emphasis is lacking in Luke when he describes Jerusalem surrounded by armies.¹⁷

There is good reason the emphasis on immediacy is not in Luke. At the destruction of Jerusalem, the approach of the Roman armies was gradual. Apparently on the basis of Luke's summary of the Olivet discourse, Christians left the city and went to Pella at least two years before it fell.¹⁸ Even when the siege began in earnest, there was an extended period of months during which individuals could slip in and out of the city.

Second, in Luke the Jewish people are scattered, "taken as prisoners to all the nations,"¹⁹ as a result of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. When the city was finally destroyed by the Romans in A.D. 70, many Jews were killed but many others were sold into slavery throughout the empire. In the section of the discourse found in Matthew and Mark, scattering does not occur.

Therefore, in Matthew's account, one reads of the urgent necessity of immediate flight from Jerusalem but no scattering of the Jews, while in the part of the Olivet discourse given by Luke, no urgency to flee immediately is mentioned but wholesale scattering is described.

15 Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, II:369: "This consideration should be answered, however, by the fact that Jesus was in the habit of using very similar language on different occasions with reference to similar but different matters." Examples include Matt. 10:17-22 and Mark 13:9-13.

16 Matt. 24:17-18; Mark 13:15-16.

17 It might also be mentioned that during his Perea ministry, Jesus, in a passage that clearly refers to his second advent, emphasizes the need for instantaneous flight from Jerusalem (Luke 17:20-32, especially v. 31). Since the note of immediacy is given after the sign of "abomination of desolation" in Matthew and Mark's summary in almost the same words, this would argue that the sign in Matthew and Mark points to the second advent and the end of the age rather than the destruction of Jerusalem.

18 See the discussion in William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973), p. 858. The organized revolt against Rome began in May, A.D. 66, but the Roman siege of Jerusalem did not begin until April, A.D. 70; the Temple was burned on August 10, the same day of the year that Nebuchadnezzar, according to tradition, destroyed the first temple (Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, I:394, 396, 398). Although some scholars question the historicity of this flight of the Christians to Pella, Schaff accepts it: "The Christians of Jerusalem, remembering the Lord's admonition, forsook the doomed city in good time and fled to the town of Pella in the Decapolis, beyond the Jordan, in the north of Perea, where King Herod Agrippa II., before whom Paul once stood, opened to them a safe asylum" (I:402). The only extant reference to such a flight from Jerusalem is Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History*, III,v,3). Eusebius puts the flight to Pella before the outbreak of the revolt or about four years before the destruction of Jerusalem. It is also possible that the flight might have occurred when the Christians saw the approach of the ill-fated Roman general, Cestius Gallus, who attempted unsuccessfully to put down the revolt (Josephus, *Wars*, Book 2, Chapter 19). However, whether Eusebius was correct about a flight to Pella does not change the fact that Jesus gave Christians a sign of Jerusalem's soon destruction.

19 Luke 21:24.

Part III of Discourse: The Sign of the Second Advent and the End of the Age

If the end of Gentile domination of Jerusalem referred to in Luke 21:24 is part of the complex of events surrounding the second advent and the end of the age, then it is easy to see the transition from the part of the discourse recorded in Luke to the discussion of the end of the age and its sign recorded by Matthew and Mark.²⁰ Quite likely, therefore, Matt. 24:15-28 and Mark 13:14-23 follow Luke 21:24. Now that Jesus has brought the disciples to the end of the age, he gives them a sign that signals its nearness.

Matthew	Mark	Luke
<p style="text-align: center;">24:15-28</p> <p><u>The Sign--The Abomination of Desolation: 15-20</u></p> <p>15"So when you see standing in the holy place 'the abomination that causes desolation,' spoken of through the prophet Daniel--let the reader understand--16then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. 17Let no one on the roof of his house go down to take anything out of the house. 18Let no one in the field go back to get his cloak. 19How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! 20Pray that your flight will not take place in winter or on the Sabbath.</p> <p><u>The Great Tribulation: 21-22</u></p> <p>21For then there will be great distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until now--and never to be equaled again. 22If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">13:14-23</p> <p><u>The Sign--The Abomination of Desolation: 14-18</u></p> <p>14"when you see 'the abomination that causes desolation' standing where it does not belong--let the reader understand--then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. 15Let no one on the roof of his house go down or enter the house to take anything out. 16Let no one in the field go back to get his cloak. 17How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! 18Pray that this will not take place in winter,</p> <p><u>The Great Tribulation: 19-20</u></p> <p>19because those will be days of distress unequaled from the beginning, when God created the world, until now--and never to be equaled again. 20If the Lord had not cut short those days, no one would survive. But for the sake of the elect, whom he has chosen, he has shortened them.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">[Missing]</p>

²⁰ Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, II:371: "We may suppose that the section of the Olivet discourse in which Jesus gave reference to the abomination followed the section in which he referred to Jerusalem being surrounded with armies."

<p><u>False Christs of the Great Tribulation: 23-25</u></p> <p>23At that time if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or, 'There he is!' do not believe it. 24For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect—if that were possible. 25See, I have told you ahead of time.</p> <p><u>Identifying the True Christ: 26-28</u></p> <p>26"So if anyone tells you, 'There he is, out in the desert,' do not go out; or, 'Here he is, in the inner rooms,' do not believe it. 27For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. 28Wherever there is a carcass, there the vultures will gather.</p>	<p><u>False Christs of the Great Tribulation: 21-23</u></p> <p>21At that time if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or, 'Look, there he is!' do not believe it. 22For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform signs and miracles to deceive the elect—if that were possible. 23So be on your guard; I have told you everything ahead of time.</p> <p><u>[Missing]</u></p>	
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Two Distinct Signs

If the signs of Luke 21:20 and Matt. 24:15 are, in fact, distinct, as argued in this paper, why would Luke leave out the section of the discourse dealing with the abomination of desolation (signaling the end of the age) and Matthew and Mark leave out the section dealing with Jerusalem surrounded by armies (signaling its destruction)? We can only surmise.

Although we regard each account in itself as the inerrant word of God, yet all three accounts are obviously fragmentary. It has been suggested that Luke's reason for omitting this particular section which Matthew and Mark include may be accounted for by the fact that Luke had already given, in his Perea section (Luke 17:31 and context), some of the same substance of teaching. Why Matthew and Mark omit the section on Jerusalem surrounded with armies and the scattering of the people during the "times of the Gentiles" we may only conjecture.²¹

The crucial question in this paper will now be addressed: What did Jesus mean by "the abomination of desolation standing in the holy place"? Does this phrase describe the sign of the coming destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in A.D. 70, therefore having substantially the same meaning as, "Jerusalem surrounded by armies"? No. There are good and substantial reasons for concluding that the "abomination of desolation" is a distinct sign and is not connected to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. If this is correct, then nothing that took place at the fall of Jerusalem fulfills the prophecy "spoken of by Daniel the prophet." On the contrary, his prophecy must refer to one of the eschatological

²¹ Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, II:371.

complex of events and signal the parousia, or second advent of Christ, at the end of the age.

First, here is what is known from history about the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.²²

Organized rebellion against Rome broke out in May of A.D. 66 when Judea was under its last procurator, Gessius Florus.²³ The emperor Nero sent Vespasian to Judea to put down the revolution, and by 68 he had isolated Jerusalem and was ready to begin a siege. In that same year, however, there was also turmoil in other parts of the empire, and Nero committed suicide. In A.D. 69, Vespasian was proclaimed emperor and left for Rome to secure his throne. He gave his son, Titus, the responsibility of ending the Jewish war.

Titus had four legions. The Tenth Legion came from Jericho to the Mount of Olives, destroying the Qumran community on its way. The Twelfth Legion came from Caesarea and camped west of the city. It was joined by the Fifth and Fifteenth Legions that came down from the north. Titus launched his offensive in the Spring of A.D. 70. After the Romans gained entrance to the city, the Jews barricaded themselves in the temple. On August 5, the temple was burned to the ground. After the Jews made their last stand in Herod's palace, Titus ordered the entire city razed to the ground, except for the three large towers at the northwest corner.

The following arguments can now be developed.

The Abomination of Desolation

All interpreters take the phrase "abomination of desolation" to mean some form of idolatrous desecration of the temple.²⁴ Certainly the Roman ensigns have idolatrous connotation. They had the image of the emperor affixed to them and were worshiped as part of a soldier's military duty.²⁵ But do the events surrounding the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70 fit the description of this sign? Clearly, they do not. Matthew indicates that the "abomination" would "stand in the holy place." This most likely is a reference to the temple sanctuary itself; at the very least it would imply standing within the temple walls. Two points must be made.

First, Josephus records that Titus built his own wall around the city, making escape impossible before the city wall itself was breached.²⁶ Hence, the possibility of escape had been cut off before the sign even occurred.

Second, the account of the war in Josephus makes it clear that the Romans never desecrated the temple while it was still standing. Rather, they burned it to the ground. By the time the ensigns were brought into the temple area, the temple was already in ashes. This is the sequence of events as described by Josephus:

And now the Romans, upon the flight of the seditious into the city, and upon

22 This summary is taken from W. S. LaSor, "Jerusalem," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982), II:1029-1030.

23 Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 8 vols. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1950), I:394: "To defy Rome in that age, without a single ally, was to defy the world in arms; but religious fanaticism, inspired by the recollection of the heroic achievements of the Maccabees, blinded the Jews against the inevitable failure of this mad and desperate revolt."

24 See W. C. Kaiser, Jr., "Desolating Sacrilege," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982), I:930-931. The Hebrew phrase occurs in Dan. 9:27; 11:31; 12:11, and the Greek phrase in Matt. 24:15; Mark 13:14. It can be translated "abomination of desolation," "abomination making desolate," or "the abominable thing that causes desolation." More loosely, it is sometimes translated "desolating sacrilege," as in the title of this ISBE article.

25 W. C. Kaiser, Jr., "Desolating Sacrilege," I:931.

26 *Wars of the Jews*, Book V, xii, 1-4.

the burning of the holy house itself, and of all the building round about it, brought their ensigns to the temple, and set them over-against its eastern gate; and there did they offer sacrifices to them...²⁷

Therefore, the ensigns within the temple area could not possibly be a sign to flee the city. It would be far too late because at that point the war and the destruction of the city was essentially over.

To avoid this problem, some interpreters argue that the mere appearance of Roman armies bearing ensigns surrounding the city would have been recognized as "the abomination of desolation standing in the holy place," a curious sort of reasoning but nevertheless equating the sign in Matt. 24:15 with that given in Luke 21:20.

When the Roman armies would arrive and desecrate "the holy place," that is, the soil which, together with its "holy city" and "holy Temple," had been historically consecrated to the Lord, Jesus warns his followers that when this occurs those in Judea should "flee to the hills." Cf. Luke 21:20.²⁸

It is certainly not the case that Roman ensigns outside Jerusalem would have been viewed by the Jews as an "abomination of desolation standing in the holy place." Roman ensigns, eagles, and idolatrous objects worshiped by the Romans were common in the time of Christ and Paul. Moreover, Josephus records an incident when Pilate brought military ensigns bearing Caesar's effigy into Jerusalem. This was offensive to the Jews, and after persistent entreaty, he removed them. Josephus does not describe this event as an "abomination." Moreover, if the presence of Roman ensigns *outside* Jerusalem were the abomination of desolation described by Jesus in the Olivet discourse, then its fulfillment would have been in the past!²⁹

I believe the above points are conclusive: the signs in Luke 21:20 and Matt. 24:15 are not the same sign and therefore signal the nearness of two distinct events. However, there is additional evidence.

Titus Does Not Fit Daniel 9:27

Jesus specifically identifies the "abomination of desolation standing in the holy place" with the prediction in "Daniel the prophet." There are two significant facts mentioned about the "he" of Dan. 9:27, the man who is responsible for this abomination of desolation.

First, he is said to have made a covenant with the people of Israel. Neither Vespasian nor Titus ever made a covenant with Israel or its leaders.

Second, he is said to put an end to sacrifice and offering. Again, Titus did no such thing. It was the Jews themselves who stopped the sacrifices. Schaff writes that "the daily sacrifices ceased July 17th [A.D. 70] because the hands were all needed for defense."³⁰

Third, Dan. 9:27 states that the perpetrator of this desolation will be completely destroyed. This certainly did not happen to Titus, for he went on to become emperor.

Therefore, Daniel's description of the "he" who causes the "abomination of

²⁷ *Wars of the Jews*, Book VI, vi, 1. Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, I:398, states that the temple was burned on August 10, A.D. 70.

²⁸ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 858.

²⁹ Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, II:404.

³⁰ Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, I:397.

desolation" does not fit Titus.³¹

The Parousia of Christ

There is yet another problem with taking Matt. 24:14 and Mark 13:14 to describe the same sign as Luke 21:20. Kik attempts to establish their identity based on the principle of Scripture interpreting Scripture.

Fortunately, we are not left to our own imagination as to what the "abomination of desolation" would be. Luke tells us in the parallel passage that it refers to the Roman army...To those who, believing in the authority of the Bible, interpret Scripture with Scripture, the phrase "abomination of desolation" affords no great difficulty. Luke, speaking of the same matter as Matthew in similar context, declares that it is the Roman army.³²

This simplistic approach, however, has a serious problem. There is, of course, nothing wrong with the principle of Scripture interpreting Scripture, but it must first be demonstrated that the two Scripture passages are talking about the same thing. Numerous dissimilarities have already been listed between the descriptions of these two signs. Here is yet another one:

Many conservative interpreters would follow Luke's account and interpret Matthew and Mark in the light of Luke. The great tribulation and the desecrating sacrilege are to be understood historically to refer to the siege of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple by Titus in A.D. 66-70. The difficulty with this view is that the parousia will take place "*immediately* after the tribulation of those days" (Matt. 24:29). It places the tribulation and the abomination of desolation eschatologically in the events of the last days.³³

There is no legitimate answer to this argument. Kik, with much sanctimonious aplomb, criticizes those who "cling to a preconceived theory on this subject and dismiss this parallel passage in Luke as not dealing with the same thing as Matthew."³⁴ Yet Kik agrees that the parousia of 24:27 is indeed the second advent at the end of the age. However, in order to maintain his view of the Olivet discourse, he must make the extraordinary claim that while 24:27 refers to the second advent, 24:30-31 does not!³⁵ Who is it, then, who "clings" to a "preconceived theory" at the most absurd cost?

False Christs

Matt. 24:23-26 and Mark 13:21-23 refer to the appearance of false christs. Why is this warning repeated when it was given earlier in 24:4-5 and 13:5-6, respectively? The reason seems to be that this second warning, coming as it does after the sign of the abomination of desolation, has a feature not mentioned in the earlier warning: the signs and miracles performed by the false christs.

Paul mentions "counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders" as eschatological events in

31 Note that this interpretation of the Olivet discourse implies the end-time reestablishment of the Jewish temple and levitical worship. 2 Thess. 2:4 implies the same conclusion. It would seem from Dan. 9:27 that the "covenant" made between the Antichrist and Israel involves the reestablishment of their national worship (Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, II:379).

32 Kik, *An Eschatology of Victory*, p. 102.

33 Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 197-198.

34 Kik, *An Eschatology of Victory*, p. 102.

35 Kik, *An Eschatology of Victory*, pp. 124-125 and pp. 127-128.

2 Thess. 2:9-10. This gives another indication that from the mention of the "abomination of desolation" forward, the passages in Matthew and Mark describe end-time events.

Another point should be noted. The earlier warnings about false christs that did not include signs and wonders simply point to the character of the age in general.³⁶ Yet the language in these two parts of the Olivet discourse is similar because in a general way the events described are similar. In like manner, the language describing the distress accompanying the destruction of Jerusalem is similar to the language describing the distress of the "great tribulation" following the abomination of desolation. Both are examples of similar language used to describe similar events in time and in different parts of the Olivet discourse.

Conclusion

Is the "abomination of desolation" a sign that signals the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, or does it signal the second advent and the end of the age? This is the key interpretive question. Once it is established that this sign signals the second advent and the end of the age, the structure of the Olivet discourse follows simply and immediately. It is the structure of the discourse presented in this paper.

Identifying the True Christ

After verses 15-25, Matthew includes a section not found in Mark. If the false christs can work signs and wonders, how will believers be able to identify these "christs" as false? Jesus gives the answer: he (Jesus) will not be "out in the desert" or "in the inner rooms." His coming (παρουσια) will be visible to all and as spectacular as the lightning that flashes through the sky from the east to the west. He will not be returning in secret: "every eye will see him."³⁷

Part IV of Discourse: The Second Advent of Jesus in Glory

The fourth section of the Olivet discourse divides naturally into two parts: a description of the cosmic events that will attend the second advent of Christ and then the second advent itself.

Matthew	Mark	Luke
24:29-33	13:24-29	21:25-31
<u>Attending Cosmic Events:</u> <u>29</u>	<u>Attending Cosmic Events:</u> <u>24-25</u>	<u>Attending Cosmic Events:</u> <u>25-26</u>
29"Immediately after the distress of those days " 'the sun will be	24"But in those days, following that distress, " 'the sun will be	25"There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and

36 According to Charles Fineberg, *Israel in the Last Days: The Olivet Discourse*, p. 8, quoted by Hiebert, *Mark: A Portrait of the Servant*, p. 318, "Up to our day there is a record of some 64 false Messiahs who have tried to lead Israel astray."

37 Rev. 1:7.

<p>darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.'</p>	<p>darkened, and the moon will not give its light; 25the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.'</p>	<p>perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. 26Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken.</p>
<p><u>The Second Advent: 30-31</u></p>	<p><u>The Second Advent: 26-27</u></p>	<p><u>The Second Advent: 27-28</u></p>
<p>30"At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. 31And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.</p>	<p>26"At that time men will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. 27And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.</p>	<p>27At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. 28When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."</p>
<p><u>The Parable of the Fig Tree: 32-33</u></p>	<p><u>The Parable of the Fig Tree: 28-29</u></p>	<p><u>The Parable of the Fig Tree: 29-31</u></p>
<p>32"Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. 33Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door.</p>	<p>28"Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. 29Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door.</p>	<p>29He told them this parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees. 30When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. 31Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near.</p>

Do These Accounts Describe the Second Advent?

It may seem odd to marshal arguments for so obvious an affirmative answer. Indeed, both premillenarians and amillenarians agree that this passage is one of the most dramatic descriptions in the Bible of the return of Christ to this earth in power and great glory. Postmillenarians in general do not. They believe the entire Olivet discourse was fulfilled in the forty-some years between the crucifixion and the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70, completely emasculating one of the greatest statements of the literal, physical, bodily, visible return of our Lord Jesus Christ. Note this emasculation in Terry's comment on Matt. 24:29-31:

It denotes...a sublime and glorious reality, the grandest event in human history, but not a visible display in the heavens of such a nature as to be a matter of scenic observation. The Son of Man came in heavenly power to

supplant Judaism by a better covenant, and to make the kingdoms of the world his own, and that parousia dates from the fall of Judaism and its temple (*Biblical Hermeneutics*, p. 447).³⁸

Concerning the same passage, Kik writes:

The above portion of Scripture employs such strong and vivid language that many think it can be descriptive of nothing else than the end of the world and the second coming of Christ. These descriptive terms would seem to indicate a catastrophic end of the earth. And yet when this passage is studied in the light of prophetic language and pronouncements, it can readily be that it is descriptive of the passing away of Judaism.³⁹

Concerning the statement, "And they shall see the Son of Man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory," Kik explains:

This clause has been thought to relate definitely to the second, visible, and personal coming of the Lord. But in the light of well-defined biblical language, the reference is rather to a coming in terms of the events of his providence in judgment against his enemies and in deliverance of his people.⁴⁰

Such an interpretation is almost laughable. The cavalier manner in which this text is handled by postmillenarians represents the same device used by liberal theologians. Compare Kik's analysis with that of L. Harold DeWolf:

The consummation of God's reign is often predicted in the New Testament as a coming again of Christ. This need not be taken to mean a spectacular bodily descent of Jesus the Nazarene. The imagery used in the gospels to describe the Parousia symbolizes mystery, and the divine majesty. At the same time, the description of God's coming in power as a return of Christ implies confidence that his coming will be in character, as he is known in Jesus of Nazareth. He will not change, so as to show himself suddenly as a God of terrible vengeance as he is sometimes pictured in later Christian writings, especially during persecutions.⁴¹

Not all postmillenarians interpret these verses in this way. Both Charles Hodge and A. H. Strong cite Matt. 24:30 as a description of the second advent of Christ.⁴² However, since the view of Kik and others has a direct bearing on the interpretation of Matt. 24:34, Mark 13:30, and Luke 21:32, it must be addressed here.

Among the vast majority of those who hold that this part of the Olivet discourse does indeed refer to the second advent, few of them construct arguments to support so obvious an interpretation. However, John Murray adduces four arguments for it.⁴³

1. In the context of the question by the disciples, the phrase, "the sign of the son of man in heaven" in Matt. 24:30, must link to their question. That the "parousia" and "the end of the age" in Matt. 24:3 together refer to the advent of Christ at the consummation of the present age is beyond question by the usage

38 Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1974), p. 447.

39 Kik, *An Eschatology of Victory*, pp. 127-128.

40 Kik, *An Eschatology of Victory*, pp. 140-141.

41 L. Harold DeWolf, *The Case for Theology in Liberal Perspective* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1959), p. 179.

42 Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.), III:794; Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1907), p. 1003.

43 Murray, "The Interadventual Period and the Advent: Matthew 24 and 25," pp. 390-391.

of the New Testament. Therefore, it is to that which Matt. 24:30 must refer.

2. The terms used in verse 30, that "all the nations of the earth...will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory," are terms that match second-advent terminology in the New Testament (Matt. 16:27; Mark 8:38; Matt. 25:31; Acts 1:9-11; 1 Thess. 4:17; 2 Thess. 1:7; Rev. 1:7). This "whole expression can reasonably be taken to specify no other event than the one which the language of the New Testament would indicate, namely, the advent in glory."
3. The parallel passage in Luke uses the word "redemption"(απολυτρωσις): "When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." The Greek word for redemption here "has a distinctly eschatological connotation, the final redemption, the consummation of the redemptive process (cf. Rom. 8:23; 1 Cor. 1:30; Eph. 1:14; 4:30)." Therefore, the use of the term here would point to an eschatological complex of events.
4. Several passages in the New Testament refer to the trumpet and the use of angels in connection with Christ's second advent (1 Cor. 15:52; 1 Thess. 4:16).

In addition to these four arguments, it might again be noted that Kik admits verse 27 refers to the advent at the end of the age. There is not the slightest exegetical hint that the coming of the Son of Man in verse 30 is different from the coming of the Son of Man in verse 27. Only a "preconceived theory on this subject" would force someone to impose such a construct on this passage.

The Cosmic Events

What is the relationship between the cosmic events⁴⁴ of Matt. 24:29, Mark 13:24-25, and Luke 21:25 and the second advent? Are the cosmic events "signs" of his immediate return or are they simultaneous with the advent?

It would seem best to regard these cosmic events as part of the second advent itself and not a sign of it or a prelude to it.

"These commotions are an integral part of the complex of events focused in Christ's advent. They can be said to constitute the *entourage* of the advent."⁴⁵

"The Sign of the Son of Man"

44 Since this paper is not strictly an exegesis of the Olivet discourse, it cannot include an analysis of every phrase and topic. However, a comment is in order regarding whether the description of these cosmic events is to be taken literally. Hiebert, *Mark: A Portrait of the Servant*, p. 327: "The portents in this paragraph may be portrayed in phenomenal language, but behind the figurative terminology, objective crisis events in the physical universe should be recognized." Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 203: "The present author has made a thorough study of this language and has concluded that it is poetical and not meant to be taken with strict literalness, yet at the same time it is meant to describe actual cosmic events."

45 Murray, "The Interadventual Period and the Advent: Matthew 24 and 25," p. 391. With this quoted statement of Murray, I fully agree. However, he sees these cosmic events depicting the change that will take place in the cosmos producing "the new heavens and new earth" (Isa. 66:22; 2 Pet. 3:10-13; Rev. 21:1-2) at the time of the second advent. Murray is not premillennial in his eschatology. While a few premillenarians would agree with him that the heavens and earth are transformed at the second advent (see, e.g., Robert D. Culver, *Daniel and the Latter Days* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1954], pp. 177-190), I follow most premillenarians and place this transformation at the end of Christ's millennial reign.

All interpreters agree that both Luke 21:20 ("Jerusalem surrounded by armies") and Matt. 24:15 ("the abomination of desolation") constitute "signs" given to the disciples by Jesus in answer to their question. Curiously, neither of these events are called "signs." However, the word "sign" is used in Matt. 24:30:

At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn.

The Greek word (σημεῖον) is the same in both verses 3 and 30. To what, then, does the word "sign" in Matt. 24:30 refer? Several suggestions have been made. The "sign" might be--

- A special emblem, such as a cross, appearing in the sky at the time of the second advent
- The cloud that surrounds Jesus as he descends, taken to be the Shekinah cloud⁴⁶
- Jesus' appearance in the sky itself⁴⁷

The fact that both Mark and Luke omit the word "sign" makes the last view most likely. Of what, then, is the appearance of Jesus a sign? It could be a sign of the fact that he is about to descend and set up his kingdom on earth. The glorious manner of his appearance will be a sign, or proof of, God's climactic vindication of his Son as the great Messiah predicted in the Old Testament.

The Parable of the Fig Tree

The parable of the fig tree is given to emphasize the expectancy and rejoicing that the second advent brings to believers.⁴⁸

As the sprouting of the leaves on the fig tree indicates that summer is nigh, so when the disciples see "these things," they can know that the kingdom of God is "near" or "right at the door."⁴⁹ Note that the second advent ("these things") brings the kingdom of God to earth in the sense in which it is now still future.⁵⁰

"These things" cannot include the second advent since it constitutes the end itself.⁵¹ The reference instead is to the events in Matt. 24:15-28 and Mark 13:14-23 that signal the beginning of the end.

Part V of Discourse: Jesus Makes Two Summary Observations

Part I of the Olivet discourse consisted of an overview of the intervening time from the Apostolic era to the second advent. Part II, then, involved movement from the end of the age back in time to address the first part of the question by the disciples: the sign for the destruction of the temple and a description of that

46 Arno C. Gaebelien, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1961), p. 508.

47 Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 864.

48 Murray, "The Interadventual Period and the Advent: Matthew 24 and 25," p. 391.

49 Note that Luke alone in 21:31 identifies the "it" of Matt. 24:33 and Mark 13:29. In Matthew and Mark, εἶμι ("is") has no explicit subject and could be "he" or "it." In light of Luke, "it" represents the better translation.

50 Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, II:399.

51 Hiebert, *Mark: A Portrait of the Servant*, p. 330.

event. Part II concluded with the comment that Jerusalem, from the time of its destruction, would be "trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled" at the end of the age. Then, having moved forward again to the end of the age, Jesus in Part III addresses the second part of the question by the disciples: the sign for the second advent at the end of the age and a description of the awful tribulation to immediately precede his second advent. Part IV, in turn, follows the natural flow of thought into a description of the second advent itself.

This paper argues that another major break occurs between verses 33 and 34 in Matthew's account of the discourse.⁵² According to this interpretation, Jesus wants to make two summary observations, one about the events surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem and the other about the events surrounding the second advent. Therefore, in verses 34-35 he again, as he did in Luke 21:20, moves back in time to the destruction of Jerusalem and then forward to the second advent in verses 36-41. The evidence for this break, and the distinction between verses 34-35 and 36-41, is given in the brilliant interpretation of verse 34 by John Murray.

Matthew	Mark	Luke
<p style="text-align: center;">24:34-41</p> <p><u>Regarding the Temple--"This Generation Will Not Pass Away": 34-35</u></p> <p>34I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. 35Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.</p> <p><u>Regarding the Second Advent--The Day and Hour Unknown: 36-41</u></p> <p>36"No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 37As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. 38For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">13:30-37</p> <p><u>Regarding the Temple--"This Generation Will Not Pass Away": 30-31</u></p> <p>30I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. 31Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.</p> <p><u>Regarding the Second Advent--The Day and Hour Unknown: 32-37</u></p> <p>32"No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 33Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. 34It's like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with his assigned task, and tells the one at the door to</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">21:32-36</p> <p><u>Regarding the Temple--"This Generation Will Not Pass Away": 32-33</u></p> <p>32"I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. 33Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.</p> <p><u>Regarding the Second Advent--The Day and Hour Unknown: 34-36</u></p> <p>34"Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap. 35For it will come upon all those who live on the face of the whole earth. 36Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be</p>

⁵² The editors of the NIV are inconsistent. They do not indicate a break by starting a new paragraph at Matt. 24:34 or its parallel in Mark 13:30, but they do start a new paragraph at the parallel in Luke 21:32.

<p>the day Noah entered the ark; 39and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. 40Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. 41Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left.</p>	<p>keep watch. 35"Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back—whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. 36If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. 37What I say to you, I say to everyone: 'Watch!' "</p>	<p>able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man."</p>
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The Destruction of the Temple: "This Generation Will Not Pass Away Until All These Things Have Happened"

All three synoptics record this statement by Jesus:

I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.

It has generated more controversy than any other statement in the Olivet discourse. "Generation" here is a translation of the Greek word γενεα. The English word "generation" means *the entire body of individuals born and living at about the same time*. However, the generation of the disciples to whom Jesus spoke certainly did pass away before the second advent and the end of the age. If we assume this prediction of Jesus did not fail, then how are we to interpret his statement?

Some background on γενεα is necessary in order to understand the various answers to this question. The major Greek lexicons, Liddell and Scott, Thayer, and Arndt and Gingrich all list meanings such as "people," "race," "family," and "kind," as the first definition.⁵³ Arndt and Gingrich call this first definition the "literal" meaning of the word and then give the following definition: "those descended from a common ancestor, a *clan*...then *race, kind*, generally." We can call this the *primary meaning* of γενεα. Significantly, Arndt and Gingrich add the following: "The meaning *nation* is advocated by some in Mt 24:34; Mk 13:30; Lk 21:32." Their second definition of γενεα is *generation, contemporaries*--"the sum total of those born at the same time, extended to include all those living at a given time."⁵⁴ Since all apparently agree that this second meaning most often fits New Testament usage, we can call this the *common meaning* of γενεα.

- Primary meaning of γενεα: "clan, race"
- Common NT meaning of γενεα: "generation"

Historically, there have been three dominant explanations of this statement by Jesus, each one advocated by competent scholars.

⁵³ Liddell and Scott, *A Greek English Lexicon*, 9th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), p. 342, cite γενεα used in this sense as early as Homer (c. 850 B.C.) and Herodotus (born c. 484 B.C.) and as late as Plutarch (c. A.D. 46-120).

⁵⁴ William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 153.

1. Some postmillenarians are anxious to have the entire Olivet discourse refer to the period between the crucifixion and the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. They then take γενεα to mean "generation" and use this statement by Jesus as an argument for their position: the Olivet discourse cannot possibly describe the second advent or the end of the age because Jesus states that "this generation" of his contemporaries will not pass away until everything predicted by him in his discourse has been fulfilled.

For example, Terry writes,

Let it be noted, then, that our Lord's apocalyptic sermon on the Mount of Olives was in answer to this question of his disciples, and with explicit reference to the overthrow of the temple and the fall of Jerusalem. But although the occasion and scope of this discourse are so clearly defined, and our Lord himself declared emphatically, in answer to the disciples question, "This generation shall not pass away until all these things shall be accomplished"...a large number of expositors insist that even now, after a lapse of nearly two thousand years, the prophecy remains in great part unfulfilled. It is quite generally admitted that Matt. xxiv, 1-28 refers to the fall of Jerusalem, but the language of verses 29-31 is supposed to be incompatible with that event, and to refer to a future literal coming of Christ in the clouds of heaven.⁵⁵

Similarly:

The entire discourse appears to have grown out of Jesus' declaration: "The days will come in which there shall not be left stone upon stone here which shall not be thrown down"...These words, especially, occasioned the disciples' question: "When shall these things be?" The whole prophecy purports to be an answer to that question, and no affirmation in it is more emphatic than these words: "Verily, I say unto you, This generation shall not pass away till all these things be accomplished"...On what valid hermeneutical principles, then, can it be fairly claimed that this discourse of Jesus comprehends all futurity? Why should we look for revelations of far distant ages and milleniums of human history in a prophecy expressly limited to the generation in which it was uttered?⁵⁶

This view has two advantages. First, it takes γενεα in its *common meaning*, "generation." Second, the statement gives a definite time limit for the fulfillment of the things predicted. However, all the arguments in this paper for taking the "abomination of desolation" as an eschatological event and for taking Matt. 24:30 as the second advent are arrayed against it.

2. Others argue that the reference is to the generation that sees the eschatological sign, namely, the abomination of desolation standing in the holy place.⁵⁷

This view has only one major advantage: it takes γενεα in its *common meaning*, "generation". It has two disadvantages. First, nowhere does Jesus explicitly mention a specific group of future contemporaries: he has consistently throughout the discourse addressed the disciples as representatives generally of the church at large throughout the interadvent period. Second, if the reference is to the future generation that sees the abomination of desolation, it would seem to "predict" only

⁵⁵ Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, pp. 438-439. Note that Terry overstated what is "generally admitted" about Matt. 24:1-28. As documented in this paper, many scholars do *not* think verses 15-28 refer to the destruction of Jerusalem.

⁵⁶ Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, p. 443

⁵⁷ For example, Hiebert, *Mark: A Portrait of the Servant*, p. 331.

what would obviously be expected to happen anyway.⁵⁸

3. Many argue that γενεα here means "race," "nation, or people".⁵⁹ Indeed, the lexicons do give this as the *primary meaning* of the word.

This view has the advantage of predicting something of substance: the miraculous survival of the Jewish people to the end of the age. The disadvantage is that γενεα is hardly ever used in this sense in the New Testament.

Each of these three views solves the problem of a prediction of Jesus failing to come true. However, each also has disadvantages. In the absence of a better interpretation, view three would be the best option, but an ideal solution would have the following characteristics:

- It would preserve the natural interpretation of γενεα to mean the generation of Jesus' contemporaries
- It would allow the discourse to describe the second advent at the end of the age and specify its sign
- It would preserve Jesus from making a prediction that did not come true--that "this generation" would "not pass away until all these things have happened."

John Murray has developed an interpretation that meets these three requirements.⁶⁰ Here are the steps in his argument. He apparently recognizes view three as the best option among the three common views because some of his points are directed against it.

First, Murray argues convincingly that γενεα means the then living generation of Jesus. The view that it could here mean "race" or "nation" is simply untenable.

1. In the LXX, γενεα most frequently occurs as the translation of the Hebrew דור, meaning *period* or *generation*.⁶¹ It is used often in the plural in such expressions as "unto your generations," "unto their generations," and "unto perpetual generations," phrases obviously referring to successive generations. This sense is also apparent in expressions such as third, fourth, and fifth generation (Gen. 9:12; Exod. 34:7). The expression εις γενεαν και γενεαν is very frequent in the LXX ("from generation to generation"). There are also many other instances of the singular meaning "generation" (e.g., Num. 32:13; Deut. 29:22; 32:5; Judg. 2:10; Job 8:8; Pslam 14:5; 22:30; 48:13; 71:18; Eccl. 1:4). The only instance in which γενεα is used to translate ον ("people") is Lev. 20:18. However, there is a textual problem with this example. Some texts of the LXX have γενοσ ("race" or "nation") instead of γενεα.
2. If "race" or "people" were intended in Matt. 24:34 and parallels, why was γενοσ not used instead of γενεα? It unambiguously means "family," "race," "nation," or "people" and is so used often in the New Testament (e.g., Mark 7:26; Acts 4:36; 7:19; 13:26; 18:2,24; 2 Cor. 11:26; Gal. 1:14; Phil. 3:5; 1 Pet. 2:9). In the LXX, γενοσ is frequently used to translate ον (e.g., Gen. 11:6; 17:14; 34:16;

⁵⁸ Hiebert, *Mark: A Portrait of the Servant*, p. 331, attempts to avoid this criticism with the following statement: "The assurance [in this statement by Jesus] is that the end-time crisis will not be of indefinite duration." However, this does not fully answer the objection. Jesus had already promised that those days of tribulation would be "cut short," and that "immediately" after them he would return.

⁵⁹ For example, Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, II:399-410.

⁶⁰ Murray, "The Interadventual Period and the Advent: Matthew 24 and 25," pp. 391-395.

⁶¹ Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 189.

Isa. 22:4; 42:6; 43:20).

3. The predominant use of γενεα in the New Testament is clearly in the sense of "generation" (e.g., Matt. 1:17; Luke 1:48,50; Acts 13:36; 14:16; 15:21; Eph. 3:5; Col. 1:26). Note especially Matt. 23:36, spoken by Jesus only a short time before the Olivet discourse: "I tell you the truth, all this will come upon this generation." In the context, Jesus was criticizing the Jews of his own time. Then he announces that judgment will fall on them and laments that Jerusalem will become desolate. There can be no doubt that in the very discourse, heard by the disciples and directly leading to their question, γενεα is used to mean the then living generation of Jesus. Can the word, then, possibly be used in a different sense in answering the question of the disciples?⁶²

Second, Murray points to three observations that lead to an interpretation that meets the three criteria specified above.

Point 1

Once "generation" is taken in its natural sense to mean the current generation of Jesus, the central problem raised in Matt. 24:34 and parallels is that the second advent of 29-31 did not occur before that generation passed off the scene. However, there are other events mentioned in the preceding parts of the discourse that were *obviously* not intended by Jesus to fall within scope of "all these things" that the current generation would see fulfilled.

- There is the phrase, "the end," of Matt. 24:14. Unless this term is given a meaning alien to its use elsewhere, it must mean the consummation of this age.
- There is the explicit reference to the second advent in Matt. 24:27.⁶³
- There is the dispersion of Israel into all nations and the treading down of Jerusalem "until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled" (Luke 21:24).
- There is the mention of the "kingdom of God" (Luke 21:31), which is the eschatological form of the kingdom because it will then, in some future time, be "near" in a sense in which it is not "near" at the time Jesus spoke these words.⁶⁴

From these observations, Murray draws the following conclusion:

We are thus advised that, in the intent of our Lord, and, therefore, in the understanding he intended for the disciples, not every event specified in the preceding part of the discourse came within the scope of the "all things" predicted as occurring in that generation. And so we are required to give to the "all things" a more restricted denotation, and there should be no more

⁶² Jesus, of course, did not deliver the Olivet discourse in Greek, which at the time the NT was written had a relatively fixed distinction between γενεα, meaning "generation," and γένος, meaning "race." Jesus spoke in Aramaic. According to Gleason Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982), p. 339, "The Aramaic term that Jesus Himself probably used is susceptible to either interpretation ["generation" or "race"]. So Archer argues that the meaning of the this prediction in Matt. 24:34 may not hang on which of these two Greek words were used to translate the Aramaic word. However, Matthew, Mark, and Luke were the inspired translators/recorders of the Olivet discourse in Greek. We must therefore assume that they chose the correct Greek word to capture the meaning intended by Jesus when he used the Aramaic word.

⁶³ Both this example and the example of the previous bullet assume that the case against the almost farcical interpretation by some postmillenarians that vv. 27 and 30 do not refer to the second advent has been made beyond reasonable doubt.

⁶⁴ Jesus often spoke of the "kingdom of God" in its non-eschatological manifestation being "near" during his own lifetime (Matt. 3:2; 4:17; 10:7; Luke 10:9,11).

difficulty in excluding the advent complex of events of verses 29-31 than there is in excluding the other events of verses 14, 27, and Luke 21:24,31.⁶⁵

Point 2

It is reasonable to suppose that in Matt. 24:34 and parallels Jesus is answering the first part of the question by the disciples about when the temple will be destroyed.

Our Lord is making a sharp distinction, in regard to eventuation, between the destruction of the temple and his advent, that is to say, between the two elements of the question asked by the disciples.⁶⁶

This claim is the central thesis of this paper, and it has already been argued at length above. Murray's point is that once this thesis is established, it affords an important key to interpreting Matt. 24:34.

Murray's argument to establish this distinction is brilliant and virtually irrefutable. It is based on the force of the contrast between verses 34 and 36:

Verse 34: I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.

Verse 36: No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, *nor the Son*, but only the Father.

If Jesus can say in verse 34 that his current generation will not pass away until certain events occur, then he must know when those events will take place! However, he did not, at the time he delivered this discourse, know when his second advent would be.⁶⁷ How, then, could Jesus say that it too would take place within the scope of his generation? This was a singularly insightful observation on Murray's part. He goes on to show the significance of this point for interpreting verse 34:

Of particular significance is the contrast between what he knew and foretold (vss. 34,35) and what he did not know (vs. 36). In interpreting verse 34 it is a capital error to overlook the significance of verse 36 and to fail to construe verse 34 accordingly. This would have made clear to the disciples the distinction between the destruction of Jerusalem and correlative events on the more proximate horizon, on the one hand, and the day of his advent, on the other.⁶⁸

Therefore, if Jesus did not know the time of his second advent and the end of the age, then in verse 34 he *must* be referring to the events surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem, of which he did know the time. In turn, we must see a logical break between verses 33 and 34. In order to make two summary observations at this point in his discourse, Jesus again moves back in time to the destruction of Jerusalem in verses 34-35 and then forward to the second advent in verses 36-41.

F. F. Bruce reaches the same conclusion on Matt. 24:34 but bases his argument on

⁶⁵ Murray, "The Interadventual Period and the Advent: Matthew 24 and 25," pp. 393-394.

⁶⁶ Murray, "The Interadventual Period and the Advent: Matthew 24 and 25," p. 394.

⁶⁷ During the Arian controversy, this statement was used against the full deity of Christ. The orthodox position has been that in the incarnation, Jesus voluntarily limited himself in some uses of his divine nature. "Though omniscient, He chose not to have in His active consciousness at this time, the knowledge of the day and hour of his return" (Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, II:406; see also the interesting discussion on page II:31). Note also that in his glorified state after the resurrection, Jesus claimed no such limitation in his answer to the question of the disciples in Acts 1:6.

⁶⁸ Murray, "The Interadventual Period and the Advent: Matthew 24 and 25," p. 394.

the word "these things" (ταυτα) in both verses 3 and 34.

In the disciples' question, 'all these things' are the destruction of the temple and attendant events. It seems reasonable to regard the hard saying [verse 34] as summing up the answer to their question. If so, then 'all these things' will have the same meaning in question and answer. The hard saying will then mean, 'this generation will not pass away before' the temple is totally destroyed.⁶⁹

Bruce also points out that "these things" in the disciples' question in verse 3 is not repeated in the second part of the question about the second advent and the end of the age.

Jesus...foretells how not one stone of the temple will be left standing on another, and the disciples say, 'Tell us, (a) when will these things be, and (b) what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?' (Matt. 24:3). Then, at the end of the following discourse, Jesus answers their twofold question by saying that (a) 'this generation shall not pass away till all *these things* take place' (Matt. 24:34) while, (b) with regard to his coming and 'the close of the age', he tells them that 'of *that* day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only (Matt. 24:36).⁷⁰

The Second Advent: The Day and the Hour Unknown

Jesus *did know* when Jerusalem and the temple would be destroyed and assured the disciple who raised that question that the current generation would not pass away until all the events surrounding this destruction had occurred. However, Jesus *did not know* the time of the second advent, so in verses 36-41 he stresses the need to be alert and watch for its preceding events.

All three synoptics emphasize the need to watch. Matthew alone includes the example of Noah to underscore this point, while Mark alone includes the parable of the absent householder.

Part VI of Discourse: Four Parables

This section of the Olivet discourse consists of four parables recorded only by Matthew.

Matthew	Mark	Luke
24:42-25:30	[Missing]	[Missing]
<p><u>The Parable of the Thief: 42-44</u></p> <p>42"Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. 43But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. 44So you also must be ready, because</p>		

69 F. F. Bruce, *The Hard Sayings of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), p. 228.

70 Bruce, *The Hard Sayings of Jesus*, pp. 229-230; emphasis original.

the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.

The Parable of the Faithful and Wise Servant: 45-51

45"Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? 46It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns. 47I tell you the truth, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. 48But suppose that servant is wicked and says to himself, 'My master is staying away a long time,' 49and he then begins to beat his fellow servants and to eat and drink with drunkards. 50The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. 51He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The Parable of the Ten Virgins: 25:1-13

1"At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. 2Five of them were foolish and five were wise. 3The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. 4The wise, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. 5The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.

6"At midnight the cry rang out: 'Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!'

7"Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. 8The foolish ones said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.'

9" 'No,' they replied, 'there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.'

10"But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut.

11"Later the others also came. 'Sir! Sir!' they said. 'Open the door for us!'

12"But he replied, 'I tell you the truth, I don't know you.'

13"Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.

The Parable of the Talents: 14-30

14"Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his property to them. 15To one he gave five talents of money, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. 16The man who had received the five talents went at once and put his money to work and gained five more. 17So also, the one with the two talents gained two more. 18But the man who had received the one

talent went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

19"After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. 20The man who had received the five talents brought the other five. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have gained five more.'

21"His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!'

22"The man with the two talents also came. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with two talents; see, I have gained two more.'

23"His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!'

24"Then the man who had received the one talent came. 'Master,' he said, 'I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. 25So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.'

26"His master replied, 'You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? 27Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest.'

28" 'Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents. 29For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. 30And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

The basic lesson in each of these parables is the need of watchfulness because the day and hour of the second advent are unknown. They can be summarized as follows.⁷¹

- The Parable of the Thief: A simple parable to emphasize the need for watchfulness and preparedness.
- The Parable of the Wise and Faithful Servant: This parable emphasizes the need for faithfulness and the consequences of unfaithfulness. "As in the prophets, eschatology has primarily an ethical orientation. It sheds the light of God's future upon His people in the present."⁷²
- The Parable of the Ten Virgins: This is another parable to drive home the need for preparedness.
- The Parable of the Talents: Here the lessons are diligence and faithfulness.

⁷¹ This summary is taken from John Murray, "The Interadventual Period and the Advent: Matthew 24 and 25," pp. 395-396.

⁷² George Eldon Ladd, "Eschatology," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, II:136.

There seems to be a parallelism between the first and the third parables and between the second and fourth.

The central admonition to "watch" in this part of the discourse deserves further comment.⁷³ The Greek verb *γρηγορεω* has the literal meaning of *to be awake* or *to keep awake*. Used figuratively, it means *to be on the alert* or *to be watchful*.⁷⁴ Ladd writes,

The word translated "watch" in these several verses does not mean "to look for" but "to be awake." It does not denote an intellectual attitude but a moral quality of spiritual readiness for the Lord's return. "You must also be ready" (Lk. 12:40). The uncertainty as to the time of the parousia means that men must be spiritually awake and ready to meet the Lord whenever he comes.⁷⁵

Part VII of Discourse: Separation of the Sheep and Goats

The last section of the Olivet discourse deals with judgment. During his earthly ministry, Jesus actually had very little to say about the eschatological judgment, and his discussion here is the most extended passage on the subject.

Matthew	Mark	Luke
25:31-46	[Missing]	[Missing]
<p>31"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. 32All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. 33He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.</p> <p>34"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. 35For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, 36I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'</p> <p>37"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? 38When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? 39When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'</p> <p>40"The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'</p> <p>41"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. 42For I was hungry and you gave me</p>		

⁷³ Matt. 24:42; 25:13; Mark 13:35,37.

⁷⁴ Arndt and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, p. 166.

⁷⁵ Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 208.

<p>nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'</p> <p>44"They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'</p> <p>45"He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'</p> <p>46"Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."</p>		
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Although this paper is not an exegesis of the Olivet discourse, a few comments on its concluding section are in order.

The Classification of the Passage

Let it be stated at the outside, however, that there is currently no view on this passage free of difficulties. In a situation like this, the theologian attempts to construct an interpretation with the least number of problems associated with it.

Having said that, there are two main approaches to the interpretation of this passage.

- It is a dramatic parable and not didactic eschatology. Therefore, it does not admit the possibility of determining when judgment occurs in the eschatological scheme.⁷⁶
- It is didactic eschatology and describes a specific judgment in the eschatological scheme.

Among those who take the latter approach, there is still much disagreement. Some argue that this judgment occurs at the second advent. Amillenarians (e.g., Hoekema⁷⁷) and some postmillenarians (e.g., Strong⁷⁸) would agree on this point and view the passage as a description of the "general judgment." Among premillenarians, dispensationalists would also agree that this passage points to a judgment occurring at the second advent, but they also argue that it is a limited judgment and one of several (e.g., Walvoord⁷⁹). On the other hand, some historical premillenarians argue that this is the great white throne judgment at the end of the millennial reign of Christ, 1000 years after the second advent (e.g., Gundry⁸⁰).

⁷⁶ Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, pp. 205-206. Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, II:422-423, also calls this passage a parable but takes a rather unusual view of what the parable depicts. While Ladd takes it to represent the final judgment, Buswell suggests that it depicts a continuous process that extends from the second advent to the great white throne judgment. However, it is doubtful that a parable would paint such a long time span and so many distinct events with so wide a brush. That would seem to be especially true of this parable, whose narrative is a simple, nightly activity performed by a shepherd.

⁷⁷ Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), p. 255.

⁷⁸ Strong, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 1010-1015.

⁷⁹ John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Co., 1959), pp. 284-288.

⁸⁰ Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Co., 1973), pp. 163-168.

The approach taken in this paper is based on the following logic.

Step 1

If the judgment in this passage is taken as part of an eschatological schema or sequence of events outlined in the Olivet discourse, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that it must be placed at the second advent. Note the verses in Matthew:

24:30-31: At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.

25:31-32: When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.

Both passages begin by describing the second advent. Then, since the wording in 24:30-31 implies that the gathering of the elect follows immediately upon Christ's return, there is a similar implication in 25:31-32 that the gathering of all nations before him likewise follows immediately upon his return. Those premillenarians like Gundry who take Matt. 25:31-46 as a reference to the great white throne judgment apply the principle of prophetic foreshortening⁸¹ to verses 31 and 32, but in the context of 24:30-31, this interpretation seems forced.

Step 2

From the standpoint of premillennialism, step 1 leaves only two choices: take Matt. 25:31-46 to be a separate, limited judgment, as in dispensationalism, or take it to be simply a parable depicting the great white throne judgment. The latter approach is attended by far fewer problems.⁸²

The Parable and Its Interpretation

What, then, are the details of the parabolic interpretation? The details are presented here under four headings.

A Qualification

It is important to note a qualification: Matt. 25:31-46 is not a parable in the strict sense of the term. A parable is an extended simile, a formal comparison between a real-life narrative taken from experience and the actual point the author of the parable wants to convey; a parable requires the interpreter to go beyond the

81 Foreshortening is that phenomenon found in certain places in prophetic writing whereby two or more events that will be separated in time at their fulfillment are described with no specific indication of the time lapse between them. Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, II:518 defines it this way: "Presenting different incidents, widely separated in time, in a broad cosmic perspective for the purpose of spiritual admonition." Buswell prefers the term "cosmic perspective" to "prophetic foreshortening" (II:417).

82 For a detailed critique of the dispensational interpretation, see Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, pp. 165-168. Note in brief, however, that it is difficult to take this as a limited judgment, especially since it supposedly determines which living "nations" enter the millennial kingdom in their natural bodies, when the end result of the separation is stated to be either "eternal life" or "eternal punishment" (Matt. 25:46). This verse, by contrast, accords well with Rev. 20:15.

narrative to bring out that intended meaning.⁸³ The characters in a parable, such as the Good Samaritan, are true-to-life but are not real people.

What follows [in Matt. 25:31-46] is not really a parable, though it does contain parabolic elements. It is a very dramatic, frequently symbolic, description of the last judgment.⁸⁴

The true-to-life narrative in this parable is a shepherd's nightly separation of the sheep and goats, the narrative giving a parabolic picture of the final judgment at the great white throne. The sheep and goats are in the narrative, but instead of a shepherd, we have Jesus himself playing the role. Since he is a real person, it is in this point only that the parable of the sheep and goats differs from other parables.

The Meaning of the Parable

The meaning of the parable is explained by Ladd as follows:

The clue to the meaning of the parable is Jesus' "brethren," and we have clear evidence as to its meaning. Jesus himself said that his brothers are those who do the will of the Father--Jesus' disciples (Mt. 12:50). Jesus used a parabolic incident of the nightly separation of the sheep and goats to tell his disciples that they have a mission to the nations of the world. The destiny of men will be determined by the way they treat Jesus' representatives--his brethren...The destiny of the nations will be determined by the way they respond to Jesus' representatives. This is not a program of eschatology but a practical parable of human destiny.⁸⁵

Now for the important question: does the interpretation of Matt. 25:31-46 as a parable solve the problem for premillennialism that verse 32 seems to create, that is, putting the final judgment at the second advent? Ladd has the following honest assessment of this question:

A final question remains to be asked. If this is the final judgment, what do we do about the millennium? There seems to be no room for it. The author is frank to admit that if we had to follow this passage as our program of prophecy, there would be no room for a millennium. I would have to be an amillennialist.

However, this is not intended to be a program of prophecy. It is a dramatic parable. Jesus knows that he is about to leave his disciples in the world with a commission to take the gospel to all nations. He is in effect saying to them, "I am entrusting the destiny of the Gentiles into your hands. Those who welcome and receive you welcome and receive me, and they will be blessed in the day of judgment. Those who reject and exclude and punish you do so to me, and it will go ill with them in the day of judgment."⁸⁶

As a parable, then, the point during the Olivet discourse at which Jesus delivers it does not determine the exact location of the judgment it depicts in the eschatological sequence of events. To close this lengthy discourse, Jesus simply reiterates his second advent in verse 31, describing the throne on which he will sit during his millennial reign, and then gives the disciples a parable to

83 Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, pp. 276-277.

84 Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 885.

85 Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 206.

86 George Eldon Ladd, *The Last Things* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978), p. 101.

underscore the gravity of their interadvent mission for the nations of the world--"the destiny of the nations" will rest on their response to the disciples, the Christians of this era.⁸⁷

Who Are the Sheep and Brothers?

The parable seems to depict three groups: the sheep, the goats, and the brothers. How, then, can it be a picture of the final judgment, which encompasses only two groups?

The dispensational view of this passage does, in fact, see the sheep, goats, and brothers as three distinct groups. However, on the view taken in this paper that the parable depicts the final judgment, if the brothers are the representatives of Christ (Christians during the interadvent period), who, then, are the sheep? Gundry offers the following answer:

It may be objected that the change from 'you' to 'these brothers of Mine' makes a distinction between the sheep and the brothers. But in this very discourse we can count no less than six shifts between the second and third persons. Cf. the Beatitudes: 'Blessed are they....Blessed are you' (Matt. 5:10,11)...Jesus does not say 'to yourselves,' for that might have implied individual self-love. And He does not say 'to one another,' because He wished to give a different emphasis. The clue that the shift in persons does not imply another group of people appears in the shift from the plural 'you' to the singular 'one.' The resultant emphasis is that a loving deed to *just a single one of Christ's most insignificant disciples* is done to Christ Himself and demonstrates true salvation [emphasis original]. With this understanding of the 'brothers,' the sheep represent the saved of all time and the goats the lost of all ages. Christ's commendation will surprise the sheep, not because they will be unaware of having ministered to one another as fellow believers, but because Christ's first statement will sound as though they have ministered to Him directly and personally.⁸⁸

The Righteous and the Great White Throne Judgment

Part of the *sine qua non*⁸⁹ of premillennialism is that there are two resurrections: the "first resurrection" of the righteous at the second advent at the beginning of the millennium and the resurrection of "the rest of the dead" just before the great white throne judgment at the end of the millennium.⁹⁰ The wicked are obviously

⁸⁷ This criterion does not imply salvation through the performance of good or charitable deeds. "All parties [in the debate over this passage] acknowledge that the treatment of the 'brothers' of Christ will constitute outward evidence of inward salvation" (Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, p. 165). Murray, "The Interadventual Period and the Advent: Matthew 24 and 25," pp. 397-398, gives a fuller explanation: "Any question that might arise from the criteria applied in this passage, namely, deeds of mercy and the absence of such, is a question that is not particular to this passage. Works good and evil are frequently set forth in judgment passages as the criteria in accord with which judgment will be dispensed (cf. Matt. 16:27; Rom. 2:6-16; 2 Cor. 5:10; Rev. 20:13,14). We must not forget that the judgment that will be executed by the Son of man (cf. John 5:27; Acts 17:31) is God's final adjudication of all history and everything, good and evil, must be adjudicated...As far as the wicked are concerned, their evil works and the absence of good works must, in the nature of the case receive their retributive award...Those righteous by the faith of Christ will be saved from the penalty due to sin. But in their case, it must not be thought that works, such as deeds of mercy, will have no bearing upon the judgment meted out. Good works are the fruit and evidence of faith, and as *such* will be adjudicated. Again, good works will be rewarded in the degrees of glory bestowed (cf. 1 Cor. 3:8,14,15)."

⁸⁸ Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, p. 166.

⁸⁹ Latin, meaning *without which not*; an essential aspect without which the definition is not satisfied.

⁹⁰ Rev. 20:4-6.

judged at the great white throne judgment, but when are the righteous judged? Is it when they are raised at the second advent? Or is the great white throne judgment indeed a "general judgment" of both the righteous and wicked?

First, several Scriptures indicate that believers will receive rewards or crowns at the second advent. However, does this constitute their formal judgment, the judicial review of all their works? Probably not. "The reception of crowns merely indicates victorious finishing of the earthly race (2 Tim. 4:8; 1 Pet. 5:4; Rev. 3:11)."⁹¹

Second, there are several indications that the judgment of believers also occurs after the millennium together with the judgment of unbelievers.

- No mention of a judgment occurs in connection with the first resurrection described in Rev. 20:4-6.
- In describing the great white throne judgment, Rev. 20:15 states, "If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire." This at least implies that the name of some there will be found in the book of life.
- Rev. 20:14 states that the lake of fire is the "second death." However, verse 6 states that the second death will have no power over those raised at the first resurrection. Again, issuing such an assurance seems at least to imply that those raised during the first resurrection will also face a judicial review of their works as believers at the great white throne. They are simply promised that, being under the blood of the Lamb, their eternal destiny is assured, and the second death, the lake of fire into which the wicked are swept for their eternal fate, will have no power over them.

Therefore, I conclude that the "judgment seat of Christ"⁹² for believers and the "great white throne" are synonymous.

The Question of Imminence

This paper closes with a discussion of the question of imminence. Is the second advent imminent?

"Imminent" is not a biblical term. The dictionary defines the English word "imminent" to mean "likely to occur at any moment." Applied to eschatology, an event can be described as imminent if there is no predicted event that must precede it.⁹³ Therefore, on this definition, all three major eschatological systems agree that the second advent of Christ at the end of the age is not imminent.

Dispensationalists hold to a pretribulational rapture of the church at which believers of this age meet the Lord in the air. On this scheme, the rapture, although not the second advent per se, is very definitely "imminent"--it could occur "any minute." However, for premillenarians who do not accept this nineteenth century novelty, as well as for many amillenarians and postmillenarians, there is still a legitimate question that must be answered with regard to the second advent: is there an inconsistency between the exhortation to "be awake and prepared, because no man knows the hour or the day" of the Lord's coming, and the fact that

⁹¹ Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, p. 169.

⁹² 2 Cor. 5:10.

⁹³ Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, p. 29; George Eldon Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1956), p. 105.

there are clearly revealed events, yet future, that must precede the second advent?

The issue is put quite succinctly by Murray:

The disciples are exhorted [in the Olivet discourse] in the strongest terms to watch and wait for the Lord's coming (24:42,44,48,50; 25:13). This teaches us the compatibility of two things that might seem incompatible, namely, the conviction that well-defined events requiring the lapse of time for their fulfilment must take place before the Lord comes, and at the same time the watching by disciples for his advent...The disciples were distinctly advised of events that would transpire prior to the advent, that the end was not immediately, and yet they were just as explicitly exhorted to watch because they knew not the day nor the hour of the advent. So conviction on the basis of the former was to go hand in hand with obedience to the latter. What was not incompatible for the early disciples cannot be incompatible for us.⁹⁴

Therefore, we must conclude that there can be no inconsistency between the admonition to "watch" and the fact that the second advent is not imminent. Why, then, is the exhortation given?

In the Olivet discourse, Jesus gives a sign of his coming advent and the end of the age: the "abomination of desolation standing in the holy place." On the usual premillennial view of Daniel's prophecy of the seventy weeks, this means that roughly three and a half years after believers see this sign, the second advent will occur. How, then, can Jesus admonish us to be ever watchful, awake, and prepared for his advent before this sign appears?

The answer lies in the meaning of the exhortation. In the context of the Olivet discourse, it cannot mean to be ever-ready for an imminent event, for the second advent, as depicted in this very discourse, is not an imminent event. Perhaps, then, the exhortation has a twofold meaning.

First, it is a warning to believers not to be caught unawares precisely because there will be preceding signs. Since no man knows the day and the hour of the second advent, Christians must be ever watchful for the signs that will indicate its nearness. As pointed out above, the Greek verb γρηγορεω when used literally means *to be awake* and when used figuratively means *to be on the alert* or *to be watchful*.

The exhortation to watch is a warning lest the coming of Christ be an event which will catch believers unprepared. The fact is that Christ's coming will not be unexpected to those who are watching. To them, it will not come as a thief, for those who belong to Christ will not be asleep but will be sober and watching...The context makes it clear that the "watch" means *to be spiritually awake* in contrast to the world which is slumbering in the sleep of sin.⁹⁵

Believers who "watch" will not be taken by surprise at the second advent. However, to unbelievers, he will come "as a thief in the night." Paul makes this very point in his first letter to the Thessalonians:

Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. But

⁹⁴ Murray, "The Interadventual Period and the Advent: Matthew 24 and 25," p. 399.

⁹⁵ Ladd, *The Blessed Hope*, p. 110.

you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief.⁹⁶

Second, the believer is to "watch" not only to avoid missing the signs and being taken by surprise at the second advent, but also because such an attitude of "watchfulness" will have a purifying effect on his whole life, making him ready to meet the Lord whenever he might come. Paul continues:

You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet.⁹⁷

One who is awake and watchful will look forward to the coming of the Lord. He will be faithful and purify himself as his regular pattern of living. "Self-purification in the light of the second coming rests...on the certainty of the event and on the knowledge that the conduct of our whole Christian life will be revealed in the light of divine presence."⁹⁸

96 1 Thess. 5:1-4.

97 1 Thess. 5:5-8.

98 Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, p. 43.