

Matthew 24:1-14¹

By Randall Price

Jesus' instruction to His disciples from the Mount of Olives (Mount Olivet), giving it the name the Olivet Discourse, appears in Matthew 24-25, Mark 13, and Luke 17:20-37. It is one of the most important texts in the Bible because it provides us with not only the final discourse of the Lord Jesus, but also His most extensive prophetic teaching. As such it reveals His interpretation of crucial Old Testament prophetic passages concerning Israel and the nations and serves as an inspired master outline of end-time events. It offers an explanation of God's judgment on Israel, but especially of God's promised restoration at the advent of King Messiah and the establishment of His messianic rule. Moreover, if properly interpreted, it enables the Church in this age to distinguish itself from national Israel in the Tribulation and from the events that will characterize that time immediately preceding the return of Christ to earth. Much prophetic confusion has resulted from a failure to understand the fulfillment of the Olivet Discourse with Israel (rather than with the Church) and in a future (eschatological) age (rather than in the past or present experience of this age). Matthew 24:1-14 explains the historical setting (verses 1-3) which precipitated the prophetic discourse and describes the signs or "birth-pains"- the divine judgments of the first half of the Tribulation (verse 4-13) - and the global evangelization that will be accomplished by the mid-point of this period (verse 14).

The Setting for the Discourse (verses 1-3)

The opening verses (verses 1-2) give us the historical background to the disciples' questions (verse 3), which elicited Jesus' answer in the form of a prophetic discourse. The setting was the latest occasion of Jesus and His disciples to journey to Jerusalem to worship in the Temple. Aware of Jesus' of pronouncement against the nation and particularly the Temple establishment in His statement of the "their house (Temple) being left desolate" (Matthew 23:37-38), the disciples perhaps thought a reminder of the national unity symbolized by the Temple might temper Jesus' disposition toward national judgment. Indeed, some Jewish sects, such as that at Qumran, expected the Temple to be destroyed because it had an illegitimate priesthood or had been ritually defiled, but the disciples knew Jesus continued to reverence the Temple as His "Father's house" (Luke 2:49; John 2:16).¹ Too, as the parallel accounts reveal (Mark 13:1-2; Luke 21:5-6), the disciples were impressed, as were most in that day, with the Temple's unrivaled magnificence that had become a source of national pride. Our verse explains the method of the disciples to make their national statement to Jesus occurred as He left the Temple precincts. There, waiting for Him, the disciples began pointing out the latest structural additions to the Herodian Temple compound, which, according to John 2:20 had been in process since the Temple's dedication some 46 years earlier. Perhaps, the disciples also thought, as the *Letter of Aristeas* (100-101) reveals, that the Temple was inviolable and invincible, and so were trying to comprehend Jesus' judicial remarks in light of this belief. In any case, Jesus addresses both of these ideas in His unexpected reply in verse 2 that all of the stones they had shown Him would be violently torn down at the time of judgment.

¹This paper was first published in the magazine *Israel My Glory* (Fall 2005).

No doubt as the disciples thought on these words they concluded that Jesus meant the final attack on Jerusalem predicted by Zechariah 12-14 to occur at the end of the age when the Lord would come to destroy the Gentile nations and begin the messianic rule (Zechariah 14:3-9). The disciples believed that with the ministry of Jesus these events were already in motion and would be soon climaxed by His public revelation and reign as Messiah. However, as they walked with Jesus up the Mount of Olives, the inner circle of disciples determined they needed clarification, especially with respect to the issue of the Temple's destruction and Jesus' timetable for these events. Therefore, in verse 3 these disciples privately posed two questions to Jesus, the first regarding the specific time of the destruction of the Temple He had just mentioned ("when will these things happen") and the second (composed of two related parts) concerning "the sign" that would mark Jesus' advent to Israel (Greek *parousia*, "bodily presence") as Messiah at the end of the age.² It is Jesus' response to these questions that form the prophetic teaching of the Olivet Discourse. The first question is addressed by Jesus in Luke 21:10-24, while the second question is addressed in Matthew 24:4-31 (and Mark 13:1-27).

The Signs of the Discourse (verses 4-13)

There has been considerable discussion as to whether these verses, as well as the whole of the Olivet Discourse, was fulfilled in the past or is yet to be fulfilled in the future. Historicists have held that most of these events (except the advent of Christ) have been fulfilled in the past though Preterists contend all events (including the advent of Christ) were specifically fulfilled in A.D. 70. The disciples had also presumed a connection between the destruction of the Temple and the messianic advent. Jesus' Olivet Discourse was given to correct this misunderstanding, otherwise the disciples might be subject to deception as a result of the events that would take place in their generation, since Jesus would not bodily return to restore Israel and begin the messianic kingdom following the Roman's razing of the Temple.³ Therefore, Jesus began His discourse with the warning, "Be on your guard lest anyone deceive you" (verse 4). Preterists, failing to understand this warning, have been led astray in their interpretation, being forced to spiritualize prophecy in an attempt to force a first-century fulfillment. Therefore, what the disciples saw as connected events, Jesus explained were chronological and sequential, but would not all occur within the same time frame.

Futurists have been divided as to whether the Olivet Discourse has been partially fulfilled with the argument hinging upon whether verses 4-14 constitute general characteristics of the inter-advent period (the Church Age)⁴ or describe only the future time of the Tribulation. I believe verses 4-14 must be eschatological and refer to the events of the first half of the Tribulation for several reasons. First, the conditions described must be considered divine *judgments* in keeping with the pattern of Old Testament revelation (rather than "natural" disasters). This can be seen in their description as "birth-pains" (verse 8). In the Old Testament "birth-pains" (Hebrew *chil*), the signal of impending child-birth, was used as a symbol by the prophets for the terrible calamities that accompanied the Day of the Lord (Isaiah 21:3; 26:17-18; 66:7; Jeremiah 4:31; Micah 4:10), and particularly "the time of Jacob's trouble" (Jeremiah 30:6-7), which is alluded to in the description of the great Tribulation in Matthew 24:21.⁵ Many Jews during the Second Temple period believed a time of suffering would immediately precede the end (e.g., 4 Ezra 9:3; 13:31-32; 2 Baruch 27:7; 70:3; Sibylline Oracles 2:22-24; 3:660-61), and the Jewish sect at Qumran referred to these troubles as "birth pangs" (e.g. Qumran *Hymns*). Rabbinic Judaism likewise spoke of the "birth-pangs of the Messiah" as a series of worldwide convulsions that would precede the Messianic Age. The Talmud's list of these disastrous spiritual, moral, political, social, and

environmental conditions that will characterize “the generation when the Son of David is to come” (*Sanhedrin 97a*) closely parallels those in Matthew 24:4-14.⁶

Since the New Testament indicates that the Church will not experience the judgments of God that have been appointed for the Day of the Lord (1 Thess. 5:9; Rev. 3:10), these verses cannot describe events within the Church Age. Second, Jesus stated that these judgments were not “the end” of the judgments but were merely the “beginning” (verse 8). However, “beginning birth-pains” must precede immediately the more intense “birth-pains” that climax the birth process. Since the Tribulation does not immediately begin after the Rapture of the Church, but only with the commencement of Daniel’s seventieth week (Daniel 9:27), these verses cannot describe events within the Church Age.⁷

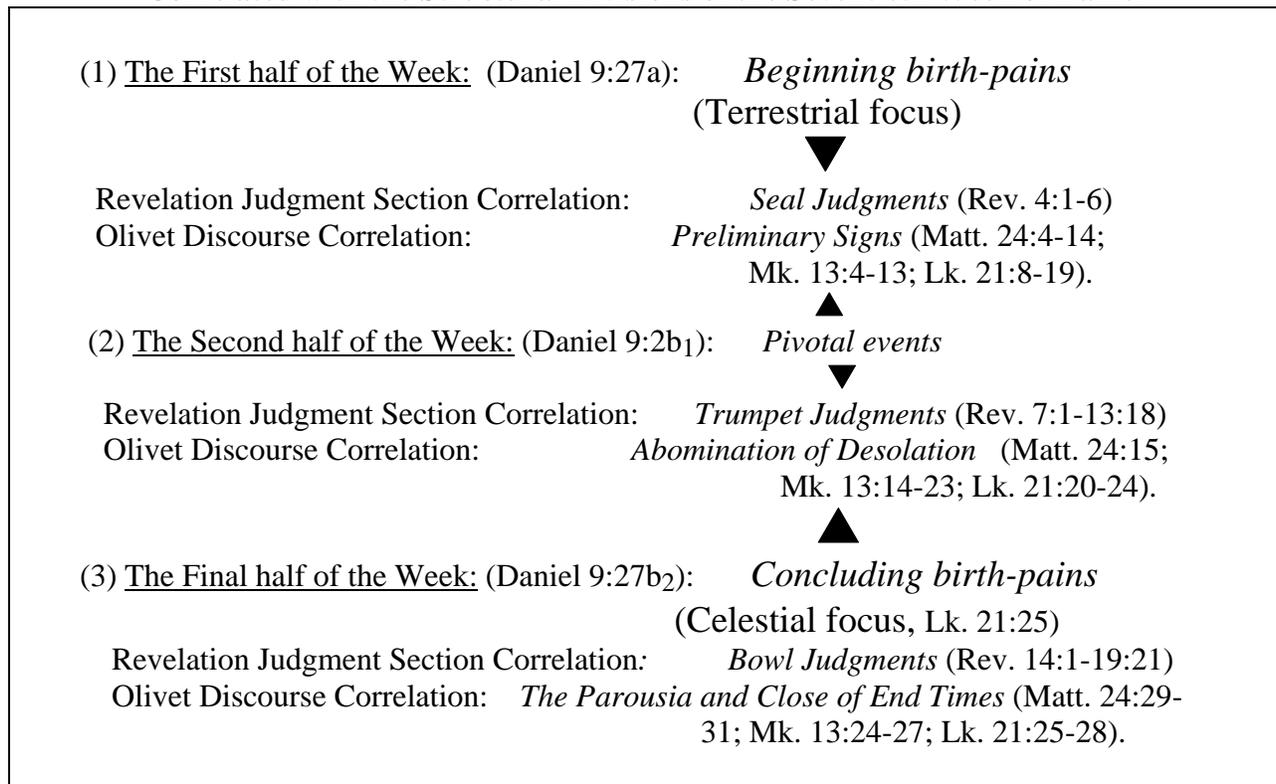
The most compelling argument for a Tribulation context for these verses comes from a comparison of verses 4-14 with the first five seal judgments in Revelation 6 (as the chart below reveals).⁸

<i>Parallels Between Matthew 24:4-14 [or parallels] and the Seal Judgments of Revelation</i>		
Condition	Matthew 24	Revelation 6
False messiahs/prophets	vss. 5, 11	vs. 2
Wars	vss. 6-7	vss. 2-4
International discord	vs. 7	vss. 3-4
Famines	vs. 7	vss. 5-8
Pestilences	[Luke 21:11]	vs. 8
Persecution/martyrdom	vs. 9	vss. 9-11
Earthquakes	vs. 7	vs. 12
Cosmic phenomena	[Luke 21:11]	vss. 12-14

These parallel conditions demonstrate that as the seal judgments of Revelation 6 lead on to the more intense judgments (trumpet and bowl judgments) of the great Tribulation so do the conditions described in Matthew 24:4-14, called “the beginning of birth-pains” (verse 8) lead to the more intense final “birth-pains” described in Matthew 24:15-26 which result in the climatic advent of Messiah (verses 27-31). However, it should be further observed that Jesus made reference in Matthew 24:15 to Daniel’s prophecy of the seventieth week and that both Matthew and Mark alert the reader to consider this text as a means to understanding the prophecy of the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24:15b; Mk. 13:14a). In other words, Jesus used the prophecy of the seventieth week as the template for the chronological events He unfolded in His response to the disciples’ questions. This applies to the judgment section of the Revelation (chapters 4-19), where Jesus, who gave also the vision to John (Revelation 1:1), modeled the vision upon the structural divisions of Daniel’s seventieth week. Viewing these texts together (as in the chart below)⁹ we find that the “beginning (preliminary) “birth-pains” of Matthew 24:4-14 correlate with the seal judgments of Revelation 4-6 which have a *terrestrial* focus and climax with the pivotal event of

the desecration of the Temple (“Abomination of Desolation”) in Matthew 24:15 (Mark 13:14), the mid-point of Daniel’s seventieth week (Daniel 9:27b₁). These events fit within the timeframe of the first half of Daniel’s seventieth week (Daniel 9:27a). These events then intensify as concluding “birth-pains” in Matthew 24:16-26 which correlate with Revelation 7-19 and have a *celestial* focus climaxing in the heavenly appearing of “the sign” of Messiah’s advent to earth in judgment (Matthew 24:27-31; Revelation 19). These events fit within the timeframe of the last half of Daniel’s seventieth week (Daniel 9:27b), which concludes with the destruction of the Temple’s desolator (“the Prince that shall come,” Daniel 9:26 or the Antichrist).

**Revelation Judgment Section and the Olivet Discourse
Correlated with the Structural Divisions of the Seventieth Week of Daniel**



If verses 4-14 predict signs that are for the future Tribulation and relate primarily to the Jewish people in that time, they cannot have had a past fulfillment, especially with the Fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. A careful comparison of the events in these verses reveals that they cannot be identified with historical events of the first-century. The wars described in this passage are between many different nations and kingdoms, not between a single nation Rome and Israel as occurred in the First Revolt. Likewise there will arise many claiming to be Christ, but there is no historical evidence of anyone claiming to be a messiah in the first-century until Bar-Kokhba (A.D. 135), and then it was only a single individual making this claim.¹⁰ Neither can they be used by the Church as “signs of the times” to indicate the nearness of the Lord’s coming. Many Christians have used the apparent increasing frequency of earthquakes or apostasy in the Church and moral decline in society in general as indicators that we are fast approaching the Rapture and the end time. However, the Rapture is a signless event and

since these “birth-pains” do not begin until Israel enters “the time of Jacob’s trouble,” and we do not know how long this will be after the Rapture of the Church, we must exercise caution in trying to predict the nearness of end time events based on the presence of these conditions in the present age. During the Church Age these general conditions (given in 1 Timothy 4:1-3, 2 Timothy 3:1-9 and 1 John 2:18; 4:1-3) remind us we are in the “last days,” but during the Tribulation the conditions of verses 4-14 become specific signs of the end time whereby “you” (in context the disciple’s people = Jewish believers) will be able to discern where they are in the seventieth week and “endure to the end (of the Tribulation) [and] be saved (physically delivered at the advent of Messiah),” verse 13. These signs, and especially the signal event of verse 15, will enable the Tribulation saints to persevere physically and spiritually as they wait for the promised rescue at the end of Daniel’s seventieth week.

The Salvation in the Discourse (verse 14)

Despite the terrible conditions of the Tribulation period there is predicted one of the greatest evangelistic outreaches in history: “And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness to the nations, and then shall come the end.” This global message, while having the same elements as the gospel of grace, that is, faith in Jesus as Savior, has its focus in repentance concerning the coming of Messiah to overthrow the nations and establish the messianic kingdom for Israel. It is this repentance that will reverse the condition of Israel’s house being left desolate (Matthew 23:38-39; cf. Acts 3:19-21). This was the same message initially preached by John the baptizer and by Jesus during His earthly ministry. However, “the gospel of the kingdom” cannot again be proclaimed until the nation has moved within the chronological confines of Daniel’s seventieth week. The term “world” (Greek *oikoumene*), while meaning “the inhabited earth,” cannot be limited to a particular region, but must include the whole world of Gentile occupation. It is this “world” that Christ is coming to judge (Acts 17:31), which in this context is implied by the phrase “then shall come the end.” For this reason this global message cannot be limited to the first-century Roman Empire or thought to have been accomplished within 25 to 30 years of Christ’s ascension, or to have fulfilled the Great Commission by A.D. 70, as the Preterists contend.

The good news that the Lord Jesus has left for believers in the time of Jacob’s trouble is that the gospel of the kingdom will not be hindered by the “birth-pains,” but will, through judgments, have its message magnified and its urgency enforced, fulfilling the promise of Jeremiah’s “birth-pains” prophecy “that she (Israel) will be saved from it” (Jeremiah 30:7).

¹ For further discussion see Randall Price, *The Coming Last Days Temple* (Harvest House Publishers, 1999), pp.

² Gerald B. Stanton, *Kept From the Hour* (Zondervan Publishing House, 1956), p. 21.

³ Randolph O. Yeager, “Matthew 19-28” in *The Renaissance New Testament* (Pelican Publishing Company, 1998), p. 277.

⁴ For example see John F. Walvoord, *Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come* (Moody Press, 1974), pp. 182-84.

⁵ For additional study see Randall Price, “Old Testament Tribulation Terms,” in *When the Trumpet Sounds* eds. Thomas Ice and T (Harvest House Publishers, 1995), pp. ___ .

⁶ See David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary* (Jewish New Testament Publications, Inc., 1996), pp. 72-73.

⁷ See further Renald Showers, *Maranatha: ()*, pp.

⁸ Adapted from John McLean, “Chronology and Sequential Structure of John’s Revelation,” in *When the Trumpet Sounds*, p. 323.

⁹ Adapted from Randall Price, *The Desecration and Restoration of the Temple as an Eschatological Motif in the Tanach, Jewish Apocalyptic Literature and the New Testament* (UMI Publications, 1994), p.

¹⁰ Thomas Ice, “The Olivet Discourse,” in *The End Times Controversy*. Eds. Tim LaHaye and Thomas Ice (Harvest House Publishers, 2003), pp. 167-170.