

INTERPRETIVE FLAWS IN THE OLIVET DISCOURSE

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The Olivet Discourse as the ultimate exposition of events related to the future of Israel has been a proving ground where incorrect rapture systems have gone astray. A survey of the Discourse starts with the backdrop of a scathing rebuke and proceeds to note the stunned disciples, the doomed temple, the timing question, the unexpected delay, the great tribulation, the second coming, and the application. The first of three erring rapture systems, posttribulationism, understands the Discourse to focus on the church, but the larger context and the immediate context demonstrate conclusively that Israel is the main focus. The pre-wrath system is the second erring interpretation when it misconstrues Matt 24:22 and its mention of the shortening of the great tribulation. The third erring system is preterism with its teaching that the Discourse was in the main fulfilled in events around A.D. 70. Preterism falters hermeneutically in its non-literal interpretation of the prophecy. Pretribulationism responds to the hermeneutical fallacies by interpreting “this generation” in Matt 24:34 to refer to the generation alive when events of the great tribulation take place. Consistent pretribulationism understands “one taken, one left” and “the fig tree” to refer to events pertaining to the second coming, not the rapture of the church.

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At first glance, it might seem strange to focus on the Olivet Discourse in a series on the rapture since the rapture is not found in this passage. Why pick this particular passage that does not discuss the rapture when there are many more that do not, as well as several that do? The answer is at least threefold.

First, the Olivet Discourse, found in Matthew 24–25 and parallel passages in Mark and Luke is of vital importance because of who the author is. This is the Lord’s ultimate exposition of future events during His time on earth.¹ Second, the Olivet Discourse gives an outline of the future of Israel—a people at the center of

¹Of course, the book of Revelation is the “Revelation of Jesus Christ” as well (Rev. 1:1).

much of biblical eschatology. Third, from a negative side, the Olivet Discourse is important because all incorrect rapture systems go astray in this passage. The Olivet Discourse is thus a monumental passage for the doctrine of eschatology.

It is impossible, of course, to give a detailed exposition of these two chapters in a brief essay, so the essay's objectives are somewhat limited.² The procedure will be twofold. First will come a survey of the Olivet Discourse in order to grasp the Lord's flow of thought in the Discourse. Of course, the survey must assume an eschatological viewpoint, which is pretribulational premillennialism. Second, with the survey as a backdrop, the article will consider the interpretive flaws in three other eschatological systems.³ The goal is not to refute any one of these systems in detail, but to point out some of the defects in interpreting the Olivet Discourse. In addition, the study will attempt to demonstrate the benefits of a consistent pretribulational understanding of the Olivet Discourse.

THE SURVEY

The Scathing Rebuke—Matthew 23

The Lord's exposition of the future is given on the Mount of Olives near the end of His ministry on earth. In the immediately preceding context, He fiercely rebukes the unbelief found in that generation of Israelites, especially the hypocrisy imbedded in their religious leaders. He concludes His denunciation of them with a curse on the Jerusalem temple, the center of first-century Judaism: "See! Your house is left to you desolate; for I say to you, you shall see Me no more till you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!'" (Matt 23:38-39, NKJV).

The Stunned Disciples—Matt 24:1

The disciples were clearly taken back by such a condemnation of the temple. In the first place, the temple was in many ways the patriotic symbol that evidenced the solidarity of Israel. Moreover, the Lord's statement no doubt reminded them of Yahweh's warning immediately before Solomon's temple was

²Other pretribulational studies of the various rapture systems' approach to the Olivet Discourse include Stanley D. Toussaint, "Are the Church and the Rapture in Matthew 24?" in *The Return*, eds. Thomas Ice and Timothy J. Demy (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999) 121-36; and Bruce A. Ware, "Is the Church in View in Matthew 24-25?" *BSac* 138 (April-June 1981):158-72. Toussaint's study interacts especially with the pre-wrath view. Ware's study focuses especially on the posttribulationism of Robert Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973). For a full-length study of the Olivet Discourse, see John F. MacArthur, *The Second Coming* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1999). Also, an excellent series of essays on the Olivet Discourse is presented in *Israel My Glory* 52/2 (April/May 1994). Authors include Will Varner, Mark Robinson, Elwood McQuaid, Fred Harftman, Renald Showers, and David M. Levy.

³Another way to approach the Olivet Discourse is to compare futurism, preterism, traditional preterist-futurism, and revised preterist-futurism. See David L. Turner, "The Structure and Sequence of Matthew 24:1-41: Interaction with Evangelical Treatments," *Grace Theological Journal* 10/1 (1989):3-27.

destroyed by the Babylonians. Concerning that temple, Jeremiah records Yahweh as saying, “I swear by Myself . . . that this house shall become a desolation” (Jer 22:5, NKJV).

So, in their nervous confusion, the disciples point out the magnificence of the temple (Matt 24:1)—and Herod’s temple was a glorious building indeed. It was constructed of huge white marble stones plated with gold. Some of the stones, in fact, weighed as much as 100 tons, and shined so brightly in the sun that people could hardly look at them. The rabbis insisted, “He who has not seen Herod’s Temple has not seen a beautiful building.” So the disciples could hardly believe their ears. “Did we hear you correctly, Lord? Will this marvelous temple be made desolate?”

The Doomed Temple—Matt 24:2

The Lord’s answer was unequivocal. “Do you not see all these things? Assuredly, I say to you, not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down” (24:2, NKJV). And so it was some 40 years later, the Roman legions, led by the emperor’s son, Titus, destroyed the temple and the city. According to Josephus, the city was ruined to such an extent that one could hardly tell that the area had been previously inhabited.

The Timing Questions—Matt 24:3

The disciples, however, knew nothing about the events of A.D. 70. What they heard from Jesus was not at all what they had expected when the Messiah came. So, when they arrived on the Mount of Olives, they asked Him three questions about the future of Israel—specifically about the relationship of the destruction of the temple to the second coming and future Kingdom. Matthew records, “Now as He sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, ‘Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?’” (24:3, NKJV). The rest of the teaching in Matthew 24–25, as well as the parallel passages in Mark 13 and Luke 21, is devoted to Jesus’ answers to these questions.

The Unexpected Delay—Matt 24:4-14

The Lord first explains that, in contrast to what the disciples had thought, His Kingdom on earth would not begin immediately. The great Messianic Kingdom promised by the OT prophets was to be delayed, and instead there would be a period characterized by false Christs, wars, famines, earthquakes, persecutions, false religions, secularism, as well as the preaching of the gospel. Such events would typify the era from the time of the Lord’s prophecy up to the middle of the seven-year tribulation.

The Great Tribulation—Matt 24:15-22

But the last half of the tribulation would be even more horrendous. According to Christ, “For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been

since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be"⁴ (24:21, NKJV). In this great tribulation, the Lord judges the earth and the unbelieving peoples of the earth, and prepares the nation of Israel spiritually for His second coming and His setting up of the Kingdom

The Second Coming—Matt 24:23-31

Concerning His second coming, Christ explains,

Immediately after the tribulation 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 the heavens 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 (24:29-30, NKJV).

These verses do not describe the rapture of the church, but the glorious coming of Christ at the end of the tribulation to establish His Kingdom.⁵

The Application—Matt 24:32-25:46

The description of the second coming of Christ to earth is followed by a series of parables and illustrations emphasizing the need to be prepared, alert, and serving the Lord in anticipation of His coming. David Turner points out, "Jesus spent only half as much time on the bare facts of the future as he did on the implications of those facts."⁶ Chapter 25 explains that at the coming of Christ, there will be a judgment on believing Israel as well as on the Gentile nations of the world. As a result of these judgments, believing Jews (the wise virgins) and believing Gentiles (the sheep) will "inherit the kingdom prepared . . . from the foundation of the world" (25:34, NKJV).⁷ Unbelieving Jews (the foolish virgins) and unbelieving Gentiles (the goats) "will go away into everlasting punishment" (25:46, NKJV).

⁴Some 60 years later, the Apostle John who was present to hear the Olivet Discourse from his Lord was given the details of this future horrible time on earth (Rev. 4–18).

⁵For the differences between the rapture and the second coming, see Paul N. Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy* (Chicago: Moody, 1995) 179-81. Benware also has a helpful critique of the pre-wrath view (221-41).

⁶Turner, "The Structure and Sequence of Matthew 24:1-41" 27.

⁷For an excellent study of the Sheep and Goats judgment, see Eugene W. Pond's three-part series: "The Background and Timing of the Judgment of the Sheep and Goats," *BSac* 159 (April-June 2002):201-20; "Who Are the Sheep and Goats in Matthew 25:31-46?," *BSac* 159 (July-September, 2002):288-301; and "Who Are 'the Least of My Brethren?',", forthcoming in *BSac* 159 (October-December, 2002).

THE SYSTEMS

The preceding survey provides a backdrop for evaluating other rapture systems, specifically, posttribulationism, pre-wrath, and preterism. Then the essay will briefly evaluate two passages that are problems for some pretribulationists.

Posttribulationism

Posttribulationism is the view that the church will be raptured at the end of the seven-year tribulation period. It is held in various forms by some premillennialists, amillennialists, and postmillennialists, though attention will focus primarily on premillennial posttribulationism. Often posttribulationists claim to be the traditional view of the church, using the term, “historic premillennialism.” This, however, is doubtful.⁸ The most common contemporary form of posttribulationism that views the tribulation as a future seven-year period is no more “historic” than contemporary pretribulationism.⁹

Discourse Focus

In explaining the Olivet Discourse, posttribulationists teach that Jesus describes the tribulation up through Matt 24:29, and that a posttribulational rapture is depicted in verses 30-31. This is in contrast to pretribulationists who believe Christ presents the second coming here without a reference to a rapture. According to posttribulationists, the rapture is described again in 24:40-42, where the Lord speaks of two men in the field, with the one taken and the other left; and two women at the mill, with one taken and the other left. Since the descriptions there follow the tribulation discussion, posttribulationists insist that this passage must describe a posttribulational rapture.

In order for the posttribulational view to find support in the Olivet Discourse, posttribulationists need to demonstrate that Jesus is explaining the future of the church, not the future of Israel. Otherwise, the Discourse could give no

⁸It is difficult to classify the rapture systems of most of the early church fathers. Some of the early fathers who were posttribulational seem to be intra-tribulationists. They believed that they were in the tribulation already, that the tribulation was of indeterminate length (not 7 years), and that Christ would rapture the church at the end of the tribulation. Thus, for them, the rapture was imminent. In the twentieth century, J. Barton Payne was the main, and almost only evangelical writer, who held to this form of “historic premillennialism.” See J. Barton Payne, *The Imminent Appearance of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962). For a helpful study of different kinds of posttribulationism, see John Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976).

⁹For a defense of the type of posttribulationism held by most posttribulationists today, see George Eldon Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956). For a defense of the historic nature of pretribulationism, see Larry V. Crutchfield, “The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation in the Apostolic Fathers,” in *The Return*, 75-93. In the same book, see Timothy Demy and Thomas Ice, “The Rapture and an Early Medieval Citation” 55-73. Also see Francis Gumerlock, “A Rapture Citation in the Fourteenth Century,” *BSac* 159 (July-September, 2002):349-62.

information about the rapture. Thus, posttribulationists argue that the disciples in this passage represent the church, not believing Israel. As posttribulationist Douglas Moo says, “Thus, the crucial question becomes: Whom do the disciples represent in this passage—Israel or the church?”¹⁰ Two evenings later, when the Lord’s Supper was instituted, they represent the church. So, why not here, asks posttribulationist J. Barton Payne. “If they represented the church in Matthew 26 on Thursday, no arbitrary exegesis can make them represent anything else in Matthew 24 on Tuesday.”¹¹ “No one doubts,” writes Moo, “that the disciples in most contexts of the gospels stand for Christians of all ages—or else why do we take Jesus’ teaching as our own instruction? Only if the context clearly necessitates a restriction should any narrowing of the audience be suggested.”¹²

Moreover, say the posttribulationists, since the church is mentioned in Matthew 16:18 and 18:15-18, the bulk of Christ’s teaching in the gospels is directly applicable to the church. Robert Gundry writes,

Pretribulationists further argue that the context of the Olivet Discourse stamps it unmistakably with a Jewish impress. But we must take care not to miss the import of the context by drawing a false deduction in dislodging the discourse from churchly teaching. Rather, the context indicates that the Jewish nation has passed into a state of divine disfavor because of their rejection of Jesus the Messiah. Since Jesus speaks from that standpoint, we might think it better logic to conclude that the discourse relates to the present dispensation characterized by Israel’s setting aside.¹³

Thus, the argument seems to unfold as follows:

1. The church is responsible for Jesus’ teaching.
2. The disciples were the original recipients of Jesus’ teaching.
3. Therefore, the disciples represent the church.
4. The nation of Israel has been set aside.
5. Therefore, the passage is explaining the rapture of the church.

Fatal Flaw: Contextual Subterfuge

Pretribulationists, however, point out that posttribulationists have missed

¹⁰Douglas J. Moo, “The Case for the Posttribulation Rapture Position,” in *The Rapture, Pre-, Mid-, or Post-Tribulation?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 192. This is a helpful book detailing the different views of the three rapture systems. Authors include Gleason L. Archer, Jr., Paul D. Feinberg, Douglas J. Moo, and Richard R. Reiter. For an interesting evaluation of the debate between pretribulationist Paul Feinberg and posttribulationist Douglas Moo, see John S. Feinberg, “Arguing for the Rapture: Who Must Prove What and How?,” in *When the Trumpet Sounds*, eds. Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy (Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House, 1995) 187-210.

¹¹Payne, *The Imminent Appearance of Christ* 55.

¹²Moo, “Case for the Posttribulation Rapture Position” 192.

¹³Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* 131.

the point of the debate.¹⁴ The issue is not about to whom the discourse is applicable. Of course, this passage, like all of Scripture, is applicable to the church. Matthew expected, no doubt, that his book would be used as a teaching manual for the church (Mat. 28:19-20). All Christians living in the present dispensation should find great teaching and helpful information in this passage for their own lives. The issue, however, is, What is Jesus talking about? Or more specifically, About whom is Jesus teaching? And the answer to this question found in the context of the passage is believing Israel.

The Larger Context: The Book of Matthew. It is impossible to ignore the Jewish flavor of the content of Matthew. In Leon Morris' words, "There is a 'Jewishness' about this Gospel."¹⁵ OT theology saturates the apologetic of the book. First, Matthew proves that Christ was the rightful heir to the promises of the Abrahamic and Davidic Covenants (1:1). Only Jesus could be the Messiah. Second, Matthew wrote to present Christ as King of Israel in exact fulfillment of OT prophecies. Third, Matthew wanted to describe Christ's presentation of the Messianic Kingdom in fulfillment of the OT prophets. His presentation was supported by Jesus' sinless life, miracles, and divine message. As Tasker says, "The apologetic aim of the evangelist can be summed up in the sentence 'Jesus is the Messiah, and in Him Jewish prophecy is fulfilled.'"¹⁶

Of course, Matthew also wrote to show why Christ introduced the church. It was because the Jews of that generation, following their religious leaders, rejected their Messiah. Therefore, Matthew explains how Christ introduced the concept of a new entity: "I will build my church" (Matt 16:18). Thus, in the end, the gospel of Christ is to be taken to the whole world. But the entire book is a study of the presentation of the Kingdom to the nation of Israel and Israel's refusal to accept it. If there is one theme for the book, it would be found in Matthew 21:5: "Behold your King is coming to you." So, though the Olivet Discourse, as well as the whole book of Matthew, is *for* the church, it is *about* the Messiah, His presentation of His Kingdom to Israel, Israel's rejection of His Kingdom and upcoming judgment, Christ's second coming, and the future Messianic Kingdom. It is apparent that Henry Thiessen was correct when he wrote, "Matthew wrote to encourage and confirm the persecuted Jewish Christians in their faith, to confute their opponents, and to prove to both that the Gospel was not a contradiction of the teaching of the Old Testament, but rather a fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham and to

¹⁴David Turner, however, apparently a pretribulationist, agrees with the posttribulationists at this point. See "The Structure and Sequence of Matthew 24:1-41" 5-7.

¹⁵Leon Morris, *New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) 115. Morris balances this statement, "Matthew's 'Jewishness' should not be stressed to the exclusion of another feature of this Gospel, its universalism (8:11-12; 12:21; 21:43; 28:16-20)" (ibid.).

¹⁶R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, ed. R.V.G. Tasker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961) 18.

David.”¹⁷

The Immediate Context: The Disciples' Question. But even more significant is the immediate context. The whole Olivet Discourse is based on three questions asked by Jesus' disciples. So an investigation of the questions the disciples asked tells whether Christ is describing the future of the church or of Israel.

As noted in the survey above, the setting for the Olivet Discourse is the disciples' consternation over the Lord's denunciation of the Jerusalem temple. Thus they pointed to the magnificence of the temple buildings (24:1). But Jesus replied that all would be destroyed (24:2). The disciples then asked three questions, clearly about the future of Israel (24:3):

1. When will the temple be destroyed?
2. What will be the sign of the second coming?
3. What will be the sign of the end of the present age and beginning of the Kingdom age?

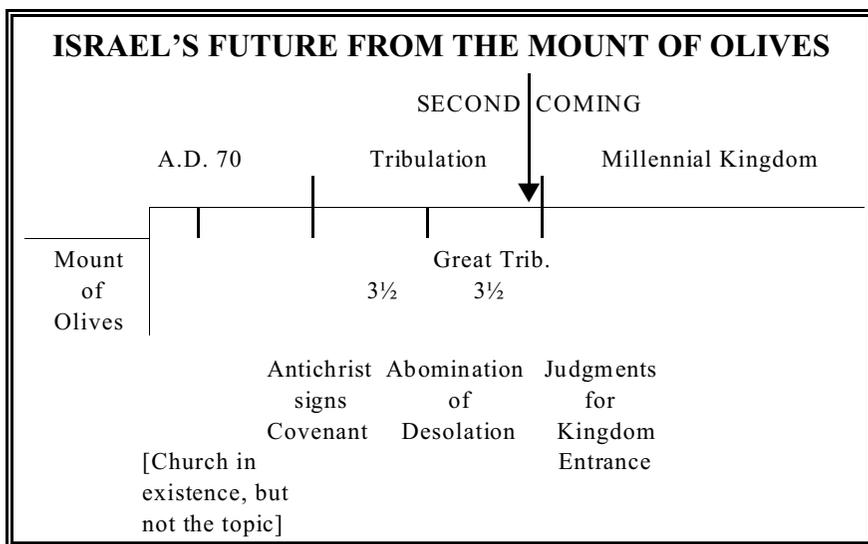
According to OT theology, these three events—the destruction of the temple, the coming of Messiah, and the beginning of the Kingdom age—went together. In the end times an attack on Jerusalem and the temple would come; Christ would return and fight for Israel; the current age would end and the Messianic Kingdom would be initiated (Zech 14:1-11). Of course, the disciples did not know that the temple in Jerusalem would be destroyed more than once in the future. So, when Christ said that the temple would be destroyed, they thought that the other two events would follow.

But the point is that the disciples were not asking anything about the church or the rapture. They knew next to nothing about either one. They knew only about Israel, the temple, Jerusalem, the coming of the Messiah to earth, and the Kingdom.

Thus the issue as to whom the disciples represent is contrived by posttribulationists. Actually, the disciples could represent the church on some occasions and Israel on other occasions.¹⁸ But this is a false issue here. The issue here is the immediate context. What did the disciples ask about? And the answer is, they asked about the main events prophesied in the OT for the future of Israel. And Christ answered those questions in His Discourse. Consistent pretribulationists are correct in teaching that the rapture is not found in Matthew 24–25.

¹⁷Henry Clarence Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1943) 137.

¹⁸For example, they represent Israel in the commission given by Christ in Matthew 10; and they represent the church in the commission given by Christ in Matt 28:19-20.



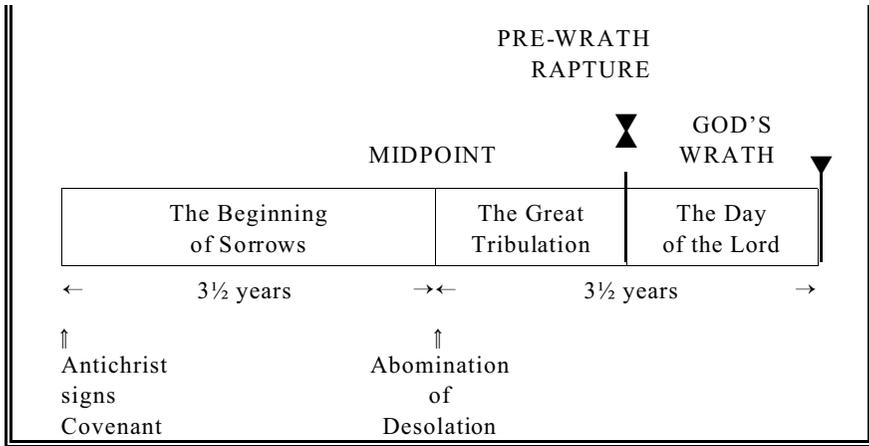
Pre-wrath

The pre-wrath rapture is a system devised recently by Marvin Rosenthal and Robert Van Kampen.¹⁹ According to this view, the rapture takes place about three-fourths of the way through the seven-year tribulation, though these authors insist that we should not call the entire time period the “tribulation.” The tribulation in this view is only the first three and one-half years of Daniel’s seventieth week. God’s wrath is actually not poured out on the earth until about the last one-fourth of the seven-year period. The troubles on the earth in the first three-fourths of this period are not God’s wrath, according to the pre-wrath view, but are brought about by Satan and man himself.²⁰ Since God does not pour out His wrath until after the rapture, the system is known as “pre-wrath.”

PRE-WRATH RAPTURE
Daniel’s 70th Week

¹⁹See Robert D. Van Kampen, *The Sign* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1992); and Robert D. Van Kampen, *The Rapture Question Answered* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1997).

²⁰This means that the earthquakes described in Matthew 24:7 (which Rosenthal thinks will occur in the first half of the seven-year era) are the result of the power of Satan or man. Toussaint observes, “Interestingly, Rosenthal never explains how the earthquakes in Matthew 24:7 are triggered by humans!” (Toussaint, “Are the Church and the Rapture in Matthew 24?” 133).



[Source of chart: Marvin Rosenthal, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church* (Nashville: Nelson, 1990) 61.]

Discourse Focus

The pre-wrath system looks to Matt 24:22 for support. “And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect’s sake those days will be shortened” (NKJV). Rosenthal explains,

To sum up, then, God will cut the Great Tribulation short; that is bring it to a conclusion before the seventieth week is concluded. The Great Tribulation will be followed by cosmic disturbance, which will indicate that the Day of the Lord is about to commence. At that time God’s glory will be manifested. . . . First, the Rapture of the church will occur; that will then be followed by the Lord’s judgment of the wicked as He begins His physical return to earth.²¹

Fatal Flaw: Exegetical Short-sightedness

There are several problems with the pre-wrath understanding of this section of the Olivet Discourse. First, as shown above, this passage does not deal with the rapture of the church at all. It is a discussion of the future of Israel from the viewpoint of believing Jews.

Second, “shortened” does not teach what Rosenthal says it does. “Shortened” (ἐκολοβώθησαν, *ekolobōthēsan*), 3rd person plural, aorist, indicative passive, from κολοβώ (kolobōō), is correctly translated “shortened.” But the real question asks, From what to what is the tribulation is shortened? First, it is shorter than what Satan’s forces—the Antichrist and his associates—want. Gerhard Delling writes, “That is, He has made it shorter than it would normally have been in terms

²¹Marvin Rosenthal, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church* (Nashville: Nelson, 1990) 112-13.

of the purpose and power of the oppressors.”²² It is also shorter than what the wicked world deserves. If God were to pour out perfect judgment, no one would survive. But God is merciful and thus limits the great tribulation to only 1260 days. It will not go on indefinitely. Paul Benware writes,

So Jesus is teaching that the decree of God, made in eternity past, had already determined that the Great Tribulation would be just three and a half years and not some longer period of time. This interpretation is verified by noting what the Scriptures say about the length of the Great Tribulation.²³

Another flaw in the pre-wrath interpretation of Matthew 24:22 is its logical failure to explain properly the reason that the great tribulation is shortened. The reason given is that if it were not, no flesh would be saved. The point of the Scripture is that when the great tribulation is over, something easier and better comes on the scene. In the pre-wrath scheme, however, something more horrible occurs—the Day of the Lord. If no flesh would have survived a continuation of the great tribulation through the full forty-two months, surely no flesh would survive if the great tribulation were to be cut short and followed by the awesome Day of the Lord.

Moreover, Matthew 24:21 says that the great tribulation will be the worst time ever. So, how can it be replaced by the Day of the Lord which is more horrible in that it consists in God’s wrath on the world? In fact, the great tribulation (Matt 24:21) and the Day of the Lord (Dan 12:1; Jer 30:7) are both said to be the worst time ever, so they must be the same time period or at least overlap one another. How much better is the pretribulational interpretation of Matthew 24:22 which says that when the great tribulation concludes at the end of 1,260 days, Christ returns, judgment on the earth ceases, and the millennial Kingdom begins!²⁴

Preterism

Preterism teaches that though the information in the Lord’s lecture on the future of Israel was prophetic when He gave it, the prophecy has already been fulfilled. There are at least three kinds of preterism. Thomas Ice writes,

Mild preterism holds that the Tribulation was fulfilled within the first three hundred years of Christianity. . . . Moderate preterism . . . sees the Tribulation and the bulk of prophecy as fulfilled in events surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in A.D. 70;

²²Gerhard Delling, “κολοβῶω,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 3, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965) 823-24.

²³Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy* 230.

²⁴For critiques of the pre-wrath rapture system, see Paul S. Karleen, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church: Is It Biblical?* (Langhorne, Pa.: BF Press, 1991); Renald E. Showers, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture View* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001), especially 93-151; Toussaint, “Are the Church and the Rapture in Matthew 24?” 133-35.

but they still hold to a future Second Coming, a physical resurrection of the dead, an end to temporary history, and the establishing of the consummate new heaven and new earth. Extreme or consistent (as they like to call themselves) preterism believes that the Second Coming, and thus the resurrection of believers, is all past. For all practical purposes all Bible prophecy has been fulfilled, and we are beyond the millennium and even now in the new heaven and the new earth.²⁵

Extreme preterists, such as John Noë, claim to be evangelical and believe in the inerrancy of Scripture.²⁶ But to maintain the view that essentially all of prophecy has been fulfilled requires fanciful interpretation of key Scriptures. What about 2 Pet 3:10? “But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up” (NASB). Has this already occurred? Noë says that this is talking about the conversion experience. “Individually, we become a ‘new heaven’ when God comes to dwell inside us, in our spirit. . . . The ‘new heaven’ is the new spirit God gives a person at salvation (1 Cor. 3:16; Eph. 2:6).”²⁷ He continues, “That means that our former earth consists of our unregenerated physical bodies, and our minds and emotions. This is what the Bible calls our ‘flesh.’”²⁸ Pretribulationist Thomas Ice says, “Both Dr. Gentry [a moderate preterist] and I believe that such a position is heretical, for it denies a bodily resurrection of believers and a future second coming of Christ.”²⁹

Discourse Focus

Where do preterists get the idea that prophetic events are already past? In Matthew 24, preterism emphasizes verse 34: “Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place” (NKJV). Preterism argues that “this generation” means the generation that was alive when Jesus was on earth, and so everything recorded in the Olivet Discourse took place by around A.D. 70.

²⁵Thomas Ice, “Introduction” to *The Great Tribulation, Past or Future?* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999) 7. In this book, two evangelicals debate the rapture question, Thomas Ice representing the pretribulationist view, and Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., representing a moderate preterism view.

²⁶See John Noë, *Beyond the End Times* (Bradford, Pa.: International Preterist Association, 1999); and Noë, *Shattering the “Left Behind” Delusion* (Bradford, Pa.: International Preterist Association, 2000).

²⁷Noë, *Beyond End Times* 253-54.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 255.

²⁹Ice, *The Great Tribulation, Past or Future?* 7.

Fatal Flaw: Hermeneutical Compromise

But once preterists have argued this point, they are in trouble because there are several events in Matthew 24 that clearly have not happened. Thus they are forced to spiritualize those events. All forms of preterism, some more than others, have to rely on figurative interpretation. John Noë, for example, defends non-literal interpretation of prophecy as follows: “The popular stream of endsayers has assumed that the Bible’s apocalyptic language must be interpreted literally and physically, and that since no one has witnessed a cataclysmic, earth-ending event of this nature, its time must lie in the future.”³⁰ The result of the compromise of the hermeneutical integrity thus results in bizarre interpretations such as noted above of 2 Pet 3:10.

Preterists take much of the Olivet Discourse figuratively. Matt 24:27 reads, “For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be” (NKJV). Actually, the passage is teaching that Christ’s coming will not be local only, but public and grandiose. But moderate preterist Gentry says that the lightning is a picture of “the Roman armies marching toward Jerusalem from an easterly direction.”³¹

In verse 30 of Matthew 24, the Lord teaches that at the second coming, “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” (NKJV). But Gentry insists that “this is not a physical, visible coming, but a judgment coming upon Jerusalem. They ‘see’ it in the sense that we ‘see’ how a math problem works: with the ‘eye of understanding’ rather than the organ of vision.”³² In this figurative sense, the prophetic events of the Olivet Discourse were fulfilled in A.D. 70 when the Romans captured and destroyed Jerusalem.

Pretribulation Response

Besides the obvious disagreement with preterists over hermeneutical method, many pretribulationists believe that the preterists’ interpretation of “this generation” (24:34) is askew. Preterists argue that this means that the generation that was alive at the time that Christ presented this discourse must remain until everything in the discourse was fulfilled.³³ For the extreme preterist, this means that the second coming occurred while that generation was alive. Noë insists, “Make no mistake about it, A.D. 70 was the Lord’s promised and personal return!”³⁴

None of the OT prophets’ predictions of the coming of the Messiah in

³⁰Ibid., 51.

³¹Gentry, *The Great Tribulation, Past or Future?* 54.

³²Ibid., 60.

³³Not all pretribulationists disagree with the preterist interpretation of “this generation.” See Turner, “The Structure and Sequence of Matthew 24:1-41” 22-26.

³⁴Noë, *Beyond End Times* 196. Noë asks, “But where does Scripture say that Jesus’ return must be ‘visible’?” (198). Such a question makes sense only if one allegorizes away such Scriptures as Acts 1:9-11 and Matt 24:23-31.

power and glory (Zechariah 12–14), however, harmonizes with the events of A.D. 70. The OT prophets taught that when the armies surrounded Jerusalem, the Messiah would come and fight for Israel. Israel, at the second coming, will be victorious. But in A. D. 70, Israel was defeated and devastated, and the times of the Gentiles was ushered in. Something is therefore awry with the extreme preterists' interpretation of "this generation."

What does it mean, therefore, that "this generation" would not pass away until all these things take place (24:34)? Some pretribulationists have suggested that "generation" in this passage means "race," or "nation," or "family." Thus the Lord would be saying that the nation of Israel would not pass away until all of the things spoken of in the Olivet Discourse are fulfilled. Though this is a true statement, this interpretation is based on an unusual meaning for "generation" (*γενεά*, *genea*). Moreover, the "until" is a problem, for it would imply that the nation of Israel *would* pass away after the second coming, and Scripture certainly does not teach this.

Some good Bible teachers have argued that "this generation" is used in a negative sense, a pejorative sense, meaning "wicked generation."³⁵ This interpretation is based on the way "generation" is often used throughout the Gospels—the wicked generation that refused the Kingship to Christ. According to this view, Christ, in effect, is setting the record straight with His disciples who believed in the immediate arrival of the Kingdom inhabited only by the righteous. Instead, says Christ, the wicked will be here until after the tribulation and second coming. In addition, Jesus may be making the point that the wicked will receive the judgments of the tribulation.

This view may be correct. It is certainly true that the wicked will be on earth until after the tribulation and second coming. Its weakness is that it is questionable that "this generation" is used enough in a pejorative sense to become a technical term for wicked people.

The best interpretation of "this generation" is that the generation who sees the events of the great tribulation will not pass away before the second coming occurs. The disciples had asked for a sign of the second coming (24:3). Jesus replies that the sign of the second coming will be the events of the great tribulation. Therefore, the generation that sees the events of the tribulation will know that the second coming is drawing near. Darrell Bock explains, "[O]nce the beginning of the end arrives with the cosmic signs . . . , the Son of Man will return before *that* generation passes away. . . . It is arguing that the end will occur within one generation; the same group that sees the start of the end will see its end."³⁶

Thus, preterism's claim that the generation alive at the time of Christ had to be alive when all of the Olivet Discourse was fulfilled is not legitimate. Preterism thus fails in this passage of Scripture because of its figurative hermeneutics and

³⁵See Neil D. Nelson, Jr., "'This Generation' in Matt. 24:34: A Literary Critical Perspective," *JETS* 38/3 (September 1996):369-85.

³⁶Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, The IVP New Testament Series, ed. Grant R. Osborne (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1994) 343-44 (emphasis in the original).

wrong interpretation of “this generation.”³⁷

Pretribulationism

Pretribulationism is the eschatological system within premillennialism that teaches that Jesus Christ will rapture away His church before the future seven-year tribulation begins. It is one of the most delightful and encouraging doctrines in all of Scripture. Its blessing resides primarily in the fact that believers may see their Lord and Savior in the next moment.

There is no doubt, of course, that there are some within pretribulationism who tend to be reckless and superficial with Scripture. Who can forget sermons, pamphlets, and booklets such as “88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Occur in 1988”? But thoughtful, biblical pretribulationism is still the most accurate harmonization of prophetic events—and specifically of the Olivet Discourse.

“One Taken, One Left”

Some pretribulationists are less consistent with their system than are others. It is not uncommon, for example, to hear pretribulationists preach prophetic sermons about the rapture from Matthew 24:40-42: “Then two men will be in the field: one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding at the mill: one will be taken and the other left. Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming” (NKJV). It sounds like a possible rapture passage, but is it?

Though there is no single pretribulationist interpretation of these verses, the more consistent pretribulationists teach that the church and the rapture are not in the Olivet Discourse at all. Though the one “taken” from the field and the mill sounds like a reference to the rapture, it is not. The point of Matt 24:40-42 is not to teach the imminency of the rapture. These verses teach the division of humanity at the second coming of Christ to earth, with part of the world’s population being “taken” into judgment. So, as described by Matthew, the person who is “taken” is an unbeliever at the end of the tribulation who is “taken” to be judged.

Three reasons show why this understanding is correct. First, the word for “taken” (παραλαμβάνω, *paralambanō*) is not a technical word at all, and is used of being taken into both good and bad judgment. Here, as in Matt 4:5, 8 where the devil “takes” Jesus up to the pinnacle of the temple and the exceedingly high mountain to be tempted, “taken” has a bad implication (cf. John 19:16).

Second, the immediately preceding verses (37-39) describe a taking into judgment as illustrated by the judgment of the flood. The wicked of Noah’s day, though they might have expected some type of flood judgment while watching Noah build an ark, missed the signs, and “did not know until the flood came and *took* them all away. . . .” And then the Lord adds, “so also will the coming of the Son of Man

³⁷For an analysis of a moderate preterist’s explanation of Matthew 24:3, see Mike Stallard, “A Review of R. C. Sproul’s *The Last Days According to Jesus: An Analysis of Moderate Preterism*, Part I,” *The Conservative Journal* 6/17 (March 2002):45-71.

be” (24:39, NKJV). Just as the Noahic flood came and took away the unsuspecting and unprepared wicked, the judgments at the time of the second coming will come and take away the unsuspecting and unprepared wicked.

Third, when Christ gives this illustration in Luke 17:34-37, the disciples ask, “Where will they be taken?” And the Lord answers, “Wherever the body is, there the eagles [i.e., vultures] will be gathered together” (17:37, NKJV). This is not a pretty picture—surely an image of judgment. It is also noteworthy that preceding this illustration in Luke 17 is another illustration of judgment—this time God’s judgment on Sodom. In other words, the taking from the field and the mill is always found in the midst of a judgment context.

So, these verses do not describe the rapture, but a taking into judgment at the conclusion of the tribulation period. The ones left are allowed to enter the millennial Kingdom.

The Fig Tree

Several Bible students, including some pretribulationists, believe they have discovered hints about the time of the rapture in the parable of the fig tree:

Now learn this parable from the fig tree: When its branch has already become tender and puts forth leaves, you know that summer is near. So you also, when you see all these things, know that it is near—at the doors! Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place (Matt 24:32-34, NKJV).

Whom does the fig tree represent? Some believe that it is Israel. Thus, when Israel became a nation in 1948, the timetable for a generation began, and the tribulation and second-coming events must take place before that generation died out. Counting back seven years from the end of the tribulation and the second coming means that the rapture would have occurred at least seven years before that generation passed away. So if one could know for sure how long a generation is, he could know about when the rapture would take place.

The fig tree, however, does not illustrate Israel becoming a nation in 1948. The fig tree is simply an illustration from nature. The disciples ask, What will be the sign of your coming and the end of the age? And the answer is, the events of the great tribulation. This is illustrated by the cycle of a tree. When leaves appear on a tree, that is a sign that summer is near. Similarly, when the events of the great tribulation unfold, believers can know the second coming is near.

There are two evidences for this interpretation. First, when Jesus makes His point from the fig tree illustration, He says, “When you see *all these things*, know that it is near—at the doors!” (33). The Lord is not talking about a single event such as Israel becoming a nation in 1948. He speaks of all of the events of the tribulation being signs of the second coming.

Second, in the parallel passage in Luke, Luke records Jesus adding the phrase, “and all the trees” (Luke 21:19). If the fig tree blossoming were a reference to the founding of Israel, what would the blossoming of the other trees illustrate? The parable understood in this way does not make sense.

Again, the best understanding of the illustration is that the Lord is simply giving an illustration from nature. MacArthur writes, “The point of the parable is utterly uncomplicated; even a child can tell by looking at a fig tree that summer is near. Likewise, the generation that sees all these signs come to pass will know with certainty that Christ’s return is near.”³⁸

CONCLUSION

The Olivet Discourse is a majestic passage of Scripture in which the Lord explains the future of Israel from the perspective of believing Israel. Unfortunately, most rapture systems go astray in their interpretation of the Lord’s message. Posttribulationism attempts to find the church and the rapture in this passage of Scripture by insisting that the disciples must represent the church. But the correct interpretation of this passage is not settled by whom the disciples represent. It is settled by the disciples’ questions. Do they ask about the future of the church or the future of Israel? Clearly they ask about the future of Israel in relationship to her temple, Messiah, and Kingdom. Thus, the posttribulation rapture is not to be found in the Olivet Discourse.

The pre-wrath rapture view insists that Jesus’ words about the shortening of the tribulation mean that the second half of the tribulation will be shortened, and the rapture will occur before God’s wrath is poured out in the Day of the Lord about three-fourths of the way through the seven-year period. But it is illogical to think of the tribulation being shortened, only to be replaced by something worse. Moreover, “shortened” means that the tribulation is limited to a specific time, shorter than what the powers of evil desire or what the wicked world deserves. It will not go on indefinitely.

Preterists believe that the prophecies in the Olivet Discourse were fulfilled in A.D. 70—the more extreme preterists even insisting that the second coming and other end-time events occurred then. But this is based on figurative interpretation and an incorrect understanding of “this generation” in Matthew 24:34.

Some pretribulationists (and others) have found the rapture in Matt 24:40-42, and a hint about the time of the rapture by interpreting the fig tree (24:32-34) as a prophecy of the establishment of the nation of Israel in 1948. However, the one taken and the one left in the illustrations in 24:40-42 point to the separation of humanity into two classes at the end of the tribulation. Unbelievers will be “taken” into judgment and believers will be left to enter the millennial Kingdom. It is not a passage about the rapture. And the fig tree is not about Israel, but illustrates how the events of the great tribulation will be signs of the soon arrival of the Lord Jesus Christ.

John MacArthur says, “Jesus’ answers by no means erased all the mystery from those [disciples’] questions. The interpretation of the Olivet Discourse is no

³⁸MacArthur, *Second Coming* 134.

easy undertaking.”³⁹ This is certainly true. No doubt most Bible-believing Christians, whatever their eschatological systems, are doing their best to understand the Lord’s instruction here. It is our contention, however, that a consistent contextual and literal interpretation of the Olivet Discourse as represented by pretribulationism most accurately mines the riches of this marvelous passage of Scripture.

³⁹Ibid., 77.

The Olivet Discourse ends with Jesus telling His disciples about the final judgment at the end of the Tribulation. Those who believe will enter into eternal life, and those who do not will enter into eternal punishment. We must prepare ourselves for judgment, for it will surely come to pass. For more detail, see Larry D. Pettigrew, "Interpretive Flaws in the Olivet Discourse," TMSJ 13.2 (Fall 2002): pp. 187-188. The Olivet Discourse of Matthew 24 and 25 has always been of unique interest to expositors of the Scriptures. For one thing, it is the only extended and uninterrupted discourse of Christ recorded in all three Synoptic Gospels. One might have expected this most extended teaching of Jesus to be predominantly ethical. Surprisingly, it is largely prophetic instead with ethical admonitions drawn from the eschatological teachings. 4 Larry D. Pettigrew, "Interpretive Flaws in the Olivet Discourse," The Master's Seminary Journal 13 (fall 2002): 174. 5 Gundry, The Church and the Tribulation, 129-39; Douglas J. Moo, "The Case for the Posttribulation Rapture Position," in Gleason L. Archer et al., Three Views on the Rapture: Pre-, Mid-, or Post-Tribulation? The Olivet Discourse is the ultimate exposition of events related to the future of Israel. Three erring rapture systems have gone astray: posttribulationism, pre-wrath, preterism. The Discourse is of vital importance because of who the author is. 13 Gundry, The Church and the Tribulation 131. Interpretive Flaws in the Olivet Discourse 179. the point of the debate. 14 The issue is not about to whom the discourse is applicable. Of course, this passage, like all of Scripture, is applicable to the church.