

# *Perspectives*

*explorations in theology and practice*

**Eschatology: The Second Horizon**

**Volume 5: (January 2024)**

# The second horizon: Olivet Discourse

In this volume our focus will be on what is termed 'the Olivet discourse': Jesus' predictions / proclamations that we find in Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21. There is essential agreement between all three accounts as to what Jesus said, our task is to decide into what time frame he is speaking, and then to analyse the various signs he gives. Oft-times at a popular level we can read of those who quote, 'wars and rumours of wars' during a time of noticeable increased warfare and conclude that 'we are in the end-times' because of the words of Jesus. Thus they use world-events to plot a time-line. The use, though, of the term 'end times' ('latter days') describes the entire period of time beginning with the post-Easter events. Jewish expectation was of a future era when the Spirit of God would be outpoured and the resurrection of the dead had taken place. Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost is based on the outpouring of the Spirit by the resurrected Jesus,

Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you see and hear (Acts 2:33).

In the light of this era change he exhorts those present with the words, 'Save yourselves from this corrupt generation (Acts 2:40).

I suggest that if we read the various parallel passages that we are looking at as not written to us but as a record of the words spoken in that historical context to those disciples we will see that the wording and the context of Jesus' words do not speak into the years

preceding the *parousia* (what we commonly term ‘the second coming’) of Christ but into **the decades of great tension leading up to the conflict in Israel between the power of the day (Rome) and the Jews**; the decades following Jesus’ ministry culminating in the period of 66-70AD. Matthew writing with a focus on a Jewish audience uses a Scriptural reference to a ‘desolating sacrilege’ but in Luke, aimed to be understood by Gentiles, we have the cryptic language of Matthew made clear. The description in Luke’s account reads,

When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies (Lk. 21:20).

which we can compare to the rather cryptic statement in Matthew (and Mark):

So when you see the desolating sacrilege, spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand) (Matt. 24:15 and Mark 13:14).

Matthew and Mark use language from Daniel 9. A Jewish understanding of that reference would recall the entrance of Antiochus IV (Epiphanes) into the Temple in 167BC when he offered a pig on the altar, thus causing a major desecration; the known history and the text would help them understand what kind of event to expect; Luke’s clarification helps us focus on the capture of Jerusalem which was finally taken and the temple torn down in 70AD by the Roman forces. The siege was brutal, and it is this major calamity that I maintain was the context that Jesus prophesied would take place in these parallel accounts. We should not be reading the chapters as if they are giving us signs to look for that will help us draw up a time-line indicating how close we are to such events as ‘Armageddon’, the rise of ‘antiChrist’ or the final *parousia* of Jesus.

## Not a new concept!

Far from being a novel approach to the Olivet discourse I would rather suggest the reverse is true - to make these chapters refer to a final set of events in some far off future time (far off as viewed from the time of Jesus) is what is new. The belief that these predictions were fulfilled in AD70 was a view held in history. Here are a few examples. Eusebius (bishop of Caesarea 263 – 339):

If any one compares the words of our Saviour with the other accounts of the historian (Josephus) concerning the whole war, how can one fail to wonder, and to admit that the foreknowledge and the prophecy of our Saviour were truly divine and marvellously strange.

The number of calamities which everywhere fell upon the nation at that time—the extreme misfortunes to which the inhabitants of Judea were especially subjected, the thousands of men as well as women and children that perished by the sword, by famine, and by other forms of death innumerable—all these things, as well as the many great sieges which were carried on against the cities of Judea and the excessive sufferings endured by those who fled to Jerusalem itself, as to a city of perfect safety, and finally the general course of the whole war, as well as its particular occurrences in detail and how at last the abomination of desolation, proclaimed by the prophets, stood in the very temple of God (so celebrated of old), the temple which was now awaiting its total and final destruction by fire—all these things anyone that wishes may find accurately described in the history written by Josephus (Church History, book 3, chapter 5, section 4).

John Wesley likewise understood the direct connection between Jesus' words and the conflict with Rome:

Josephus' History of the Jewish War is the best commentary on this chapter. It is a wonderful instance of God's providence, that he, an eyewitness, and one who lived and died a Jew, should, especially in so extraordinary a manner, be preserved, to transmit to us a collection of important facts, which so exactly illustrate this glorious prophecy, in almost every circumstance (from the introduction to his writings on Matthew).

This Gospel shall be preached in all the world—Not universally: this is not done yet: but in general through the several parts of the world, and not only in Judea. And this was done by St. Paul and the other apostles, before Jerusalem was destroyed. And then shall the end come—Of the city and temple. Josephus's History of the Jewish War is the best commentary on this chapter. It is a wonderful instance of God's providence, that he, an eyewitness, and one who lived and died a Jew, should, especially in so extraordinary a manner, be preserved, to transmit to us a collection of important facts, which so exactly illustrate this glorious prophecy, in almost every circumstance ( Wesley on Mark 13:10 in John Wesley's Explanatory Notes of the New Testament).

C.H. Spurgeon (on Matthew 24:15-21 , the Abomination of Desolation) wrote:

This portion of our Saviour's words appears to relate solely to the destruction of Jerusalem. As soon as Christ's disciples saw "the abomination of desolation," that is, the Roman ensigns, with their idolatries, "stand in the holy place," they

knew that the time for their escape had arrived; and they did flee to the mountains. (Matthew: The Gospel of the Kingdom, p. 215.)

The King left his followers in no doubt as to when these things should happen: “Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass till all these things be fulfilled.” It was just about the ordinary limit of a generation when the Roman armies compassed Jerusalem, whose measure of iniquity was then full, and overflowed in misery, agony, distress, and bloodshed such as the world never saw before or since. Jesus was a true Prophet; everything that he foretold was literally fulfilled. (The Gospel of the Kingdom, p.218.)

## **Textual reasons for the application to 66-70AD**

There are numerous aspects in the text as to why we should not look for some future fulfilment for the prophetic proclamations made by Jesus. Consider:

- The context is of ‘not one stone will remain on another’ which provoked the question as to what will be the signs that this will about to take place. In AD70 there was the destruction of the Temple and no stone remained on another.
- Secondly we have the temporal statement that, ‘This generation will not pass away until all these things have been fulfilled’. A generation biblically was understood to be 40 years in duration (a generation died in the wilderness, a period of 40 years of wandering). Jesus, making these statements around 30AD, prophesies that the catastrophic

events will take place before 40 years are past.

- Within the passage there was a warning that if and when they needed to flee, that they should pray that the flight would not be on the Sabbath nor in winter. Those two aspects are geographically and religiously limited. The Sabbath indicates a Jewish context, and winter is not experienced universally at the same time. Likewise the instruction to flee from Judea to the mountains contains not simply intensely practical advice but is geographically specific.

The Scriptures that record Jesus' warnings and predictions themselves hold us into a time frame and a geographic setting, and what took place in the years that followed fit directly with what Jesus spoke of. There is **NO** compelling evidence to suggest that what we read should give us signs that we should expect to occur in some 'end-time' scenario.

## The New Testament context

The context of the New Testament is that of the Roman occupation of the land. There had been a return to the land after the Babylonian exile, but the people nor the land had been free. Certain writers concluded that the exile was not over, and for good reason they held to that perspective, for since the return Israel had been subject to Greek rule and then to the might of Rome. In what we term the first Century of the common era there was increasing tension indicating the very real possibility of unrest breaking out. Josephus, the Jewish historian, indicates the historical setting that raised the expectations of the liberation of Israel, thus there was an overall movement of belief that the intervention of God was now about to take place. The conviction that the time was imminent was fuelled in the main by

## Daniel 9:

But now, what did the most elevate them in undertaking this war, was an ambiguous oracle that was also found in their sacred writings, how, “about that time, one from their country should become governor of the habitable earth.” The Jews took this prediction to belong to themselves in particular, and many of the wise men were thereby deceived in their determination. Now this oracle certainly denoted the government of Vespasian [*Roman emperor 69AD-79AD*], who was appointed emperor in Judea. However, it is not possible for men to avoid fate, although they see it beforehand. But these men interpreted some of these signals according to their own pleasure, and some of them they utterly despised, until their madness was demonstrated, both by the taking of their city and their own destruction. (Josephus in Jewish war Book VI ch. 5.)

There seemed to be a lot of interest around the time of Jesus as to whether this would be the time of God's intervention. Once we set some of the words and phrases that we encounter in the New Testament into the historical context we obtain a deeper reading than simply that of, for example, ‘you are bad’ so ‘repent’. The texts report what was said **into a historical context** and we need to read them in that context. With regard to the call to repentance we can return to Josephus where he writes in his autobiography that he had travelled north to Galilee in the late 60's where he had interaction with a young Jewish leader (ironically called Jesus) who was intent on armed revolt. Josephus exhorted him to ‘repent and believe in me’. The language of course has a parallel in the New Testament, and the historical culture and context casts light on the Gospel texts such as Mark 1:14 – ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’ Josephus



was not exercising some evangelistic campaign hoping for spiritual conversions, but asking for a change of mind and that the rebel would follow his path.

John preached a baptism of repentance which certainly included a turning away from what we might determine were sins and areas of disobedience, but the historical context suggests it was essentially about a turning away from determining their own future and to trust God to bring them to freedom. Likewise, when he challenged the Pharisees and Sadducees as to who had warned them to flee from the wrath to come, it is highly unlikely that the wrath he is referring to was that of 'eternal fire' but of the all-but-inevitable reprisals that would come on the Jewish nation from the Romans.

The tension and uneasy peace with Rome can be understood when we read the dialogue among the Jewish religious leaders,

If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place[h] and our nation.” But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, “You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed (John 11:48-50).

When we read the call to repentance by John we do not need to deny an understanding of repentance in the context of a call to align with a God who has been sinned against, but neither should we insist that all references to 'repentance' should be understood in that way. The New Testament has a historical context, and in the Gospels the context is about a people who claim to be chosen by God but find themselves in deep subjugation to the Imperial power of the day.

Context is everything. Jesus continually warned that if his hearers didn't follow where he was leading, the result would be disaster. Take those warnings out of context and interpret them the lens of church teaching and mediaeval beliefs and the words become a warning that unless they repented they would burn in hell; in the context of the hearers the warning was about what would be their future as a nation at the hands of the Romans.

At that very time there were some present who told Jesus[a] about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you, but unless you repent you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the other people living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you, but unless you repent you will all perish just as they did." (Lk. 13:1'5).

If we give credence to that context we can better understand how the words of Jesus are addressing the historical people. There is a broad way, a path that many in their zeal and wrongly placed hope were on, but that path would only lead to destruction; the narrow path could be found through Jesus and his way. In Luke 23:29-31 we read,

For the days are surely coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.' Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us,' and to the hills, 'Cover us.' For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?

Those words and ones similar are not being spoken into some future

(‘end-times’) era, but into the very challenging context of that time. Crucifixions as a sign as to how Rome dealt with insurrection occurred throughout this period of time (‘when the wood is green’), but in the final days of the assault on Jerusalem the brutality of the attack and the number of crucifixions increased dramatically (when the wood was ‘dry’).

Here is report from Josephus of those final days:

But when they went in numbers into the lanes of the city, with their swords drawn, they slew those whom they overtook, without mercy, and set fire to the houses wither the Jews were fled, and burnt every soul in them, and laid waste a great many of the rest; and when they were come to the houses to plunder them, they found in them entire families of dead men, and the upper rooms full of dead corpses, that is of such as died by the famine; they then stood in horror at this sight, and went out without touching anything. But although they had this commiseration for such as were destroyed in that manner, yet had they not the same for those that were still alive, but they ran every one through whom they met with, and obstructed the very lanes with their dead bodies, and made the whole city run down with blood, to such a degree indeed that the fire of many houses was quenched with these men’s blood. (The Wars Of The Jews, 6:8:5)

If we have some grasp of the tumultuous days that the words of the Gospels are recorded into we will unlikely suggest that the ‘Olivet discourse’ of Jesus is speaking into some ‘end-time’ scenario. It does, of course, fit an end-time scenario, the end of the world as it was known, and in particular the end of the Jewish world as was. The destruction of Jerusalem and temple marked the end of that age

and stood as a sign that what Jesus accomplished through the cross did indeed bring about the government of God resting on his shoulders.

## This Generation

The clear and obvious application of Matthew 24:34, 'Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place', is to the generation alive at the time in which Jesus is speaking. This is evidently clear and has raised for some the belief that Jesus was simply wrong with regard to his 'coming'. That aspect is only a possibility if his words are predicting the time of his *parousia*.

Matthew consistently uses the language of 'this generation' to apply to those who were alive at the time when Jesus was alive:

But to what will I compare **this generation**? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.' (Matt. 11:16, 17).

Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to him, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." But he answered them, "**An evil and adulterous generation** asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth. The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgement with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and indeed something greater than

Jonah is here! The queen of the South will rise up at the judgement with this generation and condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon, and indeed something greater than Solomon is here! (Matt. 12:38-42).

Then it [the unclean spirit] says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' When it returns, it finds it empty, swept, and put in order. Then it goes and brings along seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and live there, and the last state of that person is worse than the first. So will it be also with **this evil generation.**" (Matt. 12:44-45).

**An evil and adulterous generation** asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah." (Matt. 16:4)

Jesus answered, "You **faithless and perverse generation**, how much longer must I be with you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him here to me." (Matt. 17:17).

Likewise in the writings of Luke there is no understanding that the term 'this generation' applies to some future, far-off future generation,

But first he must endure much suffering and be rejected by this generation. (Lk 17:25).

Save yourselves from this corrupt generation. (Acts 2:40).

It is very clear that **the term refers specifically to those present at the time of what was spoken**, and the parallel to the generation that died in the wilderness over a 40 year period seems self-evident. The exodus occurred with the opportunity for all to journey to the land; likewise Jesus when he was transfigured and Moses and Elijah appeared the focus was on the 'exodus' that he would perform at

## Passover in Jerusalem:

They appeared in glory and were speaking about his **exodus**, which he was about to fulfil in Jerusalem (Luke 9:31).

The way of escape from the dominating powers was opened up and consequently the call was to journey to true freedom. The language of 'corrupt generation' comes from a description of the generation that did not make it into the promised land but died in the wilderness. In Deut.32:5 they are called 'a perverse and crooked generation.' If those Jews who were being addressed (by Peter) did not repent and receive Jesus as their Messiah they would not experience 'salvation' but would suffer intensely under the Roman assault on the city for there was coming a judgement on that generation that was a result of the sin that had accumulated as a result of a persistent rejection of the warnings from heaven:

Thus you testify against yourselves that you are descendants of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your ancestors. You snakes, you brood of vipers! How can you escape the judgement of hell? For this reason I send you prophets, sages, and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town, so that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. Truly I tell you, **all this will come upon this generation** (Matt. 23:31-36)..

The usage of the term 'generation' is only used in the sense of 'those alive at the time of speaking', or in reference to a specific generation such as in Matthew when he outlines the series of 14

generations from Abraham to Jesus; in Luke's Gospel the Magnificat declares that the mercies of God go from one generation to the next; in Acts those Jews being addressed by Peter are exhorted to 'save themselves from this corrupt generation' (Acts 2:40). There is no warrant to make 'this generation' mean anything other than the very obvious and clear reference to the generation alive at the time Jesus was speaking

The consistent use of the term 'generation' / 'this generation' means we should have no expectation that what we read in Matthew 24 and the parallel chapters in Mark and Luke have an application to some future era, separated from the time of Jesus by many generations. The warnings were to the generation alive at the time of Jesus and the 'discourse' makes total sense in that context.

I have laboured the point somewhat that the obvious and clear understanding is that the generation alive at the time of speaking is the referent for 'this generation', but I have done this only because there have been interpretations that suggest it refers to a generation immediately prior to the *parousia*. Those views are proposed simply because of the system they adhere to, not because the text indicates this. The agreement between the three accounts is clear:

Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place (Matt. 24:34).

Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place (Mark 13:30).

Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place (Luke 21:32).

The agreement between the Gospels is complete. The phrase begins with the word 'Amen', a very common feature in Matthew's Gospel (32 occurrences of this) which seems to be a way of indicating a direct (Aramaic) quote from Jesus' lips. The term 'will

not pass away' is a double negative in the Greek text, emphasising the certainty of 'all these things' (**all** the previous signs) occurring during the lifetime of the generation that was being addressed ('this generation' - a generation being reckoned to be 40 years thus by the year 70AD or thereabouts).

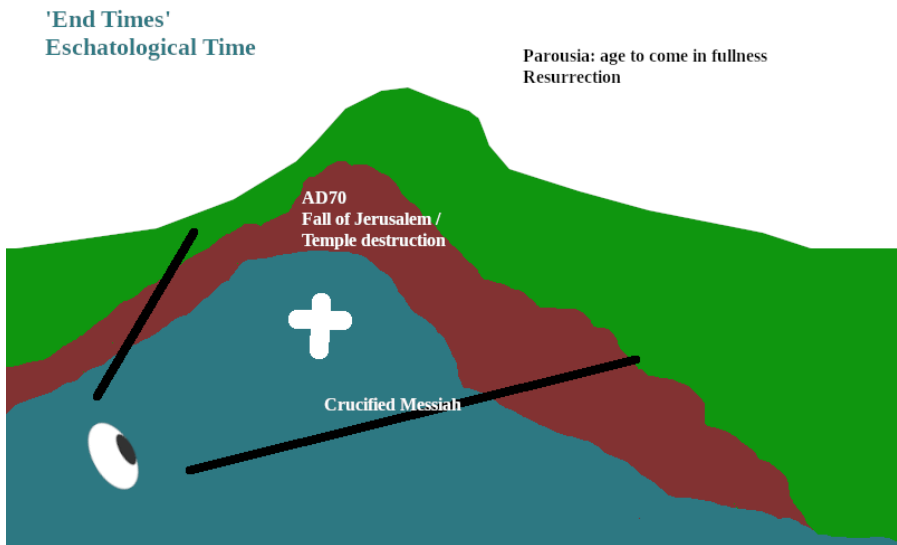
**NB: Using the scenario of multiple horizons** (see previous volume) I am not suggesting that the *parousia* is fulfilled with the events of 66-70AD but that those events that took place in those years, and the events that are part of the run up to those cataclysmic years, are the fulfilment of what Jesus spoke about and that they belong to a horizon beyond the first horizon of the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is possible that the disciples (and Jesus?) thought that the final event (what we commonly call the 'second coming') would then happen immediately following the desolation of Jerusalem? I suggest that the collapse of the Imperial power manifested at that time through Rome seems to be a horizon beyond that of Jerusalem's demise - this follows the Old Testament pattern of, for example, God using Baylon to punish Jerusalem but then Babylon would also be judged (later). If Revelation is one of the few books written after AD70 it would indicate that there was another horizon in view, that of the kingdoms of this world becoming the kingdom of our Lord and Messiah (Rev. 11:15). Aligning the events of the Olivet Discourse to the Jewish conflict with Rome seeks to reflect the immediate context of the prophecy, and therefore we have to place the events as eschatological. Those events are without doubt a marker and we could suggest that they are the 'end of the age', the end of the age of the Jewish people as God's redeeming agent for the nations. We do not read 'the end of the world' but the end of **the age**, and in suggesting that this is more likely to be the end of the Jewish age is corroborated by the use of the term 'age' to the sacrifice of Jesus in Hebrews:



for then he would have had to suffer again and again since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all **at the end of the ages** to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself (Heb. 9:26).

The death of Jesus brought in a new age, this not being something that is waited for in the far distant future (though it will then be manifest in fullness), and there are events that mark the clarity of the shift of the ages, hence I favour the phrase 'the end of the age' to be simply another reference to the desolation of Jerusalem.

We can present the various horizons that are portrayed in the New Testament as below:



The hope of the resurrection of the dead and the fulfilment of the kingdom of God was not to take place in one future event, but in and through the death of Jesus (the stumbling block for the Jew as the Messiah would never be 'hung on a tree'); the resurrection would be

the vindication that Jesus was indeed ‘declared to be the Son of God’, with the clear ‘sign’ that he was indeed the son of Man who was given authority within the kingdom being the end of (an / the) age with the fall of Jerusalem and Temple (the material in this volume); with a *parousia* then beyond that horizon.

## The question(s) the disciples ask

The closing verses in the chapter preceding the Olivet Discourse in all three of these ‘synoptic gospels’ have Jesus calling an end to the religious enslaving powers that had persistently rejected those sent by God. The prophetic voices had been rejected and that rejection was manifested in such malpractices as ‘devouring widows’ houses’. Into that context Jesus observed a widow who put her last coins into the temple treasury. The magnificent temple (with its associated buildings and storehouses occupying around 20-25% of the space of the city, or some 35 acres / 14 hectares) manifested a wealth that far from caring for the orphan, widow and alien was exploiting them. Josephus notes that the temple was covered on all sides with gold, and on sunny days (of which there were many in Jerusalem), it would shine like the sun itself. Little wonder the disciples were impressed, but Jesus noted the widow.

As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!” Then Jesus asked him, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.” (Mark 13:1, 2).

Jesus informs them that the building that was so impressive was to be demolished, and when asked a question as to when that would be he gave many signs saying that this will all be fulfilled in the

lifetime of 'this generation'. Jesus declares that the magnificent temple will fall and there will not be one stone remaining on another, the destruction being complete. In response to this startling declaration the disciples ask for clarification about the timing of this. It is worded slightly differently in the three gospels:

Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age? (Matt. 24:3).

Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished? (Mark 13:4).

Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place? (Luke 21:7).

Mark and Luke seem to restrict the question to the forthcoming destruction of the Temple, whereas In Matthew's account it is possible that we have an expansion of the question. We have the question about the destruction of the Temple ('when will this be?') **but possibly also** a second question about the 'second coming' (your *parousia*, though the question is concerning 'the **sign** of your coming (*parousia*)'). Matthew could be indicating that there are two questions related to a) the destruction of Jerusalem and b) the 'final' *parousia*; if so then we can read the later material from verse 34 onwards:

But about **that** day and hour no one knows...

as referring to the *parousia* with 'that' day no longer having any reference to 'this generation'. Whether it is one question or two does not change the important assertion in this volume that the signs Jesus quotes are to be fulfilled in the lifetime of those present when he was speaking. If the additional material is in reference to a 'horizon' beyond AD70 we note that there are **no signs** associated with that time. In other words, I do not consider it valid to try and make a 'prophetic time-line' from the signs Jesus gives. The signs

Jesus gives are then fulfilled within a generation of his prophecy.

*[Further the question is about the **sign** of your parousia. In the parallel passages there is also a reference to the **sign** of the coming of the Son of Man which I will seek to show is not a statement about the parousia but in quoting Daniel 7:13 is indicating a coming of the Son of Man to the ancient of days, and not referring to a (second) coming to earth. It is possible that Matthew is seeking to show that Jesus' later words about 'that' day is a reference to a parousia beyond the fall of Jerusalem, irrespective of that what remains is **that the signs that we read in the earlier part of the chapter find their fulfilment in the years that lead up to and are concluded with the fall of Jerusalem.**]*

Josephus (ca. 37-100 AD), the Jewish historian, in his many prolific writings offers numerous confirmations of the accuracy of what Jesus said would take place, and in the comments that follow there will be numerous quotes from his writings.

## **False prophets**

Josephus documents false religious leaders who operated during the Jewish War with Rome which brought about the destruction of the temple: "such men deceived and deluded the people under pretense of divine inspiration" (Jewish Wars 2:13:4 §259). He speaks of others as "impostors and deceivers [who] persuaded the multitude to follow them into the wilderness and pretended that they would exhibit manifest wonders and signs" (Antiquities 20:8:6 §167–68).

## **Wars**

Consequently, Jesus' words offer a significant sign warning Christians that despite the pax Romana, they will hear of 'wars and

rumours of wars' when 'nation would rise up against nation'.

When the Jewish War erupted in the late AD 60s, it broke the famous *pax Romana*. In this important war, Rome victoriously marched across Israel and mercilessly crushed the inhabitants. Though the Jewish Revolt initially flared up in late AD 66, the resulting formal war began in the Spring of AD 67. That was when Nero formally commissioned his general Vespasian to crush the revolt. As Josephus puts it: 'Nero upon Cestius's defeat, was in fear of the entire event of the war, and thereupon made Vespasian general in this war' (Jewish War Pref., 8 §21; cp. 3:1:1–3 §1–8).

### **Nation against nation...**

Josephus writes,

there were also a considerable number of auxiliaries that came from the kings Antiochus, and Agrippa, and Sohemus, each of them contributing one thousand footmen that were archers, and a thousand horsemen. Malchus also, the king of Arabia, sent a thousand horsemen, besides five thousand footmen, the greatest part of which were archers; so that the whole army, including the auxiliaries sent by the kings, as well horsemen as footmen. (Jewish War 3:4:2 §68)

But not only does this era experience the Jewish War, but it also resulted in a great and destructive civil war in Rome itself. In June of AD 68 Nero committed suicide as Rome erupted into civil upheaval and military strife (Josephus, Jewish War Pref., 9 §23). Britain, Germany, and Gaul revolted against Rome and sought to break free from the empire. Rome feared that the Parthians from the East would mobilise because of the Empire's disarray during that time.

The Roman historian Tacitus (AD 56–117) wrote,

The history on which I am entering is that of a period rich in disasters, terrible with battles, torn by civil struggles, horrible even in peace. Four emperors failed by the sword; there were three civil wars, more foreign wars and often both at the same time (Histories 1:2).

He laments that 'Rome and Italy are thoroughly wasted by intestine war' (Hist. 4:75). Josephus reports similarly that: 'all was in disorder after the death of Nero' (Jewish War Pref. 1:2 §5).

Thus, both Jerusalem and Rome were experiencing nation rising against nation (Matt 24:7). These 'wars and rumours of wars' (Matt 24:6) were truly signs for that first-century generation.

## **Famines**

In Acts 11:28 we read of Agabus' prophecy of a 'great famine' that occurred during the reign of Claudius (AD 50s).

There stood up one of them named Agabus and signified by the Spirit that there should be great famine throughout all the world: which came to pass in the days of Claudius Caesar.

This is probably the famine Josephus mentions as striking Jerusalem:

A famine did oppress them at that time, and many people died for want of what was necessary to procure food withal (Antiquities 20:2:5 §51).

Classical writers testify to the widespread, recurring famines in the AD 50s and into the 60s. We discover these in the works of Suetonius, Dio Cassius, Eusebius, and Orosius. For instance, speaking of Rome in AD 51 Tacitus writes:

This year witnessed many prodigies . . . . Further portents were seen in a shortage of corn, resulting in famine. . . . It was established that there was no more than fifteen days' supply of food in the city. (Annals 12:43).

## **Earthquakes**

There are a number of earthquakes mentioned by writers during the period just prior to 70AD. Earthquakes are recorded to have occurred in Crete, Smyrna, Miletus, Chioa, Samos, Laodicea, Hierapolis, Colossae, Campania, Rome and Judea; the famous city of Pompeii was also severely damaged by an earthquake in 63AD.

Jesus warned his disciples concerning another localised sign, 'Therefore when you see the 'abomination of desolation,' spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place (whoever reads, let him understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains'. (Matt. 24:15-16).

## **The 'Abomination that causes desolation'**

Matthew and Mark carry similar language:

So when you see the desolating sacrilege, spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), 16 then those in Judea must flee to the mountains (Matt. 24:13,14).

Let the reader understand assumes a background in the Jewish Scriptures and the reference is to Daniel 9:27 which was fulfilled by Antiochus Epiphanes who dedicated the altar to Zeus and then sacrificed a pig on the altar, thus defiling the Temple. So the expectation is of a future abomination and helpfully Luke changes the language to 'when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies'

(Lk. 21:20) saying that when that comes about ‘the desolation has come near’. ‘Future’ in the sense of the readers of the Gospels, past event though for us, further indicated by Jesus’ instruction to ‘those in Judea’ to flee to the mountains. If this was some event at some supposed final end the instruction would not simply be to those in Judea and one presumes ‘fleeing’ would not be necessary nor possible!

Josephus records,

And now the Romans . . . brought their ensigns to the temple, and set them over against its eastern gate; and there did they offer sacrifices to them, and there did they make Titus imperator, with the greatest acclamations of joy (Josephus, Jewish Wars 6:6:1).

This abomination then was to occur in the Temple and is fulfilled in the Roman assault on the city and subsequent entry to the Temple. There is no justification in suggesting some future fulfilment for this.

## **Gospel proclamation**

Paul seems to have thought that in his lifetime that the proclamation throughout the world was being fulfilled as a testimony to the Gentiles (Matt. 24:14) - Jesus said all these things would take place in a generation. Here are four examples of this perspective that the gospel was being proclaimed to the whole earth:

But I ask, have they not heard? Indeed they have; for  
“Their voice has gone out to all the earth,  
and their words **to the ends of the world**” (Rom. 10:16-18).

At the end of Romans 10 Paul jumps between addressing the Jewish and the Gentile situation; here he is addressing the Gentile



situation. The message has (not will eventually) gone throughout the whole earth and to the extremity of the *oikoumene*. That final word was a very common way the civilised world of Rome was described. The *oikoumene* was the Roman world, and here he adds the 'extremities' of it, suggesting that this was indeed the whole earth.

There is a second text in Romans (16:25-26, though it is not in every manuscript I include it here, for it accords with Paul's perspective, and even if it was added it represents an early perspective):

Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is **made known to all the Gentiles**.

To 'all the Gentiles' (*ta ethne*: same word as in Matthew 24:14). Indeed rather than refer to ethnic groups it was the most common way that those who were not Jews were described. The Gentile world was the 'ta ethne' world.

Then there are two in Colossians.

You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel that has come to you. Just as it is bearing fruit and growing **in the whole world**, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God (Col. 1:5-6).

The 'whole world', and in a book that is fairly 'cosmic' the use of the word *kosmos* is quite fitting here.

[P]rovided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised

by the gospel that you heard, which **has been proclaimed to every creature** under heaven (Col. 1:23).

Which has been proclaimed to every creature (literally ‘all creation’); same as in the disputed passage of Mark 16:15 where we read on the lips of Jesus:

And he said to them, “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation.”

So Paul uses terms ‘the whole earth’, ‘the extremities of the *oikoumene*’, ‘all the *ethne*’, ‘the whole *kosmos*’, ‘all creation’. That is a fairly strong perspective and I don’t think we can really push Jesus’ words in a different direction. We might wish to use them as a missiological imperative, but it does not seem to be what Jesus meant in that context.

The signs that Jesus spoke of all fit within the lifetime of the generation alive at the time he spoke those words, which takes us to a key statement that Jesus made,

Immediately after the suffering of those days  
the sun will be darkened,  
and the moon will not give its light;  
the stars will fall from heaven,  
and the powers of heaven will be shaken.

Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see ‘the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven’ with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds from one end of heaven to the other (Matt. 24:30,31).

## **The sign of the coming of the Son of Man**

We can immediately note two aspects about this statement. First, it is the **sign** of his coming, it is that which points to a reality and second, the coming is **not** from heaven to earth but as made plain in the reference alluded to (Daniel 7) it is the coming of 'one like a son of man to the ancient of days',

I saw one like a human being  
coming with the clouds of heaven.  
And he came to the Ancient One  
and was presented before him.  
To him was given dominion  
and glory and kingship,  
that all peoples, nations, and languages  
should serve him.  
His dominion is an everlasting dominion  
that shall not pass away,  
and his kingship is one  
that shall never be destroyed (Dan. 7:13,14).

The coming that is referenced is not from heaven to earth (the word *parousia* is not used in the passage, but the very common verb 'to come', *erchomai*) and the 'coming' is preceded in the Olivet discourse with common apocalyptic language when an earthly power falls. The language is apocalyptic language, using cosmic language to describe a cataclysmic earthly event ('an earth shattering event' describes the scale of the impact of an event, it is not describing an earthquake). We should not be expecting a literal failing of the sun and moon to take place. Cosmic signs are a way of describing the overthrow of earthly powers. We have numerous examples:

The fall of Babylon is described with this kind of language in Is. 13:10-13; verse 10 reads:

For the stars of the heavens and their constellations  
will not give their light;  
the sun will be dark at its rising,  
and the moon will not shed its light.

Judgement on the nations:

All the host of heaven shall rot away,  
and the skies roll up like a scroll (Is. 34:4).

Lift up your eyes to the heavens  
and look at the earth beneath,  
for the heavens will vanish like smoke,  
the earth will wear out like a garment,  
and those who live on it will die like gnats,  
but my salvation will be forever,  
and my deliverance will never be ended.

The judgement on Judah is described with creational chaotic terms,

I looked on the earth, and it was complete chaos,  
and to the heavens, and they had no light.  
I looked on the mountains, and they were quaking,  
and all the hills moved to and fro.  
I looked, and there was no one at all,  
and all the birds of the air had fled.  
I looked, and the fruitful land was a desert,  
and all its cities were laid in ruins  
before the Lord, before his fierce anger (Jer. 4:23-28).

The fall of Egypt;

When I blot you out, I will cover the heavens  
and make their stars dark;

I will cover the sun with a cloud,  
and the moon shall not give its light.  
All the shining lights of the heavens  
I will darken above you  
and put darkness on your land,  
says the Lord God. (Ezek. 32:7-8).

The nations caught in the valley of decision are described by Joel again using creational terms, perhaps we might refer to it as poetic language, strictly this is the not uncommon apocalyptic language of Scripture.

Multitudes, multitudes,  
in the valley of decision!  
For the day of the Lord is near  
in the valley of decision.  
The sun and the moon are darkened,  
and the stars withdraw their shining.  
The Lord roars from Zion  
and utters his voice from Jerusalem,  
and the heavens and the earth shake.  
But the Lord is a refuge for his people,  
a stronghold for the people of Israel (Joel 3:14-17).

There are other examples and when we come to the book of Revelation we encounter a whole book that is replete with apocalyptic imagery - stars falling from the sky and falling to the earth is not only scientifically impossible but remains very descriptive of the major cataclysmic changes to earthly powers.

In summary then with regard to the language introducing the sign of the son of many coming **to** the Ancient of Days is describing powers falling. It is the end of the era (age) when the Temple stood; it is the

end of the Jewish religious leaders as both overseeing the Temple and the Torah as the means through which God was made known. On trial before the Sanhedrin Jesus indicated that the kingdom was being given to him with the obvious reference to Daniel 7:13-15. It was for this that he was condemned, with the high priest saying such a claim was blasphemy.

Jesus said to him, “You have said so. But I tell you [plural throughout],

From now on you will see the Son of Man  
seated at the right hand of Power  
and coming on the clouds of heaven.” (Matt. 26:64).

Hence in this passage on ‘the coming of the Son of Man we do not have a reference to the ‘second coming’ of Jesus but the sign that the kingdom was given to Jesus (through the cross and resurrection) would be the fall of Jerusalem. His words would be proved true and this would mark the end of one era and the beginning of another.

## Conclusion on the olivet discourse

In all of the above the conclusion is that this discourse needs to be placed in the future horizon (for that generation) of the Jewish War. It finally seals that era (hence the references to escape from that ‘corrupt generation’) and establishes that we have entered a new era. There is no reason to develop a time-line from what we read there, though it is totally valid to view what we read there as giving us signs of the times we live in. As noted above it is possible that the latter part with the reference to ‘but about **that** day and hour’ (Matt. 24:36) could be referencing the final *parousia*; if it does that we note there are **no** signs associated with that.

*[The words of Jesus to describe the extent of the hardship and tribulations in extreme terms, 'For at that time there will be great suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be' (Matt. 24: 21) I simply understand as very apt but not making an absolute comparison to, for example, the holocaust.]*

Another passage that fits in with the Gospel passages is that in 2 Thessalonians 2 on the 'man of lawlessness'. As we approach this passage we must remember that the Scriptures are not written **to** us, therefore what is future in the passage is future for those it was written to - this does not mean it is necessarily future for us, and indeed this is my assertion.

## The 'man of lawlessness'

2 Thessalonians is an early letter (probably around 52AD) and I suggest that Paul is well aware of Jesus' teaching from the Olivet Discourse. He writes,

As to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we beg you, brothers and sisters, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as though from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here. Let no one deceive you in any way, for that day will not come unless the rebellion comes first and the lawless one is revealed, the one destined for destruction. He opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, declaring himself to be God. Do you not remember that I told you these things when I was still with you? And you know what is now restraining him, so that he

may be revealed when his time comes. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work, but only until the one who now restrains it is removed. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will destroy with the breath of his mouth, annihilating him by the manifestation of his coming. The coming of the lawless one is apparent in the working of Satan, who uses all power, signs, lying wonders, and every kind of wicked deception for those who are perishing because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion, leading them to believe what is false, so that all who have not believed the truth but took pleasure in unrighteousness will be condemned (2 Thessalonians 2:1-12).

This is an obscure passage (for us) in that Paul is referring to something he had already taught them (v. 5), but we don't know what that is. And rather than make it fit any predetermined scheme we need to bear in mind that those words were not written to us. It is therefore unlikely to be referring to something future for us, but is referring to something future to those receiving the letter.

The 'yet future to us' interpretation is along the lines of a rebuilt Temple, the rise of an antichrist, making a pact with the Jews, betraying that pact, stopping sacrifices etc., the restraining influence being the presence of the Holy Spirit in the church, so when the saints are raptured the restraining presence has been removed and the manifestation can take place.

Here is what seems to be clear:

There is a mystery of lawlessness now (at the time of Paul) at work, but there is also a restraint; there will be a rebellion and that restraint will be removed and then a revelation of a 'man of lawlessness' will come.



There are clear links to Daniel with the language used in describing the man of lawlessness. In Daniel the fulfilment is with the case of Antiochus Epiphanes IV who desecrated the Temple. The rabbis as a whole consider that the expression referred to the desecration of the Temple by the erection of a Zeus statue in its sacred precincts by Antiochus IV Epiphanes. (Two quotes from Maccabees:)

When these happenings were reported to the king, he thought that Judea was in revolt. Raging like a wild animal, he set out from Egypt and took Jerusalem by storm. He ordered his soldiers to cut down without mercy those whom they met and to slay those who took refuge in their houses. There was a massacre of young and old, a killing of women and children, a slaughter of virgins and infants. In the space of three days, eighty thousand were lost, forty thousand meeting a violent death, and the same number being sold into slavery. (2 Maccabees 5:11-14)

Not long after this the king sent an Athenian senator to force the Jews to abandon the customs of their ancestors and live no longer by the laws of God; also to profane the temple in Jerusalem and dedicate it to Olympian Zeus, and that on Mount Gerizim to Zeus the Hospitable, as the inhabitants of the place requested... They also brought into the temple things that were forbidden, so that the altar was covered with abominable offerings prohibited by the laws. A man could not keep the sabbath or celebrate the traditional feasts, nor even admit that he was a Jew. At the suggestion of the citizens of Ptolemais, a decree was issued ordering the neighbouring Greek cities to act in the same way against the Jews: oblige them to partake of the sacrifices, and put to death those who would not consent to adopt the customs of the Greeks. It was obvious, therefore, that disaster impended. Thus, two women

who were arrested for having circumcised their children were publicly paraded about the city with their babies hanging at their breasts and then thrown down from the top of the city wall. Others, who had assembled in nearby caves to observe the sabbath in secret, were betrayed to Philip and all burned to death. (2 Maccabees 6:1-11)

Jesus using the same kind of language ('abomination that causes desolation') spoke of a future desecration that took place in AD70 when the Romans entered the city and the Temple. And now in this passage Paul is saying that one will come to the Temple. What does he mean by referring to the Temple? Given that the Temple is still standing at the time of the letter it seems the obvious interpretation is the Temple in Jerusalem, rather than some figurative use, such as 'the people of God'. Paul seems to be referring to the literal Temple in Jerusalem. This ties what Paul is writing about to the words of Jesus in Matthew 24 and parallels.

There is an act of rebellion that precedes this event. The word (*apostasia*) can be a reference to a **religious** or **political** act. Josephus uses the word in the political sense to speak of the Jewish rebellion against Rome. This suggests again that we should look for these words to be referring to the Jewish rebellion against Rome, precipitating the destruction of city and Temple. Paul is then elaborating or repeating the words of Jesus. (We should note that there is no context here of persecution mentioned (antichrist against Jews or Christians), but of rebellion – against Rome probably.)

The day of the Lord had not arrived as there were events that were yet to happen in line with what he had explained to them when he had been with them in person.

There will come a major crisis manifesting with a claimant opposing God directly, putting himself forward in the Temple (as per

Antiochus) so bringing about a desecration. Currently, Paul says there is a restraint on this taking place (there are various suggestions on what that restraint is: it could be the church in Jerusalem / Judea; others suggest that of the Roman form of government; or the advance of the Gospel throughout the Roman empire). That restraining influence / person (both a principle of restraint '**what** is now restraining' him and something personal '**the one** who is restraining') will at some future time be removed... A viable suggestion of the 'who' is that it is James the Just (brother of Jesus) who died in 62AD, Josephus saying he was stoned to death through the work of the Sanhedrin. I will add a further suggestion below and it is the one that I favour (Ananus the high priest who ordered the death of James and who himself died in 68AD).

The above suggestions of James or of Ananus being removed, for me, come the closest to a viable historical event, and certainly subsequent to James' death the rebellion increased and the Jewish war of 66-70AD ensued.

We then read that the rebellion will increase, resulting in the manifestation of this lawless one.

I suggest there is a key to help us verses 8 and 9,

And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will destroy with the breath of his mouth, annihilating him by the manifestation of his **coming**. The **coming** of the lawless one is apparent in the working of Satan, who uses all power, signs, lying wonders...

Reading as in the above we have two distinct comings (both times the word *parousia*) mentioned. The coming of Jesus and the coming of the man of lawlessness. However, it seems to make better sense to have both 'comings' as referring to the 'man of lawlessness'. v.8

ends with 'the manifestation of his coming and v. 9 begins with 'whose coming' is in accordance with the work of Satan. Hence I suggest a more natural way to translate the verses would be,

And then shall be revealed the lawless one, whom the Lord (some MSS do not add 'Jesus') will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy and will overpower in (at the time of) the appearance of his coming, whose coming is according to the working of Satan . . .

The 'miracles and wonders' that are manifest (or at least claimed and proclaimed) fit what was attributed to the Roman Emperor. Tacitus writes of Vespasian (emperor 69-79AD) that he was called the miracle worker, because by him,

many miracles occurred (Tacitus, Histories 4:81; Suetonius, Vespasian 7).

The history books record that, amazingly, many thousands of Jews entered Jerusalem at the last moment to celebrate Passover, even while the Romans were surrounding the city, and even after many thousands had been slain on the temple mount by the Jewish (Zealot) revolutionaries. (Jesus had said to leave the city, to move in the opposite direction to those who were entering it.)

There was a leader, John of Gischala, who fed a fantasy to his followers that God would never allow the city and temple to fall into Roman hands. No matter what evil, even Jews practised, God would protect them from enemy hands. Josephus says that John commissioned false prophets to propagate that lie, while drawing more and more victims to the temple mount. As a result of that lie, hundreds of thousands met their violent end. Josephus gives the

figure at 1,100,000 dead and 97,000 prisoners (probably an exaggerated figure but nevertheless gives an indication that the result was of cataclysmic proportions).

Once the High Priest, Ananus, was killed in the build up to the increase of rebellion **the restraint** on John of Gischala **was taken away**... The prophetic words of Jesus, and Paul's elaboration of it played out.

Taken this way this passage is not about the second coming (it is not even mentioned in this context), but about the events of AD70 that have to take place prior to the *parousia* of Christ or the Day of the Lord.

The 'antichrist' that some understand to be who Paul is calling 'the man of lawlessness' then does not need to be understood as a future ruler, and there is certainly no need from this passage to surmise the possibility of a rebuilt temple.

This does not rule out the possibility of a future manifestation, or a world ruler, simply that this passage is not a direct support for such a belief.

## The second horizon

The events that led up to the destruction of both the city and Temple seem to be the focus of Jesus' words in the Olivet discourse and also what Paul had previously taught in Thessalonica. One cannot ascertain if Paul's expectation was that the 'final' *parousia* would happen immediately after the fall of Jerusalem or not. I suspect he probably did for he writes of 'that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord' (1 Thess.4:15). Perhaps Paul had no sight

beyond the 'second horizon' other than 'the Day of the Lord' would come in fullness. For a perspective that looks beyond the second horizon we will have to go to the book that focuses beyond Jerusalem and on Rome, beyond the fall of one epoch to the fall of Imperial power.