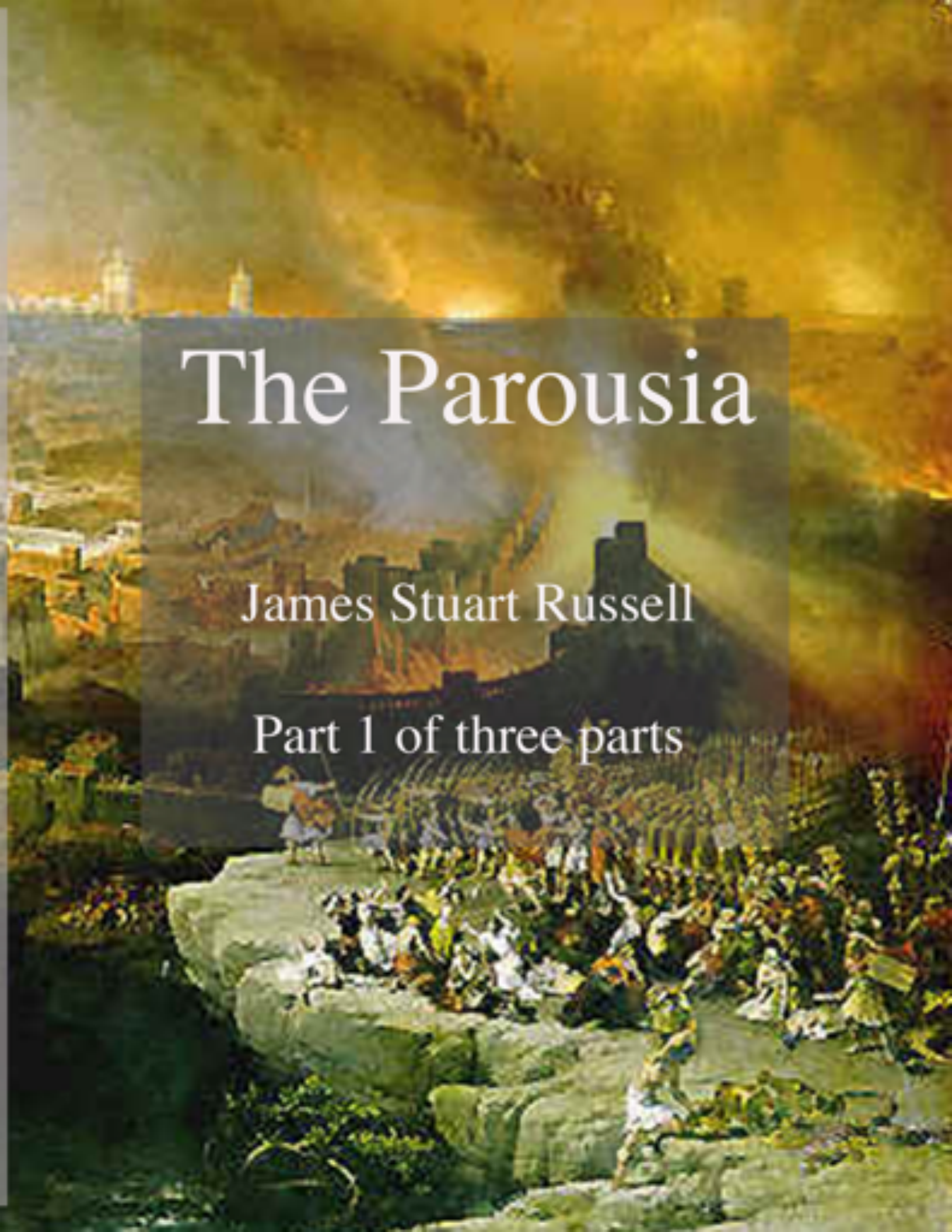

The Parousia
James Stuart Russell
Part 1 of three parts

THE PAROUSIA

A General Inquiry

INTO THE DOCTRINE OF

OUR LORD'S SECOND COMING

Οὐ γὰρ σεσοφισμένοις μύθοις ἐξακολουθήσαντες ἐγνωρίσαμεν ὑμῖν τὴν τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ δύναμιν καὶ παρουσίαν ἀλλ' ἐπόπται γενηθέντες τῆς ἐκείνου μεγαλειότητος 2 Peter 1. 16.

'HYPOTHESES NON FINGO,' --SIR ISAAC NEWTON



By James Stuart Russell M.A., D. Div.,
(1816 - 1895)

In three Parts This is Part 1

Re: Published by

Bierton Strict and Particular Baptists
11 Hayling Close
Fareham
Hampshire
United Kingdom
PO14 3AE

www.BiertonParticularBaptists.co.uk

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

Bierton Particular Baptists have republished James Stuart Russell's The Parousia to help readers gain a clearer understanding of the Book of Revelation and biblical eschatology.

The Greek word Parousia is commonly expressed in modern English as "the second coming of Christ." This is the term generally used by Christians when referring to the promised coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Russell's work examines the meaning and timing of the Parousia in the light of the teaching of Christ and His apostles, particularly the significance of their declarations concerning its nearness.

ABOUT THE PUBLISHER

David Clarke is the sole remaining member of the Bierton Particular Baptists, a Strict and Particular Baptist church founded in 1832. He joined the church in 1976, and on 16 January 1981 it became a Gospel Standard cause. In 1982, David was called by the Lord and sent by the church to preach the gospel.

When David was first called by the Lord, he had very little knowledge of the Bible and could scarcely read. He learned to read by studying Scripture. Through this, he came to understand more clearly who Jesus Christ is and the way of salvation. He soon realised that he needed to study the writings of earlier Christian authors to gain a fuller understanding of the truths of the gospel.

During his time attending Assemblies of God and Pentecostal churches in Aylesbury, he was disappointed to find that few Christians were able to help him develop his theological understanding. He also discovered that the pastors of these churches opposed Calvinism. He was therefore especially grateful to the small number of believers who came to his aid and encouraged him in his studies.

David became increasingly concerned about the unusual interpretations of the Book of Revelation held by many Christians. He also questioned some of their ideas about how God works in the lives of men and women.

Through reading the works of Dr John Gill, John Bunyan, Martin Luther, William Huntington, J. C. Philpot and others, together with the guidance of Strict and Particular Baptist ministers, he became convinced that the doctrines of grace were the truths taught in Scripture. This conviction led him to join the Bierton Strict and Particular Baptist Church in 1976.

David was also aware of the different interpretations of the second coming of Christ. These included the pre-tribulation rapture, the future restoration of the nation of Israel, the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem, and the restoration of animal sacrifices.

He came to regard these teachings as distractions from the Word of God and from the truth revealed in Scripture concerning the Lord Jesus Christ.

Reading James Stuart Russell's The Parousia brought him a much clearer understanding of the second coming of Christ. He believes the book can help both Calvinists and Arminians examine the teaching of Scripture more carefully and rightly divide the word of truth.

The Bierton Particular Baptists maintain that the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, rather than the Law of Moses, is the believer's rule of life.

David discovered that this question had long been a cause of disagreement among Calvinists. Many maintained that the Law of Moses remained the Christian's rule of life, while others held that believers were governed by the gospel of Christ.

This was one of several doctrinal disputes David encountered while serving as secretary and minister

of the Bierton Strict and Particular Baptist Church. He believes The Parousia can help readers who wish to understand these matters more clearly.

The Parousia demonstrates the importance of the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 and the ending of the Mosaic religious system associated with the Old Covenant.

David believes that many Christians have overlooked the significance of these events. A fresh examination of Scripture can help readers understand their importance and gain a clearer knowledge of God's purposes.

The prayer of the psalmist is particularly appropriate:

"Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law."

Psalm 119:18

We should also remember that the Law was a shadow pointing forward to Christ. As the apostle Paul writes:

"Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ."

Colossians 2:17

The publisher believes that The Parousia will help Christians gain a clearer understanding of biblical eschatology, the relationship between the Old and New Covenants, and the believer's relationship to Jesus Christ.

It may also encourage churches to reconsider their articles of religion and confessions of faith, examining whether their doctrinal statements agree with the teaching of Scripture.

For further information, see Difficulties Associated with Articles of Religion Among Particular Baptists.

David Clarke
2026

CONTENTS

PUBLISHER'S NOTE 3

ABOUT THE PUBLISHER 3

PREFACE. 7

THE LAST WORDS OF OLD TESTAMENT PROPHECY 8

THE INTERVAL BETWEEN MALACHI AND JOHN THE BAPTIST. 12

THE PAROUSIA IN THE GOSPELS 13

THE TEACHING OF OUR LORD CONCERNING THE PAROUSIA IN THE SYNOPTICAL GOSPELS 16

THE END OF THE AGE, OR CLOSE OF THE JEWISH DISPENSATION 21

THE COMING OF THE SON OF MAN (THE PAROUSIA) 25

THE PROPHECY ON THE MOUNT OF OLIVES EXAMINED 63

THE PAROUSIA IN THE GOSPEL OF ST JOHN 123

SUMMARY OF THE TEACHING OF THE GOSPELS RESPECTING THE PAROUSIA 141

APPENDIX TO PART I 143

NOTE A. ON THE DOUBLE-SENSE THEORY OF INTERPRETATION 143

No attentive reader of the New Testament can fail to notice the importance given by the evangelists and apostles to the Parousia, or coming of the Lord. This event is the great theme of New Testament prophecy. From the Gospel of Matthew to the Revelation of John, scarcely a book fails to present it as the glorious promise of God and the blessed hope of the Church. Our Lord frequently and solemnly foretold His coming. The apostles continually reminded the early Christians of it, and the churches of the apostolic age firmly believed in it and eagerly awaited its fulfilment.

There is, however, a remarkable difference between the attitude of the first Christians towards the Parousia and that of Christians today. The glorious hope that filled the hearts and minds of believers in the apostolic age has almost disappeared from the thoughts of modern Christians. Whatever beliefs may still be expressed in creeds and confessions of faith, we must frankly acknowledge that the second coming of Christ has largely ceased to be a living and practical expectation.

Several reasons may help explain this change. Some interpreters of prophecy have made rash and confident predictions about future events. When those predictions failed, the resulting disappointment and loss of confidence discouraged thoughtful and reverent Christians from examining what is commonly called unfulfilled prophecy. On the other hand, rationalistic criticism has led some to question whether the prophecies of the New Testament were ever intended to receive a literal or historical fulfilment.

Between these two extremes, rationalism on the one hand and irrationalism on the other, widespread uncertainty and confusion have arisen concerning New Testament prophecy. This helps explain, though it does not justify, why so many have abandoned the subject as hopelessly obscure, regarding its difficulties as problems that cannot be solved.

Yet this is only part of the explanation. We must consider whether there is a fundamental difference between the position of the Church in the apostolic age, when the Parousia was still expected, and that of the Church in later generations.

The first Christians undoubtedly believed that they stood on the very edge of a great and approaching catastrophe. We know how intensely they anticipated the coming of the Lord, and how this expectation filled them with enthusiasm and hope. But if Christians today do not stand in the same position, it would be neither truthful nor reasonable for them to adopt precisely the same expectation as the early Church.

The same event cannot be imminent at two different periods separated by nearly two thousand years.

There must, therefore, be a serious misunderstanding among those who maintain that the Christian Church today stands in exactly the same relation to the coming of the Lord as the Church did in the days of the apostle Paul, and should consequently maintain the same attitude of immediate expectation.

The purpose of this book is to examine that misunderstanding in a sincere and reverent spirit. It seeks to discover the true meaning of the Word of God concerning a subject that occupies such an important place in the teaching of our Lord and His apostles.

This work is the result of many years of patient investigation. The author has spared no effort in examining the evidence and testing the soundness of his conclusions. His single aim has been to discover what Scripture truly teaches, and his earnest desire has been to submit faithfully to its authority.

Throughout this inquiry, he has sought to follow the principle of biblical interpretation expressed so well by a German theologian:

"Explicatio plana non tortuosa, facilis non violenta, eademque et exegeticae et Christianae conscientiae pariter arridens."[1]

The nature of this investigation makes it necessary to refer frequently to the original language of the New Testament and to the principles of grammar and interpretation. Nevertheless, the author has endeavoured to make this book accessible to ordinary readers. His intention is that anyone of reasonable education and understanding should be able to read it with ease and interest.

The Bible is a book for everyone. This work has not been written merely for scholars and critics, but for the many readers who are deeply interested in understanding Scripture. They share the conviction expressed by John Locke, who regarded:

"an impartial search into the true meaning of the sacred Scripture [as] the best employment of all the time they have."[2]

The author will consider his labour amply rewarded if this book helps, even in some measure, to make clear those truths of divine revelation that have been obscured by traditional prejudices or misunderstood through mistaken interpretation.

1878

Footnotes

Donier, De Oratione Christi Eschatologica, p. 1.

John Locke, Notes on Ephesians, 1:10.

THE LAST WORDS OF OLD TESTAMENT PROPHECY

THE BOOK OF MALACHI

The Old Testament Scriptures close in a very different way from what we might have expected after the glorious future promised to Israel in the prophecies of Isaiah. Of all the prophets, none delivers a more solemn warning than the last. Malachi is a prophet of approaching judgment.

It seems that the nation, through its stubborn disobedience and refusal to repent, had forfeited the favour of God. Israel had shown itself not only unworthy of the promised blessings, but incapable of receiving them. The departure of the prophetic spirit was an ominous sign, suggesting that the Lord was about to abandon the land. Thus, the light of Old Testament prophecy fades amid gathering clouds of judgment.

The Book of Malachi is one long and solemn accusation against the nation. The Lord Himself brings the charges, and each is supported by clear evidence. The accusations include sacrilege, hypocrisy, contempt for God, unfaithfulness in marriage, false swearing, apostasy and blasphemy.

Yet the people have the boldness to deny their guilt. They refuse to acknowledge the charges brought against them. They appear to have reached that dangerous state of moral blindness in which people can no longer distinguish good from evil. They are rapidly approaching the point at which judgment must fall.

It is therefore fitting that Malachi's prophecy centres upon the coming judgment of Israel.

In Malachi 3:5, the Lord declares:

"And I will come near to you to judgment; and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, and against the adulterers, and against false swearers, and against those that oppress the hireling in his wages, the widow, and the fatherless, and that turn aside the stranger from his right, and fear not me, saith the LORD of hosts."

Again, in Malachi 4:1, we read:

"For, behold, the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the LORD of hosts, that it shall

leave them neither root nor branch."

These are not vague or meaningless threats. Their language is clear and definite. Everything points towards an approaching crisis in the nation's history, when God would bring judgment upon His rebellious people.

A particular day was coming, a day of burning judgment, described as the great and terrible day of the Lord.

There can be little doubt that this expression refers to a definite period and a particular event. The prophet Joel had already foretold it in almost identical language:

"The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and the terrible day of the LORD come."

Joel 2:31

We shall also find a direct reference to this prophecy in the apostle Peter's address on the Day of Pentecost, recorded in Acts 2:20.

But Malachi provides an even clearer indication of when this judgment would take place. In Malachi 4:5, the Lord declares:

"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD."

Our Lord expressly identified this promised Elijah as John the Baptist, His own forerunner. In Matthew 11:14, He declared:

"And if ye will receive it, this is Elias, which was for to come."

This identification enables us to determine the period and event described as the great and dreadful day of the Lord.

It must refer to an event occurring not long after the ministry of John the Baptist. The judgment in view, therefore, was the judgment of the Jewish nation, when Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed and the whole system of government and worship established under the Mosaic covenant came to an end.

It is worth noticing that both Isaiah and Malachi foretold the appearance of John the Baptist as the forerunner of our Lord. Yet they described his mission in very different ways.

Isaiah presents him as the herald of the coming Saviour:

"The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God."

Isaiah 40:3

Malachi, however, presents John as the forerunner of the coming Judge:

"Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the LORD of hosts."

Malachi 3:1

That this refers to a coming in judgment is evident from the words that immediately follow. The prophet describes the fear and alarm that will accompany His appearance:

"But who may abide the day of his coming? and who shall stand when he appeareth?"

Malachi 3:2

Such language cannot reasonably be applied to the first coming of Christ. It is, however, entirely appropriate to His second coming.

There is a striking reference to this prophecy in Revelation 6, where the kings of the earth, the great men, the rich and the powerful are pictured hiding themselves from the One who sits upon the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb.

Their cry is:

"For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?"

Revelation 6:17

The connection between these passages is unmistakable. The day of His coming in Malachi 3:2 is the same as the great and dreadful day of the Lord in Malachi 4:5. Both correspond to the great day of His wrath described in Revelation 6:17.

We must therefore conclude that Malachi is speaking, not of our Lord's first coming, but of His second.

This conclusion is strengthened by another important detail. In Malachi 3:1, the Lord is described as suddenly coming to His temple.

Some have understood this prophecy to refer to the presentation of the infant Jesus in the temple by His parents. Others have applied it to His later appearances in the temple courts, or to His cleansing of the temple when He drove out those who were buying and selling there.

But surely these explanations are inadequate.

None of those occasions was accompanied by the terror and dismay implied in the question:

"But who may abide the day of his coming?"

Malachi 3:2

The language is far more appropriate to His final visitation of His Father's house in judgment, when the temple would be left desolate, just as He Himself had foretold.

The temple stood at the centre of the nation's religious life. It was the visible symbol of the covenant relationship between God and Israel. It was therefore the very place where judgment would begin, and where sudden destruction would fall.

Consider all these details together.

The Lord would suddenly come to His temple. His appearance would cause fear and dismay. He would come as a refiner's fire, purifying what was precious and consuming what was worthless. He would draw near to His people in judgment. The approaching day would burn like a furnace, destroying the wicked completely, leaving neither root nor branch.

And before that great and dreadful day arrived, John the Baptist, the promised second Elijah, would appear.

When all these circumstances are considered together, it is impossible to escape the conclusion that Malachi was foretelling the great national catastrophe in which Jerusalem, its temple and the Jewish nation suffered destruction.

This was the event described as the day of His coming.

However surprising it may seem, the first coming of our Lord is not the event foretold in Malachi's prophecy.

Hengstenberg acknowledges this when he writes:

"Malachi passes by the first coming of Christ in humiliation altogether and leaves the interval between his forerunner and the judgment of Jerusalem a perfect blank."[1]

The reason is clear. The principal purpose of Malachi's prophecy was to announce national destruction rather than national deliverance.

Nevertheless, although judgment and wrath dominate the prophecy, they are not its only themes.

The day of wrath would also be a day of redemption.

Even within an apostate nation, there remained a faithful remnant. There was gold and silver to be purified, as well as worthless material to be cast aside. There were precious jewels to be gathered, as well as stubble to be burned.

There were sons to be spared, as well as enemies to be destroyed.

The same day that would bring darkness and terror to the wicked would bring healing and deliverance to the faithful. For them, the promise remained:

"But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings;"
Malachi 4:2

Even Malachi makes it clear that the door of mercy had not yet been closed.

If the nation would return to God, He would return to them. If they would restore what they had wrongfully withheld from His service, He would pour out blessings beyond their capacity to receive.

Israel might still become a delightful land, admired among the nations.

Even at this late hour, if the mission of the second Elijah succeeded in turning the hearts of the people back to God, the approaching catastrophe might yet be avoided.

These promises and warnings appear throughout Malachi 3:3, 16–18 and 4:2–6.

Yet the prophecy ends with the solemn expectation that the warnings will not be heeded.

Its final words sound like the tolling of a funeral bell:

"Lest I come and smite the earth with a curse."
Malachi 4:6

The full meaning of this terrible warning may not be immediately apparent to a modern reader.

To the Hebrew mind, however, it suggested the most dreadful fate that could befall a city or nation.

The word translated curse refers to the Hebrew cherem, a term describing something placed under a solemn ban and devoted to complete destruction.

An example is found in the judgment pronounced upon Jericho in Joshua 6:17. A fuller description of such destruction appears in Deuteronomy 13:12–18.

Under this judgment, a city was to be destroyed by the sword. Every living thing within it was to perish. Its possessions were not to be taken as spoil, because everything had been placed under the curse. The city itself was to be consumed by fire and left desolate.

Hengstenberg remarks:

"All the things that can possibly be thought of are included in this one word."[2]

He also quotes Vitringa's explanation of the passage:

"There can be no doubt that God intended to say, that He would give up to certain destruction, both the obstinate transgressors of the law and also their city, and that they should suffer the extreme penalty of His justice, as heads devoted to God, without any hope of favour or forgiveness."

Such was the fearful sentence hanging over the land of Israel as the voice of Old Testament prophecy fell silent for centuries.

We must observe that this warning has a definite and particular reference to the land of Israel.

The prophet's message is addressed to Israel. The sins condemned are the sins of Israel. The Lord is coming to His temple in Israel. The land threatened with destruction is the land of Israel.[3]

Everything points towards a specific national catastrophe, occurring in a particular place and affecting

a particular people.

The land of Israel would be the scene of that judgment, and its guilty inhabitants would suffer its consequences.

History records the fulfilment of this prophecy in the destruction of Jerusalem and the calamity that overwhelmed the Jewish nation.

The time, the place and the circumstances correspond to the judgment foretold by Malachi.

FOOTNOTES

1. See Hengstenberg, Nature of Prophecy, Christology, Vol. IV, p. 418.

2. Hengstenberg, Christology, Vol. IV, p. 227.

3. The meaning of Malachi 4:6 is obscured by the translation of the Hebrew word as earth rather than land. The Hebrew word, like the corresponding Greek term, is frequently used in a restricted geographical sense. The reference here is plainly to the land of Israel. See Hengstenberg, Christology, Vol. IV, p. 224.

THE INTERVAL BETWEEN MALACHI AND JOHN THE BAPTIST

The four centuries between the close of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New Testament form a blank in the history recorded by Scripture. Yet we know from the Books of the Maccabees and the writings of Josephus that this was an eventful period in the history of the Jewish nation.

During these centuries, Judea passed under the control of several great powers: Persia, Greece, Egypt, Syria and Rome. There was also a period of independence under the Maccabean rulers.

Although the nation endured much suffering during these years, it also produced remarkable examples of patriotism and faithfulness to God. Yet throughout this long period, we find no divine revelation and no inspired prophet declaring the word of the Lord.

Israel could truly have said, in the words of the psalmist:

"We see not our signs: there is no more any prophet: neither is there among us any that knoweth how long."

Psalm 74:9

Nevertheless, these four centuries had a profound influence upon the character and religious life of the Jewish nation.

Synagogues were established throughout the land, making the Scriptures more widely known among the people. During this period, the two great religious schools of the Pharisees and Sadducees also arose. Both claimed to be faithful interpreters and defenders of the Law of Moses.

Large numbers of Jews settled in the principal cities of Egypt, Asia Minor, Greece and Italy. Wherever they went, they carried with them the worship of the synagogue and the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament Scriptures.

Above all, the Jewish people continued to cherish the hope of a coming Deliverer.

They expected a descendant of the royal house of David who would become their promised King, free Israel from Gentile rule and establish a reign of peace and glory. They looked forward to a kingdom so blessed and glorious that it could rightly be called the kingdom of heaven.

For the most part, however, their expectations were earthly rather than spiritual.

They imagined a kingdom of political power and national greatness, with Israel freed from foreign domination. Their hopes centred upon earthly deliverance rather than the spiritual character of the promised kingdom.

Nor had the moral condition of the nation improved during these four hundred years.

Between the empty religious formalism of the Pharisees and the scepticism of the Sadducees, true religion had declined to its lowest point.

Yet even in this time of spiritual decline, a faithful remnant remained.

There were still those who possessed a clearer understanding of the kingdom of heaven and who looked for the redemption promised by God.

As the appointed time drew near, signs began to appear that the long silence of prophecy was about to end. There were indications that the prophetic spirit was returning and that the promised Deliverer was at hand.

Simeon received a divine assurance that he would not die before seeing the Lord's Christ. A similar revelation appears to have been given to Anna, the aged prophetess.

We may reasonably suppose that such revelations awakened eager expectation in the hearts of many faithful Israelites.

They prepared the way for the remarkable announcement that would soon be heard in the wilderness of Judea:

"Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Matthew 3:2

After four centuries of silence, a prophet had once again appeared in Israel.

The long period of waiting was coming to an end.

God was again speaking to His people, and the time of the promised fulfilment was drawing near.

The words later spoken by the people were especially fitting:

"God hath visited his people."

Luke 7:16

THE PAROUSIA IN THE GOSPELS

THE PAROUSIA PREDICTED BY JOHN THE BAPTIST

Nothing is more clearly established in the New Testament than the identification of John the Baptist with the messenger foretold by Isaiah and the Elijah promised by Malachi.

The similarity between John and Elijah is immediately apparent. Both lived strict and self-denying lives. Both were zealous reformers of religion, and both boldly condemned sin. The circumstances of their times were remarkably alike. In each period, the nation had fallen into serious moral and spiritual corruption. As Elijah had to confront Ahab, so John had to confront Herod.

It is no objection to this identification that John himself denied being Elijah when the priests and Levites sent from Jerusalem questioned him:

"And they asked him, What then? Art thou Elias? And he saith, I am not. Art thou that prophet? And he answered, No."

John 1:21

The Jews expected Elijah himself to return in person. John's answer was directed against that mistaken expectation.

Yet his identity as the promised Elijah had already been declared by the angel who announced his birth to his father, Zacharias:

"And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the

children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Luke 1:17

Our Lord also expressly confirmed this identification:

"And if ye will receive it, this is Elias, which was for to come."

Matthew 11:14

Again, Jesus declared:

"But I say unto you, That Elias is come already, and they knew him not, but have done unto him whatsoever they listed. Likewise shall also the Son of man suffer of them. Then the disciples understood that he spake unto them of John the Baptist."

Matthew 17:12–13

John was therefore the second Elijah. In him, the predictions of Isaiah and Malachi concerning the promised forerunner were completely fulfilled.

To imagine that another Elijah must appear at some future time is, in effect, to question the express testimony of Scripture. Such an expectation has no foundation in the Word of God.

We have already considered the two different aspects of John's mission presented by Isaiah and Malachi. The same distinction appears in the New Testament accounts of his ministry.

Isaiah presents John as the herald of the coming Saviour. This gracious aspect of his mission is also found in the angel's announcement of his birth and in the inspired words of his father, Zacharias:

"And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest: for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways; To give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins,"

Luke 1:76–77

The same gracious purpose appears in the opening chapter of John's Gospel:

"The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe."

John 1:7

But the other aspect of John's mission is just as clearly presented in the Gospels.

He was not only the herald of the coming Saviour. He was also the herald of the coming Judge.

Indeed, John's recorded preaching speaks far more frequently of wrath than of salvation. His warnings resemble the message of Elijah in Malachi more closely than the comforting announcement of the wilderness messenger in Isaiah.

John warned the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the crowds who came to his baptism that they must flee from the approaching wrath.

He declared:

"And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees:"

Matthew 3:10

He announced the coming of One greater than himself, saying:

"Whose fan is in his hand, and he will throughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

Matthew 3:12

The close correspondence between John's language and the prophecy of Malachi is impossible to overlook.

As Hengstenberg observes:

"The prophecy of Malachi is throughout the text upon which John comments."[1]

Both describe the coming of the Lord as a day of wrath.

Both speak of His coming with fire: fire that purifies and tests, but also fire that burns and consumes.

Both describe a time of separation between the righteous and the wicked. The precious metal is separated from the worthless material; the wheat is gathered, while the chaff is burned.

Both announce the complete destruction of what is worthless, using the image of an unquenchable fire.

These similarities cannot be dismissed as mere coincidences. The two prophecies correspond so closely that they must refer to the same event: the same day of the Lord and the same approaching judgment.

But there is another feature of John's preaching that deserves particular attention.

The judgment he announced was evidently near.

The familiar expression the wrath to come does not fully convey the force of his language.[2] The meaning is more accurately expressed as the coming wrath.

The distinction is important.

The phrase wrath to come might refer to something lying far in the future. But the coming wrath describes a judgment that is already approaching.

As Alford rightly observes:

"John is now speaking in the true character of a prophet foretelling the wrath soon to be poured on the Jewish nation."[3]

The other images used by John convey the same sense of urgency.

The axe was already lying at the root of the trees. The instrument of judgment was in position, ready to strike.

The winnowing fan was already in the hands of the One who would separate the wheat from the chaff. The work of separation was about to begin.

Everything in these warnings points towards the swift approach of destruction.

John's preaching was not merely a collection of general warnings about repentance, intended equally for people in every age. His words were urgent and solemn, directed towards the men and women who stood before him.

They had a definite and immediate meaning for the generation then living.

The Jewish nation was approaching its final trial.

The second Elijah had appeared, just as Malachi had foretold. He had come to prepare the way for the great and dreadful day of the Lord.

If the people rejected his warnings, the judgment announced by Malachi would surely and speedily follow:

"Lest I come and smite the earth with a curse."

Malachi 4:6

Nothing could be clearer than that the catastrophe foretold by John was particular, national and local. It concerned the Jewish nation, and it was rapidly approaching.

History records that within the lifetime of the very generation that heard John's warnings, the predicted judgment fell upon the nation.

The words of the apostle Paul describe the result:

"for the wrath is come upon them to the uttermost."

1 Thessalonians 2:16

Thus, the coming wrath announced by John the Baptist was not a distant and indefinite event. It was a judgment approaching the people to whom he preached, and it overtook them within that generation.

FOOTNOTES

1. Hengstenberg, Christology, Vol. IV, p. 232.

2. The Greek expression is τῆς μελλούσης ὀργῆς, meaning "the coming wrath."

3. Alford, The Greek Testament, commentary on the passage.

THE TEACHING OF OUR LORD CONCERNING THE PAROUSIA IN THE SYNOPTICAL GOSPELS

The imprisonment of John the Baptist by Herod Antipas marked an important turning point in the ministry of our Lord.

Before this, Jesus had already taught the people, performed miracles, gained followers and become widely known. But John's imprisonment marked the apparent failure of his mission. Following this event, our Lord withdrew into Galilee and entered a new stage of His public ministry.

Matthew records:

"From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Matthew 4:17

These are precisely the same words used to describe the preaching of John the Baptist:

"And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Matthew 3:2

Both John and our Lord called the nation to repentance. Both announced that the kingdom of heaven was approaching.

This agreement in their message is important.

When John declared that the kingdom of heaven was at hand, he could not have meant merely that the Messiah was about to appear. For when Christ Himself appeared and began His ministry, He made exactly the same announcement: the kingdom of heaven was still at hand.

The same distinction appears when our Lord sent out the twelve disciples on their first mission to preach the gospel. He did not instruct them to announce that the kingdom of heaven had already come. Instead, He commanded them:

"And as ye go, preach, saying, The kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Matthew 10:7

Furthermore, the kingdom did not arrive during our Lord's earthly ministry, nor on the Day of Pentecost.

This is evident from His prophetic discourse on the Mount of Olives. There, Jesus gave His disciples certain signs by which they would recognise that the kingdom of God was approaching.

He told them:

"So likewise ye, when ye see these things come to pass, know ye that the kingdom of God is nigh at hand."

Luke 21:31

From these statements, we may draw three clear conclusions concerning the teaching of our Lord.

First, Jesus announced that a great approaching crisis, or consummation, was near. This event was described as the coming of the kingdom of heaven, or the kingdom of God.

Second, although this consummation was near, it would not take place during His earthly lifetime, nor

immediately after His death. Some years would pass before its arrival.

Third, His disciples, or at least some of them, could expect to live long enough to witness its fulfilment.

These conclusions follow naturally from the words of our Lord and the circumstances in which they were spoken.

The wider subject of the kingdom of heaven, however, requires a fuller examination. We shall therefore return to it later in this inquiry.

PREDICTION OF COMING WRATH UPON THAT GENERATION

There is another important similarity between the preaching of our Lord and that of John the Baptist. Both clearly warned that a time of judgment was rapidly approaching. This judgment would fall upon the generation then living because they had rejected the warnings and invitations of God's mercy.

Just as John spoke of the coming wrath, so our Lord warned the people of approaching judgment.

Jesus rebuked the cities in which most of His mighty works had been performed because their inhabitants refused to repent. He declared that their punishment would be more severe than the judgments that had fallen upon Tyre and Sidon, and upon Sodom and Gomorrah (Matthew 11:20–24).

That these warnings concerned a catastrophe which was near, rather than some distant event, becomes clear from the words of Jesus Himself.

Matthew 12:38–45 (compare Luke 11:16, 24–36):

Then certain of the scribes and of the Pharisees answered, saying, Master, we would see a sign from thee.

But he answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas:

For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

The men of Nineveh shall rise in judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: because they repented at the preaching of Jonas; and, behold, a greater than Jonas is here.

The queen of the south shall rise up in the judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: for she came from the uttermost parts of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and, behold, a greater than Solomon is here.

When the unclean spirit is gone out of a man, he walketh through dry places, seeking rest, and findeth none.

Then he saith, I will return into my house from whence I came out; and when he is come, he findeth it empty, swept, and garnished.

Then goeth he, and taketh with himself seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter in and dwell there: and the last state of that man is worse than the first. Even so shall it be also unto this wicked generation.

This passage is especially important because it helps us determine the true meaning of the expression this generation, translated from the Greek word genea.

In this passage, the expression can refer only to the people of Israel who were then living. It means the generation that existed in the days of our Lord.

No commentator has seriously suggested that genea, as used here, refers to the entire Jewish race throughout all generations.

Our Lord frequently used the expression this generation when speaking of His contemporaries.

For example, He asked:

Whereunto shall I liken this generation?

Matthew 11:16

He was speaking of the people of His own day, who refused to listen either to John the Baptist or to Himself.

Even commentators such as Stier, who elsewhere argue that genea may mean a race or family line, acknowledge that in this instance the expression refers to the generation living at that particular time. Stier describes it as:

"the generation living in that then extant and most important age."

There can therefore be no reasonable dispute about the meaning of this generation in the passage before us. It refers specifically to the people who were living when Christ spoke these words.

Our Lord also bears witness to the extraordinary wickedness of that generation.

Shortly before this, He had addressed them in language similar to that used by John the Baptist:

O generation of vipers, how can ye, being evil, speak good things?

Matthew 12:34

Their guilt was declared to be greater than that of the heathen nations.

Jesus compared their condition to that of a man from whom an unclean spirit had departed. For a time, the man appeared to be free. But the spirit eventually returned, bringing seven other spirits even more wicked than itself.

The man's final condition was therefore worse than his first.

This was the condition our Lord foretold for the generation then living.

We find a remarkable confirmation of His description in the writings of the Jewish historian Josephus, who witnessed the events surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem.

Describing the wickedness of the people during that period, Josephus writes:

"As it were impossible to relate their enormities in detail, I shall briefly state that no other city ever endured similar calamities, and no generation ever existed more prolific in crime. They confessed themselves to be, what they were—slaves, and the very dregs of society, the spurious and polluted spawn of the nation."

In another passage, Josephus expresses his horror at the wickedness that had overtaken Jerusalem:

"And here I cannot refrain from expressing what my feelings suggest. I am of opinion, that had the Romans deferred the punishment of these wretches, either the earth would have opened and swallowed up the city, or it would have been swept away by a deluge, or have shared the thunderbolts of the land of Sodom. For it produced a race far more ungodly than those who were thus visited. For through the desperate madness of these men the whole nation was involved in their ruin."

He gives a similar account elsewhere:

"That period had somehow become so prolific in iniquity of every description amongst the Jews, that no work of evil was left unperpetrated; ... so universal was the contagion, both in public and private, and such the emulation to surpass each other in acts of impiety towards God, and of injustice towards their neighbors."

Such was the dreadful moral condition towards which the Jewish nation was moving when our Lord uttered His prophetic warning.

The full measure of wickedness had not yet been reached, but the nation was rapidly approaching it.

To use the image employed by Jesus, the unclean spirit had not yet returned to his former dwelling, but he was already on his way.

Stier makes a striking observation about this period:

"In the period between the ascension of Christ and the destruction of Jerusalem, especially towards the end of it, this nation shows itself, one might say, as if possessed by seven thousand devils."

Does this not provide an adequate and complete fulfilment of our Saviour's prediction?

What reason have we for supposing that His words referred to something else, or to something more than these events?

Why should we look for another fulfilment in some distant future?

Would we not, in effect, weaken the force of the prophecy by refusing its plain and natural meaning?

Our Lord spoke of a judgment that would overtake this generation. The people to whom He spoke were moving towards a terrible national catastrophe. Before that generation had passed away, the predicted destruction came upon them.

Surely we show the greatest reverence for the Word of God when we accept its clear teaching, rather than imposing upon it interpretations drawn from human speculation.

We must therefore conclude that the extraordinary wickedness of that age, together with the terrible calamities that overwhelmed the Jewish nation before the generation had passed away, provides the historical evidence of the complete fulfilment of our Lord's prophecy.

FURTHER ALLUSIONS TO THE COMING WRATH

Luke 13:1–5

There were present at that season some that told him of the Galilaeans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.

And Jesus answering said unto them, Suppose ye that these Galilaeans were sinners above all the Galilaeans, because they suffered such things?

I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.

Or those eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell, and slew them, think ye that they were sinners above all men that dwelt in Jerusalem?

I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.

This passage shows how clearly our Lord foresaw the approaching calamities of the Jewish nation, and how plainly He warned the people of what was coming.

Two recent tragedies had become subjects of public discussion.

The first concerned a group of Galileans who had apparently travelled to Jerusalem for the Passover. They had been killed, either by the direct command of Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, or with his approval. Their blood had been mingled with the sacrifices they were offering.

The second tragedy concerned eighteen people who had been killed when a tower near the pool of Siloam collapsed upon them.

These events had naturally caused much discussion among the people.

Our Lord, however, drew their attention to something far more important than the immediate causes of these tragedies.

He declared that those who had suffered were not greater sinners than other Galileans or inhabitants of Jerusalem. Their terrible deaths were not proof that they were exceptionally wicked.

But He then gave a solemn warning to the very people who were discussing these events.

Unless they repented, they too would perish in a similar manner.

The particular force of this warning is often overlooked. Our Lord was not simply declaring that all people must eventually die. His words pointed to a similarity between the deaths of those unfortunate victims and the destruction that awaited His hearers.

The emphasis falls upon the expression likewise perish.

The meaning is not merely that they would also perish, but that they would perish in a similar manner.

There can be little doubt that our Lord was referring to the final catastrophe that would soon overwhelm Jerusalem and the Jewish nation.

The resemblance between the incidents He mentioned and the events that followed is remarkable.

It was during the Passover that great numbers of Jews from throughout Judea gathered in Jerusalem. The Roman armies under Titus surrounded the city, trapping the people within its walls.

Josephus tells us that, during the terrible suffering of the siege, the blood of priests performing their duties was shed at the altar of sacrifice.

The similarity to the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices is striking.

The second incident also finds a parallel in the destruction of Jerusalem.

Just as the tower of Siloam had fallen and killed those beneath it, so the buildings and towers of Jerusalem were brought down during the Roman assault. Many people perished beneath the ruins.

In this way, the Roman soldiers became the instruments through which the divine judgment was carried out.

The destruction of the city and temple brought death upon multitudes who had refused the warnings of repentance and mercy.

It is therefore significant that both Alford and Stier recognised the historical reference contained in our Lord's words.

Alford particularly draws attention to the Greek expression translated likewise. He observes that its full force is better expressed by the words in like manner, and points to the way the Jewish people subsequently perished by the sword of the Romans.[6]

The connection is clear.

Our Lord was warning His contemporaries of a real and approaching danger. The calamities they had been discussing were not merely occasions for reflection upon the uncertainty of human life. They were solemn reminders of the far greater destruction that threatened their own nation.

Unless they repented, they too would perish.

And within that very generation, the judgment came.

IMPENDING FATE OF THE JEWISH NATION

The Parable of the Barren Fig-tree

Luke 13:6–9

He spake also this parable; A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came and sought fruit thereon, and found none.

Then said he unto the dresser of his vineyard, Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and find none: cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground?

And he answering said unto him, Lord, let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it, and dung it:

And if it bear fruit, well: and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down.

This parable carries the same prophetic meaning as the warnings we have just considered. It closely

resembles the parable of the vineyard in Isaiah 5, both in its imagery and in the lesson it teaches.

Its meaning is so clear that little explanation should be necessary, especially when we consider it alongside our Lord's preceding warnings.

The barren fig-tree represents Israel.

For many generations, God had cared for His people, cultivated them and provided everything necessary for them to bear fruit. Yet despite all this care, the nation had failed to produce what its Lord had a right to expect.

Israel was now approaching its final opportunity to repent.

John the Baptist had already warned that the axe was laid to the root of the trees. The judgment was ready to fall, but the fatal blow had been delayed through the intervention of mercy.

Even then, the Saviour was engaged in His gracious work among the people. He was still teaching, warning and calling them to repentance, giving them a further opportunity to bear fruit.

But that opportunity would not continue indefinitely.

A little longer, and the sentence would be pronounced:

"cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground?"

Luke 13:7

There can be no doubt that this parable, like many others, contains principles that apply to all nations and all generations. Wherever people receive the blessings and privileges of God but fail to respond to them, its warning remains instructive.

Yet we must not allow this wider application to obscure its original and primary meaning.

The parable was directed particularly towards the Jewish nation and the judgment that was approaching in our Lord's own generation.

Stier and Alford appear to lose sight of this central meaning as they search for hidden and mystical interpretations in the lesser details of the parable.

Neander, however, gives a clear and convincing explanation of its true significance:

"As the fruitless tree, failing to realize the aim of its being, was destroyed, so the theocratic nation, for the same reason, was to be overtaken, after long forbearance, by the judgments of God, and shut out from His kingdom."[7]

The meaning is therefore plain.

Israel had long enjoyed the special privileges of God's covenant. The nation had been patiently cultivated and repeatedly warned, yet it had failed to produce the fruit that God required.

The time of divine forbearance was drawing to an end.

Unless the nation repented, the judgment already announced by John the Baptist would fall upon it.

The barren fig-tree would be cut down.

THE END OF THE AGE, OR CLOSE OF THE JEWISH DISPENSATION

Parables of the Tares and of the Drag-net

Matthew 13:36–43, 47–50

Then Jesus sent the multitude away, and went into the house: and his disciples came unto him, saying, Declare unto us the parable of the tares of the field.

He answered and said unto them, He that soweth the good seed is the Son of man;

The field is the world; the good seed are the children of the kingdom; but the tares are the children of

the wicked one;

The enemy that sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the world; and the reapers are the angels.

As therefore the tares are gathered and burned in the fire; so shall it be in the end of this world.

The Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity;

And shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth.

Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Who hath ears to hear, let him hear.

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a net, that was cast into the sea, and gathered of every kind:

Which, when it was full, they drew to shore, and sat down, and gathered the good into vessels, but cast the bad away.

So shall it be at the end of the world: the angels shall come forth, and sever the wicked from among the just,

And shall cast them into the furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth.

These passages provide an important example of how an inaccurate translation can confuse readers and lead them to misunderstand the teaching of Scripture.

The expression the end of the world is a case in point.

Probably ninety-nine readers out of a hundred understand these words to mean the end of human history and the destruction of the physical earth.

Few would imagine that the word translated world in verse 38 is entirely different from the word translated world in verses 39 and 40. Yet this is precisely the case.

In verse 38, the Greek word is kosmos, which is correctly translated as world. It refers to the world of mankind.

But in verses 39 and 40, the Greek word is aeon (aiōn), which means a period of time, an age or an epoch. Lange retains the word aeon in his translation.

This distinction is of the greatest importance.

An aeon is an age or period of time. The word corresponds closely to the Latin aevum, which carries the same meaning.

The Greek expression translated in our English Bible as the end of the world should therefore be understood as the close of the age.

The distinction is not a small matter of wording. It changes the meaning that readers naturally attach to the passage.

If we understand the expression as referring to the destruction of the material universe, we are led in one direction. But if it refers to the completion of a particular age or dispensation, we are led towards a very different understanding.

Tittmann observes that the expression used in the New Testament does not necessarily mean the absolute end of everything. Rather, it refers to the consummation, or completion, of an age, which is followed by another age.

He applies this observation particularly to Matthew 13:39, 40 and 49, and to Matthew 24:3. He warns that the last of these passages may be misunderstood if it is taken as referring to the destruction of the world.[8]

The Jews believed that the coming of the Messiah would introduce a new aeon, or age. They associated this new age with the kingdom of heaven.

The existing aeon was therefore the Jewish dispensation, the religious order established under the Mosaic covenant.

That dispensation was now approaching its close.

And in these parables, our Lord solemnly describes the manner in which it would end.

It is remarkable that so many interpreters have failed to recognise the close connection between these predictions and the earlier warnings of Malachi and John the Baptist.

The same images appear throughout.

There is the separation of the righteous from the wicked. There is the cleansing of the threshing floor, the gathering of the wheat into the barn, and the burning of the chaff in the fire.

In the parable of the tares, the same distinction appears between the good seed and the weeds. The good is preserved, while the worthless is gathered for destruction.

Can we seriously doubt that Malachi, John the Baptist and our Lord were speaking of the same judgment, the same period and the same historical event?

We have already seen that John the Baptist announced a judgment that was close at hand.

Its approach was so near that the axe was already lying at the root of the trees. The threatened destruction was not an event belonging to some distant and uncertain future. It was impending.

This agreed with Malachi's prophecy that the great and dreadful day of the Lord would follow the appearance of the second Elijah.

We are therefore led to the conclusion that the separation of the righteous from the wicked, the gathering of the wheat and the burning of the tares all refer to the same great catastrophe.

It was the judgment that came upon that very generation, when Jerusalem became, in a terrible and literal sense, a furnace of fire.

Then the aeon of Judaism reached its close in the great and dreadful day of the Lord.

This conclusion is further supported by the close connection between that great period of judgment and the coming of the kingdom of heaven.

Our Lord represents the separation of the righteous and the wicked as a characteristic feature of the great consummation associated with the kingdom of God.

But the kingdom had already been declared to be at hand.

It follows, therefore, that these parables cannot properly be understood as referring exclusively to an event in some remote future. They concern a consummation that was already approaching during our Saviour's earthly ministry.

There is another important reason for reaching this conclusion.

In explaining the parable of the tares, our Lord identifies Himself as the One who sows the good seed:

He that soweth the good seed is the Son of man;

Matthew 13:37

He is referring to His own ministry and to the results of His personal work among the people.

We must therefore recognise that the parable has a special and direct application to those who lived during His earthly ministry.

This agrees perfectly with His solemn warning recorded in Luke 13:26–28.

There, Jesus describes the condemnation of people who had enjoyed the privilege of His personal

presence and teaching, yet were rejected because they were not His true disciples.

They were tares rather than wheat.

Our Lord declares:

Then shall ye begin to say, We have eaten and drunk in thy presence, and thou hast taught in our streets.

But he shall say, I tell you, I know you not whence ye are; depart from me, all ye workers of iniquity.

There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when ye shall see Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets, in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrust out.

These words may certainly contain lessons applicable to people living under the gospel in every age.

Nevertheless, their first and direct application is unmistakable.

They were addressed to the contemporaries of our Lord, the very generation that witnessed His miracles, heard His teaching and listened to His parables.

They had enjoyed privileges that no later generation could possess in precisely the same way.

It was therefore upon them that these warnings had their most immediate and particular force.

At the conclusion of the parable of the tares, our Lord adds a solemn command:

Who hath ears to hear, let him hear.

Matthew 13:43

These words call for special attention to the meaning of the parable.

They also provide an opportunity to emphasise how important it is to understand the historical period in which our Lord and His apostles lived and taught.

Without a clear understanding of that period, we cannot properly interpret the New Testament teaching concerning the kingdom of God, the end of the age and the coming aeon, or world to come.

The time in which Jesus and His apostles lived was near the end of the Jewish dispensation.

The Mosaic economy, that great system of laws, institutions and ordinances given by God Himself to the nation of Israel, had continued for more than forty generations.

But it was now approaching its appointed end.

That ancient order was about to be superseded and pass away.

The last generation that would possess the land under that dispensation had already appeared upon the scene.

It was not only the last generation, but also the worst.

It had inherited the privileges, responsibilities and accumulated guilt of the generations that had gone before it.

For centuries, Jehovah had dealt patiently with Israel. In His wisdom and love, He had employed every means necessary for the nation's instruction, cultivation and reformation.

He had given His people the Law, sent them prophets, warned them of judgment and repeatedly called them to repentance.

But that long period of divine patience was drawing to its close.

And it was to end in disaster.

The wrath that had been restrained for so long was about to break forth and overwhelm that generation.

Its last day would be a dies irae, a day of wrath: the great and terrible day of the Lord.

This was the end of the age so frequently spoken of by our Lord and continually anticipated by His

apostles.

They were already living in the shadow of that tremendous crisis.

With each passing day, the approaching judgment drew nearer.

At last, it would come suddenly and unexpectedly, as Scripture describes it:

For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night.

1 Thessalonians 5:2

This historical setting explains the repeated exhortations to watchfulness, patience and hope that appear throughout the apostolic epistles.

The first Christians were not merely waiting for an event that might occur thousands of years after their deaths.

They were expecting a great consummation that would take place in their own time.

They believed that they themselves might live to witness its arrival.

This expectation is evident throughout the writings of the New Testament.

It provides the key to understanding many passages that would otherwise remain obscure or difficult to explain.

As we continue this investigation, we shall find that this understanding is consistently supported by the whole course of New Testament teaching.

THE COMING OF THE SON OF MAN (THE PAROUSIA)

In the Lifetime of the Apostles

Matthew 10:23

But when they persecute you in this city, flee ye into another: for verily I say unto you, Ye shall not have gone over the cities of Israel, till the Son of man be come.

In this passage, we find the earliest clear reference to the great event that our Lord and His apostles would so frequently speak of afterwards: His coming again, or the Parousia.

There is some question, as we shall see later, whether this statement belongs to this particular stage of the Gospel history.[9] For the present, however, we may set that question aside and consider what our Lord meant by the coming of the Son of Man.

Could He have meant, as Lange suggests, that Jesus would follow His disciples so quickly during their preaching journey that He would catch up with them before they had completed their work?

Or does the passage refer, as Stier and Alford maintain, to two separate comings of Christ, divided by thousands of years? One would be comparatively near, while the other would belong to some distant and uncertain future.

Or should we agree with Michaelis and Meyer, and accept the plain and natural meaning of our Lord's words?

Lange's explanation can scarcely be accepted.

Who can seriously doubt that the expression the coming of the Son of Man refers here, as it does elsewhere, to the Parousia, the second coming of Christ?

This expression has a definite and consistent meaning in the New Testament. It refers to a particular event, just as the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ refer to particular events. There is no sound reason for giving it a different meaning in this passage.

But might the prophecy have a double meaning?

Could it refer first to the approaching judgment of Jerusalem and then, beyond that, to the final destruction of the world? Might the first event be intended as a symbol or foreshadowing of the second?

Alford strongly supports this double interpretation and severely criticises those who are unwilling to accept it.

But there is an important distinction between what an interpreter believes Christ intended to say and what Christ actually said.

Are those who advocate a double meaning certain that our Lord intended more than His words plainly express?

Let us examine the prediction itself.

Could anything be more definite concerning the people addressed, the place involved, the time indicated and the circumstances described?

Our Lord was speaking to the twelve apostles.

The places in question were the cities of Israel.

The work they were commanded to undertake was the preaching of the gospel throughout those cities.

The event foretold was His own coming.

And the time was so near that His coming would take place before they had completed their mission.

All these details are plainly stated.

But suppose we are told that this is not the full meaning of the prophecy. Suppose it is claimed that the words also refer to another coming, involving other preachers, living in different ages and working in distant lands.

We would then be asked to believe that our Lord was also speaking of an event which, after eighteen centuries, was still in the future and might remain so for an indefinite period.

If such an interpretation is allowed, a serious question arises:

What, then, may Scripture not be made to mean?

The ordinary meaning of words would no longer be sufficient to guide us in understanding the Bible.

Scripture would become a puzzle to be solved by guesswork, an oracle delivering mysterious and uncertain answers.

No reader could then be confident of understanding what was written without some further and special revelation.

Such a method of interpretation would leave the meaning of Scripture uncertain and place it at the mercy of human speculation.

We are therefore inclined to agree with Meyer, who describes this attempt to give the prophecy a double meaning as:

"nothing but a forced and unnatural evasion."

The words of our Lord should be understood according to their plain and natural meaning.

Before the apostles had completed their life's work of preaching the gospel throughout the land of Israel, the coming of the Lord would take place.

This is also the interpretation adopted by Dr E. Robinson, who writes:

"The coming alluded to is the destruction of Jerusalem and the dispersion of the Jewish nation; and the meaning is, that the apostles would barely have time, before the catastrophe came, to go over the land warning the people to save themselves from the doom of an untoward generation; so that they could not well afford to tarry in any locality after its inhabitants had heard and rejected the message."[10]

The meaning of our Lord's prediction is therefore both definite and urgent.

The apostles were to carry the message of the gospel throughout the cities of Israel. When persecution arose in one place, they were to move to another.

They were not to suppose that an unlimited period lay before them in which to accomplish their mission.

The time was short.

Before their work among the cities of Israel had been completed, the Son of Man would come.

The prediction thus places the Parousia within the lifetime and ministry of the apostles to whom these words were originally addressed.

THE PAROUSIA TO TAKE PLACE WITHIN THE LIFETIME OF SOME OF THE DISCIPLES

Matthew 16:27–28

For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works.

Verily I say unto you, There be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom.

Mark 8:38; 9:1

Whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation; of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.

And he said unto them, Verily I say unto you, That there be some of them that stand here, which shall not taste of death, till they have seen the kingdom of God come with power.

Luke 9:26–27

For whosoever shall be ashamed of me and of my words, of him shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he shall come in his own glory, and in his Father's, and of the holy angels.

But I tell you of a truth, there be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the kingdom of God.

This remarkable declaration is of the greatest importance to our inquiry. Indeed, it may be regarded as the key to a correct understanding of the New Testament teaching concerning the Parousia.

The language itself presents no particular difficulty. Yet few passages have caused greater disagreement among commentators, who have offered widely differing explanations of its meaning.

Surely there should be little doubt about the coming of the Son of Man that our Lord is predicting.

Some have supposed that He was referring merely to His glorious appearance on the Mount of Transfiguration. Although this interpretation has been supported by distinguished scholars, it is so plainly inadequate that it scarcely requires a detailed refutation.

Dr Lange offers another explanation. He believes that the prediction received a partial fulfilment in the resurrection of Christ.

His interpretation provides a striking example of the difficulties faced by those who attempt to give our Lord's words a double meaning. It is therefore worth examining.

Lange writes:

"In our opinion, it is necessary to distinguish between the advent of Christ in the glory of His kingdom within the circle of His disciples, and that same advent as applying to the world generally and for judgment. The latter is what is generally understood by the second advent: the former took place when

the Saviour rose from the dead and revealed Himself in the midst of His disciples. Hence the meaning of the words of Jesus is: the moment is close at hand when your hearts shall be set at rest by the manifestation of My glory; nor will it be the lot of all who stand here to die during the interval. The Lord might have said that only two of that circle would die till then, viz., Himself and Judas. But in His wisdom He chose the expression, 'Some standing here shall not taste of death,' to give them exactly that measure of hope and earnest expectation which they needed."[12]

It is difficult to imagine that such an interpretation could ever have occurred to those who originally heard our Saviour speak.

The explanation is so elaborate, artificial and far removed from the natural meaning of the words that its very ingenuity counts against it.

More importantly, it does not satisfy the language of the prediction.

How could the resurrection of Christ be described as His coming in the glory of His Father, accompanied by the holy angels, appearing in His kingdom and coming to judgment?

These are not the circumstances associated with His resurrection.

There is another serious difficulty.

If our Lord was speaking of His resurrection, an event that would take place within approximately twelve months, why would He say that some of those standing before Him would not die before witnessing it?

The form of His statement is significant.

When a speaker says that some of those present will live to see a particular event, the natural implication is that others will not. The expression suggests that a considerable period will pass before the event occurs.

It implies that not everyone present will survive until that time. Indeed, the language suggests that many will have died, but that some will remain alive to witness what was foretold.

Such a statement would be entirely appropriate if the interval were thirty or forty years.

By then, most of those who originally heard the prediction might have died, while a smaller number would still be living.

But it is not a natural way of speaking about an event that would occur within a few months, or even within a very few years.

Alford and Stier offer a more reasonable interpretation.

They understand the passage as referring:

"to the destruction of Jerusalem and the full manifestation of the kingdom of Christ by the annihilation of the Jewish polity."

Yet they weaken and confuse this explanation by introducing another supposed meaning.

They maintain that the destruction of Jerusalem also contained a hidden reference to a further and final coming of Christ, of which the earlier event was the type and pledge.

But where is the evidence for this additional meaning?

Neither our Lord nor the evangelists give the slightest indication that such a hidden reference was intended.

It is true that Jesus sometimes used language that His hearers did not immediately understand.

For example, He said to the Jews:

"Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."

John 2:19

But the evangelist carefully explains His meaning:

"But he spake of the temple of his body."

John 2:21

Again, when our Lord spoke of rivers of living water flowing from those who believed in Him, John added an explanation:

"(But this spake he of the Spirit, which they that believe on him should receive: for the Holy Ghost was not yet given; because that Jesus was not yet glorified.)"

John 7:39

On another occasion, Jesus spoke of the manner in which He would die:

"And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me."

John 12:32

Once again, the evangelist explains:

"This he said, signifying what death he should die."

John 12:33

These examples show that when our Lord used language with a meaning that was not immediately apparent, the evangelists sometimes supplied an explanation.

It is therefore reasonable to suppose that, if they had understood His predictions of the Parousia to contain another, deeper and hidden meaning, they would have given some indication of it.

But they provide no such explanation.

They say nothing to suggest that the apparent meaning of our Lord's words is not also their full and true meaning.

In the passage before us, there is no uncertainty about the coming to which Jesus refers.

It is not one among several possible comings.

It is the one great and supreme event that our Lord so frequently foretold and that His disciples so constantly expected.

It is His coming in glory.

It is His coming to judgment.

It is His coming in His kingdom.

It is the coming of the kingdom of God.

These expressions do not describe several different events. They refer to one and the same great event: the Parousia.

Nor should we think of the Parousia as a gradual process extending over a long period.

It is not a process, but an act.

Neither must we confuse the Parousia itself with the destruction of Jerusalem.

The two events were closely connected and occurred at the same period, but they were not identical.

The destruction of Jerusalem was one event. The coming of the Lord in glory was another, related to it and occurring at the same time.

The distinction must be carefully preserved.

The New Testament recognises only one Parousia: one glorious coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is therefore a misuse of language to speak of several different comings of Christ, each supposedly fulfilling the same prediction in a different way.

Some speak of His coming at His resurrection, others of His coming on the Day of Pentecost, at the destruction of Jerusalem, at the death of individual believers, or during various important events in the providential government of the world.

But this is not how the New Testament uses the expression.

Such interpretations introduce confusion where the language of Scripture is definite and consistent.

The passage we are considering contains so much important teaching about the Parousia that it may be said to cover nearly the whole subject.

Properly understood, it provides a key to the interpretation of the New Testament doctrine of the coming of the Lord.

We may therefore draw the following conclusions.

1. The coming foretold is the Parousia.

The event spoken of is the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

2. His coming would be glorious.

He would come in His own glory, in the glory of His Father, and accompanied by the holy angels.

3. His coming would be a coming to judgment.

Its purpose was to judge the wicked and adulterous generation of which our Lord spoke, and to reward every person according to their works.

4. His coming would mark the consummation of the kingdom of God.

It would bring the existing aeon, or age, to its close and mark the coming of the kingdom of God with power.

5. His coming was expressly declared to be near.

Our Saviour did not speak of an event lying in some remote and indefinite future.

As Lange rightly observes, the words are:

"emphatically placed at the beginning of the sentence; not a simple future, but meaning, The event is impending that He shall come; He is about to come."[14]

6. Some of those who heard the prediction would live to witness its fulfilment.

Our Lord expressly declared that some of the people standing before Him would not die before seeing the Son of Man coming in His kingdom.

They would live to witness the glorious event of which He spoke.

The conclusion is therefore unavoidable.

Our Lord Himself declared that the Parousia, His glorious coming, would take place within the lifetime of the generation then living.

This is not an inference drawn from uncertain language or a hidden interpretation imposed upon the passage.

It follows directly from the words of Christ.

And as we proceed with our investigation, we shall find this conclusion abundantly confirmed by the teaching of the New Testament.

FOOTNOTES

Lange, Commentary on St Matthew, commentary on the passage.

Lange, commentary on the passage.

THE COMING OF THE SON OF MAN CERTAIN AND SPEEDY

Parable of the Importunate Widow

Luke 18:1–8

And he spake a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint;

Saying, There was in a city a judge, which feared not God, neither regarded man:

And there was a widow in that city; and she came unto him, saying, Avenge me of mine adversary.

And he would not for a while: but afterward he said within himself, Though I fear not God, nor regard man;

Yet because this widow troubleth me, I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me.

And the Lord said, Hear what the unjust judge saith.

And shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night unto him, though he bear long with them?

I tell you that he will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?

One important feature of our Lord's teaching is often overlooked: His words were directed towards the people and circumstances of His own time. He spoke to His own people, in His own generation. He was God's messenger to Israel. Although His words are certainly for all people and all ages, they were first and directly addressed to the generation among whom He lived.

Many interpreters have failed to recognise this, and as a result have missed the true meaning of the parable before us. They treat it as a vague prediction that the righteous will one day be vindicated, at some distant and uncertain time. In doing so, they overlook its particular relevance to the people who first heard it.

Whatever meaning this parable may have for us or for future generations, it certainly had a direct and urgent message for the disciples to whom Jesus spoke. He was about to leave them "as sheep in the midst of wolves" (Matthew 10:16). They would face persecution and suffering, and would be hated for His sake. Under such trials, their courage might fail and their hearts grow weary.

In this parable, the Saviour encourages them to continue in prayer and not lose heart. He shows them the power of persistent prayer, even when addressed to an unjust man. If the repeated appeals of a helpless widow could persuade an unrighteous judge to give her justice, how much more surely would God, the righteous Judge, hear the prayers of His own children and put right the wrongs they had suffered?

We need not turn every detail of the parable into an allegory, as some interpreters have done. Its central lesson is clear. God's persecuted children would certainly be vindicated, and that without delay. God Himself would bring them justice, and He would do so speedily.

But when would this happen?

The time is not left uncertain. It would be "when the Son of man cometh."

The Parousia would be the appointed hour when God's suffering people received justice and deliverance.

The question with which our Lord concludes the parable deserves particular attention:

Nevertheless when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?

Luke 18:8

To understand the significance of these words, we must return to what we have already considered concerning the ministry of John the Baptist.

We have seen how dark and threatening was the future that lay before Israel when John began preaching repentance.

He was the promised forerunner of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. He was the second Elijah, sent to announce the coming of the One who would bring judgment upon the land.

Malachi's prophecy ended with the solemn warning:

lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.

Malachi 4:6

Our Lord's question suggests that He foresaw the failure of the nation to respond to the warnings it had received.

Only repentance could avert the approaching judgment. Yet the people would not repent.

There would be no true faith in God, no trust in His promises and no proper regard for His warnings of judgment.

The day of His coming would therefore become, for that unbelieving nation, the day described by our Lord as:

the days of vengeance

Luke 21:22

Doddridge understood the purpose of this parable very clearly. In his explanation of the opening verse, he writes:

"Thus our Lord discoursed with His disciples of the approaching destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans; and for their encouragement under those hardships which they might in the meantime expect, from their unbelieving countrymen or others, He spake a parable to them, which was intended to inculcate upon them this great truth, that how distressed soever their circumstances might be, they ought always to pray with faith and perseverance, and not to faint under their trials."[15]

Doddridge therefore understood the parable as an encouragement given to the disciples in view of the persecution they would suffer before the destruction of Jerusalem.

Their troubles would be severe, but they were not to abandon hope.

They were to continue in prayer, trusting that God would hear them and bring their suffering to an end.

Doddridge also explains the concluding words of our Lord in verse 8:

"Yes I say unto you, He will certainly vindicate them; and when He once undertakes it, He will do it speedily too; and this generation of men shall see and feel it to their terror. Nevertheless, when the Son of man, having been put in possession of His glorious kingdom, comes to appear for this important purpose, will He find faith in the land?"[16]

This interpretation brings out the immediate and practical meaning of the parable.

The disciples were not being encouraged to look forward to an uncertain deliverance in some distant age. They were being assured that God would vindicate His suffering people, and that the judgment of their persecutors would come speedily.

The generation that rejected Christ and persecuted His followers would itself witness the consequences.

The question concerning faith must therefore be considered in relation to the land and people of Israel.

Would the Son of Man, at His coming, find faith among those who had received His warnings?

Would the nation have repented and believed, or would it remain hardened in unbelief?

The answer, as the approaching events would reveal, was already becoming clear.

The nation was moving towards its appointed judgment.

Yet for the faithful disciples of Christ, that same coming would bring deliverance.

Thus, the parable joins together two great truths: the certain judgment of those who persecuted God's people, and the promised vindication of those who remained faithful to Him.

Both were connected with the Parousia.

And both were presented as events that were rapidly approaching.

FOOTNOTES

15. Doddridge, The Family Expositor, commentary on Luke 18:1–8.

16. Doddridge observes that the expression translated "on the earth" may refer, not to the whole earth, but to a particular country or land. He points to Acts 7:3, 4 and 11, among many other passages, where the word is used in this more restricted sense.

He considers that the context of Luke 18 requires this narrower meaning. The believing Hebrews were in great danger of becoming weary and discouraged under the persecutions and hardships they were enduring.

Compare Hebrews 3:12–14; 10:23–39; 12:1–4; James 1:1–4; 2:6.

Campbell's interpretation provides further support for this understanding.

He observes that there is usually a close connection between the different parts of our Lord's teaching, a connection that careful readers will recognise.

If Jesus was referring here to the approaching destruction of the Jewish nation, as the judgment of God upon those who rejected and killed the Messiah and persecuted His followers, then the question about faith must be understood in that context.

The faith in question would be belief in the particular truth that Jesus had just taught: that God would vindicate His elect and bring judgment upon their persecutors.

Similarly, the word translated "earth" should be understood as referring to the land of Judea.

Campbell acknowledges that the Greek word may be translated either earth or land. But he argues that the latter gives the passage a more definite meaning and connects it more closely with the preceding words.

See Campbell, The Gospels, Vol. II, p. 384.

The teaching of this remarkable parable is not yet exhausted. At a later stage of our investigation, we shall find that it sheds unexpected light upon another passage of Scripture whose meaning has often been considered difficult.

For the present, we may turn to 2 Thessalonians 1:4–10. That passage provides a striking commentary upon the whole parable, showing the close connection between the Parousia and the vindication of God's persecuted people.

THE REWARD OF THE DISCIPLES IN THE COMING AEON

At the Parousia

Matthew 19:27–29

Then answered Peter and said unto him, Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed thee; what shall we have therefore?

And Jesus said unto them, Verily I say unto you, That ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

And every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or chil-

dren, or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life.

Mark 10:28–30

Then Peter began to say unto him, Lo, we have left all, and have followed thee.

And Jesus answered and said, Verily I say unto you, There is no man that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my sake, and the gospel's,

But he shall receive an hundredfold now in this time, houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, with persecutions; and in the world to come eternal life.

Luke 18:28–30

Then Peter said, Lo, we have left all, and followed thee.

And he said unto them, Verily I say unto you, There is no man that hath left house, or parents, or brethren, or wife, or children, for the kingdom of God's sake,

Who shall not receive manifold more in this present time, and in the world to come life everlasting.

To what period are we to assign the event or condition that our Lord calls the regeneration?

The answer is closely connected with His promise that the Son of Man would sit upon the throne of His glory.

It is evident that the regeneration and the enthronement of the Son of Man belong to the same period.

Nor can there be any real doubt that the expressions the Son of Man coming in His kingdom and the Son of Man sitting on the throne of His glory refer to the same event and the same time.

Both point to the Parousia.

There is another important indication of time that connects the regeneration with the Parousia.

Our Lord speaks of the coming age, or aeon, as the period in which His faithful disciples would receive their promised reward (Mark 10:30; Luke 18:30).

But we have already seen that the coming aeon was to succeed the age then existing.

That existing age was the Jewish dispensation, the period during which the Mosaic covenant and its institutions governed the religious life of Israel.

Our Lord had expressly declared that the end of that age was approaching.

We must therefore conclude that the regeneration, the coming aeon and the Parousia are either different expressions for substantially the same event or, at the very least, belong to the same period.

The connection becomes clearer when we consider the purpose of the Son of Man's coming.

His coming in His kingdom and glory is expressly described as a coming to judgment.

Our Lord declares:

For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works.

Matthew 16:27

In the same way, His sitting upon the throne of His glory during the regeneration must also be understood as His sitting in judgment.

The apostles were promised a remarkable honour in connection with this judgment. They would sit with their Lord as assessors, sharing in the administration of His royal judgment.

Jesus declared:

And I appoint unto you a kingdom, as my Father hath appointed unto me;

That ye may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

Luke 22:29–30

This promise connects the reward of the disciples with the establishment of the kingdom and the exercise of judgment.

But when was this glorious coming to judgment to take place?

Our Lord had already answered that question.

He expressly declared that some of those who heard Him speak would live to witness His coming in His kingdom:

Verily I say unto you, There be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom.

Matthew 16:28

The promise was therefore limited to the lifetime of the generation then living.

It was no distant and indefinitely postponed hope that Jesus held before His disciples.

He did not direct their expectations towards an event lying thousands of years beyond their own lifetime.

Peter and his fellow disciples already knew that the kingdom of heaven was at hand.

They had first heard this announcement from John the Baptist in the wilderness.

Their Lord and Master had repeatedly confirmed it.

They themselves had travelled throughout Galilee proclaiming the same message to their countrymen.

They had therefore every reason to understand that the promised kingdom was approaching.

When our Lord assured them that they would sit upon thrones in the coming aeon, could He possibly have intended that countless ages must pass before they received their promised reward?

Were centuries upon centuries, and even thousands of years, to pass away before the apostles entered upon the honours that He had promised them?

Are we to suppose that their inheritance of everlasting life and their sitting upon twelve thrones still belong to the things for which they must wait?

Surely such an interpretation defeats itself.

What meaning would the promise have held for the disciples if they had been told that its fulfilment would be postponed for thousands of years?

Far from encouraging them, such an explanation would have made the promise appear almost like a mockery.

But suppose we understand the regeneration as taking place at the Parousia.

Suppose also that we recognise the Parousia as belonging to the close of the Jewish age, when Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed.

We then have a definite and intelligible period for the fulfilment of our Lord's promise.

The event would not lie hidden in some distant and uncertain future. It would be near enough to fall within the lifetime of people then living.

At that appointed time, the enemies of Christ would receive their predicted judgment, while His faithful disciples would enter upon their promised reward.

Thus, the regeneration, the coming aeon and the Parousia all point towards the same great consummation.

The old Jewish dispensation would pass away, the kingdom of Christ would be manifested in power, and the disciples who had faithfully followed Him would receive the glorious recompense He had prom-

ised them.

PROPHETIC INTIMATIONS OF THE APPROACHING CONSUMMATION OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

I. The Parable of the Pounds

Luke 19:11–27

And as they heard these things, he added and spake a parable, because he was nigh to Jerusalem, and because they thought that the kingdom of God should immediately appear.

He said therefore, A certain nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom, and to return.

And he called his ten servants, and delivered them ten pounds, and said unto them, Occupy till I come.

But his citizens hated him, and sent a message after him, saying, We will not have this man to reign over us.

And it came to pass, that when he was returned, having received the kingdom, then he commanded these servants to be called unto him, to whom he had given the money, that he might know how much every man had gained by trading.

Then came the first, saying, Lord, thy pound hath gained ten pounds.

And he said unto him, Well, thou good servant: because thou hast been faithful in a very little, have thou authority over ten cities.

And the second came, saying, Lord, thy pound hath gained five pounds.

And he said likewise to him, Be thou also over five cities.

And another came, saying, Lord, behold, here is thy pound, which I have kept laid up in a napkin:

For I feared thee, because thou art an austere man: thou takest up that thou layedst not down, and reapest that thou didst not sow.

And he saith unto him, Out of thine own mouth will I judge thee, thou wicked servant. Thou knewest that I was an austere man, taking up that I laid not down, and reaping that I did not sow:

Wherefore then gavest not thou my money into the bank, that at my coming I might have required mine own with usury?

And he said unto them that stood by, Take from him the pound, and give it to him that hath ten pounds.

(And they said unto him, Lord, he hath ten pounds.)

For I say unto you, That unto every one which hath shall be given; and from him that hath not, even that he hath shall be taken away from him.

But those mine enemies, which would not that I should reign over them, bring hither, and slay them before me.

Every careful reader of the Gospels must notice how frequently our Lord spoke of approaching judgment as He drew near to the end of His earthly ministry.

When He delivered this parable, He was travelling towards Jerusalem to celebrate His final Passover before His suffering and death.

Yet it is remarkable that His teaching during this period was concerned, not so much with His own approaching death, as with the terrible catastrophe that awaited the Jewish nation.

The parable of the pounds is only one example of this repeated warning.

We find the same subject in His lamentation over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41), His cursing of the fig-tree (Matthew 21; Mark 11), the parable of the wicked husbandmen (Matthew 21; Mark 12; Luke 20), and the parable of the marriage of the king's son (Matthew 22).

It appears again in the solemn woes pronounced upon that generation (Matthew 23:29–36), His second lamentation over Jerusalem (Matthew 23:37–38), and His great prophetic discourse on the Mount of Olives, together with the parables and illustrations recorded by Matthew.

All these passages are concerned with the same great subject: the approaching judgment of the Jewish nation.

As we examine these prophecies, we shall see that the catastrophe foreseen by our Lord was not an event lying hundreds or thousands of years in the future.

Its shadow was already falling upon the people and circumstances of His own time.

Nor does Scripture give us any warrant for supposing that His words referred to some other event, or included some additional fulfilment beyond the judgment He was plainly predicting.

The parable of the pounds was spoken to correct a mistaken expectation among the disciples.

They believed that the kingdom of God was about to appear immediately.

It is not difficult to understand why they thought so.

John the Baptist had announced that the kingdom of heaven was at hand. Jesus Himself had proclaimed the same message and had sent His disciples throughout the cities and villages of Galilee to declare its approach.

As patriotic Israelites, they felt deeply the humiliation of living under Roman rule. They longed to see their nation restored to its former freedom.

As devout descendants of Abraham, they also desired the fulfilment of God's promise that all nations would be blessed through him.

Yet their expectations were not entirely free from personal ambition.

Was not their own Master the promised Son of David, the coming King?

And if He was about to receive His kingdom, what honours might His faithful followers expect?

They were His chosen disciples and intimate companions. Surely they would have important places in His reign.

This explains why they disputed among themselves about who should hold the highest position in the kingdom.

It also explains why the sons of Zebedee were so eager to secure the places of greatest honour, one at their Lord's right hand and the other at His left, when He entered upon His royal authority.

And now they were approaching Jerusalem.

The great national festival of Passover was near. Jews from every part of the country were gathering in the Holy City.

Jesus of Nazareth had become widely known, and His arrival could hardly fail to attract attention.

What could seem more likely than that the enthusiasm of the people would lead them to acknowledge Him as their King and place Him upon the throne of His father David?

This was what the disciples longed to see.

And because they desired it so strongly, they persuaded themselves that it was about to happen.

As Luke tells us:

they thought that the kingdom of God should immediately appear.

But our Lord restrained their enthusiasm.

Through this parable, He taught them that an interval must pass before the fulfilment of their expectations.

To illustrate this, He drew upon an incident from recent Jewish history that would have been familiar to His hearers.

Archelaus, the son of Herod the Great, had travelled to Rome to seek the emperor's approval to succeed his father as ruler over his territories.

Jesus used this incident as the foundation of His parable.

The nobleman travels to a distant country to receive royal authority, intending afterwards to return.

In the same way, our Lord would depart from the earth, ascend into heaven, receive His kingdom and subsequently return in glory.

During His absence, His servants would be entrusted with responsibilities.

They were not to remain idle while waiting for His return.

Their instructions were clear:

Occupy till I come.

Luke 19:13

They were to carry out the work committed to them with diligence and faithfulness.

When their Lord returned, they would be called to account for the manner in which they had fulfilled their duties.

Those who had proved faithful would receive His approval and reward.

But those who had rejected His authority and refused to acknowledge His reign would face judgment and destruction.

Neander gives an excellent explanation of the parable. Indeed, its meaning is so clear that it almost explains itself. Nevertheless, his observations deserve to be quoted:

"In this parable, in view of the circumstances under which it was uttered, and of the approaching catastrophe, special intimations are given of Christ's departure from the earth, of His ascension, and return to judge the rebellious theocratic nation, and consummate His dominion. It describes a great man, who travels to the distant court of the mighty emperor, to receive from him authority over his countrymen, and to return with royal power. So Christ was not immediately recognised in His kingly office, but first had to depart from the earth, and leave His agents to advance His kingdom, to ascend into heaven and be appointed theocratic King, and return again to exercise His contested power."

This is the meaning of the parable of the pounds.

Our Lord was correcting the disciples' belief that the kingdom would appear at the very moment they expected.

They were mistaken about the precise time.

But it does not follow that the kingdom had been postponed for hundreds or thousands of years.

Such an interpretation would directly contradict the plain declarations of Christ and His forerunner.

How could John the Baptist and Jesus Himself have proclaimed that the kingdom was at hand if its appearance was still many ages away?

How could an event truly be described as near if it lay further in the future than the entire period of the Jewish dispensation, from Moses to Christ?

The kingdom might still be near, even though it was not quite so near as the disciples imagined.

There was to be an interval between the departure of their Lord and His return. That much the parable clearly teaches.

But an interval does not necessarily mean a delay of many centuries.

It was necessary that their Lord should depart. Yet His absence was to be comparatively brief. He would return to them and come in His kingdom.

This was the hope in which the disciples lived.

It was the faith they proclaimed to others.

They believed that the kingdom of God was approaching and that their Lord would return to establish His royal authority.

And we cannot believe that the faith and hope inspired by the express promises of Christ rested upon a misunderstanding.

The kingdom was indeed at hand.

The disciples were mistaken in expecting its immediate appearance, but they were not mistaken in believing that its coming was near.

II. Lamentation of Jesus over Jerusalem

Luke 19:41–44

And when he was come near, he beheld the city, and wept over it,

Saying, If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace! but now they are hid from thine eyes.

For the days shall come upon thee, that thine enemies shall cast a trench about thee, and compass thee round, and keep thee in on every side,

And shall lay thee even with the ground, and thy children within thee; and they shall not leave in thee one stone upon another; because thou knewest not the time of thy visitation.

Here we come to a prophecy whose meaning can scarcely be disputed.

Our Lord's words are as clear and definite as a historical account. Even those who favour giving prophecy a double meaning have not suggested that this passage refers to anything other than Jerusalem and its approaching destruction.

Jesus was not speaking of the earth being consumed by fire or of the dissolution of the created universe.

He was foretelling the siege and destruction of Jerusalem, together with the slaughter of its inhabitants.

These events took place less than forty years after He spoke. The prophecy was fulfilled in the destruction of the Holy City, and there is no reason to suppose that it refers to anything more.

But why should this be so?

Why should we not give this prophecy a double meaning, just as some interpreters do with our Lord's great prophetic discourse on the Mount of Olives?

The answer will doubtless be that the passage is clear and consistent throughout. Jesus was looking directly at Jerusalem, speaking about Jerusalem and predicting a catastrophe that would shortly overtake Jerusalem.

Everything in the passage concerns the same city and the same approaching event.

But precisely the same may be said of the prophecy recorded in Matthew 24.

Yet in that passage, some interpreters find themselves moving backwards and forwards between two

entirely different subjects.

At one moment, they understand Jesus to be speaking of Jerusalem; at another, of the whole world.

Sometimes they interpret His words as referring to the end of the Jewish dispensation; at other times, to the end of human history.

In one verse, they see the events of AD 70. In another, they imagine an event belonging to some future time that no one can determine.

But what authority do they have for making these distinctions?

As we shall see, the prophecy delivered on the Mount of Olives is just as connected and consistent as this prediction of Jerusalem's destruction.

It forms one continuous and complete discourse, dealing with a single great subject.

If the theory of a double meaning were a sound principle of interpretation, it ought to apply equally well to the prophecy now before us.

Yet even those who defend that theory do not attempt to apply it here.

Why not?

Because the meaning of our Lord's lamentation is too plain to admit such an interpretation.

He stood before Jerusalem. He wept over Jerusalem. He foretold the approaching destruction of Jerusalem.

The city had failed to recognise the time of its visitation, and the consequences of that failure would soon fall upon it.

No elaborate interpretation is required.

Common sense recognises that this deeply moving lament concerns Jerusalem, and Jerusalem alone.

III. Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen

Matthew 21:33–46; Mark 12:1–12; Luke 20:9–19

The parable of the wicked husbandmen is recorded in remarkably similar language by Matthew, Mark and Luke. Each Gospel describes a vineyard entrusted to tenants who refuse to give its owner the fruit that belongs to him. When the owner sends his servants, they are beaten, mistreated and killed. At last, he sends his beloved son, whom the tenants also murder in the hope of possessing the inheritance.

Matthew 21:33–46

Hear another parable: There was a certain householder, which planted a vineyard, and hedged it round about, and digged a winepress in it, and built a tower, and let it out to husbandmen, and went into a far country:

And when the time of the fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the husbandmen, that they might receive the fruits of it.

And the husbandmen took his servants, and beat one, and killed another, and stoned another.

Again, he sent other servants more than the first: and they did unto them likewise.

But last of all he sent unto them his son, saying, They will reverence my son.

But when the husbandmen saw the son, they said among themselves, This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and let us seize on his inheritance.

And they caught him, and cast him out of the vineyard, and slew him.

When the lord therefore of the vineyard cometh, what will he do unto those husbandmen?

They say unto him, He will miserably destroy those wicked men, and will let out his vineyard unto other husbandmen, which shall render him the fruits in their seasons.

Jesus saith unto them, Did ye never read in the scriptures, The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner: this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes?

Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof.

And whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken: but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder.

And when the chief priests and Pharisees had heard his parables, they perceived that he spake of them.

But when they sought to lay hands on him, they feared the multitude, because they took him for a prophet.

The parallel accounts

Mark records the same rejection of the owner's servants and the murder of his beloved son. He concludes the account of the tenants' punishment with these words:

He will come and destroy the husbandmen, and will give the vineyard unto others.

Mark 12:9

Luke likewise records the owner's decision to send his beloved son, the tenants' determination to kill him and the judgment pronounced upon them:

He shall come and destroy these husbandmen, and shall give the vineyard to others. And when they heard it, they said, God forbid.

Luke 20:16

Luke also tells us that the chief priests and scribes immediately recognised the meaning of the parable:

And the chief priests and the scribes the same hour sought to lay hands on him; and they feared the people: for they perceived that he had spoken this parable against them.

Luke 20:19

The meaning of the parable

This parable scarcely requires an interpreter.

Its meaning is so plain, and its reference to the Jewish nation so direct, that there should be little room for disagreement.

The vineyard represents the land of Israel.

The owner of the vineyard is God the Father.

The servants sent to collect its fruit are the prophets whom God repeatedly sent to His people.

The owner's only and beloved son is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

The wicked husbandmen represent the rebellious Jews who rejected God's messengers and finally rejected and killed His Son.

The punishment pronounced upon them is the approaching national catastrophe associated with the Parousia.

At that time, the covenant relationship under which Israel had enjoyed its special privileges would come to an end, and the kingdom would be transferred to others who would bring forth its proper fruit.

Neander expresses this clearly when he speaks of the time when:

"the theocratic relation is broken, and the kingdom is transferred to other nations that shall bring forth fruits corresponding to it."[2]

The application of the parable to the people living in our Saviour's time is unmistakable.

Indeed, the chief priests and Pharisees understood perfectly well that Jesus was speaking against them.

They recognised themselves in the wicked tenants and were deeply offended by the accusation.

The parable struck directly at their guilt, and they felt its force.

As the account stands, its meaning is clear and consistent. Yet theologians have sometimes managed to make even such plain teaching difficult and obscure by introducing interpretations that the words themselves do not support.

Lange provides an example of this approach.

Commenting on Matthew 21:41, he writes:

"The Parousia of Christ is consummated in His last coming, but is not one with it. It begins in principle with the resurrection (John xvi. 16); continues as a power through the New Testament period (John xiv. 3–19); and is consummated in the stricter sense in the final advent (1 Cor. xv. 23; Matt. xxv. 31; 2 Thess. ii., etc.)."[3]

Here we have something very different from the straightforward prediction of our Lord.

Instead of one coming of Christ, we are presented with three distinct comings, or with a single coming divided into three different stages.

The first supposedly began with His resurrection.

The second is said to continue throughout the entire Christian age.

The third is placed at some final coming still in the future.

According to this explanation, the Parousia becomes a continuous process extending over many centuries.

It has already continued for nearly two thousand years, and for all we know, it might continue for another two thousand.

But where does the passage teach anything of the kind?

There is not the slightest indication of such an interpretation in the parable itself.

Nor can any clear authority for it be found elsewhere in Scripture.

It is a human explanation imposed upon the text, arising from the attempt to give the prophecies of Christ two or even three separate meanings.

Such interpretations do not make the Scriptures clearer. They introduce difficulties that the words themselves do not contain.

Alford offers a much more reasonable explanation.

He observes:

"We may observe that our Lord makes 'when the Lord cometh' coincide with the destruction of Jerusalem, which is incontestably the overthrow of the wicked husbandmen. This passage therefore forms an important key to our Lord's prophecies, and a decisive justification for those who, like myself, firmly hold that the coming of the Lord is, in many places, to be identified, primarily, with that overthrow."[4]

This is an important admission.

Alford recognises that the coming of the lord of the vineyard corresponds to the destruction of Jerusalem. He also acknowledges that this passage provides a valuable key to understanding other prophecies of our Lord.

It is unfortunate, however, that he weakens an otherwise sound explanation by adding the expressions in many places and primarily.

These qualifications suggest that the words may have other meanings or further fulfilments beyond

the event to which they plainly refer.

Yet the central point of his interpretation remains valuable.

Here, undoubtedly, we find an important key to our Lord's prophetic teaching.

But the master key has already been placed in our hands.

It is the declaration recorded in Matthew 16:27–28, where Jesus foretold His coming in glory and expressly stated that some of those standing before Him would live to witness it.

That prediction establishes the time within which the Parousia was to occur.

It provides the means of understanding not only the parable of the wicked husbandmen, but many other passages of New Testament prophecy that have long been considered difficult.

The parable before us agrees completely with that declaration.

The owner of the vineyard would come. The rebellious tenants would be judged and destroyed. The vineyard would be entrusted to others who would produce its fruit.

The prophecy points directly to the judgment that would overtake the Jewish nation and to the great change in the administration of the kingdom of God associated with the Parousia.

Footnotes

Neander, explanation of the parable of the wicked husbandmen.

Lange, commentary on Matthew 21:41.

Alford, The Greek Testament, commentary on Matthew 21:41.

IV. Parable of the Marriage of the King's Son

Matthew 22:1–14

And Jesus answered and spake unto them again by parables, and said,

The kingdom of heaven is like unto a certain king, which made a marriage for his son,

And sent forth his servants to call them that were bidden to the wedding: and they would not come.

Again, he sent forth other servants, saying, Tell them which are bidden, Behold, I have prepared my dinner: my oxen and my fatlings are killed, and all things are ready: come unto the marriage.

But they made light of it, and went their ways, one to his farm, another to his merchandise:

And the remnant took his servants, and entreated them spitefully, and slew them.

But when the king heard thereof, he was wroth: and he sent forth his armies, and destroyed those murderers, and burned up their city.

Then saith he to his servants, The wedding is ready, but they which were bidden were not worthy.

Go ye therefore into the highways, and as many as ye shall find, bid to the marriage.

So those servants went out into the highways, and gathered together all as many as they found, both bad and good: and the wedding was furnished with guests.

And when the king came in to see the guests, he saw there a man which had not on a wedding garment:

And he saith unto him, Friend, how camest thou in hither not having a wedding garment? And he was speechless.

Then said the king to the servants, Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

For many are called, but few are chosen.

This parable closely resembles the parable of the Great Supper recorded in Luke 14.

It is possible that the two accounts are different versions of the same original parable. However, this

question does not affect our present inquiry, and there is no conclusive evidence that our Lord did not speak them on separate occasions.

Both parables teach essentially the same lesson.

But the account given by Matthew has a more distinctly eschatological character. It deals more directly with the approaching judgment and the consummation of the kingdom of heaven.

The meaning is clear.

The king sends his servants to invite the guests to his son's wedding. Those who were first invited refuse to come. Some treat the invitation with contempt, while others seize the king's servants, mistreat them and kill them.

The king responds by sending his armies to destroy the murderers and burn their city.

This part of the parable fixes its historical application.

The murderers represent those among the Jewish people who rejected and persecuted the messengers sent to them. The city marked for destruction is Jerusalem.

The Roman armies were the instruments through which divine justice was carried out. Jerusalem perished because of her guilt and rebellion against her King.

The connection between the parable and the approaching destruction of Jerusalem is therefore direct and unmistakable.

Alford recognises this connection in his commentary. He acknowledges that the parable has a primary and partial reference to Israel and Jerusalem.

But he does not consider that reference sufficient to explain the whole prophecy.

Instead, he divides the parable into two separate parts.

According to his interpretation, the first part ends at verse 10 and refers to events already fulfilled in the judgment of Jerusalem. A second part begins at verse 11, which he regards as referring to a judgment still in the future.

This interpretation implies that the destruction of Jerusalem and the judgment of the Jewish nation do not provide a complete fulfilment of our Lord's words.

But what authority is there for making such a division?

On the one hand, we have the teaching of Christ Himself, expressed in plain and intelligible language.

On the other, we have the speculation of an interpreter who introduces a further meaning without offering any clear evidence from Scripture to support it.

Why should we suppose that our Lord intended a second and distant fulfilment when He gave no indication of one?

Why should a parable that speaks so clearly of the approaching destruction of Jerusalem be divided into separate judgments belonging to different ages?

The difficulty arises, not from the words of Christ, but from the interpretation imposed upon them.

To understand the parable according to its plain historical meaning may be dismissed by some as shallow, superficial or lacking in spiritual insight.

But apparently it is considered a mark of superior understanding to discover hidden meanings, distant fulfilments and mysterious depths that only learned theologians can uncover!

Such interpretations may be praised as evidence of remarkable insight and spiritual discernment. Yet they often make obscure what Scripture has made clear.

We cannot accept that this is sound biblical interpretation.

To introduce human theories and double meanings into the predictions of our Lord, without clear authority from His words, is inconsistent both with careful criticism and with genuine reverence for Scripture.

It is not faithful interpretation, but speculation.

Instead of explaining the truth, it conceals it beneath unnecessary difficulties.

We must distinguish between discovering what Scripture actually teaches and imposing upon it meanings that arise from our own imagination.

The first is the proper work of an interpreter. The second risks replacing divine revelation with human conjecture.

At the risk, therefore, of being considered shallow or superficial, we shall continue to hold firmly to the plain meaning of Scripture.

We shall not abandon the natural sense of our Lord's words in pursuit of hidden or speculative interpretations, however learned or distinguished their advocates may be.

The authority of Scripture must stand above the authority of commentators.

And where our Lord has spoken clearly, we have no right to make His meaning uncertain.

V. The Woes Denounced on the Scribes and Pharisees

Matthew 23:29–36

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because ye build the tombs of the prophets, and garnish the sepulchres of the righteous,

And say, If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets.

Wherefore ye be witnesses unto yourselves, that ye are the children of them which killed the prophets.

Fill ye up then the measure of your fathers.

Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?

Wherefore, behold, I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes: and some of them ye shall kill and crucify; and some of them shall ye scourge in your synagogues, and persecute them from city to city:

That upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias son of Barachias, whom ye slew between the temple and the altar.

Verily I say unto you, All these things shall come upon this generation.

Luke 11:47–51

Woe unto you! for ye build the sepulchres of the prophets, and your fathers killed them.

Truly ye bear witness that ye allow the deeds of your fathers: for they indeed killed them, and ye build their sepulchres.

Therefore also said the wisdom of God, I will send them prophets and apostles, and some of them they shall slay and persecute:

That the blood of all the prophets, which was shed from the foundation of the world, may be required of this generation;

From the blood of Abel unto the blood of Zacharias which perished between the altar and the temple: verily I say unto you, It shall be required of this generation.

Luke records these words in a different setting from Matthew and appears to place them on another

occasion.

Did our Lord repeat the same warning twice? Or did Luke place the discourse in a different part of his narrative from the occasion on which it was originally spoken?

This is not an easy question to settle.

The suggestion that Jesus delivered precisely the same extended discourse on two separate occasions seems improbable.

We can readily understand how brief sayings and memorable expressions might have been repeated at different times.

For example, our Lord may well have used such statements as:

> For many are called, but few are chosen.
>
> Matthew 22:14

And again:

> So the last shall be first, and the first last:
>
> Matthew 20:16

These short, striking sayings could naturally have been repeated in different circumstances.

But the same cannot so easily be supposed of long and carefully connected discourses.

It is difficult to imagine that our Lord delivered the Sermon on the Mount, His prophetic discourse on the Mount of Olives, or this solemn denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees in precisely the same words on several different occasions.

We must also remember that the Gospel writers did not always arrange their accounts in strict chronological order.

This is a point we have already considered.

It is generally acknowledged that the evangelists sometimes grouped together events or teachings because they were related in subject, without necessarily placing them in the exact order in which they occurred.

Stier makes this observation concerning Luke's Gospel:

> "Two things are sufficiently plain: First, that he mentions individual occurrences without strict regard to chronology, even repeating and intercalating some things elsewhere recorded," etc.

Neander also comments on the passage before us:

> "As this last discourse given by Matthew contains various passages given by Luke in the table conversation (chap. xi.), so Luke inserts there this prophetic announcement, whose proper position is found in Matthew."[5]

Neander therefore recognises that Matthew preserves the more appropriate setting for this solemn prophecy.

However, we cannot agree with his further suggestion that Matthew 23 contains many statements originally spoken on other occasions.[6]

Anyone who reads the twenty-third chapter of Matthew carefully can hardly fail to recognise that it forms one continuous and connected discourse.

Its different parts follow naturally from one another.

The argument develops steadily, each accusation adding force to what has already been said.

The chapter is also carefully structured around seven solemn woes pronounced against the scribes and Pharisees.[7]

These men claimed unusual holiness and religious authority. Yet, instead of guiding the people into truth, they were themselves blind guides.

The occasion was especially solemn, for this was our Lord's final public address.

Both the structure of the discourse and the circumstances in which it was delivered strongly suggest that it was spoken as one complete whole.

We are therefore led to conclude that Matthew preserves the original form and setting of this denunciation.

Nevertheless, the precise arrangement of the passage in the Gospels is not essential to our present inquiry.

There is a matter of far greater importance.

We must notice how closely the closing words of our Lord's public ministry resemble those spoken earlier by John the Baptist.

Jesus declares:

> Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?
> Matthew 23:33

These words are almost identical in spirit and language to the warning John had addressed to the same class of people when he announced the approaching wrath.

The resemblance is surely no accident.

Our Lord deliberately takes up the solemn warning of His forerunner.

John had called the nation to repentance and warned of the coming judgment.

Jesus had followed with His own gracious invitations, His teaching, His miracles and His repeated appeals to the people.

Yet Israel had rejected both.

The nation had refused the stern warnings of the second Elijah and the tender appeals of the Lamb of God.

Its measure of guilt was now almost full.

The day of wrath was rapidly approaching.

But the most important feature of this discourse is the unmistakable reference to the people living at the time when Jesus spoke.

Matthew records His solemn declaration:

> Verily I say unto you, All these things shall come upon this generation.
> Matthew 23:36

Luke expresses the same warning:

> It shall be required of this generation.
> Luke 11:51

Surely no one can reasonably argue that these words have one meaning for the people then living and another meaning for some distant generation.

There is no basis here for distinguishing between a primary and a secondary fulfilment.

The words are definite.

Our Lord declares that the judgment will fall upon this generation.

No careful interpreter can deny that He is speaking of the Jewish people who were then alive.

Even Dorner, who strongly argues that the Greek word genea, meaning generation, may carry several

different meanings in Scripture, freely admits that it refers here to the contemporaries of Christ.

He describes them as:

"Hoc ipsum hominum aevum."[8]

That is, the particular generation of people then living.

This admission is of great importance.

It helps us establish the true meaning of the expression this generation, which occupies such a significant place in several of our Lord's prophecies.

It is especially important for understanding His great prophetic discourse on the Mount of Olives.

There, too, the same expression appears in connection with events that He declares will certainly take place.

We must therefore give careful attention to the meaning established by the passage before us.

Here, the words cannot reasonably refer to the Jewish race throughout all ages.

Nor can they refer to some future generation living many centuries after Christ.

They refer to the generation that heard His words.

Our Lord describes that generation as the heir of all the generations that had gone before it.

It had inherited not merely the privileges and responsibilities of its ancestors, but also the rebellious spirit and deep-rooted corruption that had so often characterised the nation's history.

Its people condemned their forefathers for persecuting and killing the prophets, yet they were preparing to commit even greater crimes themselves.

They would reject and kill the Son of God.

They would also persecute the messengers whom He would send after Him.

In this way, the accumulated guilt of the nation was reaching its climax.

The long history of rebellion against God was approaching its final and dreadful conclusion.

The judgments that had been threatened through successive generations, but so long delayed by divine patience, were now about to fall.

The generation then living would bear the consequences.

It would be overwhelmed by the flood of wrath that had been gathering through the ages.

This is the solemn meaning of our Lord's declaration:

All these things shall come upon this generation.

Matthew 23:36

The warning is not vague, nor is its fulfilment left to an indefinite future.

It concerns the people to whom Jesus spoke, the guilt they were bringing upon themselves, and the judgment that would overtake them before that generation had passed away.

VI. The Second Lamentation of Jesus over Jerusalem

Matthew 23:37–39

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!

Behold, your house is left unto you desolate.

For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord.

Luke 13:34–35

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, which killest the prophets, and stonest them that are sent unto thee; how often would I have gathered thy children together, as a hen doth gather her brood under her wings, and ye would not!

Behold, your house is left unto you desolate: and verily I say unto you, Ye shall not see me, until the time come when ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord.

Here again, we encounter one of those differences between the Gospel accounts that have caused difficulty for those who seek to arrange every event in strict chronological order.

Luke records this moving lament in a different setting from Matthew.

Yet it is difficult to believe that our Lord spoke precisely these same words on more than one occasion. The circumstances described by Matthew appear to provide their natural and original setting.

Dorner takes this view. He argues that the words themselves show that they were spoken on the occasion recorded by Matthew, rather than at the earlier point where Luke places them. Our Lord was then leaving the temple, never to return to it again until He came in judgment.[9]

Lange also suggests that Luke placed the passage earlier in his Gospel for reasons connected with the arrangement and purpose of his narrative.

We may therefore reasonably regard the lament as having been spoken on the occasion described by Matthew.

In that setting, its significance becomes especially clear.

These deeply moving words soften the severity of the judgments that our Lord had just pronounced upon the scribes and Pharisees.

After His solemn denunciations, His public ministry closes with an expression of extraordinary tenderness and divine compassion.

The same Saviour who had condemned the wickedness of the nation now mourns over the city that has rejected Him.

As Lange beautifully observes:

"The Lord mourns and laments over His own ruined Jerusalem. . . . His whole pilgrimage on earth was troubled by distress for Jerusalem, like the hen which sees the eagle threatening in the sky, and anxiously seeks to gather her chickens under her wings. With such distress Jesus saw the Roman eagles approach for judgment upon the children of Jerusalem, and sought with the strongest solicitations of love to save them, but in vain. They were like dead children to the voice of maternal love!"[10]

Can there be any doubt about the subject of this lamentation?

It concerns Jerusalem, and Jerusalem alone.

There is no uncertainty here, no double meaning, and no reason to seek both an immediate and a distant fulfilment.

One thought, one sorrow and one object filled the heart of Jesus.

Jerusalem!

The city of God, so deeply loved, yet so guilty and so near to destruction.

Her fate was almost sealed. As our Saviour took His leave of her, His heart was filled with anguish.

But how are we to understand the closing words of His lament?

Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord.

Matthew 23:39

The expression Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord was a recognised form of greeting

used by the Jews in connection with the coming of the Messiah.

It was the Messianic greeting, expressing welcome to the Anointed One of God.

The words were generally understood to come from Psalm 118:26:

Blessed be he that cometh in the name of the LORD: we have blessed you out of the house of the LORD.

Our Lord's statement therefore points towards a time when this Messianic greeting would be appropriate.

The Lord who was now leaving the temple would return to His temple.

More than this, the very generation to whom He was speaking would witness that return.

This is plainly implied in the form of His words.

He does not say that one generation would cease to see Him and that another generation, living centuries later, would witness His return.

He addresses the same people throughout:

Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say

The force of this statement would be greatly weakened if the people referred to in the first part were not the same people referred to in the second.

Nothing could be clearer than that our Lord was addressing the inhabitants of Jerusalem, His own contemporaries.

They and He would meet again.

The Messiah whom they professed so eagerly to expect would return.

Malachi had foretold that the Lord whom the people sought would suddenly come to His temple.

But the people had misunderstood the character of that coming.

They expected it to be an occasion of joy and triumph.

Instead, it would be a day of judgment.

The prophet had already asked:

But who may abide the day of his coming? and who shall stand when he appeareth?

Malachi 3:2

That coming would bring the desolation of the house of God, the destruction of the Jewish nation's established order, and the outpouring of divine wrath that had so long been restrained.

This was the return to which our Saviour referred.

This was the meeting that would take place between Himself and the generation that had rejected Him.

And had He not already declared these very things?

Only a little earlier, He had announced that the terrible judgments pronounced upon the scribes and Pharisees would fall upon that generation.

His words were unmistakable:

Verily I say unto you, All these things shall come upon this generation.

Matthew 23:36

Had He not also solemnly declared that some of those then living would see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom and glory?

He had foretold His coming with the angels, when He would reward every person according to their works.

That was plainly a coming to judgment.

Why, then, should we give His present words an entirely different meaning?

Some distinguished commentators have suggested that our Lord was speaking of a far distant future, when Israel would be converted to Christianity and would at last be ready to welcome Him as her King.

According to this interpretation, the people to whom Jesus spoke would never see Him again, but a future generation of believing Israelites would receive Him with the Messianic greeting.

But surely this takes unwarranted liberties with the language of Scripture.

Our Lord does not say, Ye shall not see me until they shall say.

Nor does He say, until another generation shall say.

He says:

till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord.

The distinction is decisive.

Nor must we assume that because the Messianic greeting is mentioned, those who would witness His coming must necessarily understand or sincerely acknowledge its true significance.

Only a day or two earlier, multitudes in the streets of Jerusalem had welcomed Jesus with these very words.

Yet within a remarkably short time, cries of welcome had been replaced by the demand:

Crucify him, crucify him.

Luke 23:21

The use of the Messianic greeting, therefore, did not necessarily prove that those who spoke it possessed true faith or understood the character of the Messiah's kingdom.

In the present passage, the expression points to the fact of His coming.

It identifies the coming of the Messiah, rather than proving that those who witnessed it would welcome Him with genuine faith and repentance.

The unhappy people to whom our Saviour spoke would never be able to offer that greeting in its true and highest sense.

They would not sincerely acknowledge Him as their blessed and rightful King.

Nevertheless, they would witness His coming.

They would experience the event with which the Messianic greeting was inseparably connected.

That event was the Parousia.

We are therefore not merely permitted, but compelled, to conclude that our Lord was speaking of His coming in judgment upon Jerusalem.

It was the coming that would bring the Jewish age to its close.

And, according to His own express declarations, it would take place within the lifetime of the generation then living.

History confirms the fulfilment of the prophecy.

Less than forty years after these solemn words were spoken, Jerusalem and her temple were destroyed.

Judea and her people were overwhelmed by the terrible judgments our Lord had foretold.

Their land was laid waste.

Their house was left desolate.

Jerusalem, together with the inhabitants gathered within her walls, was engulfed in one common ruin.

Thus, the sorrowful farewell of our Lord was followed by the very catastrophe He had predicted.

The city that refused His gracious invitation experienced the judgment of His coming.

And the generation that heard His warning lived to see the fulfilment of His words.

VII. THE PROPHECY ON THE MOUNT OF OLIVES

The Coming of the Son of Man (The Parousia) Before the Passing Away of That Generation

Matthew 24–25; Mark 13; Luke 21

We now come to the fullest and most explicit of all our Lord's prophecies concerning His coming and the solemn events connected with it.

The discourse delivered on the Mount of Olives is the great prophecy of the New Testament. It may rightly be called the Apocalypse of the Gospels.

A correct understanding of this discourse is essential to understanding the prophetic teaching of the apostles. Indeed, we might almost say that the Epistles contain little concerning these events that has not already been taught in the Gospels.

Our Saviour's prophecy is the great source from which the apostles drew much of their teaching about the coming judgment and the Parousia.

The commonly accepted interpretation of this discourse, followed by many commentators and generally assumed by readers, is that our Lord combines two different subjects in His reply to the disciples.

According to this view, He begins by speaking of the approaching destruction of the temple at Jerusalem, but then passes on to the destruction of the world, the universal judgment and the final consummation of all things.

The change is supposed to take place almost without warning.

One moment, Jesus is understood to be speaking of Jerusalem and the catastrophe that would shortly overtake it. The next, He is said to be describing an infinitely greater event, belonging to some distant and uncertain future.

On this interpretation, the two subjects are so closely interwoven that it becomes extremely difficult to distinguish between them.

Sometimes the prophecy is said to refer to Jerusalem, and sometimes to the whole world.

Sometimes it concerns Israel, and sometimes the entire human race.

At one point, it describes events close at hand; at another, events separated from them by thousands of years.

To decide where one subject ends and the other begins becomes almost impossible.

Perhaps the fairest way to represent this interpretation is to examine the arrangement proposed by Dr Lange, whose explanation has been accepted by several distinguished commentators.

Lange writes:

"In harmony with apocalyptic style, Jesus exhibited the judgments of His coming in a series of cycles, each of which depicts the whole futurity, but in such a manner, that with every new cycle the scene seems to approximate to and more closely resemble the final catastrophe. Thus, the first cycle delineates the whole course of the world down to the end, in its general characteristics (ver. 4–14). The second gives the signs of the approaching destruction of Jerusalem, and paints this destruction itself as a sign and a commencement of the judgment of the world, which from that day onward proceeds in silent and suppressed days of judgment down to the last (ver. 15–28). The third describes the sudden end of the world, and the judgment which ensues (ver. 29–44). Then follows a series of parables and similitudes, in which the Lord paints the judgment itself, which unfolds itself in an organic succession of several acts. In the last act

Christ reveals His universal judicial majesty. Chap. xxiv. 45–51 exhibits the judgment upon the servants of Christ, or the clergy. Chap. xxv. 1–13 (the wise and foolish virgins) exhibits the judgment upon the Church, or the people. Then follows the judgment on the individual members of the Church (ver. 14–30). Finally, ver. 31–46 introduce the universal judgment of the world."[11]

Stier proposes a somewhat similar arrangement.

He distinguishes three comings of Christ, which he describes as events that overlap one another when viewed prophetically:

The coming of the Lord in judgment upon Judaism.

His coming in judgment upon a degenerate and anti-Christian Christendom.

His coming in judgment upon all heathen nations, culminating in the final judgment of the world.

Stier regards these events together as constituting the coming again of Christ. He believes that Matthew records their similarities and differences with particular accuracy.[12]

Such are the elaborate and complicated explanations offered by some commentators.

But serious objections may be raised against this entire method of interpretation.

The more carefully we examine these explanations, the more difficult they become to defend.

1. The objection to multiple meanings

Our first objection concerns the principle upon which this interpretation rests.

Are we justified in searching for double, triple or even multiple meanings in a passage where we might reasonably expect a plain answer to a plain question?

Are we to suppose that a prophecy contains other prophecies hidden within it, and that each apparent meaning conceals another mystery?

If Scripture is to be understood in this way, how can anyone be certain that they have discovered its true meaning?

Our Lord was answering the questions of His disciples. Was it His intention to leave them struggling through a maze of complicated predictions, each referring to different events and different ages?

The system suggested by these commentators reminds us of the complicated arrangements once used in the old Ptolemaic astronomy, with its cycles and epicycles, one sphere moving within another.

It is difficult to see how such a method can make the teaching of Christ clearer.

Indeed, a revelation that is so uncertain and obscure can scarcely be called a revelation at all.

Such mysterious language would seem more appropriate to the ambiguous predictions of the ancient Greek oracles than to the teaching of the Saviour, whom ordinary people heard with gladness.[13]

2. Could the disciples have understood such an explanation?

Our second objection is equally serious.

If the interpretations offered by Lange and Stier are correct, how could the disciples who listened to Jesus on the Mount of Olives possibly have understood what He was saying?

We know that they were often slow to understand their Master's teaching.

Yet we would have to credit them with extraordinary powers of interpretation if we supposed that they could follow a prophecy consisting of repeated cycles, each describing the entire future while gradually approaching a final catastrophe.

Such a scheme is difficult enough for the modern reader to follow, even with the assistance of learned commentators.

What, then, must it have been like for the disciples?

They would have been required to distinguish between a succession of judgments extending from the destruction of Jerusalem to the end of the world.

Their minds would have been overwhelmed by a bewildering series of crises, catastrophes and supposed comings of Christ.

Perhaps someone will answer that it did not matter whether the disciples understood the discourse.

Perhaps we shall be told that our Lord was not really speaking for their benefit, but for generations yet unborn.

Yet those future generations have found the prophecy just as difficult to interpret under this system as the original hearers supposedly would have done.

We must reject such an explanation.

The disciples came to their Master with a direct and earnest question.

It is incredible that He would respond by giving them an unintelligible riddle.

We should surely assume that our Saviour intended His disciples to understand His answer.

And we should also assume that they did understand it.

3. The disciples' questions concerned one great event

Our third objection is that the interpretation under consideration appears to misunderstand both the question asked by the disciples and the answer given by our Lord.

It is commonly assumed that the disciples asked three different questions concerning three separate events.

The first question was:

Tell us, when shall these things be?

Matthew 24:3

This is generally understood to refer to the approaching destruction of the temple.

The remaining questions were:

and what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?

Matthew 24:3

These are then supposed to refer to events belonging to a much later period, events which, according to this interpretation, have not yet taken place.

It is further assumed that our Lord arranged His answer to correspond with these three separate questions.

But how probable is it that the disciples had such an elaborate understanding of the future in their minds?

Let us consider their circumstances.

They had just heard their Master predict the complete destruction of the magnificent temple that they had been admiring.

The announcement must have filled them with astonishment.

The temple was the glory of Jerusalem and one of the most sacred objects in the religious life of Israel.

Yet Jesus had declared:

Verily I say unto you, There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down.

Matthew 24:2

The disciples were still struggling to comprehend this astonishing prediction when they came private-

ly to Jesus and asked when these things would happen.

Is it not far more reasonable to suppose that one great concern occupied their minds?

They were thinking about the threatened destruction of the temple.

They wanted to know when that calamity would occur and what signs would announce its approach.

Was this a moment when their thoughts were likely to turn towards events thousands of years in the future?

Surely their attention was fixed upon the fate of the sacred building that stood before them.

Whether they imagined that the destruction of the temple would also bring about the dissolution of the material universe and the end of human history, we cannot say with certainty.

But we can confidently conclude that their principal concern was the catastrophe their Master had just foretold.

They had every reason to understand that this catastrophe was approaching.

Their question was therefore concerned with its timing and the signs that would precede it.

Mark and Luke make this especially clear.

Mark records the question as follows:

Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign when all these things shall be fulfilled?

Mark 13:4

Luke gives it in similar terms:

Master, but when shall these things be? and what sign will there be when these things shall come to pass?

Luke 21:7

In both accounts, the disciples ask about one event and one period.

There is no suggestion that they are asking about several different catastrophes separated by thousands of years.

We are therefore led to conclude that the questions recorded by Matthew concern different aspects of the same great event.

This understanding brings Matthew's account into harmony with those of Mark and Luke.

It also agrees with the circumstances in which the questions were asked.

4. The meaning of the expression "the end of the age"

Our fourth objection concerns a serious misunderstanding of the phrase the end of the world.

The expression is commonly taken to mean the destruction of the material earth.

We can understand how readers who know only the English translation might arrive at this conclusion.

But scholars who understand the original Greek should not encourage such a mistake.

As we have already observed, the Greek word aeon does not properly mean the material world.

It means an age, an epoch or a period of time.

Its Latin equivalent, aevum, carries the same general sense.

The expression the end of the age therefore means the conclusion of a particular period.

In the prophecy before us, it refers to the approaching end of the Jewish age or dispensation.

Our Lord had repeatedly indicated that this period was drawing to its close.

The expressions the end, the end of the age and the ends of the ages all point to this approaching consummation.

And throughout the New Testament, that consummation is represented as near.

Paul provides an important example.

Writing to the Corinthians, he says:

Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come.

1 Corinthians 10:11

Paul clearly regarded himself and his readers as living at the conclusion of an age.

The original expression concerns the ends of the ages.

It does not imply that the material universe was about to be destroyed.

The Epistle to the Hebrews contains another remarkable statement:

but now once in the end of the world hath he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.

Hebrews 9:26

Here again, the expression translated the end of the world refers to the consummation of the ages.

The writer places the appearance and sacrifice of Christ near the close of a particular dispensational period.

To suppose that he meant the physical destruction of the earth was approaching would make his statement historically incorrect.

The material world has continued for many centuries since the incarnation of Christ.

Indeed, it has already endured longer since that event than the entire period of the Mosaic dispensation, from the Exodus to the destruction of the temple.

It is therefore unreasonable to argue that the expression the end of the age refers to a prolonged period beginning with the incarnation and continuing through all the centuries that have followed.

Such a period would itself be an age.

It would not be the end of an age.

The age of which our Lord spoke was drawing towards a definite conclusion.

That conclusion would be marked by a great catastrophe.

A catastrophe is not an indefinitely extended process. It is a decisive event that brings an existing condition to its end.

We are therefore compelled to conclude that the expression the end of the age, as used in this prophecy, refers to the approaching termination of the Jewish dispensation.

5. There is no indication of a change from near events to distant events

It may be objected that, even if the disciples were concerned only with the temple and the circumstances of their own generation, our Lord was free to speak about events far beyond their immediate interests.

Certainly He was.

There is no question that Jesus could have extended His prophecy into the distant future if He had chosen to do so.

But if He had done this, we would reasonably expect Him to give some indication of the change.

We would look for a clear distinction between events close at hand and events belonging to a remote period.

If the discourse passed from the destruction of Jerusalem to the final judgment of the whole world, surely some expression would mark that transition.

We might expect words such as after many days, or after these things, or some similar indication that a long interval would separate the two subjects.

But no such indication appears.

We search the prophecy in vain for any clear dividing line.

The attempts of commentators to identify points where our Lord supposedly stops speaking of Jerusalem and begins speaking of distant events are entirely unsatisfactory.

Their divisions are arbitrary.

They cannot withstand careful examination.

More importantly, they often contradict the express language of the prophecy.

Some commentators, for example, place the supposed transition at Matthew 24:29.

Yet that verse begins with these words:

Immediately after the tribulation of those days

Matthew 24:29

The word Immediately plainly excludes the idea of a long interval between the preceding events and those that follow.

If commentators are prepared to introduce an imaginary gap of centuries at a point where our Lord expressly says Immediately, what may they not attempt in passages where the language is less definite?

In reality, every attempt to divide this discourse into separate prophecies concerning different ages fails to account for its natural continuity.

Let us examine Lange's proposed arrangement more closely, since it may fairly be regarded as representative of those commentators who advocate a double meaning.

He gives the first section, Matthew 24:4–14, the title:

"Signs, and the manifestation of the end of the world in general."

But can we seriously believe that Jesus began His reply to the anxious disciples by speaking about the general end of the world?

Their hearts were troubled by His prediction concerning Jerusalem and the temple.

They wanted to know when the threatened catastrophe would occur.

Yet, according to Lange, our Lord began by discussing events that would extend throughout the entire future history of mankind.

The disciples were thinking about the temple and their own immediate future.

Was Jesus speaking instead about the whole world and a distant, indefinite future?

But let us consider the contents of this first section.

Is there anything in it that could not apply to the disciples themselves and to the period in which they lived?

Is there anything that did not actually occur during their lifetime?

One objection will probably be raised.

Our Lord declared:

And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come.

Matthew 24:14

It may be said that the gospel had not been preached throughout the whole world during the apostolic age.

But Paul himself bears witness to the wide extent of its proclamation.

Writing to the Colossians, he refers to:

the word of the truth of the gospel;

Which is come unto you, as it is in all the world;

Colossians 1:5–6

And again, he speaks of the gospel:

which was preached to every creature which is under heaven;

Colossians 1:23

These statements show that the gospel had spread throughout the known world of the apostles to an extent sufficient to satisfy the language of our Lord's prediction.

The word translated world in Matthew 24:14 is oikoumene, an expression commonly used for the inhabited world.

The apostolic proclamation of the gospel therefore supplies no reason for extending this portion of the prophecy into a distant future.

But there is an even stronger objection to Lange's arrangement.

Throughout this opening part of the discourse, our Lord addresses the disciples directly.

He tells them what they will see, what they must do and what they will suffer.

The prophecy concerns events that would fall within their own observation and experience.

It is addressed to them, not to some invisible audience belonging to an age that had not yet begun.

Lange's next division covers Matthew 24:15–22.

He calls it:

"Signs of the end of the world in particular:

(a) The Destruction of Jerusalem."

It is satisfactory, at least, to find Jerusalem introduced at last.

But how unnatural is the supposed transition!

According to this scheme, our Lord begins by discussing the general end of the world, then suddenly returns to the Roman invasion of Judea and the siege of Jerusalem.

How could the disciples have followed such an unexpected change?

And where is it indicated in the words themselves?

Lange places the transition at verse 15:

When ye therefore shall see the abomination of desolation

Matthew 24:15

But these words indicate continuity, not a change of subject.

Everything that precedes them leads naturally towards this point.

The wars, famines, pestilences, persecutions and martyrdoms are all preparatory events.

They introduce the approaching end.

And that end is the terrible catastrophe destined to overtake Jerusalem, its temple and the Jewish nation.

Lange then gives Matthew 24:23–28 another heading:

"Interval of partial and suppressed judgment."

This title is itself an example of the arbitrary character of the interpretation.

It is difficult even to understand what is intended by such an expression.

A day of judgment naturally suggests the open manifestation of justice.

Yet Lange speaks of judgments that are partial, silent and suppressed.

What are we to understand by silent and suppressed days of judgment extending from the destruction of Jerusalem to the end of the world?

If the meaning is simply that God continues to exercise judgment in the affairs of mankind, the statement is true enough.

But it was equally true before the destruction of Jerusalem.

It supplies no reason for making this passage refer to the whole period of Christian history.

The most serious objection, however, concerns the treatment of the word then in Matthew 24:23.

Lange interprets it as meaning:

"Then (i.e., in the time intervening between the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of the world)."

What an extraordinary meaning to place upon such a simple word!

The Greek word is tote, meaning then or at that time.

But Lange makes it cover an entire aeon, an immense and indefinite period.

The statements in verses 23–28 are thus supposed to be fulfilled continuously throughout the centuries between Jerusalem's destruction and the final judgment.

Yet the prophecy itself gives no indication of such a change.

There is no new subject.

There is no break in the discourse.

There is no suggestion that our Lord has passed from one age into another.

The word then connects what follows with the events already described.

Jesus is warning His disciples against the false Christs and deceivers who would arise during the final troubles of the Jewish commonwealth.

His meaning is plain:

Then if any man shall say unto you, Lo, here is Christ, or there; believe it not.

Matthew 24:23

That is, at the time of those approaching troubles, when the Jewish nation would be suffering the horrors of war, the disciples must not allow themselves to be deceived by false claimants.

The subject remains the same.

It is Jerusalem, throughout.

Jerusalem, and nothing else, is the subject of our Lord's warning.

At length Lange reaches the section that he describes as:

"The Actual End of the World."

Having first moved from the supposed end of the world backwards to the destruction of Jerusalem, he now reverses the process.

He introduces another transition, this time from Jerusalem's destruction to the final end of the material world.

This supposed final catastrophe is placed after the warnings concerning false Christs and false prophets.

But the reference to false Christs ought itself to have shown the commentator the period to which the prediction belongs.

These warnings were addressed to the disciples concerning the circumstances they would encounter.

And where is the slightest indication that the subject changes at this point?

There is none.

On the contrary, our Lord's language expressly excludes the possibility of a long interval.

He declares:

Immediately after the tribulation of those days

Matthew 24:29

This statement is decisive.

The word Immediately forbids us to insert a gap of centuries between the events already described and those that follow.

There is no break in the continuity of the prophecy.

The discourse proceeds from one connected event to another.

We have perhaps gone further than necessary in exposing the arbitrary character of these interpretations.

Indeed, we have already begun to discuss portions of the prophecy that properly belong to our later examination.

For the present, our principal concern is to establish the unity and continuity of the whole discourse.

From the beginning of Matthew 24 to the end of Matthew 25, the prophecy forms one connected and indivisible whole.

Its subject is the approaching consummation of the age, together with the events that would accompany it.

These include the judgments destined to fall upon that wicked generation: the invasion of the Roman armies, the siege and capture of Jerusalem, the complete destruction of the temple and the terrible sufferings of the people.

Alongside these events stands the true Parousia, the coming of the Son of Man.

This includes the execution of divine judgment upon the impenitent, together with the deliverance and reward of those who remained faithful.

Throughout the two chapters, the subject remains continuous and consistent.

This is how the disciples who heard the discourse must have understood it.

And since the Gospel record gives us no indication that the prophecy should be divided into separate fulfilments belonging to different ages, we are bound to interpret it as one complete discourse.

6. The true significance of the end of the Jewish age

There is one final consideration that must not be overlooked.

We believe that much of the misunderstanding surrounding this prophecy has arisen because commentators have failed to appreciate the extraordinary importance of the event it describes.

That event was the consummation of the aeon, the end of the Jewish age and the abolition of the Mosaic dispensation.

It was not an ordinary political upheaval.

It was one of the great turning points in the divine government of the world.

Consider the importance of the Mosaic dispensation.

It had been introduced with extraordinary solemnity and splendour.

At Mount Sinai, amid thunder, lightning and the sound of the trumpet, God established His covenant with Israel.

That dispensation had continued for nearly sixteen centuries.

It was a divinely appointed means by which God maintained His special relationship with His people.

Through it, the kingdom of God was intended to be represented upon earth.

Yet, because of the moral unfitness and persistent rebellion of the people of Israel, the system had failed to accomplish its intended purpose in their national life.

It was now destined to come to an end.

And its termination would be accompanied by a terrible demonstration of divine justice and wrath.

The temple of Jerusalem had stood for generations as the glory of Mount Zion.

It was the sacred sanctuary where Jehovah had been pleased to place His name and manifest His presence.

To the Jewish people, it was their holy and beautiful house, the symbol of their national security and religious identity.

It was dearer than life itself to every devoted child of Abraham.

Yet that temple was about to be desecrated and destroyed.

Not one stone would be left upon another.

The people themselves were the chosen nation, descended from Abraham, the friend of God.

They were the people with whom the God of the whole earth had entered into covenant and over whom He had graciously acknowledged Himself as King.

But now they were about to experience calamities more terrible than any that had previously overtaken their nation.

They would be driven from their country.

Their national independence would be destroyed.

Their ancient and distinctive covenant relationship would come to an end.

They would be scattered among the nations, becoming wanderers across the earth and objects of contempt among the peoples.

Yet these terrible events were not the whole story.

Alongside the judgments that brought the old order to its close, there were to be changes of surpassing glory and importance.

First and greatest of all, the close of the aeon would mark the inauguration of the reign of God.

The faithful servants of God would receive honour and glory.

They would enter into the full possession of the heavenly inheritance promised to them.

We shall have occasion to examine this more fully as our investigation proceeds.

But the change would not be confined to the heavenly inheritance of the faithful.

There would also be a glorious transformation in the religious condition of the world.

The old would give place to the new.

The Law would be succeeded by the Gospel.

Moses would give way to Christ.

The old covenant system, with its restrictions and its special relationship to a single nation, would be replaced by a new and better covenant embracing the whole human family.

Under this new dispensation, the distinction between Jew and Gentile, circumcised and uncircumcised, would no longer determine access to God.

The old order of symbols, ceremonies and outward observances, suited to the earlier stages of divine

revelation, would give place to a more spiritual form of worship.

Every place could become a temple.

Every worshipper could approach God as a priest.

And God would be recognised as the universal Father.

This was a revolution greater than any that had previously taken place in human history.

It brought into existence a new world.

It was the world to come, the expression used in Hebrews 2:5.

The original Greek expression, oikoumenē mellousa, refers to the coming inhabited world or order.

The greatness of this change can scarcely be overstated.

It is this that gives such profound significance to the destruction of Jerusalem and the overthrow of the temple.

These events were the outward and visible signs that the former dispensation had ended and a new order had begun.

The siege and capture of Jerusalem must therefore be regarded as something far greater than an exciting or tragic episode in ancient history.

It was not merely another famous siege, comparable with the siege of Troy or the fall of Carthage.

Nor was it simply the final chapter in the history of an ancient nation.

It possessed a supernatural and divine significance.

It concerned the relationship between God and mankind.

It marked one of the most memorable turning points in the history of the world.

This explains why Scripture describes these events in language of such extraordinary power and solemnity.

Some commentators have considered the expressions used by our Lord too magnificent or too terrible to be fulfilled by the destruction of Jerusalem.

They therefore suppose that the prophecy must refer to some greater catastrophe, such as the final dissolution of the material universe.

But this reasoning overlooks the true importance of the event itself.

If the Mosaic dispensation was introduced amid extraordinary signs and wonders, why should its conclusion not be attended by signs of equal solemnity?

Its beginning had been marked by earthquakes, lightning, thunder and the sound of trumpets.

It was surely appropriate that its termination should be accompanied by fearful sights and great signs from heaven.

If commentators had better understood the spiritual and historical grandeur of the end of the Jewish age, they would not have regarded our Lord's prophetic language as excessive or exaggerated.[14]

They would have recognised that the magnitude of the event fully justified the solemnity of the terms in which it was foretold.

We are now prepared to examine the contents of the prophecy on the Mount of Olives in greater detail.

We shall endeavour to do so as clearly and concisely as possible.

Footnotes

11. Lange, Commentary on Matthew, p. 418.

12. Stier, Reden Jesu, Vol. III, p. 251.

13. See Note A, Part I, on the Double-Sense Theory of Interpretation.

14. The termination of the Jewish aeon in the first century, and that of the Roman age in the fifth and sixth centuries, were both marked by a similar succession of calamities: wars, civil disturbances, pestilences, earthquakes and other disasters. Such events have been regarded as accompanying exceptional periods of divine visitation.

For comparable observations concerning the connection between physical upheavals and moral disturbances, see Niebuhr, Lebensnachrichten, Vol. II, p. 672; and Dr Arnold, Life, by Stanley, Vol. I, p. 311.

THE PROPHECY ON THE MOUNT OF OLIVES EXAMINED

I. The Question of the Disciples

Matthew 24:1–3

And Jesus went out, and departed from the temple: and his disciples came to him for to shew him the buildings of the temple.

And Jesus said unto them, See ye not all these things? verily I say unto you, There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down.

And as he sat upon the mount of Olives, the disciples came unto him privately, saying, Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?

Mark 13:1–4

And as he went out of the temple, one of his disciples saith unto him, Master, see what manner of stones and what buildings are here!

And Jesus answering said unto him, Seest thou these great buildings? there shall not be left one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down.

And as he sat upon the mount of Olives over against the temple, Peter and James and John and Andrew asked him privately,

Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign when all these things shall be fulfilled?

Luke 21:5–7

And as some spake of the temple, how it was adorned with goodly stones and gifts, he said,

As for these things which ye behold, the days will come, in the which there shall not be left one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down.

And they asked him, saying, Master, but when shall these things be? and what sign will there be when these things shall come to pass?

We can easily imagine the astonishment and alarm of the disciples when Jesus announced that the magnificent temple of God would be completely destroyed.

They had been admiring the beauty and grandeur of its buildings. Yet their Master had just declared that the entire structure would be overthrown, so completely that not one stone would remain upon another.

It is hardly surprising that four of the disciples, Peter, James, John and Andrew, who appear to have enjoyed a particularly close relationship with Jesus, should seek further information about a matter of such extraordinary importance.

The only question requiring clarification is the precise extent of their inquiry.

What exactly did the disciples wish to know?

Mark and Luke describe their question as relating to two matters: the time when the predicted destruction would occur, and the sign that would announce its approach.

Matthew records the question in a somewhat different form:

Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?

Matthew 24:3

Here again, the disciples are asking about the time and the sign.

There is no sufficient reason to suppose that they were thinking of three distinct events, separated from one another by long periods of time.

Why should we imagine that they regarded the destruction of the temple, the coming of the Lord and the end of the age as events belonging to entirely different periods?

It is far more natural to suppose that they understood these events to be closely connected and expected them to take place at approximately the same time.

We cannot say with certainty what precise ideas the disciples held concerning the end of the age or the circumstances that would accompany it.

But we do know what they had already been taught by their Master.

They had repeatedly heard Him speak of His coming again.

He had told them that He would come in His kingdom and in His glory.

More importantly, He had expressly declared that some of those who heard Him speak would remain alive to witness that coming.

They had also heard Him speak of the end of the age.

The expression was therefore not unfamiliar to them.

They evidently connected the coming of the Son of Man with the approaching conclusion of the existing age.

This explains the form of their question.

They were not asking about three unrelated subjects. They were asking about different aspects of the same great event.

The destruction of the temple, the coming of the Lord and the end of the age were, in their understanding, closely associated and contemporaneous.

This interpretation also explains why the three Synoptic Gospels record the question in slightly different language without any real difference in meaning.

Matthew gives the fuller expression, mentioning the coming of the Lord and the end of the age.

Mark and Luke express the question more simply, referring to the time when the predicted events would take place and the sign of their fulfilment.

But all three accounts concern the same inquiry.

The disciples had heard their Master predict the destruction of the temple.

They wished to know when it would happen and how they would recognise its approach.

That was the question to which our Lord now proceeded to give His answer.

II. Our Lord's Answer to the Disciples

(a) Events That Were to Precede the Consummation

Matthew 24:4–14

And Jesus answered and said unto them, Take heed that no man deceive you.

For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many.

And ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars: see that ye be not troubled: for all these things must

come to pass, but the end is not yet.

For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in divers places.

All these are the beginning of sorrows.

Then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you: and ye shall be hated of all nations for my name's sake.

And then shall many be offended, and shall betray one another, and shall hate one another.

And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many.

And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold.

But he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved.

And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come.

Mark 13:5–13

And Jesus answering them began to say, Take heed lest any man deceive you:

For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many.

And when ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars, be ye not troubled: for such things must needs be; but the end shall not be yet.

For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be earthquakes in divers places, and there shall be famines and troubles: these are the beginnings of sorrows.

But take heed to yourselves: for they shall deliver you up to councils; and in the synagogues ye shall be beaten: and ye shall be brought before rulers and kings for my sake, for a testimony against them.

And the gospel must first be published among all nations.

But when they shall lead you, and deliver you up, take no thought beforehand what ye shall speak, neither do ye premeditate: but whatsoever shall be given you in that hour, that speak ye: for it is not ye that speak, but the Holy Ghost.

Now the brother shall betray the brother to death, and the father the son; and children shall rise up against their parents, and shall cause them to be put to death.

And ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake: but he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved.

Luke 21:8–19

And he said, Take heed that ye be not deceived: for many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and the time draweth near: go ye not therefore after them.

But when ye shall hear of wars and commotions, be not terrified: for these things must first come to pass; but the end is not by and by.

Then said he unto them, Nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom:

And great earthquakes shall be in divers places, and famines, and pestilences; and fearful sights and great signs shall there be from heaven.

But before all these, they shall lay their hands on you, and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues, and into prisons, being brought before kings and rulers for my name's sake.

And it shall turn to you for a testimony.

Settle it therefore in your hearts, not to meditate before what ye shall answer:

For I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which all your adversaries shall not be able to gainsay nor

resist.

And ye shall be betrayed both by parents, and brethren, and kinsfolks, and friends; and some of you shall they cause to be put to death.

And ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake.

But there shall not an hair of your head perish.

In your patience possess ye your souls.

It is impossible to read these passages carefully without recognising their direct reference to the period between our Lord's crucifixion and the destruction of Jerusalem.

The words are addressed to the disciples themselves.

Jesus tells them what they will hear, what they will witness and what they will suffer.

To suppose that the repeated use of ye and you refers, not to the disciples who were actually listening, but to unknown people living in some distant future age, is an interpretation too improbable to deserve serious consideration.

We have abundant historical evidence that our Lord's predictions were fulfilled during the period between His crucifixion and the close of the Jewish age.

False Christs and false prophets began to appear very early in the Christian era. They continued to trouble the land until the final overthrow of the Jewish nation.

During the administration of Pontius Pilate, about AD 36, one such deceiver appeared in Samaria and persuaded large numbers of people to follow him.

Another appeared during the governorship of Cuspius Fadus, about AD 45.

Later, during the administration of Felix, from approximately AD 53 to 60, the situation became still more disturbed.

Josephus tells us that the country was filled with robbers, magicians, false prophets, false messiahs and impostors who deceived the people with promises of extraordinary events.[1]

Thus, the warning of our Lord concerning false claimants and deceivers was not an empty prediction. Such men actually appeared during the lifetime of the apostles.

The same historian describes the civil disturbances and conflicts that troubled the Jewish people during this period.

Hostility between the Jews and their neighbours frequently broke out into violence.

In Alexandria, Seleucia, Syria and Babylonia, serious conflicts occurred between Jews and Greeks, and between Jews and Syrians living in the same cities.

Josephus describes the extent of these divisions in striking terms:

"Every city was divided into two camps."

These events provide a clear illustration of our Lord's warning that nation would rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom.

There were also occasions when war with Rome appeared imminent.

During the reign of Caligula, the people of Judea feared that a terrible conflict would break out because the emperor intended to place his own statue in the temple at Jerusalem.

To the Jews, such an act would have been an intolerable desecration of the sanctuary.

The proposal produced widespread alarm and brought the country close to open conflict with Rome.

Famines also occurred during this troubled period.

In the reign of Claudius, from AD 41 to 54, there were four seasons of severe scarcity.

During the fourth year of his reign, Judea suffered a particularly serious famine.

Food became extraordinarily expensive, and many people died from hunger.

Earthquakes were also recorded during the reigns of Caligula and Claudius.[2]

We therefore find examples of the very disturbances and calamities that Jesus had foretold.

False prophets, political unrest, conflicts between nations, threatened wars, famines and earthquakes all marked the period preceding the destruction of Jerusalem.

Yet our Lord had warned His disciples that these events, however alarming, would not themselves constitute the final catastrophe.

They were signs that the end was approaching, but they were not the end itself.

He expressly declared:

but the end is not yet.

Matthew 24:6

And again:

All these are the beginning of sorrows.

Matthew 24:8

The disciples were therefore to understand that these troubles would precede the great consummation.

They marked the beginning of the approaching crisis, but not its final stage.

At this point, in Matthew 24:9–13, our Lord turns from the general condition of nations and kingdoms to the personal experiences of His own disciples.

He has spoken of public disturbances and national calamities.

He now speaks of the sufferings that His followers themselves must endure.

While these events were taking place, the apostles would become objects of suspicion and hostility to the authorities.

They would be arrested and brought before councils, rulers and kings.

They would be imprisoned.

They would be beaten in the synagogues.

They would be hated because of their loyalty to Jesus.

They would experience betrayal, even from members of their own families.

Some would be put to death.

How remarkably these predictions were fulfilled may be seen in the Acts of the Apostles and in the Epistles of Paul.

The history of the early church contains repeated examples of the very persecutions that our Lord described.

The apostles were arrested, questioned before religious and civil authorities, imprisoned, beaten and threatened.

Their preaching brought them into conflict with both Jewish and Roman rulers.

Yet, amid these dangers, the promise of divine protection was remarkably fulfilled.

Up to the close of the apostolic history recorded in Acts, around AD 63, only one of the twelve apostles is expressly recorded there as having been put to death by his persecutors.

That apostle was James, the brother of John.

The others, despite the hostility directed against them, were preserved through many dangers.

Thus, even in their sufferings, the disciples experienced the fulfilment of their Master's words.

But one further sign was to precede the consummation.

Our Lord declared:

And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come.

Matthew 24:14

This prediction is especially important because it provides a definite indication of the time when the end would arrive.

The gospel was first to be proclaimed throughout the world.

Only after that work had been accomplished would the consummation take place.

We have already considered the fulfilment of this prophecy during the apostolic age.

The testimony of Paul establishes that the gospel had spread sufficiently widely during his lifetime to satisfy the prediction of our Lord.

Writing to the Colossians, he speaks of:

the word of the truth of the gospel;

Which is come unto you, as it is in all the world;

Colossians 1:5–6

Again, in the same Epistle, he refers to the gospel:

which was preached to every creature which is under heaven;

Colossians 1:23

These statements are of great importance.

They show that Paul regarded the gospel as having already been proclaimed throughout the world in the sense intended by such language.

Without this express testimony from an apostle, some commentators would probably refuse to believe that our Lord's prediction could have been fulfilled before the destruction of Jerusalem.

They would consider such an explanation extravagant and unreasonable.

But when Paul himself declares that the gospel had been preached so widely, the objection loses its force.

The expression used by our Lord in Matthew 24:14 is ***oikoumene***, commonly referring to the inhabited world.

In the circumstances of the apostolic age, the term could naturally be understood as embracing the Roman world.

The prediction did not require that every individual inhabitant of the earth should personally have heard the gospel before the end could come.

It required that the gospel should be widely proclaimed among the nations.

According to Paul's testimony, this had already taken place.

It is useful here to recall another declaration of our Lord, spoken to His disciples on an earlier occasion.

He said:

Verily I say unto you, Ye shall not have gone over the cities of Israel, till the Son of man be come.

Matthew 10:23

When we compare this statement with Matthew 24:14, we discover a close agreement between them.

Both identify the proclamation of the gospel as an important event preceding the Parousia.

In Matthew 10:23, our Lord speaks of the evangelisation of the cities of Israel.

In Matthew 24:14, He speaks of the proclamation of the gospel throughout the inhabited world.

In the first instance, the reference is to the disciples' mission within the land of Israel.

In the second, it extends to their mission throughout the Roman Empire.

Both predictions are consistent.

Both identify a limit of time before which the coming of the Lord would take place.

The work of preaching the gospel throughout the cities of Israel might well occupy the greater part of a generation.

The apostles had a vast task before them.

Their mission among their own countrymen was extensive enough, even without the additional responsibility of carrying the gospel to other nations.

It is therefore entirely reasonable to understand both predictions as referring to work that would be accomplished during the apostolic age.

We must, of course, interpret the expressions used by our Lord and Paul according to their ordinary and generally understood meaning.

It would be unfair to insist upon an extreme literal interpretation that neither speaker intended.

When Paul declares that the gospel had been preached to every creature under heaven, we should understand the expression in the broad and natural sense in which such language was commonly used.

The widespread proclamation of the gospel throughout Israel and the Roman world is sufficient to satisfy our Lord's prediction.

Thus far, then, we have found one continuous and connected discourse.

It concerns a definite event.

It was addressed to particular people.

And its predictions relate to circumstances that were to fall within their own experience.

We may now identify four principal signs, or groups of signs, that were to announce the approach of the great catastrophe:

The appearance of false Christs and false prophets.

Great social disturbances and natural calamities, including wars, famines and earthquakes.

The persecution of the disciples and the falling away of professed believers.

The widespread proclamation of the gospel throughout the Roman Empire.

The last of these was especially important.

It was the sign that would announce the near approach of the end.

Our Lord had declared that the gospel must first be preached among the nations.

Then the end would come.

And the testimony of the apostle Paul shows that this appointed condition had been fulfilled during the lifetime of the generation to whom Jesus spoke.

(b) Further Indications of the Approaching Doom of Jerusalem

Matthew 24:15–22

When ye therefore shall see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, stand in the holy place, (whoso readeth, let him understand:)

Then let them which be in Judaea flee into the mountains:

Let him which is on the housetop not come down to take any thing out of his house:

Neither let him which is in the field return back to take his clothes.

And woe unto them that are with child, and to them that give suck in those days!

But pray ye that your flight be not in the winter, neither on the sabbath day:

For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be.

And except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved: but for the elect's sake those days shall be shortened.

Mark 13:14–20

But when ye shall see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing where it ought not, (let him that readeth understand,) then let them that be in Judaea flee to the mountains:

And let him that is on the housetop not go down into the house, neither enter therein, to take any thing out of his house:

And let him that is in the field not turn back again for to take up his garment.

But woe to them that are with child, and to them that give suck in those days!

And pray ye that your flight be not in the winter.

For in those days shall be affliction, such as was not from the beginning of the creation which God created unto this time, neither shall be.

And except that the Lord had shortened those days, no flesh should be saved: but for the elect's sake, whom he hath chosen, he hath shortened the days.

Luke 21:20–24

And when ye shall see Jerusalem compassed with armies, then know that the desolation thereof is nigh.

Then let them which are in Judaea flee to the mountains; and let them which are in the midst of it depart out; and let not them that are in the countries enter thereinto.

For these be the days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled.

But woe unto them that are with child, and to them that give suck, in those days! for there shall be great distress in the land, and wrath upon this people.

And they shall fall by the edge of the sword, and shall be led away captive into all nations: and Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled.

It scarcely requires an argument to establish that this part of our Lord's prophecy refers directly and exclusively to Jerusalem and Judea.

There is no indication here of a double meaning, no suggestion of an immediate fulfilment followed by another in some distant age, and no reason to search for a hidden or symbolic application beyond the events plainly described.

Everything is definite.

The place is Judea.

The people concerned are the inhabitants of Israel.

The threatened calamity is the destruction of Jerusalem.

And the time is indicated by our Lord's direct address to His own disciples:

When ye therefore shall see the abomination of desolation

Matthew 24:15

The warning concerns something that those very disciples might live to witness.

Most commentators understand the expression the abomination of desolation as referring to the standards of the Roman legions.

This explanation is highly probable.

The Roman military standards bore images and emblems that were treated with religious reverence by the soldiers. The eagle, in particular, was closely associated with the power and authority of Rome.

To the Jews, such images were idolatrous and offensive to the law of God.

Luke's account provides strong evidence that this is the correct interpretation, for he expresses the warning in unmistakably military terms:

And when ye shall see Jerusalem compassed with armies, then know that the desolation thereof is nigh.

Luke 21:20

We know from Josephus that, during the reign of Tiberius, a Roman general named Vitellius intended to march his troops through Judea.

The Jewish authorities resisted his proposal because the images displayed upon the Roman military standards would, in their judgment, violate their religious law.[3]

If the mere passage of such standards through their territory was considered a serious offence, how much greater would be the desecration when those same idolatrous emblems were displayed in full view of Jerusalem and its sacred temple!

This would be the final sign that the city's hour of judgment had arrived.

When the disciples saw that sign, they were to understand that Jerusalem's destruction was near.

The warning was not given merely to satisfy their curiosity about future events.

It was intended to save their lives.

Those who were in Judea were to flee immediately to the mountains.

There was to be no hesitation and no delay.

The person standing on the housetop was not to descend into the house to collect possessions.

The labourer working in the field was not to return home even to retrieve a garment.

The urgency of these commands shows how imminent and terrible the danger would be.

The approaching catastrophe would leave no time for ordinary preparations.

Flight would be the only means of escape.

Our Lord's words also reveal His deep concern for those who would be least able to endure the hardships of that time.

He speaks particularly of pregnant women and mothers nursing young children.

For them, sudden flight, hunger, exposure and the violence of war would bring exceptional suffering.

The disciples were therefore instructed to pray that their escape would not take place during the winter, when travel would be especially difficult, or on the Sabbath, when Jewish religious restrictions might create further obstacles.

All these details point to an actual and approaching calamity in a particular country.

They are not the language of a prophecy concerning the destruction of the material universe.

Our Lord was warning His followers about dangers that would arise during the siege and devastation of Jerusalem.

The suffering would be extraordinary.

He declared:

For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be.

Matthew 24:21

That this great tribulation refers to the terrible events accompanying the siege of Jerusalem can scarcely be questioned.

The calamities of that siege fell with particular severity upon women and children, as our Lord's warning had already indicated.

Anyone who has read the dreadful account preserved by Josephus will understand why such extraordinary language was used.

The Jewish historian describes scenes of suffering almost beyond belief.

Indeed, at the beginning of his history of the Jewish War, Josephus declares that, in his judgment, all the miseries endured by mankind from the beginning of the world would appear comparatively slight when set beside the sufferings of the Jews.[4]

His account of the famine within Jerusalem gives a terrible illustration of the fulfilment of our Lord's prophecy.

The historian describes how the desperate struggle for food destroyed even the strongest bonds of family affection.

Those who had once loved and protected one another began to fight over the smallest quantities of food.

The dying were searched for anything they might have concealed.

People driven almost beyond reason by hunger wandered from house to house, searching desperately for something to eat.

The ordinary boundaries of human behaviour were broken down by the extremity of their suffering.

Josephus gives the following dreadful description:

"Incalculable was the multitude of those who perished in famine in the city; and beyond description the sufferings they endured. In every house, if anywhere there appeared but the shadow of food, a conflict ensued; those united by the tenderest ties fiercely contending, and snatching from one another the miserable supports of life.

"Nor were even the dying allowed the credit of being in want; nay, even those who were just expiring the brigands would search, lest any, with food concealed under a fold of his garment, should feign death.

"Gaping with hunger, as maddened dogs, they went staggering to and fro and prowling about, assailing the doors like drunken men, and in bewilderment rushing into the same house twice or thrice in one hour.

"The cravings of nature led them to gnaw anything, and what would be rejected by the very filthiest of the brute creation they were fain to collect and eat.

"Even from their belts and shoes they were at length unable to refrain, and they tore off and chewed the very leather of their shields.

"To some, wisps of old hay served for food; for the fibres were gathered, and the smallest quantities sold for four Attic pieces."

The historian then introduces an incident so dreadful that he admits his reluctance to record it.

It is the account of a mother driven by starvation to an act that almost defies belief.

Josephus writes:

"But why speak of the famine as despising restraint in the use of inanimate things, when I am about to state an instance of it to which, in the history of Greeks or Barbarians, no parallel is to be found, and which is horrible to relate, and is incredible to hear?

"Gladly, indeed, would I have omitted to mention the occurrence, lest I should be thought by future generations to deal in the marvellous, had I not innumerable witnesses among my contemporaries.

"I should, besides, pay my country but a cold compliment, were I to suppress the narration of the woes which she actually suffered."[5]

Such was the dreadful condition to which Jerusalem was reduced.

The sufferings of the inhabitants were beyond ordinary description.

The siege brought famine, violence, terror and death on a scale that deeply impressed even the historian who recorded them.

It is possible that our Lord had these very horrors in view when He uttered His sorrowful warning:

And woe unto them that are with child, and to them that give suck in those days!

Matthew 24:19

The suffering of mothers and children during the siege gives these words a particularly tragic significance.

The prophecy was not concerned with some distant event at the end of human history.

It concerned the terrible judgment that was about to overtake the Jewish nation and its capital.

Nor should we overlook the concluding words of our Lord's description of the great tribulation:

no, nor ever shall be.

Matthew 24:21

These words emphasise the extraordinary and unparalleled character of the catastrophe.

They also confirm that Jesus was speaking of a particular historical calamity, one that could be compared with other events before and after it.

The siege of Jerusalem, with all its horrors, was the event to which His warning pointed.

The place, the people, the circumstances and the time all agree.

There is no need to introduce another catastrophe in a distant age to explain the prophecy.

The approaching destruction of Jerusalem supplies its natural and sufficient fulfilment.

Footnote References

3. Josephus, concerning the opposition to the passage of Roman military standards through Judea during the administration of Vitellius.

4. Josephus, The Jewish War, introductory account of the unparalleled sufferings of the Jewish nation.

5. Josephus, The Jewish War, description of the famine during the siege of Jerusalem and the account of the starving mother.

(c) The Disciples Warned Against False Prophets

Matthew 24:23–28

Then if any man shall say unto you, Lo, here is Christ, or there; believe it not.

For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect.

Behold, I have told you before.

Wherefore if they shall say unto you, Behold, he is in the desert; go not forth: behold, he is in the secret chambers; believe it not.

For as the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be.

For wheresoever the carcase is, there will the eagles be gathered together.

Mark 13:21–23

And then if any man shall say to you, Lo, here is Christ; or, lo, he is there; believe him not:

For false Christs and false prophets shall rise, and shall shew signs and wonders, to seduce, if it were possible, even the elect.

But take ye heed: behold, I have foretold you all things.

So far, we have found no break in the continuity of our Lord's discourse.

There is not the slightest indication that He has changed His subject or begun speaking of another period of history.

The prophecy remains one connected and consistent account. Each part follows naturally from what has gone before.

The same is true of the passage now before us.

Indeed, its very first word, Then, establishes its connection with the preceding verses.

Our Lord continues to address the disciples personally.

His words are intended for their warning and guidance. He tells them what would shortly take place, or at least what they might live to witness with their own eyes.

The events He describes correspond closely with what actually occurred during the closing years of the Jewish commonwealth.

At that time, the Jewish people, particularly the inhabitants of Jerusalem, were encouraged to cherish false hopes by impostors who claimed to speak with divine authority.

These deceivers filled the land with promises of extraordinary deliverance.

They persuaded many to believe that, however desperate their circumstances became, God was about to intervene miraculously on their behalf.

The result was disastrous.

Instead of recognising their danger and seeking safety, multitudes placed their trust in these false prophets and were led towards destruction.

Josephus records a particularly terrible example of this deception.

When the temple itself was already burning, large numbers of people were still being persuaded that deliverance was at hand.

Their confidence in the promises of false prophets was so great that they remained where escape was no longer possible.

The Jewish historian describes the tragedy in these words:

"Of so great a multitude, not one escaped. Their destruction was caused by a false prophet, who had on that day proclaimed to those remaining in the city, that 'God commanded them to go up to the temple, there to receive the signs of their deliverance.'

"There were at this time many prophets suborned by the tyrants to delude the people, by bidding them wait for help from God, in order that there might be less desertion, and that those who were above fear and control might be encouraged by hope.

"Under calamities man readily yields to persuasion; but when the deceiver pictures to him deliverance from pressing evils, then the sufferer is wholly influenced by hope.

"Thus it was that the impostors and pretended messengers of heaven at that time beguiled the wretched people."[6]

This account provides a striking illustration of our Lord's warning.

The people were surrounded by danger, yet false prophets persuaded them that divine help was about to arrive.

They were promised deliverance when destruction was already upon them.

And because they believed these promises, they remained in the city and perished.

It was against precisely such deception that Jesus warned His disciples.

They were not to follow anyone who claimed that the Messiah had appeared in some distant or secret place.

They were not to be persuaded by reports that Christ could be found in the wilderness or concealed within some private chamber.

Nor were they to accept the extraordinary claims of men who professed to possess miraculous powers.

Their Master's warning was unmistakable:

Behold, I have told you before.

Matthew 24:25

They had been forewarned.

They were therefore responsible for refusing the deception that would surround them during those troubled days.

Our Lord then explains that His own coming would be altogether different from the secret appearances claimed by these impostors.

It would not depend upon rumours or reports brought by others.

It would be sudden, unmistakable and conspicuous.

He declares:

For as the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be.

Matthew 24:27

The lightning flashes suddenly across the sky.

Its appearance is immediate and striking. It does not need to be announced by messengers or discovered through the reports of others.

In the same way, the coming of the Son of Man in judgment would be sudden and unmistakable.

It would manifest itself with the certainty and overwhelming power of a lightning flash.

Our Lord then adds a further illustration:

For wheresoever the carcase is, there will the eagles be gathered together.

Matthew 24:28

The meaning of this saying is closely connected with the circumstances of the coming judgment.

Wherever the guilty and condemned children of Israel were found, there the instruments of divine wrath would gather against them.

The Roman legions, whose standards bore the eagle, would become the agents through whom that judgment was carried out.

As birds of prey gather wherever a carcass lies, so the Roman armies would descend upon the nation marked for destruction.

The comparison is solemn and terrible.

It represents the certainty of the judgment awaiting Israel.

No false prophet could prevent it.

No promise of miraculous deliverance could avert it.

The people might continue to hope that God would save them from their enemies, but the judgment foretold by Christ would surely come.

Thus, the warning against false prophets belongs naturally to the same series of events already described.

There is no change of subject and no reference to a different age.

The words concern the approaching destruction of Jerusalem, the deceptions that would accompany its final troubles, and the sudden manifestation of the Son of Man in judgment.

The prophecy remains continuous from beginning to end.

The same disciples are addressed.

The same nation is concerned.

The same approaching catastrophe remains in view.

And the coming of the Son of Man, the Parousia, is represented as the certain and decisive judgment that would overtake that generation.

Footnote

6. Josephus, The Jewish War, Book VI, Chapter V, Section 2, translated by Traill.

(d) The Arrival of the End, or the Catastrophe of Jerusalem

Matthew 24:29–31

Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken:

And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.

And he shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

Mark 13:24–27

But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun shall be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light,

And the stars of heaven shall fall, and the powers that are in heaven shall be shaken.

And then shall they see the Son of man coming in the clouds with great power and glory.

And then shall he send his angels, and shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from the uttermost part of the earth to the uttermost part of heaven.

Luke 21:25–28

And there shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars; and upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring;

Men's hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth: for the powers of heaven shall be shaken.

And then shall they see the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.

And when these things begin to come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh.

Once again, the language of our Lord leaves no room for supposing that He has changed His subject or begun speaking of another event.

Nothing indicates that the scene has shifted or that a new period of history has been introduced.

The passage is directly connected with the great tribulation described in Matthew 24:21.

Indeed, our Lord makes the connection unmistakable by beginning with the word Immediately.

He declares:

Immediately after the tribulation of those days

Matthew 24:29

This expression excludes the possibility of introducing a long interval between the tribulation and the events that follow.

But the place where the great tribulation was to occur has already been clearly identified.

It was Jerusalem and Judea.

In verses 15 and 16, Jesus warned His disciples about the approaching desolation and commanded those in Judea to flee to the mountains.

The events described in the present passage must therefore belong to the same period and the same catastrophe.

There is no justification for separating them.

Another important expression occurs in verse 30, where our Lord speaks of the mourning of the tribes of the earth.

The Greek word translated earth is gē, which may also mean land.

In this context, we understand the expression to refer to the tribes of the land of Israel.

There is no necessity to extend its meaning to every nation and people throughout the world.

Yet Lange interprets the words as referring to all the races and peoples of the earth.

Such an explanation seems forced and unnatural.

The restricted use of gē to mean a particular country or land is common in the New Testament.

And when the word is joined with tribes, as it is here, the reference to the tribes of Israel becomes especially appropriate.

This is the interpretation adopted by Dr Campbell and Moses Stuart.

A similar expression occurs in the prophecy of Zechariah:

And the land shall mourn, every family apart; the family of the house of David apart, and their wives apart; the family of the house of Nathan apart, and their wives apart;

Zechariah 12:12

Here the reference is unmistakably to the families of the land of Israel.

The two passages are closely parallel.

It would therefore be misleading to insist that our Lord's words must refer to all the peoples of the earth.

The structure of the discourse itself resists such an interpretation.

The time remains the same.

The place remains the same.

The circumstances remain the same.

Everything points towards the approaching judgment of Jerusalem.

It is therefore with considerable surprise that we find Dean Alford offering the following explanation:

"All the difficulty which this word [immediately] has been supposed to involve has arisen from confounding the fulfilment of the prophecy with its ultimate one. The important insertion ver. 23, 24, in Luke xxi. shows us that the 'tribulation' includes 'wrath upon this people,' which is yet being inflicted, and the treading down of Jerusalem by the Gentiles, still going on; and immediately after that tribulation, which shall happen when the cup of Gentile iniquity is full, and when this gospel shall have been preached in all the world for a witness, and rejected by the Gentiles, shall the coming of the Lord Himself happen. . . . (The expression in Mark is equally indicative of a considerable interval—in those days after that tribulation.) The fact of His coming and its attendant circumstances being known to Him, but the exact time unknown, He speaks without regard to the interval, which would be employed in His waiting till all things are put under His feet," etc.[7]

It would be difficult to find an interpretation containing more objections than this.

Indeed, it resembles an independent prophecy invented by the commentator rather than an explanation of the prophecy delivered by Christ.

Let us consider the difficulties it introduces.

First, Alford assumes that our Lord's words have a double meaning, involving both a partial and an ultimate fulfilment.

But no evidence for such a distinction appears in the passage.

It is simply an assumption imposed upon the text.

Second, the tribulation is represented as continuing throughout the centuries.

Yet our Lord expressly declared that the days of tribulation would be shortened.

What Jesus described as a limited period of exceptional suffering is therefore transformed into a condition extending through successive ages.

Third, the word Immediately is made to refer to a time that has not yet arrived.

Between verses 28 and 29, where no ordinary reader could discover any indication of a break, Alford introduces an interval already extending beyond eighteen centuries, with the possibility of continuing indefinitely.

Such treatment deprives the word Immediately of its natural meaning.

Fourth, this interpretation appears to contradict Paul's express testimony concerning the spread of the gospel.

Paul declared that the gospel had been preached throughout the world.

In Colossians 1:23, he speaks of the gospel:

which was preached to every creature which is under heaven;

But Alford makes the coming of Christ depend upon a future proclamation of the gospel throughout the world, followed by its rejection by the Gentiles.

This introduces conditions that are not stated in our Lord's prophecy.

Fifth, Alford maintains that Mark's language suggests a considerable interval.

But Mark's words are:

But in those days, after that tribulation

Mark 13:24

The original Greek expression, en ekeinais tais hēmerais meta tēn thlipsin ekeinēn, places the events within those very days, after the tribulation already described.

How can this be made to signify an indefinite period extending across many centuries?

Surely the words exclude rather than suggest such an interval.

Finally, Alford appears to explain away the difficulty by suggesting that our Lord, although knowing the fact of His coming and the circumstances attending it, did not know the exact time and therefore spoke without regard to the interval.

But this seems little better than an apology for the accuracy of the prediction.

Our Lord expressly connected the coming with the tribulation by the word Immediately.

We have no right to disregard that connection merely because it does not agree with an interpretation we wish to maintain.

If Scripture may be explained in this manner, the ordinary principles of interpretation must be abandoned.

The most successful interpreter would then be the person most willing to speculate.

Would any competent scholar treat an ancient classical writer in this way?

If similar liberties were taken with the writings of Homer or Plato, would they not immediately be condemned as arbitrary and unscholarly?

Why, then, should they be permitted in the interpretation of Scripture?

And what would the disciples have made of such an explanation?

They had asked their Master a plain question:

Tell us, when shall these things be?

Matthew 24:3

Were they expected to understand that His answer contained partial and ultimate fulfilments, hidden meanings and long intervals that He never expressly mentioned?

How could they possibly have distinguished between such different events?

What effect could such a reply have produced except confusion and bewilderment?

We must therefore protest against interpretations that treat the words of Scripture with such freedom.

They are not merely unsatisfactory from a scholarly standpoint. They appear inconsistent with the reverence due to the words of Christ.

The Prophetic Language of the Passage

But an objection will immediately be raised.

Does not the extraordinary language of this passage require us to understand it as referring to the final dissolution of the material universe?

Our Lord speaks of the darkening of the sun, the moon ceasing to give its light, the stars falling from heaven and the powers of the heavens being shaken.

He also speaks of the Son of Man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.

Can anyone seriously maintain, it may be asked, that such events occurred at the destruction of Jerusalem?

Were the sun and moon actually darkened?

Did the stars literally fall from the sky?

Was the Son of Man visibly seen descending upon the clouds?

Must not such language describe a far greater catastrophe than the overthrow of a city and nation?

Must it not refer to the final consummation of all things?

Those who argue in this way overlook the nature and character of prophetic language.

Symbol and metaphor belong to the ordinary language of prophecy.

Every careful reader of the Old Testament prophets should recognise this.

Why should the judgment of Jerusalem not be described in language as magnificent and solemn as that used concerning the destruction of Babylon, Bozrah or Tyre?

Let us consider the language employed by Isaiah when he foretold the fall of Babylon.

The prophet declares:

Behold, the day of the LORD cometh, cruel both with wrath and fierce anger, to lay the land desolate: and he shall destroy the sinners thereof out of it.

For the stars of heaven and the constellations thereof shall not give their light: the sun shall be darkened in his going forth, and the moon shall not cause her light to shine.

Isaiah 13:9–10

And again:

Therefore I will shake the heavens, and the earth shall remove out of her place, in the wrath of the LORD of hosts, and in the day of his fierce anger.

Isaiah 13:13

The resemblance between this prophecy and the language of our Lord is immediately apparent.

Isaiah speaks of the stars withholding their light, the sun being darkened, the moon ceasing to shine, and the heavens and earth being shaken.

Yet the prophecy concerns the overthrow of Babylon.

If such language was appropriate to describe the fall of that ancient kingdom, why should similar expressions be considered inappropriate when describing the destruction of Jerusalem?

Indeed, the latter catastrophe possessed an even greater significance in the history of God's covenant dealings with mankind.

Let us consider another example.

Isaiah foretells the destruction of Bozrah, the capital of Edom, in language of equal grandeur.

He declares:

And all the host of heaven shall be dissolved, and the heavens shall be rolled together as a scroll: and all their host shall fall down, as the leaf falleth off from the vine, and as a falling fig from the fig tree.

For my sword shall be bathed in heaven: behold, it shall come down upon Idumea, and upon the people of my curse, to judgment.

Isaiah 34:4–5

Here again, the imagery closely resembles that employed in our Lord's prophecy.

The heavens are dissolved.

They are rolled together like a scroll.

The heavenly bodies fall like leaves from a vine or figs from a tree.

Yet the subject is the judgment of Edom.

If the destruction of Bozrah could properly be represented in such magnificent terms, why should it be considered unreasonable to use similar language for the destruction of Jerusalem?

A third example may be found in the prophecy of Micah.

The prophet describes a coming of the Lord in judgment upon Samaria and Jerusalem.

This was a judgment that had undoubtedly taken place long before the earthly ministry of Christ.

Yet notice the grandeur of the language:

For, behold, the LORD cometh forth out of his place, and will come down, and tread upon the high

places of the earth.

And the mountains shall be molten under him, and the valleys shall be cleft, as wax before the fire, and as the waters that are poured down a steep place.

Micah 1:3–4

Here we have the Lord represented as coming forth from His dwelling place.

The mountains melt beneath Him.

The valleys are split apart.

The whole scene is described as a tremendous upheaval of the natural world.

Yet the prophecy refers to a historical judgment upon particular nations and cities.

These examples could easily be multiplied.

They reveal a characteristic feature of biblical prophecy.

Prophecy often speaks in the language of poetry rather than in the plain descriptive language of history.

The prophet does not always describe an event as a historian would, giving a literal account of each occurrence.

Instead, he employs powerful images to communicate the greatness, terror and spiritual significance of what is foretold.

We must also remember that the language of Scripture reflects the vivid imagery and expressive force of the ancient East.

It is not written according to the cold and strictly analytical habits of Western thought.

Yet this does not make its language excessive or improper.

The greatness of the moral and spiritual events being described may fully justify the use of images drawn from the most tremendous disturbances of the natural world.

The collapse of kingdoms and the overthrow of established powers may fittingly be represented by earthquakes, darkened heavens and the shaking of the universe.

Nor is it necessary to devise an elaborate system in which every image has a separate and exact symbolic equivalent.

To insist upon finding a precise interpretation for every detail would be to turn prophecy into an artificial allegory.

It is enough to understand the general character and purpose of prophetic imagery.

The following observations concerning the figurative language of Scripture are particularly appropriate:

"What is grand in nature is used to express what is dignified and important among men,—the heavenly bodies, mountains, stately trees, kingdoms or those in authority. . . . Political changes are represented by earthquakes, tempests, eclipses, the turning of waters and seas into blood."[8]

These principles provide a natural explanation of the language used by our Lord.

We are therefore led to conclude that the imagery of Matthew 24:29–31 is entirely appropriate to the dissolution of the Jewish state and the overthrow of its national and religious institutions.

It is appropriate because it follows the recognised language of the Old Testament prophets.

It is also appropriate because the spiritual and historical importance of the event fully justifies such solemn and magnificent expressions.

The destruction of Jerusalem was no ordinary national disaster.

It marked the end of the Jewish age and the passing away of the Mosaic dispensation.

It was a great turning point in the divine government of the world.

There is therefore no reason to suppose that the prophetic language must refer to the destruction of the material universe.

The Prophecy Refers to the Same Coming Previously Foretold

But we may go further.

We maintain not merely that the language is appropriate to the destruction of Jerusalem, but that this is its true and exclusive application.

There is no indication in the passage that our Lord intended another, hidden meaning or a second fulfilment in some distant age.

On the contrary, nearly every important feature of this description can be connected with predictions that Jesus had already made concerning a particular event and a particular time.

Consider, first, His declaration:

and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.

Matthew 24:30

Compare this with His earlier words:

For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works.

Matthew 16:27

The resemblance is unmistakable.

Both passages describe the glorious coming of the Son of Man.

Both associate that coming with divine authority and judgment.

Both refer to the same great event: the Parousia.

But in the earlier passage, our Lord had expressly fixed the time within which that coming would take place.

He declared:

Verily I say unto you, There be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom.

Matthew 16:28

Some of the disciples who heard Him speak would live to witness that event.

Why should we suppose that He now speaks of an entirely different coming, separated from the first by thousands of years?

There is no reason for making such a distinction.

The coming foretold in Matthew 24 is the same glorious coming previously announced in Matthew 16.

Consider next the sending forth of the angels to gather the elect.

Our Lord declares:

And he shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

Matthew 24:31

This agrees closely with His earlier teaching in the parables of the tares and the dragnet.

In explaining the parable of the tares, Jesus said:

The Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that

offend, and them which do iniquity;

Matthew 13:41

And in the parable of the dragnet, He declared:

So shall it be at the end of the world: the angels shall come forth, and sever the wicked from among the just,

And shall cast them into the furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth.

Matthew 13:49–50

In these parables, the expression translated the end of the world refers to the end of the age, or aeon.

The angels appear as ministers of divine judgment.

They separate the wicked from the righteous.

The scene is one of judgment and consummation.

This is precisely the character of the event described in the prophecy on the Mount of Olives.

The parables and the prophecy therefore represent the same scene and the same period.

They concern the close of the existing age, not the physical destruction of the material universe.

And they present that great judicial event as approaching.

Luke's account supplies further evidence that the prophecy concerns the lifetime of the disciples.

Our Lord declares:

And when these things begin to come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh.

Luke 21:28

To whom were these words spoken?

Were they not addressed to the disciples who were listening to Jesus on the Mount of Olives?

Were they not intended to encourage those very men amid the trials and sufferings He had just foretold?

They were to recognise the approaching events.

They were to lift up their heads.

They were to understand that their redemption was drawing near.

How can we reasonably suppose that the words were intended, not for those who heard them, but for people who would not exist until thousands of years later?

Such an interpretation contradicts the natural meaning of the discourse.

The disciples themselves were the persons addressed.

The events foretold were those they might live to witness.

And the promised redemption was associated with the coming of the Son of Man in glory.

Thus, every part of the prophecy agrees with what our Lord had previously taught.

There is no need to introduce another coming or another judgment belonging to a remote future.

The same Parousia is consistently presented throughout His teaching.

And as though to remove every remaining possibility of misunderstanding, our Lord immediately proceeds to place the fulfilment of the prophecy within a definite and unmistakable limit of time.

The declaration that follows is so clear and decisive that it ought to settle the whole question.

(e) The Parousia to Take Place Before the Passing Away of the Existing Generation

Matthew 24:32–34

Now learn a parable of the fig tree; When his branch is yet tender, and putteth forth leaves, ye know

that summer is nigh:

So likewise ye, when ye shall see all these things, know that it is near, even at the doors.

Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled.

Mark 13:28–30

Now learn a parable of the fig tree; When her branch is yet tender, and putteth forth leaves, ye know that summer is near:

So ye in like manner, when ye shall see these things come to pass, know that it is nigh, even at the doors.

Verily I say unto you, that this generation shall not pass, till all these things be done.

Luke 21:29–32

And he spake to them a parable; Behold the fig tree, and all the trees;

When they now shoot forth, ye see and know of your own selves that summer is now nigh at hand.

So likewise ye, when ye see these things come to pass, know ye that the kingdom of God is nigh at hand.

Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass away, till all be fulfilled.

If words have any definite meaning, these solemn and unmistakable declarations must establish that the great event which forms the subject of our Lord's discourse was near at hand.

First, consider the parable of the fig tree.

When its branches become tender and its leaves begin to appear, everyone understands that summer is approaching.

The signs are familiar and their meaning is plain.

In the same way, our Lord tells His disciples that the events He has just described will be signs of the approaching consummation.

When they see these things happening, they are to recognise that the end is near.

Not merely approaching at some indefinite future time, but near enough to be described as:

even at the doors.

Matthew 24:33

Notice particularly that Jesus addresses the disciples themselves.

They are the ones who are to observe the signs.

They are the ones who are to recognise their meaning.

And they are the ones who are to understand that the predicted consummation is close at hand.

Our Lord then concludes with a declaration intended to remove every remaining doubt about the time:

Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled.

Matthew 24:34

Surely, after such a clear and definite statement, there should be little room for disagreement.

Our Lord Himself has settled the question.

If a hundred people were asked to explain these words according to their ordinary meaning, ninety-nine would surely understand that the events foretold were to happen within the lifetime of the generation then living.

This does not require every member of that generation to survive until the fulfilment of the prophecy.

It means that the generation itself would not have completely passed away.

Many, and perhaps most, of those living when Jesus spoke might still be alive to witness the predicted events.

There can be little doubt that this is how the disciples themselves would have understood His words.

Unless we are prepared to suppose that our Lord intended to confuse His hearers, we must accept that He was giving them a definite assurance concerning the time of His coming.

His coming, the judgment of the Jewish nation and the close of the age would all take place before the existing generation had wholly passed away.

They would occur within the limits of the disciples' own lifetime.

Nor was this a new teaching.

As we have already seen, our Lord had expressed the same truth on several previous occasions.

Yet, instead of accepting His statement as decisive, many commentators have strongly resisted what appears to be its natural and obvious meaning.

They begin by assuming that the predicted events did not take place within that generation.

From this assumption, they argue that the word generation cannot mean what it ordinarily means: the people living during a particular period, or the contemporaries of our Lord.

But this is to assume the very point that needs to be proved.

Whether the predictions were fulfilled within the stated period is the question under investigation.

We cannot first decide that they were not fulfilled and then alter the meaning of our Lord's words to agree with that conclusion.

The proper duty of an interpreter is to determine the meaning of the language.

A grammarian should not allow anxiety about the possible consequences of an interpretation to influence the meaning assigned to words.

Our Lord's predictions may safely be left to stand upon their own authority.

Our responsibility is to understand what He said.

The Meaning of "This Generation"

Many commentators argue that the Greek word genea, translated generation, should here be understood as meaning race or nation.

According to this interpretation, our Lord was declaring only that the Jewish people would continue to exist until all the predicted events had been fulfilled.

This is the explanation adopted by Lange, Stier, Alford and several other distinguished commentators.

Dorner defends it with considerable learning and ability in his treatise De Oratione Christi Eschatologica.

We readily admit that genea, like many other words, may have different shades of meaning.

In classical Greek and in the Septuagint, it can sometimes refer to a nation or race.

But the question is not whether the word may occasionally bear such a meaning.

The question is what our Lord meant by the particular expression this generation.

We maintain that, whenever Jesus uses this expression, it refers to His contemporaries, the Jewish people living at the time when He spoke.

This conclusion appears to us beyond reasonable doubt.

We might safely leave the matter to the judgment of any careful reader, whether acquainted with Greek or not.

Nevertheless, because the question is so important to the interpretation of the prophecy before us, it

is desirable to examine the evidence in detail.

1. Matthew 23:36

In His final public address, delivered on the same day as the discourse on the Mount of Olives, our Lord declared:

Verily I say unto you, All these things shall come upon this generation.

Matthew 23:36

No commentator has seriously proposed that these words refer to any people other than the generation then living.

The judgment was to fall upon those whom Jesus was addressing.

Here, therefore, the meaning of this generation is clear.

It refers to His contemporaries.

2. Matthew 11:16

On another occasion, Jesus asked:

But whereunto shall I liken this generation?

Matthew 11:16

Here again, the reference is to the people living at the time of His ministry.

Even Lange and Stier acknowledge that the expression refers to the generation of Israel then existing.

Lange describes it as:

"the then existing last generation of Israel."

There is therefore no disagreement about the meaning of the expression in this passage.

It refers directly to those who heard our Lord's teaching.

3. Matthew 12:39, 41, 42 and 45

We find four further examples in Matthew 12.

First, Jesus declares:

An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign;

Matthew 12:39

He then says:

The men of Nineveh shall rise in judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it:

Matthew 12:41

Again:

The queen of the south shall rise up in the judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it:

Matthew 12:42

And finally:

Even so shall it be also unto this wicked generation.

Matthew 12:45

Dorner attempts to show that these passages do not refer merely to the people living in our Lord's time.

His reasoning is that the Gentiles, represented by the men of Nineveh and the queen of the south, are contrasted with the Jews.

He therefore concludes that the expression this generation must refer to the Jewish nation or race as a whole.

But this argument is not convincing.

Surely the generation that demanded a sign was the generation then living.

It was our Lord's own contemporaries who were asking Him to provide miraculous evidence of His authority.

And against whom would the men of Nineveh and the queen of the south rise in judgment?

Was it not against the generation that had refused to respond to the preaching of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ?

The people of Nineveh had repented at the preaching of Jonah.

The queen of the south had travelled a great distance to hear the wisdom of Solomon.

Yet the people who heard Christ Himself had rejected His message.

It was this unbelieving generation that stood condemned by the faith and repentance of those who had received far less light.

There is therefore only one natural interpretation.

Our Lord was speaking of the rebellious and unbelieving people of His own time.

4. Luke 11:50–51

Our Lord also declared:

That the blood of all the prophets, which was shed from the foundation of the world, may be required of this generation;

Luke 11:50

And again:

Verily I say unto you, It shall be required of this generation.

Luke 11:51

In this passage, even Dorner admits that the expression refers to the existing generation.

He describes it in Latin as hoc ipsum hominum aevum, meaning the very generation of people then living.

This admission is important.

For here the judgment pronounced by Jesus is expressly connected with the people who were rejecting Him and preparing to complete the guilt of their forefathers.

5. Mark 8:38

We find another example in the words:

Whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation; of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.

Mark 8:38

The reference is plainly to the generation among whom Jesus was then living and teaching.

It was that generation which He described as adulterous and sinful.

6. Luke 17:25

Finally, our Lord declared:

But first must he suffer many things, and be rejected of this generation.

Luke 17:25

The meaning cannot reasonably be disputed.

The generation that would reject the Son of Man was the generation living during His earthly ministry.

These examples are sufficient to establish the meaning of the expression.

They comprise the instances in which our Lord uses the words this generation.

In each case, the natural reference is to His own contemporaries.

Why, then, should we assign a different meaning to the same words when they appear in the great prophecy on the Mount of Olives?

There is no sound reason for doing so.

The Difficulty of Interpreting "Generation" as "Race"

But suppose we accept the proposed alternative and interpret genea as meaning race.

What would then become of the prophecy?

What real significance would remain in our Lord's solemn declaration?

Are we to understand Him as saying nothing more than that the Jewish race would not become extinct before all the predicted events had taken place?

Would that be a meaningful answer to the disciples' question?

Consider a similar situation in our own time.

Suppose a prophet announced that London was to suffer a terrible catastrophe.

He foretold that the city would be destroyed, that St Paul's Cathedral and the Houses of Parliament would be levelled to the ground, and that a dreadful slaughter of the inhabitants would take place.

Naturally, his hearers would be deeply alarmed.

They would ask him when these events were going to happen.

Now suppose that he replied:

"The Anglo-Saxon race will not become extinct until all these things have been fulfilled."

Would anyone regard this as a satisfactory answer?

Would his hearers not feel that their question had been evaded?

Might they not reasonably complain that it was very easy to prophesy when the predicted event could be postponed indefinitely?

Such an answer would tell them practically nothing about the time of the approaching catastrophe.

Indeed, it would appear to make a mockery of both the prophet and his hearers.

Yet this is substantially the meaning attributed to our Lord's words by those who insist that this generation means the Jewish race.

The interpretation becomes absurd when examined in this way.

Was this the reason Jesus commanded His disciples to watch?

Was this the lesson taught by the budding fig tree?

Were they to regard the approach of summer as an illustration of an event that might not occur for thousands of years?

Were they to wait until the Jewish race was approaching extinction before obeying the command:

then look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh.

Luke 21:28

Surely not.

Such an interpretation defeats itself.

We must therefore return to the only natural and defensible meaning of our Lord's words.

He declared that the events described in His prophecy would take place before the existing generation had completely passed away.

That is what His language plainly expresses.

Every other interpretation requires us to force upon the words a meaning that they do not naturally bear.

The Consistency of Our Lord's Teaching

This interpretation also agrees perfectly with the teaching of Jesus on earlier occasions.

He had already assured His disciples that some of those who heard Him speak would live to witness His coming in glory.

In Matthew 16:27–28, He declared:

For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works.

Verily I say unto you, There be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom.

He had also told them that His coming would take place before they had completed their mission throughout the cities of Israel:

Verily I say unto you, Ye shall not have gone over the cities of Israel, till the Son of man be come.

Matthew 10:23

And in His solemn denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees, He had declared that the accumulated guilt of the nation would be visited upon the generation then living.

He spoke of the righteous blood shed from Abel to Zacharias and concluded:

Verily I say unto you, All these things shall come upon this generation.

Matthew 23:36

The declaration in Matthew 24 therefore introduces no new or unexpected idea.

It repeats and confirms what our Lord had already taught.

The generation that heard His words would witness the approaching judgment.

We should never overlook the exceptional character of that generation.

In the history of Israel, it occupied a unique position.

It was the final generation of the Jewish dispensation, and, in its rejection of Christ, the most guilty of all.

It inherited the accumulated guilt and rebelliousness of those who had gone before.

Its members were about to complete that guilt by rejecting and putting to death the Son of God.

Upon that generation, therefore, unparalleled judgments were about to fall.

Whether those predicted events actually took place is another question.

We shall examine the historical fulfilment of the prophecy in its proper place.[10]

But the meaning of our Lord's words must first be established.

And that meaning is clear.

Other explanations have occasionally been proposed.

Some have suggested that this generation means the whole human race.

Others have interpreted it as the generation of the righteous or the generation of the wicked.

Such explanations are so plainly unsuitable to the context that they scarcely require examination.

How Long Is a Generation?

A few words may be necessary concerning the period ordinarily covered by a generation.

The expression does not denote an exact measure of time, such as a decade or a century.

Its length is not fixed with mathematical precision.

There is a certain flexibility in its meaning.

Nevertheless, that flexibility has reasonable limits.

A generation may ordinarily be understood as extending over approximately thirty or forty years.

We find an important example in the Book of Numbers.

The Israelites who rebelled against God in the wilderness were condemned to die without entering the land of Canaan.

The judgment upon that generation was to be completed during a period of forty years.

The same period is mentioned in Psalm 95:

Forty years long was I grieved with this generation,

Psalm 95:10

Here the term generation is associated with a period of forty years.

Matthew's genealogy also supplies evidence concerning the approximate length of a generation.

The evangelist declares:

and from the carrying away into Babylon unto Christ are fourteen generations.

Matthew 1:17

The captivity associated with the reign of Zedekiah is generally dated to about 586 BC.

Dividing that period by fourteen gives an average of approximately forty-one years for each generation.

We therefore have sufficient grounds for regarding a generation as a period of roughly thirty to forty years, allowing for some variation.

Now consider the historical dates connected with our Lord's prophecy.

The Jewish war under Nero began in AD 66.

If we assume that Jesus was approximately thirty-three years old at the time of His crucifixion, about thirty-three years would have elapsed before the disturbances announcing the approaching end began to reach their final stage.

The destruction of Jerusalem and its temple took place in September AD 70.

That was approximately thirty-seven years after our Lord delivered His prophecy on the Mount of Olives.

The period therefore falls well within the ordinary meaning of a generation.

It is not so short that the expression this generation shall not pass would seem inappropriate.

Nor is it so long that the predicted events must be placed beyond the lifetime of those who heard Jesus speak.

Many who had seen and heard the Saviour could still have been alive.

Some of the disciples themselves could also have survived to witness the catastrophe.

Thus, the historical interval agrees with the natural meaning of our Lord's declaration.

The generation to which He spoke was indeed passing away.

Many of its members had died.

But it had not wholly passed away.

The prophecy was therefore fulfilled within the limits of the generation specified by Christ.

Footnote

10. Dr Edward Robinson, in his Harmony of the Four Gospels, Part VII, §128, rejects the suggestion that this generation means either the Jewish nation or the human race. He understands it to mean that

not all the people living when Jesus spoke would die before the prophecy was fulfilled.

He connects this declaration with Matthew 16:28 and identifies the destruction of Jerusalem, approximately thirty-seven years after our Lord's prediction, as its fulfilment.

(f) Certainty of the Consummation, Yet Uncertainty of Its Precise Date

Matthew 24:35–36

Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.

But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only.

Mark 13:31–32

Heaven and earth shall pass away: but my words shall not pass away.

But of that day and that hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father.

Luke 21:33

Heaven and earth shall pass away: but my words shall not pass away.

Although our Lord has clearly established the period within which the predicted consummation would take place, He has not revealed the precise moment of its arrival.

He has declared that it would occur before the generation then living had passed away. But He has not specified the exact date.

He has not named the hour or the day, nor even the month or the year.

We must not suppose, however, that because the precise date was unknown, the whole question of time remained uncertain.

There is an important distinction between knowing the general period within which an event will occur and knowing the exact moment when it will happen.

Our Lord had already settled the first question.

The consummation would take place within the lifetime of the existing generation.

But the particular hour when the final judgment would fall was not revealed.

That knowledge was withheld from men and angels.

More remarkable still, according to the express statement in Mark's Gospel, it was not known even to the Son of Man Himself.

It was a secret reserved to the Father alone.

The precise time remained within His own authority.

There were, no doubt, sufficient reasons for withholding this knowledge.

Suppose our Lord had announced the exact date of Jerusalem's destruction.

Suppose He had declared that in the thirty-seventh year, on the eighth day of the sixth month, the city would be captured and the temple destroyed by fire.

Such a declaration would have been entirely different from the ordinary manner of biblical prophecy.

More importantly, it would have removed one of the strongest reasons for constant watchfulness and prayer.

The disciples were to know that the event was approaching.

They were to recognise the signs that would precede it.

They were to remain alert and prepared.

But they were not to know the precise hour.

It was this uncertainty that made continued vigilance necessary.

Thus, the certainty of the event and the uncertainty of its exact date are perfectly consistent.

Our Lord assured His disciples that His words would not fail.

The predicted consummation would certainly come.

But because its precise moment remained unknown, they must continue to watch and pray until it arrived.

(g) Suddenness of the Parousia, and Calls to Watchfulness

Matthew 24:37–42

But as the days of Noe were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be.

For as in the days that were before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noe entered into the ark,

And knew not until the flood came, and took them all away; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be.

Then shall two be in the field; the one shall be taken, and the other left.

Two women shall be grinding at the mill; the one shall be taken, and the other left.

Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come.

Luke 17:26–37

And as it was in the days of Noe, so shall it be also in the days of the Son of man.

They did eat, they drank, they married wives, they were given in marriage, until the day that Noe entered into the ark, and the flood came, and destroyed them all.

Likewise also as it was in the days of Lot; they did eat, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they builded;

But the same day that Lot went out of Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven, and destroyed them all.

Even thus shall it be in the day when the Son of man is revealed.

In that day, he which shall be upon the housetop, and his stuff in the house, let him not come down to take it away: and he that is in the field, let him likewise not return back.

Remember Lot's wife.

Whosoever shall seek to save his life shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it.

I tell you, in that night there shall be two men in one bed; the one shall be taken, and the other shall be left.

Two women shall be grinding together; the one shall be taken, and the other left.

Two men shall be in the field; the one shall be taken, and the other left.

And they answered and said unto him, Where, Lord? And he said unto them, Wheresoever the body is, thither will the eagles be gathered together.

Mark 13:33–37

Take ye heed, watch and pray: for ye know not when the time is.

For the Son of man is as a man taking a far journey, who left his house, and gave authority to his servants, and to every man his work, and commanded the porter to watch.

Watch ye therefore: for ye know not when the master of the house cometh, at even, or at midnight, or at the cockcrowing, or in the morning:

Lest coming suddenly he find you sleeping.

And what I say unto you I say unto all, Watch.

Luke 21:34–36

And take heed to yourselves, lest at any time your hearts be overcharged with surfeiting, and drunkenness, and cares of this life, and so that day come upon you unawares.

For as a snare shall it come on all them that dwell on the face of the whole earth.

Watch ye therefore, and pray always, that ye may be accounted worthy to escape all these things that shall come to pass, and to stand before the Son of man.

Every description our Lord gives of the approaching catastrophe suggests that it would take people by surprise.

The destruction would come suddenly, while they were occupied with the ordinary activities of life.

Jesus compares it with two great judgments recorded in the Old Testament.

The first is the flood in the days of Noah.

People continued eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, with little thought of the judgment approaching them. They carried on with their daily lives until Noah entered the ark.

Then the flood came and swept them away.

The second example is the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

In the days of Lot, people were buying and selling, planting and building. Life continued much as usual, until the very day that Lot departed from Sodom.

Then fire and brimstone fell from heaven and destroyed the cities.

In the same way, the final catastrophe would overtake Jerusalem and Judea at an unexpected moment.

The ordinary business and pleasures of life would occupy people's thoughts. They would continue their usual activities, unaware of how near their destruction had come.

Luke 17 contains the fullest account of our Lord's teaching on this subject.

There is, however, a question about the position of these words in the Gospel narratives.

Did Luke place the discourse in a different setting from the one in which it was originally spoken? Or did our Lord repeat the same teaching on separate occasions?

This question does not greatly affect our present investigation.

Neander believes that Luke preserves the natural setting of the discourse, while Matthew places it alongside other sayings relating to the final crisis.[11]

We are doubtful of this explanation.

But whatever conclusion we reach about the arrangement of the Gospel accounts, one fact remains beyond dispute.

Matthew and Luke are describing the same event, the same period and the same catastrophe.

It is therefore surprising to find Alford declaring, concerning the passage in Luke:

"There is not a word in all this of the destruction of Jerusalem."

We would say, on the contrary, that every word concerns the destruction of Jerusalem.

Consider the unmistakable indication of time given by our Lord immediately before this passage.

He declares:

But first must he suffer many things, and be rejected of this generation.

Luke 17:25

Here the reference is expressly to the generation then living.

And what other catastrophe, belonging to the lifetime of that generation, could appropriately be compared with the destruction of the world by the flood and the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah by fire?

The destruction of Jerusalem answers to this description.

It was the great judgment destined to overtake that generation.

It would be sudden, terrible and overwhelming.

The people would be caught unprepared, just as those who perished in the flood and the cities of the plain had been.

The Necessity of Watchfulness

From the certainty and suddenness of the approaching consummation, our Lord draws a practical lesson for His disciples.

They must remain watchful.

Here He gives the solemn warning that would become a constant watchword among His followers throughout the apostolic age:

Watch and pray!

As we proceed with our investigation, we shall see how frequently and earnestly the apostles repeated this command.

Again and again, they urged the faithful to remain alert and prepared for the coming of the Lord.

The warning continued to be heard throughout the apostolic period, even in the latest writings that have come down to us from that age.

This watchfulness was essential to the safety of Christ's followers.

The approaching catastrophe would come so unexpectedly that those who were careless and unprepared would be caught as birds are caught in a net.

Our Lord expressly warns:

For as a snare shall it come on all them that dwell on the face of the whole earth.

Luke 21:35

The Greek expression translated the whole earth is pasēs tēs gēs.

It may equally be understood as the whole land.

We regard this as a further indication of the local and national character of the judgment.

The warning concerns the inhabitants of the land upon which the approaching calamity would fall.

The Testimony of Josephus

We have a striking historical illustration of these words in the account of Josephus.

The Jewish historian explains how such an immense number of people came to be trapped within Jerusalem during the Roman siege.

He records that approximately one million one hundred thousand people perished.

In explaining why so many were present in the city, he writes:

"Of these the greater proportion were of Jewish blood, though not natives of the place. Having assembled from the whole country for the feast of unleavened bread, they were suddenly hemmed in by the war. On this occasion the whole nation had been shut up as in a prison, by fate; and the war encircled the city when it was crowded with men."[12]

The circumstances could scarcely have provided a more striking fulfilment of our Lord's prediction.

The people had gathered in Jerusalem from different parts of the country to celebrate one of their great religious festivals.

They had come for the Feast of Unleavened Bread, expecting to take part in the customary observances of their religion.

Yet while the city was crowded with worshippers, the Roman armies surrounded it.

The inhabitants and visitors were suddenly trapped.

What had begun as a religious gathering became a scene of imprisonment, suffering and destruction.

How closely this corresponds with our Lord's warning that the day would come upon the inhabitants of the land like a snare!

The catastrophe overtook them when they were least prepared to escape.

It is difficult to imagine a more exact historical illustration of Luke 21:35.

The Warning Was Addressed to the Disciples

Throughout these passages, we observe the same direct and personal manner of address that has characterised the whole prophecy.

Our Lord is speaking to His disciples about events in which they themselves would be concerned.

He warns them of dangers they would need to recognise.

He commands them to watch and pray.

He urges them to remain prepared so that they may escape the approaching calamities.

There is not the slightest indication that His words contain another hidden meaning.

Nothing suggests that when He spoke of Jerusalem, He really meant the whole world.

Nothing suggests that when He spoke of this generation, He meant generations living thousands of years later.

And nothing suggests that when He addressed His disciples as ye and you, He intended those words to refer primarily to disciples not yet born.

Such interpretations must be introduced from outside the discourse.

They do not arise naturally from the language of Christ.

The Arrangement of the Gospel Accounts

At this point, Mark and Luke bring their accounts of the prophecy on the Mount of Olives to a close.

Their conclusion is both natural and appropriate.

Matthew, however, continues with a series of parables and parabolic sayings connected with the coming of the Lord.

These resemble the illustrations Jesus frequently employed when teaching the people.

It may seem somewhat unusual that our Lord should have spoken in parables to His disciples on an occasion such as this.

There is therefore something to be said for Neander's suggestion that Matthew brought together sayings of Christ that were closely related in subject, although they may originally have been spoken at different times.

Neander observes:

"It was peculiar to the editor of our Greek Matthew to arrange together congenial sayings of Christ, though uttered at different times and in different relations. We need not therefore wonder if we find it impossible to draw the lines of distinction in this discourse with entire accuracy; nor need such a result lead us to forced interpretations, inconsistent with truth, and with the love of truth.

"It is much easier to make such distinctions in Luke's account (chap. xxi.), though even that is not without its difficulties. In comparing Matthew and Luke together, however, we can trace the origin of most of these difficulties to the blending of different portions together, when the discourses of Christ were arranged in collections."[13]

We need not attempt to settle this question here.

It is sufficient to observe that the parables recorded by Matthew are entirely appropriate to the subject of the discourse.

Even if some of them were originally spoken on other occasions, they remain closely connected with the teaching already given.

They illustrate the same great truths concerning the coming of the Lord, the certainty of judgment and the necessity of watchfulness.

If, on the other hand, Matthew has preserved their original place in the discourse, their connection with the prophecy becomes even closer and more direct.

In either case, their relevance to our present investigation is unmistakable.

We shall therefore proceed to examine the parables and parabolic sayings of our Lord that are recorded in connection with this prophecy, chiefly by Matthew.

Footnotes

11. Neander, Life of Christ, Chapter XII, §214, note.

12. Josephus, The Jewish War, Book VI, Chapter IX, §§3–4, translated by Traill.

13. Neander, Life of Christ, §254, note.

(h) The Disciples Warned of the Suddenness of the Parousia

Parable of the Goodman of the House

Matthew 24:43–51

But know this, that if the goodman of the house had known in what watch the thief would come, he would have watched, and would not have suffered his house to be broken up.

Therefore be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh.

Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his lord hath made ruler over his household, to give them meat in due season?

Blessed is that servant, whom his lord when he cometh shall find so doing.

Verily I say unto you, That he shall make him ruler over all his goods.

But and if that evil servant shall say in his heart, My lord delayeth his coming;

And shall begin to smite his fellowservants, and to eat and drink with the drunken;

The lord of that servant shall come in a day when he looketh not for him, and in an hour that he is not aware of,

And shall cut him asunder, and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Mark 13:34–37

For the Son of man is as a man taking a far journey, who left his house, and gave authority to his servants, and to every man his work, and commanded the porter to watch.

Watch ye therefore: for ye know not when the master of the house cometh, at even, or at midnight, or at the cockcrowing, or in the morning:

Lest coming suddenly he find you sleeping.

And what I say unto you I say unto all, Watch.

Luke 12:39–46

And this know, that if the goodman of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched, and not have suffered his house to be broken through.

Be ye therefore ready also: for the Son of man cometh at an hour when ye think not.

Then Peter said unto him, Lord, speakest thou this parable unto us, or even to all?

And the Lord said, Who then is that faithful and wise steward, whom his lord shall make ruler over his household, to give them their portion of meat in due season?

Blessed is that servant, whom his lord when he cometh shall find so doing.

Of a truth I say unto you, that he will make him ruler over all that he hath.

But and if that servant say in his heart, My lord delayeth his coming; and shall begin to beat the men-servants and maidens, and to eat and drink, and to be drunken;

The lord of that servant will come in a day when he looketh not for him, and at an hour when he is not aware, and will cut him in sunder, and will appoint him his portion with the unbelievers.

We find this parabolic teaching of our Lord recorded in quite different settings by Matthew and Luke.

Yet the resemblance between the two accounts is so close, even in their wording, that it seems unlikely Jesus spoke precisely the same words on two separate occasions.

A careful comparison suggests that Luke gives the fuller account and preserves the original chronological setting.

One important detail supports this conclusion.

Luke records a question asked by Peter:

Lord, speakest thou this parable unto us, or even to all?

Luke 12:41

This question provides the connection between the first part of our Lord's teaching and the explanation that follows.

Without it, as in Matthew's account, the transition from the watchful householder to the faithful and unfaithful servants appears rather sudden.

Peter's question also helps us understand the circumstances in which the words were spoken.

According to Matthew, the discourse on the Mount of Olives was delivered privately to four disciples.

It would seem strange for Peter, when speaking with Jesus in the company of only three other disciples, to ask whether the teaching was intended for them or for everyone.

But the question becomes perfectly natural in the setting described by Luke.

At the beginning of Luke 12, we are told that an immense crowd had gathered, while Jesus addressed His disciples in the presence of the multitude.

In those circumstances, Peter might reasonably wonder whether the warning applied particularly to the disciples or more generally to all who heard it.

There is another interesting detail in Mark's account.

In Mark 13:34–37, we find clear traces of the same parable, and the concluding words appear to provide a direct answer to Peter's question:

And what I say unto you I say unto all, Watch.

Mark 13:37

This statement would seem unnecessary if Jesus were speaking privately to only four disciples.

But it would be entirely appropriate if He were addressing His disciples in the presence of a great multitude.

We may therefore reasonably suppose that Matthew included this teaching in the discourse on the Mount of Olives because it so perfectly illustrated the necessity for watchfulness in view of the Lord's

coming.

Even if the words were originally spoken on another occasion, their connection with the subject before us is unmistakable.

Stier suggests that Mark's account contains a brief summary of Matthew 24:43, together with elements of the parables of the servant in Matthew 24:45–51 and Matthew 25:14, and perhaps even a slight echo of the parable of the virgins.[14]

We have no more reason to insist that the evangelists always followed an exact chronological order than to demand that every account should reproduce our Lord's words with absolute verbal precision.

Neither strict chronology nor word-for-word reporting appears to have been essential to their method of writing.

But the chief question for our present inquiry is not where this parable was originally spoken.

It is how the parable relates to the prophecy that precedes it.

And here its meaning is perfectly clear.

The warning about the householder who must remain awake because he does not know when the thief will come is closely woven into the whole argument of the discourse.

There is no introduction of a new subject at Matthew 24:43.

There is no transition from the approaching judgment of Jerusalem to another catastrophe in some distant age.

Nor is there any suggestion that our Lord has stopped speaking of the coming that had occupied the attention of His disciples throughout the discourse.

The subject remains the same.

The warning continues without interruption.

The necessity for watchfulness arises from the uncertainty of the precise time when the Son of Man will come.

It seems almost incredible that any interpreter should choose Matthew 24:43 as the beginning of an entirely new subject.

Yet this is precisely what Dr Edward Robinson does.

He writes:

"Our Lord here makes a transition, and proceeds to speak of his final coming at the day of judgment. This appears from the fact that the matter of these sections is added by Matthew after Mark and Luke have ended their parallel reports relative to the Jewish catastrophe; and Matthew here commences, with ver. 43, the discourse which Luke has given on another occasion, Luke xii. 39, &c."[15]

But where is the evidence for such a transition?

There is not the slightest indication of it in the words of our Lord.

No dividing line can reasonably be drawn between the preceding verses and the parable that follows.

We cannot assign one part of the discourse to the judgment of the Jewish nation and another to a universal judgment of the human race merely because Matthew includes material that Mark and Luke place elsewhere or do not record.

At verse 43, we find not a change of subject, but a direct continuation of the same subject.

Indeed, the connection could scarcely be clearer.

In verse 42, Jesus says:

Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come.

Matthew 24:42

Then, in verse 44, He declares:

Therefore be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh.

Matthew 24:44

The second statement follows naturally from the first.

The word therefore expressly connects the warning with what has already been said.

The disciples must watch because they do not know the hour of their Lord's coming.

They must remain ready because the Son of Man will come when they do not expect Him.

There is no change in the people addressed, no change in the event foretold and no change in the reason given for watchfulness.

Everything remains connected.

To suppose that Jesus suddenly introduced a wholly different coming, belonging to a distant and indefinite future, is an arbitrary interpretation for which the passage gives no authority.

The teaching is continuous throughout.

The Parousia of which our Lord speaks in this parable is the same coming He has been describing from the beginning of His prophetic discourse.

Footnotes

14. Stier, Reden Jesu, Vol. III, p. 304.

15. Edward Robinson, Harmony of the Four Gospels, §129.

(i) The Parousia a Time of Judgment Alike to the Friends and Enemies of Christ

Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins

Matthew 25:1–13

Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom.

And five of them were wise, and five were foolish.

They that were foolish took their lamps, and took no oil with them:

But the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps.

While the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept.

And at midnight there was a cry made, Behold, the bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet him.

Then all those virgins arose, and trimmed their lamps.

And the foolish said unto the wise, Give us of your oil; for our lamps are gone out.

But the wise answered, saying, Not so; lest there be not enough for us and you: but go ye rather to them that sell, and buy for yourselves.

And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came; and they that were ready went in with him to the marriage: and the door was shut.

Afterward came also the other virgins, saying, Lord, Lord, open to us.

But he answered and said, Verily I say unto you, I know you not.

Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh.

Almost all commentators suppose that, at this point, Jerusalem and Israel disappear entirely from the prophecy.

They maintain that our Lord now turns away from the approaching destruction of Jerusalem and begins to speak exclusively of the final consummation of all things and the judgment of the whole human

race.

For the English reader, this supposed change of subject is made easier to accept because a new chapter begins here.

But has our Lord really abandoned the subject that has occupied both Him and His disciples throughout the preceding discourse?

Has He suddenly passed from events that were near at hand to events belonging to a distant future, separated from His own time by hundreds or even thousands of years?

If such a change had occurred, we might reasonably expect some clear indication of it.

Yet we find none.

On the contrary, the opening and closing words of the parable expressly forbid us to suppose that a new subject has been introduced.

Notice how the parable begins:

Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom.

Matthew 25:1

The word then is important.

It means at that time.

It connects the parable directly with the events already described.

There is no interruption between the conclusion of Matthew 24 and the beginning of Matthew 25.

The division into chapters must not lead us to imagine that our Lord's discourse has been divided into separate subjects.

The connecting word then carries the argument forward. It joins the parable to the preceding prophecy in subject, time and the people addressed.

This connection is strengthened by the lesson with which the parable concludes.

The warning given to the ten virgins is precisely the same as the warning concerning the householder in the preceding chapter.

In both cases, the lesson is the necessity of watchfulness.

The parable ends with these words:

Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh.

Matthew 25:13

Compare this with the words already spoken by our Lord:

Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come.

Matthew 24:42

The resemblance is unmistakable.

Both warnings are addressed to the disciples.

Both concern the uncertainty of the precise time of their Lord's coming.

Both require the same response: constant watchfulness and readiness.

Surely, then, they must refer to the same event.

It is not our purpose here to give a detailed explanation of every feature of this parable.

Some theologians discover a mystery in almost every word.

They attach special significance to the number ten, the division into five wise and five foolish virgins, their virginity, their lamps, their oil and other details.

Lange provides examples of this method of interpretation.

Calvin expresses his impatience with such attempts in the observation:

"Multum se torquent quidam, in lucernis, in vasis, in oleo."

That is, Some greatly trouble themselves over the lamps, the vessels and the oil.

We need not follow these elaborate interpretations.

The principal lesson of the parable is plain.

The disciples must remain constantly prepared for the sudden and speedy coming of the Son of Man.

The wise virgins were ready when the bridegroom arrived.

The foolish virgins were not.

Those who were prepared entered the marriage feast.

Those who had neglected their preparation arrived too late and found the door shut against them.

Their exclusion illustrates the solemn consequences of failing to watch and remain ready for the Lord's coming.

The unprepared would suffer the penalty represented by the foolish virgins: exclusion from the marriage supper of the Lamb.

Thus, this parable is not an isolated teaching about an entirely different judgment.

It is closely and naturally connected with the whole discourse that precedes it.

Our Lord is still speaking of the same great event: the consummation of the age, which He had expressly declared would take place before the existing generation had passed away.

It was this approaching event that had filled the disciples with concern and led them to question their Master on the Mount of Olives.

And it was in view of that same event that He now urged them to watch and remain ready.

(k) The Parousia a Time of Judgment

Parable of the Talents

Matthew 25:14–30

For the kingdom of heaven is as a man travelling into a far country, who called his own servants, and delivered unto them his goods.

And unto one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one; to every man according to his several ability; and straightway took his journey.

Then he that had received the five talents went and traded with the same, and made them other five talents.

And likewise he that had received two, he also gained other two.

But he that had received one went and digged in the earth, and hid his lord's money.

After a long time the lord of those servants cometh, and reckoneth with them.

And so he that had received five talents came and brought other five talents, saying, Lord, thou deliveredst unto me five talents: behold, I have gained beside them five talents more.

His lord said unto him, Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord.

He also that had received two talents came and said, Lord, thou deliveredst unto me two talents: behold, I have gained two other talents beside them.

His lord said unto him, Well done, good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord.

Then he which had received the one talent came and said, Lord, I knew thee that thou art an hard man, reaping where thou hast not sown, and gathering where thou hast not strawed:

And I was afraid, and went and hid thy talent in the earth: lo, there thou hast that is thine.

His lord answered and said unto him, Thou wicked and slothful servant, thou knewest that I reap where I sowed not, and gather where I have not strawed:

Thou oughtest therefore to have put my money to the exchangers, and then at my coming I should have received mine own with usury.

Take therefore the talent from him, and give it unto him which hath ten talents.

For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath.

And cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

In this parable, our Lord continues the same subject, though He presents it from a somewhat different point of view.

The principal lesson of the preceding parable was watchfulness. Here, the lesson is diligence.

Yet this does not introduce anything fundamentally new. Throughout the whole prophetic discourse, our Lord has represented His coming as a time of judgment. Indeed, it is this certainty of approaching judgment that gives such urgency to His repeated warnings to remain watchful and prepared.

The Parousia was to be a time of judgment not only for Jerusalem and the Jewish nation, but also for the disciples of Christ themselves.

They, too, would have to stand before the Son of Man.

There was danger that the day might overtake them when they were neither prepared nor expecting it.

We have already seen this connection between the Parousia and judgment in the parable of the householder who must watch against the unexpected arrival of a thief.

It appears even more clearly in the account of the faithful and unfaithful servants.

The same truth is presented with still greater force in the parable of the wise and foolish virgins.

In the parable of the talents, the judgment of the servants becomes more prominent still.

And it reaches its fullest and most solemn expression in the concluding description of the sheep and the goats.

We need not examine every detail of the parable of the talents to understand its principal meaning.

Its leading features are plain.

The master entrusts his possessions to his servants and then departs.

During his absence, they are responsible for making faithful use of what has been committed to their care.

When he returns, he calls them to account.

Those who have served him faithfully and diligently receive an abundant reward.

The servant who has neglected his duty is condemned and punished.

The lesson for the servants of Christ is unmistakable.

They must remain faithful and diligent during their Lord's absence, remembering that the day will come when He returns to reckon with them.

But the particular question that concerns us is how this parable relates to the prophetic discourse that precedes it.

And here the connection could scarcely be clearer.

The word For, with which verse 14 begins, expressly links the parable with what has already been said.

It indicates that our Lord is continuing His discourse, not introducing an entirely different subject.

The theme remains the same.

The time remains the same.

The great event towards which everything points remains the same.

It is the approaching Parousia, with the judgment and recompense that accompany it.

Up to this point, therefore, we have found no interruption in the argument, no change of subject and no introduction of another event belonging to some distant future.

The discourse remains one connected and consistent whole.

Our Lord has never departed from the great subject that first prompted the disciples' questions: the approaching judgment of Jerusalem and the Jewish nation, together with the solemn events associated with that catastrophe.

All these things were to take place within the lifetime of the existing generation.

And the disciples themselves, or at least some of them, would live to witness their fulfilment.

(l) The Parousia a Time of Judgment

The Sheep and the Goats

Matthew 25:31–46

When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory:

And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats:

And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left.

Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world:

For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in:

Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me.

Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink?

When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee?

Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee?

And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.

Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels:

For I was an hungred, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink:

I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not.

Then shall they also answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee?

Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me.

And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.

Throughout our examination of the prophecy on the Mount of Olives, we have found one continuous discourse concerning the great catastrophe that was approaching the Jewish nation.

Our Lord had declared that these events would take place before the generation then living had passed away.

We now come, however, to a passage that almost every commentator regards as referring to something entirely different.

According to the usual interpretation, the description of the sheep and the goats cannot refer merely to Jerusalem or Israel. It must concern the whole human race and the final consummation of all things.

If the agreement of commentators were enough to establish the meaning of Scripture, we would have little choice but to accept that conclusion.

We would have to suppose that our Lord had abandoned the subject of the disciples' original question and had begun describing the last scene in the history of the world.

We freely acknowledge that this passage differs in several important respects from the preceding portions of the discourse.

It appears more separate and distinct from what has gone before. The connecting expressions that have been so evident elsewhere are less obvious here.

More importantly, the scene itself seems to extend far beyond Jerusalem and Israel.

It appears to describe the judgment, not of one nation, but of all nations.

It seems to concern, not merely a city or country, but the whole world.

And it has the appearance, not of a particular historical crisis, but of the final consummation.

We therefore approach this passage fully aware of the difficulty involved in challenging an interpretation accepted by so many learned and sincere Christians.

Nevertheless, we maintain that the description is an essential part of the prophecy.

We also maintain that it belongs to the same subject as the discourse that precedes it: the judgment of Israel and the close of the Jewish age.

Let us examine the reasons for this conclusion.

1. The Connection with the Previous Discourse

Although the passage may appear somewhat detached in our English Bible, the original Greek contains a connecting expression that links it with what has gone before.

This expression serves two purposes.

It introduces a new illustration, while also connecting that illustration with the preceding discourse.

Alford preserves this connection in his revised translation:

"But when the Son of man shall have come in his glory," etc.

The opening might equally well be rendered:

"And when the Son of man shall come in his glory," etc.

The precise wording is less important than the relationship it establishes.

Our Lord is not necessarily beginning an entirely new subject.

He is continuing His account of the coming of the Son of Man and describing another aspect of the judgment associated with that coming.

2. The Coming Has Already Been Foretold

The coming of the Son of Man described in Matthew 25 has already been announced in the preceding

chapter.

Our Lord declared:

And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.

Matthew 24:30

He also expressly defined the period within which the events of His prophecy would take place:

Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled.

Matthew 24:34

This declaration embraces the events described in the prophecy.

Why, then, should the coming of the Son of Man in Matthew 25 be regarded as an entirely different coming?

Nothing in the text requires such a distinction.

3. The Agreement Between Matthew 16 and Matthew 25

A comparison with an earlier prediction of our Lord provides still stronger evidence.

In Matthew 16:27–28, Jesus had already described His coming in glory and expressly declared that some of those then present would live to witness it.

Let us compare the passages.

Matthew 16:27–28

For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works.

Verily I say unto you, There be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom.

Matthew 25:31–32

When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory:

And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats:

The agreement between these descriptions is remarkable.

First, both concern the same subject: the coming of the Son of Man, or the Parousia.

Second, in both passages He comes in glory.

Third, in both He is accompanied by the holy angels.

Fourth, both describe His coming in royal authority. In Matthew 16, He comes in His kingdom. In Matthew 25, He takes His place upon the throne of His glory and acts as King.

Fifth, both passages describe a coming to judgment.

Sixth, the judgment is expressed in terms that appear universal. In one passage, He rewards every person according to their works. In the other, all nations are gathered before Him.

Finally, and most importantly, Matthew 16 expressly declares that this glorious coming would occur during the lifetime of some who heard Jesus speak.

That statement fixes the time of the Parousia within the limits of a human lifetime.

It agrees perfectly with the later declaration:

This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled.

Matthew 24:34

We are therefore fully justified in understanding the coming described in Matthew 25 as identical with the coming announced in Matthew 16.

It is the event that some of the disciples were promised they would live to witness.

Consequently, despite the expression all nations in Matthew 25:32, we are led to conclude that our Lord is describing the judgment of Israel at the close of the Jewish age, not the final dissolution of the material universe.

4. The Meaning of "All Nations"

It will no doubt be objected that one considerable difficulty remains.

How can the expression all nations be limited to Israel or Palestine?

At first sight, this appears to be a serious objection.

Yet we believe that the difficulty is greater in appearance than in reality.

There are several considerations that must be taken into account.

First, Scripture frequently employs universal expressions that must be understood in a limited or qualified sense.

We find an example in this very prophecy.

Speaking of the great tribulation, our Lord declared:

And except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved: but for the elect's sake those days shall be shortened.

Matthew 24:22

The expression no flesh could, if taken in its fullest possible sense, include every human being on earth.

Yet the tribulation under discussion concerns Jerusalem and Judea.

A statement expressed in universal terms is therefore used in connection with the inhabitants of a particular land.

Nevertheless, Lange and Alford interpret it in the widest possible sense.

But the circumstances of the prophecy show that a more restricted meaning is entirely natural.

Second, it is highly probable that the expression all nations in Matthew 25 corresponds to all the tribes of the land in Matthew 24:30.

There is nothing improper in describing the tribes or peoples of Palestine as nations.

God's promise to Abraham was that he would become the father of many nations.

This language appears in Genesis 17:5 and is repeated by Paul in Romans 4:17–18.

In the time of our Lord, the inhabitants of Palestine were commonly spoken of as belonging to several different nations.

Josephus refers to the nation of the Samaritans, the nation of the Batanaeans and the nation of the Galileans.

He employs the Greek word ethnos, the same word used in the passage before us.

Judea could be regarded as a distinct nation, often possessing its own ruler.

The same was true of Samaria.

Other regions, including Idumea, Galilee, Peraea, Batanea, Trachonitis, Ituraea and Abilene, had at various times been governed by rulers bearing the title ethnarch.

The word itself signifies a ruler of a nation or people.

We therefore do no violence to the language if we understand all nations as referring to the various

peoples of Palestine.

In this sense, the expression corresponds closely to all the tribes of the land.

Third, this interpretation receives further support from the way the apostles themselves appear to have understood the expression all nations.

In the commission recorded in Matthew 28:19, our Lord commanded:

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost:

It is generally assumed that the apostles immediately understood these words as a command to evangelise the whole world, including every Gentile nation.

But their subsequent conduct raises serious questions about that assumption.

If they clearly understood that they were commissioned to preach throughout the entire world, why did they not immediately undertake that task?

If they knew that the Gentiles were to receive the gospel on equal terms with the Jews, why did this truth come upon them with such surprise?

Professor Burton observes:

"It was not until fourteen years after our Lord's ascension that St. Paul travelled for the first time, and preached the gospel to the Gentiles. Nor is there any evidence that during that period the other apostles passed the confines of Judea."[1]

The evidence suggests that the apostolic commission did not initially convey to the disciples the full idea of a worldwide Gentile mission.

They were astonished when they discovered that God had opened the way of salvation to the Gentiles.

After Peter's visit to Cornelius, the believers acknowledged:

Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life.

Acts 11:18

The significance of this discovery should not be overlooked.

Peter had been challenged for entering the house of uncircumcised men and eating with them.

Yet he did not appear to defend his conduct by appealing to the command to teach all nations.

If the apostles had already understood that command in its fullest universal sense, such an appeal would surely have been obvious.

They would have recognised from the beginning that the gospel was intended for Jew and Gentile alike.

Instead, a special revelation from heaven was necessary to overcome their Jewish prejudices.

Only then did they begin to understand the mystery later expressed by Paul:

That the Gentiles should be fellowheirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel:

Ephesians 3:6

These considerations make it reasonable to understand all nations in the passage before us in a more restricted sense.

We therefore regard it as referring to the nations or peoples of Palestine.

This interpretation also harmonises with our Lord's earlier declaration:

Verily I say unto you, Ye shall not have gone over the cities of Israel, till the Son of man be come.

Matthew 10:23

5. The Test Applied in the Judgment

There remains another consideration, which appears to us especially important.

The test of character applied by the King in this description is difficult to reconcile with the common interpretation that it represents the final judgment of the entire human race.

Notice the standard by which the righteous and the wicked are distinguished.

Their destiny turns upon the treatment they have given to the suffering disciples of Christ.

Those who fed the hungry, welcomed strangers, clothed the naked and visited the sick and imprisoned are commended.

Those who failed to provide such help are condemned.

All other moral qualities appear to be left out of consideration.

Virtuous conduct in general, true faith and the other principles of Christian righteousness are not expressly mentioned.

Instead, acts of kindness towards Christ's suffering brethren appear to be the decisive test.

It is hardly surprising that this feature of the passage has perplexed theologians and ordinary readers alike.

Is this the doctrine taught by Paul?

Is this the basis of justification before God presented in the New Testament?

Are we to suppose that the eternal destiny of every human being, from Adam to the last person who will ever live, finally depends upon their treatment of persecuted Christians?

The difficulty is serious if the passage describes the universal judgment of all mankind at the end of time.

Nor should we dismiss it without careful consideration.

How could nations that existed before the birth of Christ be judged by such a standard?

How could peoples who had never heard of Christ, and therefore never encountered His disciples, be judged according to their treatment of those disciples?

And how could the same test be applied appropriately to nations living during periods when Christianity was prosperous and powerful rather than persecuted and suffering?

The standard seems unsuitable for such a universal judgment.

But the difficulty disappears when we understand the scene as the judgment of Israel at the close of the Jewish age.

The Judge is the rejected King of Israel.

Those brought before Him belong to the hostile and unbelieving generation that had refused to acknowledge His authority.

It was the last and most guilty generation of the nation.

How appropriate, then, that their treatment of Christ's messengers should become the test by which their character was revealed!

The disciples, and particularly the apostles, had been sent to proclaim His message.

Their reception or rejection was inseparably connected with the reception or rejection of Christ Himself.

The circumstances described in the King's address are especially appropriate to a time when Christianity was a persecuted faith.

The followers of Jesus were hungry, thirsty, poorly clothed, strangers in unfamiliar places, sick and

imprisoned.

Those who welcomed and assisted them showed their sympathy with Christ.

Those who rejected or persecuted them displayed their hostility towards Him.

The persons described as these my brethren are therefore, in our judgment, the apostles and disciples of our Lord.

In their sufferings, Christ Himself was represented.

When they hungered, He hungered in them.

When they thirsted, He thirsted in them.

When they suffered imprisonment, He was identified with their suffering.

This interpretation agrees perfectly with the teaching our Lord gave when He first sent His disciples forth to preach.

He declared:

He that receiveth you receiveth me, and he that receiveth me receiveth him that sent me.

He that receiveth a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward; and he that receiveth a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man's reward.

And whosoever shall give to drink unto one of these little ones a cup of cold water only in the name of a disciple, verily I say unto you, he shall in no wise lose his reward.

Matthew 10:40–42

Here the principle is stated plainly.

To receive Christ's messengers is to receive Christ.

To show kindness to His disciples is to honour Him.

And even the smallest act of kindness performed because a person belongs to Christ will not go unrewarded.

The same principle governs the judgment described in Matthew 25.

It is therefore especially suited to the circumstances of the apostolic age.

We are thus brought to the conclusion that best agrees with the whole course of our Lord's discourse.

The passage does not describe the final judgment of every person who has ever lived.

It describes the judgment of the guilty nation, or nations, of Palestine.

They had rejected their King.

They had mistreated and killed His messengers, as He had already foretold in the parable of the marriage of the king's son (Matthew 22:1–14).

And now the day of their judgment was approaching.

The Unity of the Prophecy

When this interpretation is accepted, the whole prophecy on the Mount of Olives becomes one connected and harmonious discourse.

It is, in the words of the Latin expression, simplex duntaxat et unum: simply and entirely one.

It is no longer a confused collection of predictions that seem to point in different directions.

It no longer appears to speak of two events at once, or to pass without warning from one age to another.

Instead, it becomes a clear and consistent prophecy concerning the judgment of the theocratic nation at the close of the Jewish age.

The alternative interpretation, which regards the discourse as partly or wholly typical of a final uni-

versal judgment accompanied by a worldwide catastrophe, finds no clear support in the prophecy itself.

Indeed, it introduces serious difficulties.

If it could be demonstrated that every part of the discourse applied equally to two different events separated by centuries, the theory of a double meaning would have some reasonable foundation.

Or if our Lord had plainly indicated the point at which He left the subject of Jerusalem and began speaking of a distant judgment, the proposed division could be defended.

But neither condition is satisfied.

We have found no natural dividing line between the near and the distant.

Every proposed division has proved arbitrary and unsatisfactory.

Still less can we accept the theory that two meanings run simultaneously through the entire discourse.

Such an interpretation assumes that the commentator possesses some special power to recognise hidden fulfilments beneath the natural meaning of the words.

It gives an almost unlimited freedom to the imagination of the interpreter.

And this seems wholly inconsistent with the reverence due to the Word of God.

Alford's Uncertainty

The difficulties created by the double-sense theory are strikingly illustrated by a remarkable admission from Dean Alford.

At the conclusion of his commentary on this prophecy, he frankly acknowledges that he is no longer satisfied with the interpretation he had previously adopted.

He writes:

"I think it proper to state, in this third edition, that, having now entered upon the deeper study of the prophetic portions of the New Testament, I do not feel by any means that full confidence which I once did in the exegesis, quoad prophetical interpretation, here given of the three portions of this chap. xxv.

"But I have no other system to substitute, and some of the points here dwelt on seem to me as weighty as ever.

"I very much question whether the thorough study of Scripture prophecy will not make me more and more distrustful of all human systematising, and less willing to hazard strong assertion on any portion of the subject."

Alford dated this statement July 1855.

In the fourth edition, he added:

"Endorsed, October 1858."

This is a frank and honourable admission.

It does great credit to Alford's intellectual honesty.

But it also raises a serious question.

If, after eighteen centuries of Christian scholarship, the prophecy on the Mount of Olives remained so difficult that a distinguished commentator could not confidently explain it, how could the disciples have understood it when they first heard it?

They listened eagerly to the words of their Master.

They had come to Him with a sincere and urgent question.

Are we to suppose that He answered them in riddles that would remain almost impossible to understand for generations?

When they asked for bread, would He give them a stone?

Surely not.

There is no reason to believe that the disciples were incapable of understanding His words.

If the prophecy has become obscure to later readers, the fault does not lie in the teaching of Christ.

It lies in the methods of interpretation that have been imposed upon His language.

These methods have made difficult what was originally clear.

We cannot help expressing surprise that commentators have so often disregarded the definite limits of time established by our Lord.

Why should such expressions as aeon, genea and eutheōs be forced into meanings that their ordinary usage does not support?

Why should arbitrary divisions be introduced where the discourse itself contains none?

Why should Scripture be subjected to methods of interpretation that would never be tolerated in the study of Greek or Latin classical literature?

Let the language of Scripture be treated with ordinary fairness.

Let it be interpreted according to grammar, context and common sense.

Much of the uncertainty will disappear.

And the true meaning of the prophecy will become clear.[2]

The Historical Fulfilment of the Prophecy

Before leaving this important discourse, we should consider the extraordinary correspondence between its predictions and the historical events recorded by Josephus.

It is a remarkable fact that we possess such a full account of the times and circumstances surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem.

And the value of that account is greatly increased by the character of its author.

Josephus was a Jewish statesman, soldier, priest and man of letters.

He possessed access to important sources of information and was himself an eyewitness of many of the events he described.

His testimony is therefore especially valuable.

It does not come from a Christian writer who might be suspected of shaping the history to support the claims of Jesus.

It comes from a Jew who was indifferent, if not hostile, to the Christian cause.

The correspondence between the prophecy and the history is so remarkable that, if there were any grounds for doing so, someone might attempt to revive the old objection raised by Porphyry against the Book of Daniel.

Porphyry argued that Daniel's predictions must have been written after the events they described.

The agreement between our Lord's prophecy and the history of Jerusalem might seem equally extraordinary.

Yet there is no reasonable basis for making such an accusation.

Consider the circumstances when Jesus delivered His prophecy.

The Jewish people were often restless under Roman rule and frequently resented foreign domination.

Nevertheless, there was no immediate indication that the nation was approaching complete destruction.

The more influential classes professed loyalty to the Roman government.

Their declaration was:

We have no king but Caesar.

John 19:15

Roman policy generally allowed subject peoples to practise their own religion.

There was therefore no obvious reason why the magnificent temple at Jerusalem should not continue standing for centuries.

Nor was there any apparent necessity for Judea to lose its national existence.

Indeed, under Roman protection, the country might reasonably have expected to enjoy greater peace and prosperity than it had known under many of its own rulers.

Yet Jesus foretold the complete destruction of the temple, the overthrow of Jerusalem and the ruin of the nation.

And before the generation that rejected and crucified the Son of David had wholly passed away, these predictions were fulfilled.

The Jewish national order was brought to an end.

Jerusalem was devastated.

The holy and beautiful temple on Mount Zion was destroyed.

And the people who had failed to recognise the time of their visitation were overwhelmed by calamities of unparalleled severity.

These are undeniable facts.

Yet we cannot expect everyone to accept them as a sufficient fulfilment of our Lord's prophecy.

Many commentators have been taught by long-established interpretations to look for something far greater than the destruction of Jerusalem.

They argue that the language of the prophecy is too magnificent and the events too tremendous to be fulfilled by the judgment of Israel alone.

But we have already considered the extraordinary significance of that judgment.

The destruction of Jerusalem marked the close of the Jewish dispensation and the passing away of the old covenant order.

It was an event of immense importance in the history of God's dealings with mankind.

Yet there is one answer to every objection of this kind that should be sufficient.

It is our Lord's own declaration:

Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled.

Matthew 24:34

This statement covers the entire ground of the prophecy.

It fixes the period within which the predicted events were to take place.

There are, of course, some features of the prophecy whose fulfilment cannot be established by ordinary historical evidence.

Can we expect Tacitus, Suetonius, Josephus or any other historian to report that the Son of Man was seen coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory?

Could a human historian record that Christ gathered the nations before His tribunal and rewarded every person according to their works?

There is a realm into which human observation cannot enter.

The mysteries of the spiritual and immaterial world are beyond the reach of ordinary witnesses and reporters.

We cannot expect flesh and blood to observe and describe every transaction belonging to that invisible sphere.

But a large portion of our Lord's prophecy concerns events capable of historical verification.

And those events have been abundantly verified.

Even an opponent of Christianity, who rejects the supernatural knowledge of Christ, has been compelled to acknowledge that the prediction concerning the destruction of Jerusalem is remarkably definite and agrees closely with the actual events.[4]

The fulfilment of the portions that fall within the sphere of human observation therefore provides a guarantee of the truth of the remainder.

As our investigation proceeds, we shall see that the events now regarded by many as incredible were confidently expected by the Christians of the apostolic age.

They believed that these things were real.

And they believed that their fulfilment was near.

We are therefore confronted with a serious choice.

Either the words of Jesus failed, and the hopes of His disciples were disappointed, or His words were fulfilled and the prophecy was accomplished in all its parts.

There is no escaping the definite limitation of time imposed by our Lord.

The truth of His prediction is bound up with His declaration that the events He described would take place before the existing generation passed away.

If any language can be called precise and definite, surely it is the language He employed.

Other nations may experience catastrophes in other ages.

Other judgments may occur in the future.

But concerning such events, this prophecy says nothing.

Our Lord is speaking of His own guilty nation.

He is speaking of His coming in judgment at the close of the age.

This was the event foretold by Malachi, announced by John the Baptist and repeatedly predicted by Jesus Himself.[5]

For the fulfilment of these declarations, His words must stand responsible.

To go beyond them is to enter the region of human speculation.

The Danger of Making Every Event a Coming of Christ

Our purpose throughout this examination has been to recover the natural meaning of this great prophecy.

We have endeavoured to free it from methods of interpretation that have obscured its meaning and introduced unnecessary confusion.

We wish the words of Jesus to convey to us the same definite meaning that they conveyed to His disciples.

Reverence for Scripture, together with the ordinary principles of interpretation, forbids us to impose unnatural meanings upon the text.

Nor are we justified in giving the same prediction two entirely different fulfilments when the words themselves provide no authority for doing so.

Such a method comes dangerously close to adding meanings that our Lord did not express.

We dare not treat His precise statements as though their meaning could be altered whenever an in-

terpretation becomes difficult.

In the prophecy on the Mount of Olives, we find one Parousia, one end of the age, one approaching catastrophe and one definite limit of time:

This generation.

We therefore protest against the freedom with which some commentators handle the language of Scripture.

For example, one writer declares:

"The Lord is always coming to those who look for His appearing. We see His coming on a large scale in every crisis of the great human story. In revolutions, in reformations, and in the crises of our individual history. For each one of us there is an advent of the Lord, as often as new and larger views of truth are presented to us, or we are called to enter on new and perchance more laborious and exciting duties."[6]

But if this is what we mean by the coming of the Lord, what event could not be described as a coming?

Every revolution would become a Parousia.

Every reformation would become a Parousia.

Every important change in our personal circumstances would become another advent of Christ.

By making the expression apply to almost anything, we deprive it of its definite meaning.

It becomes so general that it no longer refers to any particular event.

There would be no reason why the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Christ could not be treated in the same manner.

They, too, might be reduced to ordinary events continually repeated in human experience.

But this would destroy the distinctive historical character of the great events of redemption.

We must distinguish between two very different truths.

It is one thing to affirm that the principles of God's government are eternal and unchanging.

What God has done in judgment or mercy towards one people may teach us what He will do towards others in similar circumstances.

The lessons of His dealings with Israel remain important for every generation.

But it is quite another thing to assert that a particular prophecy possesses two separate meanings: one concerning Jerusalem and Israel, and another concerning the entire world and the final consummation of all things.

We agree with Neander when he says:

"The words of Christ, like His works, contain within them the germ of an infinite development, reserved for future ages to unfold."[7]

This is undoubtedly true.

The teaching of Christ possesses a depth and richness that succeeding generations may continue to discover and appreciate.

But it does not follow that prophecy may mean whatever an ingenious interpreter can imagine.

Nor does it follow that every prediction contains hidden and distant fulfilments beneath its plain and natural meaning.

The task of the interpreter is not to discover how many meanings can be drawn from a passage.

It is to discover what Scripture actually says.

We are not called to impose our ideas upon the Word of God.

We are called to submit our understanding to its teaching.

And the true sayings of God, however profound their significance, are often wonderfully plain in their meaning.[8]

Footnotes

1. Professor Burton, Bampton Lectures, p. 20.

2. In an article entitled "The Coming of Christ", published in the first volume of Bibliotheca Sacra (1843), Dr Edward Robinson argues that Matthew 24, up to verse 42, refers exclusively to the destruction of Jerusalem.

He examines the attempts to interpret the prophecy as referring instead to the final judgment and the end of the material world. In particular, he rejects efforts to evade our Lord's definite limitations of time by assigning unusual meanings to such expressions as immediately and this generation.

Robinson argues that interpreting generation as the Jewish race or as the disciples of Christ lacks proper linguistic justification and is contrary to normal usage.

Yet, after so clear an explanation, it is disappointing that he does not apply the same principles consistently to the remainder of the discourse.

Assuming that the description of the sheep and the goats must concern the final judgment of mankind, he works backwards through Matthew 25.

He regards the parable of the talents as teaching the same final retribution, and then assigns the same meaning to the parable of the ten virgins.

He therefore concludes that Matthew 25 concerns the final judgment.

Because Matthew 24:43–51 is closely connected with those parables, he places the beginning of the supposed new subject at Matthew 24:43.

But the entire argument rests upon his original assumption that the sheep and the goats describe the universal judgment of the human race.

We have endeavoured to show that this assumption is without sufficient foundation, and that no new subject begins at Matthew 24:43.

4. Contemporary Review, November 1876. See also Note B, Part I.

5. Jonathan Edwards, speaking of the destruction of Jerusalem, writes:

"Thus there was a final end to the Old Testament world: all was finished with a kind of day of judgment, in which the people of God were saved, and His enemies terribly destroyed."

History of Redemption, Vol. I, p. 445.

6. Evangelical Magazine, February 1877, p. 69.

7. Neander, Life of Christ, §165.

8. See Note A, Part I.

Our Lord's Declaration Before the High Priest

Matthew 26:64

Jesus saith unto him, Thou hast said: nevertheless I say unto you, Hereafter shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven.

Mark 14:62

And Jesus said, I am: and ye shall see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven.

Luke 22:69

Hereafter shall the Son of man sit on the right hand of the power of God.

Our Saviour's reply to the solemn questioning of the high priest is almost an exact repetition of what He had previously declared to His disciples on the Mount of Olives:

and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.

Matthew 24:30

It is evident that both declarations refer to the same event and the same period.

The words spoken before the high priest imply that those who heard them, or at least some of them, would live to witness the event foretold.

The expression ye shall see would hardly be appropriate if Jesus were referring to something that none of His hearers would live to witness, and which would not happen for thousands of years.

Our Lord was therefore telling His judges that they, or some among them, would live to see Him coming in judgment, or coming in His kingdom.

This agrees perfectly with His earlier declaration to the disciples:

For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works.

Verily I say unto you, There be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom.

Matthew 16:27–28

Some of His disciples, and some of His judges, would live long enough to witness that great consummation.

It was then less than forty years away.

At that time, the Son of Man would come in His kingdom to execute the judgments of God upon the guilty nation.

This is precisely what our Lord had declared in His prophecy on the Mount of Olives:

Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled.

Matthew 24:34

There is neither obscurity nor ambiguity in these statements.

But can the same be said of interpretations that place their fulfilment in a future age, describing an event that has not yet taken place?

And what are we to make of the interpretation which regards the coming foretold before the Jewish Sanhedrin, not as one definite event, but as a continuous process?

According to this view, the coming began with the resurrection of Christ, has continued throughout the centuries, and will go on until the end of the world.

This is substantially the interpretation adopted by Lange and Alford.

It rests partly upon the assumption that our Lord's prediction has not yet been fulfilled, and partly upon the expression henceforth, which they understand as indicating a continuing process.[1]

But is such an explanation really credible?

Can we seriously suppose that the high priest and the members of the Sanhedrin began, from that moment, to see the Son of Man coming in the clouds of heaven?

And how could such a coming be understood as a process continuing through countless generations?

Surely the language points to a definite and particular event.

Nor can there be any reasonable doubt about which event is intended.

It is the Parousia, so frequently foretold by our Lord.

That coming was not represented as a slow and continuous process extending throughout history.

It was described as a decisive act of judgment: sudden, swift and unmistakable, like the flash of lightning.

The editors of the Critical English Testament express the meaning well:

"The meaning cannot be, that immediately after the moment of His answer He should so come, and they so see Him; but rather that He would now depart from them, and that when they next saw Him, after His rejection by them, it would be at His coming in glory, as foretold by the prophet Daniel."[2]

This explanation preserves the natural meaning of our Lord's words.

He was not promising that His judges would immediately witness His glorious coming.

He was declaring that, after they had rejected Him, they would see Him again in the manifestation of His royal authority and judgment.

The reference is to the coming foretold by Daniel, which Jesus had repeatedly announced during His ministry.

We therefore find in this declaration another confirmation of the truth already established: the coming of the Son of Man would take place within the lifetime of the generation then living.

Some of His judges, as well as some of His disciples, would witness it.

Indeed, the statement would lose its natural force if those addressed were not expected to witness the predicted event while they were still alive.

The expression ye shall see must therefore be understood as referring to a coming that would take place within their own lifetime.

Thus, the declaration before the high priest agrees completely with the prophecy on the Mount of Olives.

Both refer to the same Parousia.

Both place it within the period of the existing generation.

And both describe the coming of the Son of Man in glory and judgment.

The testimony is consistent throughout.

Prediction of the Woes Coming on Jerusalem

Luke 23:27–31

And there followed him a great company of people, and of women, which also bewailed and lamented him.

But Jesus turning unto them said, Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me, but weep for yourselves, and for your children.

For, behold, the days are coming, in the which they shall say, Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bare, and the paps which never gave suck.

Then shall they begin to say to the mountains, Fall on us; and to the hills, Cover us.

For if they do these things in a green tree, what shall be done in the dry?

Here we have a prediction so clear and definite that there can be little uncertainty about its meaning.

Every detail points to a particular time, place and people.

Our Lord speaks of events that were not far distant:

For, behold, the days are coming

Luke 23:29

The warning was addressed to the women of Jerusalem, and it concerned both them and their chil-

dren.

It foretold a time of dreadful suffering, when the calamities falling upon the city would be especially severe for mothers and children.

The distress would be so overwhelming that people would despair of life itself.

In their terror and anguish, they would cry to the mountains and hills to fall upon them and hide them from their suffering.

These remarkable details will become especially important when we examine other passages of Scripture prophecy later in our investigation.

For the present, however, their meaning is sufficiently clear.

Our Lord was speaking of the approaching catastrophe that would overtake Jerusalem during the final years of the Jewish nation.

We need only turn to the pages of Josephus to find the historical evidence that illustrates and confirms His words.

The suffering endured during the siege of Jerusalem was almost beyond description.

Famine reduced the inhabitants to desperation. Even the ordinary bonds of affection were broken by the struggle for survival.

One of the most horrifying incidents recorded by Josephus concerns Mary of Peraea, a mother whose terrible act, committed under the pressure of starvation, shocked even the merciless robbers who prowled through the city like starving wolves.

The historian's account recalls the dreadful banquet of Thyestes in Greek tragedy.

It is against the background of such suffering that we begin to appreciate the full force of our Saviour's words:

Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bare, and the paps which never gave suck.

Luke 23:29

In ordinary circumstances, motherhood was regarded as a blessing.

But the calamities awaiting Jerusalem would be so terrible that women would regard those who had never borne children as fortunate.

Our Lord saw the suffering that was approaching, and His heart was moved with compassion.

It is therefore difficult to listen patiently when commentators insist that these words must also contain a hidden reference to some distant and universal judgment.

Stier, influenced by the misleading theory of a double fulfilment, declares:

"He spoke expressly and primarily of the judgment of Jerusalem and Israel, yet He contemplated and refers to that which was shadowed out in this historical type, the judgment of all the impenitent, and of all unbelievers in common, down to the last."[3]

Alford follows substantially the same interpretation.

But where is the evidence for such an additional meaning?

It exists only in the imagination of the commentator.

There is no suggestion of it in the words of Jesus.

We cannot help expressing surprise that a scholarly interpreter should go so far as to describe the actual historical fulfilment as:

"the least thing: the meaning of the word reaches much further."

Surely, if there is any passage in which we ought to resist the temptation to introduce double meanings

and secondary fulfilments, it is this one.

Consider the circumstances in which these words were spoken.

Jesus was being led away to His crucifixion.

Around Him were women who mourned and lamented His suffering.

Yet instead of directing their attention to His own approaching death, He turned their thoughts towards the calamities that awaited them.

At that moment of anguish, His heart was filled with compassion for Jerusalem.

He saw the gathering storm of judgment that would soon overwhelm the city.

He foresaw the dreadful suffering that would fall upon its inhabitants, particularly its mothers and children.

The women wept for Him, but He was moved even more deeply by the suffering that He knew lay ahead for them.

Their compassion for Him was answered by His still greater compassion for them.

Even in the hour of His own suffering, He was concerned for those who would soon endure such terrible affliction.

What need is there to look beyond this approaching tragedy for another catastrophe of which the passage says nothing?

The words are already full of meaning.

They are definite in their reference, solemn in their warning and deeply moving in their expression of our Lord's compassion.

They belong to the same approaching judgment of Jerusalem that Jesus had so frequently foretold.

There is no reason to remove them from their historical setting or to suppose that they conceal a prediction concerning the final judgment of all mankind.

Footnote

3. Stier, Reden Jesu, Vol. VII, p. 426.

The Prayer of the Penitent Thief

Luke 23:42

And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.

The particular point that concerns us in this remarkable incident is the dying thief's reference to our Lord's coming in His kingdom.

We do not know how this man had acquired his knowledge of Christ. Yet, in the rejected and suffering Jesus who hung beside him, he recognised the King of Israel, the Son of God.

He believed that, although Jesus had been rejected and crucified by His own nation, He would nevertheless come again in His kingdom.

What extraordinary faith, shown by such a man at such a moment!

If the thief had heard our Lord's declaration before the high priest, or had known of His promise to the disciples that some of them would not taste death until they had seen the Son of Man coming in His kingdom, we might more easily understand the origin of his remarkable confidence.

But whatever the source of his knowledge, his words reveal a clear recognition of Christ's future kingly authority.

Even a disciple could scarcely have expressed this belief with greater understanding or precision than this dying criminal, a man rescued from destruction like a brand plucked from the fire.

We cannot say with certainty what he believed about the time of Christ's coming.

Did he expect it to happen soon, or did he imagine that it belonged to some distant future?

We have no direct evidence by which to answer that question.

Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to suppose that he regarded the event as near.

A dying man would scarcely be expected to pray that he might be remembered at some remote period, after centuries or even thousands of years had passed.

At such a moment, with death immediately before him, his thoughts would naturally be directed towards something near at hand.

His prayer was brief, but it expressed extraordinary faith in the future triumph and kingdom of the crucified Messiah.

One conclusion, at least, appears certain.

Of all the interpretations that might be offered, the most difficult to accept is the suggestion that this man's prayer still remains unanswered, and that the coming of Christ's kingdom to which he referred must still be placed among the unknown events of a distant future.

The Apostolic Commission

Matthew 28:19–20

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost:

Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen.

Mark 16:15

And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.

Mark 16:20

And they went forth, and preached every where, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following. Amen.

Luke 24:47

And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.

It is customary to regard the apostolic commission as though it were addressed to the whole Christian Church throughout every age.

No doubt we may rightly draw from these words the continuing obligation of Christians to spread the gospel among all nations.

Nevertheless, it is important to consider the commission in its original setting and to recognise those to whom it was first addressed.

These words were spoken by Christ to His chosen apostles.

He was appointing them to their work as messengers of the gospel and assuring them of His continuing presence and protection.

The commission therefore had a particular application to the apostles themselves, an application that cannot belong in precisely the same way to later generations.

We have already observed that the disciples do not appear to have understood this commission as requiring them immediately to carry their preaching beyond Palestine or to proclaim the gospel to Jews and Gentiles without distinction.

It is certain that they did not at once begin such a mission.

Indeed, several years passed before the gospel was deliberately carried to the Gentiles on a substantial scale.

Nor does it seem likely that the apostles would have undertaken this wider mission without a special revelation from heaven.

As Dr Burton has shown, approximately fifteen years passed between Paul's conversion and his first great missionary journey among the Gentiles.

He observes:

"Nor is there any evidence that during that period the other apostles passed the confines of Judaea."

These circumstances give considerable support to the conclusion that the language of the apostolic commission did not convey precisely the same meaning to the disciples that it commonly conveys to modern readers.

In particular, we have already suggested that the expression all nations may, in its original setting, have been understood as referring to the different peoples or tribes of the land.

This would help explain why the apostles initially confined their ministry so largely to the Jewish people.

But there is another feature of the commission that deserves our special attention.

It concerns the remarkable limitation of time contained in our Lord's concluding promise.

The Promise of Christ's Presence Until the End of the Age

Our Lord declares:

and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world.

Matthew 28:20

Here we encounter an expression whose meaning is of the greatest importance to our investigation.

The words translated in the Authorised Version as the end of the world are more accurately understood as the close of the age.

The Greek expression refers to the consummation of an aeon, or age.

Nothing could be more misleading to an English reader than to suppose that these words must signify the destruction of the physical earth, the end of human history or the cessation of time itself.

Such a meaning is not required by the language.

Even Lange, although he does not fully recognise the significance of the expression, correctly explains it as:

"The consummation of the secular aeon, or the period of time which comes to an end with the Parousia."

This brings us to an important consideration.

When Christ promised to remain with His disciples until the close of the age, did He not imply that they themselves would live to witness that consummation?

The promise was addressed directly to them.

They were the men appointed to carry out His commission.

And He assured them that His presence would accompany them throughout their work, until the age reached its appointed end.

That consummation was not represented as a remote event.

Our Lord had repeatedly spoken of it as near at hand.

He had expressly declared that some of His disciples would live to see it.

It was the conclusion of the Mosaic dispensation.

It marked the end of the long period during which the Jewish nation had occupied its special position under the theocratic government of God.

The whole structure of the Jewish religious and national order was about to pass away.

The institutions of the old covenant would come to their appointed conclusion, and the kingdom of God would be manifested with power.

This great event, our Lord had declared, would take place within the lifetime of the existing generation.

The close of the age therefore coincided with the Parousia.

And the great outward and visible event that marked this consummation was the destruction of Jerusalem.

This is the definite limit of time that we find repeatedly established in the New Testament.

To Israel, it was the end.

It was the end of all things, the passing away of heaven and earth, the removal of the old order and the establishment of the new.

These expressions belong to the close of the Jewish age and the passing away of the system that had governed the nation's religious life for so many centuries.

What History Can Tell Us

Of this great event in God's providential government, history tells us much.

But prophecy reveals still more.

History records the signs that preceded the approaching catastrophe.

It tells us of the false Christs who appeared and deceived the people.

It records the wars and rumours of wars, the rebellions and disturbances, the earthquakes, famines and pestilences.

It describes the persecutions and tribulations that marked those troubled years.

It tells us of the advancing Roman legions, the siege and capture of Jerusalem, and the destruction of the temple by fire.

It records the slaughter of countless inhabitants and the overthrow of the Jewish national order.

These were events that could be witnessed by human eyes and recorded by historians.

And their occurrence provides striking confirmation of the predictions made by our Lord.

But history can take us only so far.

It cannot remove the veil that separates the visible world from the unseen spiritual realm.

It can bring us to the very boundary of that realm, but it cannot describe what lies beyond it.

For that knowledge, we must turn to the more certain testimony of prophecy.

What Prophecy Reveals

Prophecy does not merely invite us to speculate about the unseen.

It gives us the assurance of divine revelation.

It reveals the Son of Man coming in His glory.

It presents the King seated upon His throne.

It describes the judgment established and the books opened.

It shows the separation of the sheep from the goats.

It declares that the righteous enter into everlasting life, while the wicked depart into everlasting punishment.

These are matters belonging to the spiritual and invisible realm.

We cannot expect them to be established by the same kind of historical evidence that confirms the siege of Jerusalem or the burning of the temple.

The visible and the invisible are not equally accessible to our senses.

It is therefore unreasonable to demand the same form of evidence for both.

Nevertheless, we receive the testimony of prophecy because we trust the word of Him who declared:

> Verily I say unto you, All these things shall come upon this generation.
>
> Matthew 23:36

And again:

> Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled.
>
> Matthew 24:34

Our Lord also gave this solemn assurance:

> Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.
>
> Matthew 24:35

We therefore rest upon the certainty of His word.

The literal fulfilment of those predictions that belong to the sphere of historical observation gives us grounds for trusting the fulfilment of those that concern the unseen and spiritual world.

What history can verify confirms the truthfulness of the prophecy.

And the same divine authority that foretold the visible events assures us of the reality of those that human observation cannot reach.

Thus, the apostolic commission stands in harmony with the other declarations of our Lord concerning His coming.

The promise of His presence until the close of the age was given to the apostles themselves.

That age was approaching its consummation.

The Parousia would mark its close.

And the destruction of Jerusalem would provide the great visible sign that the appointed end had arrived.

THE PAROUSIA IN THE GOSPEL OF ST JOHN

In our examination of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), we have frequently been able to compare one evangelist's account of the Parousia with those of the others. This comparison has often helped us to understand the meaning of our Lord's words.

The Gospel of John, however, presents a different situation.

It is not easy to combine John's account with those of the other three evangelists. Indeed, it is remarkable that the particular references to the Parousia found in the Synoptic Gospels are not repeated in the same form in the Fourth Gospel.

It is therefore better to examine John's Gospel separately.

Although its references to the Parousia are comparatively few, we shall find that they are of great importance and provide valuable evidence for our investigation.

The Parousia and the Resurrection of the Dead

John 5:25–29

Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live.

For as the Father hath life in himself; so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself;

And hath given him authority to execute judgment also, because he is the Son of man.

Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice,

And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation.

Throughout our examination of the Synoptic Gospels, one feature of the approaching consummation has repeatedly attracted our attention.

The Parousia is consistently associated with a great act of judgment.

From the earliest announcement of this coming event to the final predictions of our Lord, the thought of judgment occupies a prominent place.

John the Baptist warned the Jewish nation of the approaching wrath.

Jesus declared that the men of Nineveh and the queen of the south would rise in judgment against the generation that rejected Him.

In the parable of the wheat and the tares, the harvest at the close of the age would bring the separation of the righteous from the wicked. The tares would be burned, while the wheat would be gathered into the barn.

The Son of Man was to come in His glory and reward every person according to their works.

Our Lord also declared that the judgment of Capernaum and Chorazin would be more severe than that of Tyre and Sidon.

The closing parables of His ministry repeatedly return to the same theme.

The parables of the pounds, the wicked husbandmen, the marriage of the king's son, the ten virgins, the talents, and the sheep and the goats all contain solemn warnings of approaching judgment.

The great prophecy on the Mount of Olives is likewise concerned throughout with this subject.

It is therefore significant that John's first reference to the event also recognises its character as a time of judgment.

But in this passage we encounter an additional feature of the approaching consummation.

The Parousia is now expressly connected with the resurrection of the dead.

Our Lord declares:

Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice,

And shall come forth;

John 5:28–29

There can be no reasonable doubt that these words refer to the literal resurrection of the dead.

Those who are in their graves will hear the voice of the Son of God and come forth, either to the resurrection of life or to the resurrection of damnation.

We may also readily admit that the preceding verses, particularly verses 25 and 26, refer to a different but closely related work: the communication of spiritual life to those who are spiritually dead.[1]

Our Lord says:

Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live.

John 5:25

Notice that He does not merely say that the hour is coming.

He adds:

and now is

This indicates that the life-giving work of which He speaks had already begun.

Those who were dead in trespasses and sins were to be made spiritually alive through the quickening power of the Holy Spirit, working in their hearts through the preaching of the gospel.

This power to give life belonged to the Son of God by the Father's appointment.

The Father, who possesses life in Himself, had given to the Son that same life-giving authority.

And to the Son, because He is the Son of Man, the Father had also entrusted the office of supreme Judge.

Our Lord then makes an even more remarkable declaration.

Anticipating that His claim to possess such authority might astonish His hearers, He speaks of a still greater manifestation of His power.

The time was approaching when even those lying in their graves would hear His voice and come forth to judgment.

Here, then, the resurrection of the dead is brought into direct connection with the judicial authority of the Son of Man.

The Importance of the Words "The Hour Is Coming"

We must pay particular attention to the indications of time contained in these statements.

Our Lord employs two similar expressions, but there is an important difference between them.

First, in verse 25, He declares:

The hour is coming, and now is

This tells us that the work He describes has already begun.

The communication of spiritual life to those who are spiritually dead was already taking place.

But in verse 28, when speaking of the resurrection of those in the graves, He says:

the hour is coming

Here the words and now is are omitted.

This suggests that the resurrection was still future.

It had not yet begun in the sense intended by our Lord, although the time of its fulfilment was approaching.

The expression the hour is coming ordinarily indicates an event that is not far distant.

It does not identify the precise date, but it directs attention towards something expected within a comparatively short period.

We find an instructive example of these expressions in our Lord's conversation with the woman of Samaria.

In John 4:23, Jesus declares:

But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him.

Here the addition and now is clearly indicates that the promised change had already begun.

Christ had commenced His work of gathering those who would become the true spiritual worshippers of God.

The beginnings of that spiritual church were already present in His ministry.

But earlier in the same conversation, Jesus had declared:

Woman, believe me, the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father.

John 4:21

In this case, the words and now is are absent.

Our Lord speaks of a change that had not yet taken place, although it was approaching.

He foresaw the time when the worship associated with the temple at Jerusalem would come to an end.

Mount Zion would be brought low, as the prophet Micah had foretold, and the religious system centred upon the temple would pass away.

Mount Gerizim, too, with its associations with Samaritan worship, would no longer possess the significance formerly attached to it.

The coming judgment would sweep away the old system of worship tied to particular sacred places.

The removal of that local and material order would make way for the fuller establishment of worship that was universal and spiritual.

The temple and its ritual would pass away, giving place to the nobler worship of God:

in spirit and in truth.

John 4:24

We therefore find a striking similarity between our Lord's language in John 4 and His words in John 5.

In both passages, He distinguishes between something already beginning and something still approaching.

In the first case, true spiritual worship had already commenced, while the removal of the old religious order remained future.

In the second, spiritual life was already being communicated to those who heard His voice, while the resurrection of the dead and the associated judgment were still to come.

We cannot, of course, prove absolutely that the words the hour is coming refer to precisely the same point in time in both passages.

Nevertheless, there is a strong presumption that they do.

For the present, it is enough to observe that our Lord speaks of the resurrection of the dead and the judgment as approaching events.

They are not represented as belonging to an indefinitely distant future.

They are described as sufficiently near for Him to declare:

the hour is coming.

John 5:28

This brings the resurrection of the dead into close connection with the approaching consummation and the Parousia, which, as we have already seen, our Lord repeatedly placed within the lifetime of the existing generation.

Footnote

1. Russell distinguishes between the spiritual quickening described in John 5:25–26 and the literal resurrection of the dead described in verses 28–29. This distinction is important to his interpretation of the passage.

John 6:39

And this is the Father's will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day.

John 6:40

and I will raise him up at the last day.

John 6:44

and I will raise him up at the last day.

John 11:24

Martha saith unto him, I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day.

John 12:48

the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day.

In these passages we encounter another expression connected with the approaching consummation: the last day.

This expression is characteristic of the Fourth Gospel.

We do not find the precise words the last day in the Synoptic Gospels, although we do find expressions that convey the same meaning, such as that day and the day of judgment.

There is little reason to doubt that these expressions refer to the same period.

We have already seen that the judgment is closely associated with the end of the age, or, in Greek, synteleia tou aiōnos.

We therefore conclude that the last day is another way of describing the close of the age.

The Parousia is likewise consistently represented as taking place at the end of that age.

It follows that these great events belong to the same period: the Parousia, the resurrection of the dead, the judgment and the last day.

They are not presented as separate events divided by long ages, but as belonging together to the great consummation foretold by our Lord.

Now we have already established that the end of the age does not signify, as is commonly supposed, the destruction of the physical world or the termination of human history.

It refers to the close of the Jewish dispensation.

Our Lord repeatedly and unmistakably declared that this consummation would take place within the lifetime of the generation then living.

We are therefore led to the conclusion that the Parousia, the resurrection, the judgment and the last day all belong to the period marked by the destruction of Jerusalem.

This conclusion may at first appear startling, perhaps even incredible.

Nevertheless, we maintain that it follows necessarily from the teaching of the New Testament.

As we proceed with our investigation, we shall find the evidence supporting it becoming increasingly strong.

We shall encounter such expressions as the last times, the last days and the last hour.

These expressions evidently refer to the same general period as the last day.

Yet we shall find that the New Testament writers speak of these last times, not merely as approaching, but sometimes as having already begun.

Their language places the consummation near to the period in which they themselves were living.

For the present, we ask the reader not to reject our conclusion simply because it differs from familiar

interpretations.

Let us reserve our judgment until the evidence has been fully examined.

Above all, let us approach the question calmly, fairly and without prejudice.

Our conclusions must rest, not upon the authority of commentators or established theological systems, but upon the testimony of inspired Scripture itself.

The Judgment of This World, and of the Prince of This World

John 12:31

Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out.

John 16:11

Of judgment, because the prince of this world is judged.

These remarkable declarations of our Lord are commonly understood as referring to a great turning point in the spiritual history of the world.

According to this interpretation, the death of Christ upon the cross marked the decisive moment in the struggle between good and evil.

It was the great conflict between the living and true God and Satan, who had unlawfully exercised dominion over the world.

Through the death of Christ, Satan's final overthrow was assured, and the kingdom of truth and righteousness would eventually be established upon the ruins of his dominion.

We freely acknowledge that this explanation contains much important truth.

Nevertheless, it does not fully account for the clear and emphatic language used by our Lord.

In particular, it fails to give sufficient weight to the nearness and completeness of the events He describes.

Notice His words:

Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out.

John 12:31

The word now is repeated for emphasis.

Our Lord is speaking of something near at hand.

It is not sufficient to suggest that, because Jesus possessed prophetic knowledge, the distant future appeared to Him as though it were already present.

Nor is it sufficient to say that His approaching death would make the eventual judgment of the world and the overthrow of Satan so certain that He could speak of them as accomplished facts.

Neither does it adequately explain His words to suppose that Satan's power would begin gradually to decline from the moment of the crucifixion, continuing to diminish through successive ages until it finally disappeared.

Such explanations do not seem to agree with the language of the passage.

Our Lord appears to be describing a great and decisive act of judgment that was soon to take place.

Judgment, in this sense, is not naturally understood as a process continuing indefinitely.

Still less can we regard it as such when the word now points to a definite and approaching time.

The expression cast out is equally significant.

It strongly recalls the expulsion of an unclean spirit from a person possessed by a demon.

Such an expulsion is represented as a sudden and decisive act.

It is not a gradual process extending over centuries.

Indeed, it would be difficult to find a less suitable illustration of Satan's power slowly diminishing than the casting out of a demon.

We must therefore reject interpretations that make our Lord's words refer to a judgment that remains unfinished after many ages, or to an expulsion of Satan that has still not been accomplished.

Jesus would scarcely have described a judgment lying thousands of years in the future as taking place now.

Nor would He have spoken of Satan's expulsion as immediately approaching if He intended nothing more than a slow and prolonged decline in his influence.

The Judgment Associated with the Close of the Age

We conclude, therefore, that when our Lord declared:

Now is the judgment of this world

John 12:31

He was referring to an event that was near and, in an important sense, already beginning.

We understand Him to have in view that great catastrophe which appears to have been continually present in His thoughts: the approaching judgment at the close of the Jewish age.

It was the time when the Son of Man would sit upon the throne of His glory.

It was the great harvest at the end of the age, when the angels would gather out of His kingdom those who had offended and practised wickedness.

Our Lord had already described that judgment in the parables of the kingdom and in His prophetic declarations concerning Jerusalem.

It may be objected that the word world is too comprehensive to refer to the judgment of one nation.

The Greek word here is kosmos.

But this word is frequently employed, particularly in the writings of John, in an ethical or moral sense rather than a strictly geographical one.

It may describe the world considered in its moral condition, especially in its opposition to God.

Examples of this use may be found in John 7:7, John 8:23 and 1 John 2:15.

We are therefore not obliged to understand the judgment of this world as referring to the physical destruction of the entire earth.

The expression may properly describe a decisive judgment upon the existing order of things.

Why Does Our Lord Say "Now"?

A further objection may be raised.

If the judgment of Israel was still nearly forty years away, how could Jesus speak of it as taking place now?

Is an event forty years in the future any more present than one occurring four thousand years later?

This difficulty deserves consideration.

The answer lies in the extraordinary event that was then approaching.

The crucifixion of Christ would bring the guilt of the Jewish nation to its climax.

It would be the culminating act of apostasy and rebellion.

By rejecting and crucifying the Son of God, that generation would complete the measure of its guilt and seal its approaching judgment.

The cup of divine wrath would be filled.

The sentence, in effect, would already have been pronounced.

The period between the crucifixion and the destruction of Jerusalem was therefore comparable to the interval between the condemnation of a criminal and the execution of the sentence.

The judgment was certain, although its final execution had not yet taken place.

We find a similar expression in our Lord's last words concerning the temple.

As He departed from it, He declared:

Behold, your house is left unto you desolate.

Matthew 23:38

Yet the temple was not actually destroyed until nearly forty years later.

Nevertheless, Jesus could speak of its desolation as already determined.

Its fate had been sealed.

In precisely the same way, He could declare:

Now is the judgment of this world

John 12:31

although some years would pass before the visible execution of that judgment.

The decisive cause was already at hand.

The rejection and crucifixion of Christ would make the approaching catastrophe inevitable.

The Casting Out of the Prince of This World

Our Lord connects the judgment of the world with another event:

now shall the prince of this world be cast out.

John 12:31

These two events are represented as belonging together.

Both are closely connected with the death of Christ.

But how are we to understand the casting out of Satan as taking place at the judgment associated with the close of the age?

We must remember that this judgment marked a great turning point in God's government of the world.

It introduced a new order of things.

It was the coming of the kingdom of God in a great and distinctive sense.

The special covenant relationship that had existed between Jehovah and Israel was brought to its appointed conclusion.

The old national and religious order passed away.

God was now to be known, not merely in His particular relationship with Israel, but as the God and Father of mankind.

From that time, Satan was no longer to exercise the position described by the expression the god of this world.

The Most High would take the kingdom to Himself.

This great change was accomplished through the atoning death of Christ upon the cross.

Paul describes the reconciling work of Christ in these words:

And, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven.

Colossians 1:20

The foundation of the new order was laid through the sacrifice of Christ.

But its formal inauguration is represented as taking place at the end of the age.

That was the time when the kingdom of God would come with power and the Son of Man would sit upon the throne of His glory as Judge.

What, then, could be more appropriate than the casting out of the prince of this world at the very time when his dominion was judged?

The two events belong naturally together.

The judgment of the existing order and the overthrow of Satan's dominion are represented as parts of the same great consummation.

The Evidence of Satan's Defeat

It may reasonably be asked whether such an overthrow of Satan's power ought not to have produced some visible change in human experience.

If Satan was indeed cast out at the close of the age, should we not expect to find evidence that his power over mankind had been diminished?

The objection is reasonable.

We believe that evidence of such a change may be found.

The Gospel narratives describe a form of Satanic influence over the minds and bodies of men that appears to have been especially prominent during our Lord's earthly ministry.

We refer to the mysterious condition described in Scripture as demoniacal possession.

The New Testament attributes this phenomenon to the agency of evil spirits.

One of the signs demonstrating our Lord's divine authority was His power to cast out demons.

Jesus Himself declared:

But if I with the finger of God cast out devils, no doubt the kingdom of God is come upon you.

Luke 11:20

The question therefore arises: when did these manifestations of demoniacal power cease?

They were common during the ministry of Christ.

They continued throughout the apostolic period, as the Book of Acts repeatedly shows.

The apostles exercised authority over unclean spirits in the name of Jesus.

But, we maintain, there is no comparable evidence that the same phenomenon continued in the ages following the apostles.

It appears to have disappeared so completely that many people have come to doubt whether it ever existed in the form described by Scripture.

Some explain the Gospel accounts as expressions of popular superstition.

Others regard them as an early and unscientific interpretation of mental illness.

But such explanations are incompatible with the New Testament's own representation of demoniacal possession as the work of evil spirits.

We therefore regard the apparent disappearance of this phenomenon as evidence of a great change in the influence exercised by Satan.

It is consistent with the declaration that the prince of this world would be cast out.

"I Beheld Satan as Lightning Fall from Heaven"

There is another saying of our Lord that deserves careful attention because it closely resembles the words we are considering.

When the seventy disciples returned from their mission, they rejoiced in the authority they had exer-

cised over evil spirits.

They declared:

Lord, even the devils are subject unto us through thy name.

Luke 10:17

Jesus replied:

I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven.

Luke 10:18

This declaration bears a striking resemblance to the words:

now shall the prince of this world be cast out.

John 12:31

In both passages, the overthrow of Satan is represented as a decisive event.

The comparison with lightning is particularly significant.

Lightning does not fall slowly or gradually.

It flashes suddenly.

It is a swift and unmistakable occurrence.

Neander offers some thoughtful observations upon our Lord's declaration.

He writes:

"As Christ had previously designated the cure of demoniacs wrought by Himself as a sign that the kingdom of God had come upon the earth, so now he considered what the disciples reported as a token of the conquering power of that kingdom, before which every evil thing must yield.

"'I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven,' that is, from the pinnacle of power which he had thus far held among men.

"Before the intuitive glance of His spirit lay open the results which were to flow from His redemptive work after His ascension into heaven.

"He saw, in spirit, the kingdom of God advancing in triumph over the kingdom of Satan.

"He does not say, 'I see now,' but, 'I saw.' He saw it before the disciples brought their report of their accomplished wonders.

"While they were doing these isolated works he saw the one great work, of which theirs were only particular and individual signs, the victory over the mighty power of evil which had ruled mankind completely achieved."[2]

These observations contain much that is valuable.

Yet we believe that Neander has not fully recognised the significance of our Lord's language.

A comparison of the two sayings brings three important considerations to our attention.

First, both declarations were made when the approaching triumph of Christ's cause was especially prominent.

In Luke, the disciples had returned rejoicing in the authority exercised through His name.

In John, our Lord was approaching the great sacrifice by which His victory would be secured.

Second, in both passages the overthrow of Satan is spoken of as a decisive reality.

The language does not merely describe a possibility or a distant hope.

It expresses the certainty of Satan's defeat, as though the victory were already accomplished.

Third, both passages employ imagery suggesting a swift and definite act rather than a slow and prolonged process.

In Luke, Satan falls like lightning from heaven.

In John, he is cast out, as an unclean spirit is expelled from a possessed person.

These are not natural descriptions of a process extending over many centuries.

They point to a decisive overthrow.

For this reason, although we appreciate Neander's explanation, we believe that he has not quite reached the central meaning of the passage.

The words of our Lord appear to refer to a great act of judgment that would take place at a particular time.

That time was near.

And the event would follow as the consequence and result of His approaching death upon the cross.

Where can we find such an event?

We believe it can only be found in the great catastrophe so vividly described by our Lord in His prophetic discourse.

It was the judgment at the close of the Jewish age.

It was the consummation associated with the Parousia.

It was the decisive manifestation of the kingdom of God and the overthrow of the old order.

We therefore have no hesitation in understanding our Lord's declaration as referring to that memorable event.

No other explanation, in our judgment, satisfies the full meaning and force of His words:

Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out.

John 12:31

Footnote

2. Neander, Life of Christ, Chapter XII, §205.

Christ's Return (the Parousia) Speedy

John 14:3

And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.

John 14:18

I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you.

John 14:28

Ye have heard how I said unto you, I go away, and come again unto you.

John 16:16

A little while, and ye shall not see me: and again, a little while, and ye shall see me, because I go to the Father.

John 16:22

And ye now therefore have sorrow: but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you.

Simple as these declarations may appear, they have caused considerable difficulty for commentators.

Perhaps their very simplicity is the chief cause of the problem, because interpreters have found it so difficult to accept that the words mean precisely what they seem to say.

Some suppose that our Lord refers in certain passages to His approaching departure from the earth and His final return at the end of human history.

In other passages, they believe He is speaking only of His brief absence from the disciples between His crucifixion and resurrection.

But a careful examination of our Lord's statements concerning His departure and His return leads us to a different conclusion.

We maintain that His coming, or coming again, refers consistently to one particular event and one particular period.

No event is more clearly identified in the New Testament than the Parousia, the second coming of the Lord.

It is always represented as an act, not as a prolonged process.

It is a great and glorious event, a blessed hope that the disciples eagerly anticipated and confidently expected to take place soon.

The apostles and the early Christians knew nothing of a Parousia extending over an indefinite period of centuries.

Nor did they expect a series of distinct and separate comings, each fulfilling a different part of Christ's promise.

They looked for one coming: the Parousia.

Paul describes this glorious expectation as:

Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ;

Titus 2:13

If anything is clearly taught in the New Testament, surely it is this.

We are therefore astonished by Dean Alford's explanation of our Lord's promise in John 14:3.

He writes:

"The coming again of the Lord is not one single act, as His resurrection, or the descent of the Spirit, or His second personal advent, or the final coming to judgment, but the great complex of all these, the result of which shall be His taking His people to Himself to where He is.

"This erchomai is begun (ver. 18) in His resurrection; carried on (ver. 23) in the spiritual life, making them ready for the place prepared; farther advanced when each by death is fetched away to be with Him (Phil. i. 23); fully completed at His coming in glory, when they shall ever be with Him (1 Thess. iv. 17) in the perfected resurrection state."[3]

What an extraordinary range of meanings is drawn from the single Greek word erchomai, meaning I come!

According to this explanation, Christ's coming begins with His resurrection, continues through the spiritual life of believers, advances further whenever a Christian dies, and is finally completed at His glorious return.

But if the word coming can contain such a complicated series of events, why should the words describing His departure not be interpreted in the same way?

Why should not hypagō and poreuomai, both used in connection with going away, also be understood as referring to a succession of different departures and processes?

Why should Christ's going away be treated as a definite act, while His coming again is given so many separate meanings?

There is another difficulty.

How could the disciples possibly have understood our Lord's words if they were intended to convey such a complicated collection of meanings?

And how can ordinary readers hope to understand Scripture if its simplest expressions are made so intricate and bewildering?

Such an interpretation does not appear to arise from the plain meaning of the language.

It resembles the elaborate and mystical explanations sometimes found in Lange and Stier rather than a straightforward reading of the text.

Surely nothing could be clearer than that Christ's coming again is as definite an act as His going away.

The two expressions stand in direct relation to each other.

He was about to depart.

He promised to return.

And that return can naturally refer only to the great coming foretold throughout the New Testament: the Parousia.

The Promise of a Speedy Return

That the promised return was not to be long delayed is evident from the language our Lord employed.

He says:

I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.

John 14:3

The whole character of His farewell discourse suggests that the separation between Jesus and His disciples would be comparatively brief.

Their sorrow would not continue indefinitely.

His departure would be followed by His return, and their reunion would be joyful and lasting.

Why was He going away?

He tells them that He was going to prepare a place for them.

But if the Parousia still belongs to some unknown future time, must we suppose that the preparation has not yet been completed?

Has He not yet received His disciples to Himself?

Are they not yet where He is?

If the coming promised in these words remains entirely future, then the hopes held out to those disciples remain unfulfilled.

But our Lord's subsequent declarations make it clear that He did not intend them to expect a separation lasting through many centuries.

He said:

A little while, and ye shall not see me: and again, a little while, and ye shall see me, because I go to the Father.

John 16:16

These words are especially significant.

Jesus was soon to leave His disciples.

But His absence was not to last for ever, nor even for a very long time.

It was to continue for only a little while.

After a comparatively brief interval, their separation and sorrow would end.

He assured them:

but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you.

John 16:22

Notice carefully that our Lord did not say that death would reunite them.

He did not tell them that they must wait until they died before they would see Him again.

He promised that He Himself would come to them.

Their joy would arise from His return.

That coming, therefore, could not reasonably be understood as an event belonging to a distant age.

The Meaning of "A Little While"

We believe that the expression a little while refers to the interval between our Lord's departure and His Parousia.

Two considerations support this interpretation.

First, Jesus expressly connects His departure with His return to the Father.

He says:

because I go to the Father.

John 16:16

This shows that the absence of which He speaks concerns the period following His ascension.

He was not merely referring to the short interval between His death and resurrection.

He was speaking of His departure to the Father and His subsequent coming again to receive His disciples.

Second, the Epistle to the Hebrews describes this same interval between the departure and return of Christ as a little while.

The writer declares:

For yet a little while, and he that shall come will come, and will not tarry.

Hebrews 10:37

Here the coming of the Lord is presented as near at hand.

The language closely agrees with the promise given by Jesus to His disciples.

Both passages speak of His coming after a comparatively short interval.

Both encourage believers to expect His return.

And neither suggests a delay extending over countless generations.

Alford's Interpretation of "Ye Shall See Me"

We must once again protest against the forced interpretation offered by Dean Alford.

Commenting upon John 16:16, he writes:

"The mode of expression is purposely enigmatical; the theōreite and opsesthe not being co-ordinate: the first referring to physical, the second also to spiritual sight.

"The opsesthe (ye shall see) began to be fulfilled at the resurrection; then received its main fulfilment at the day of Pentecost; and shall have its final completion at the great return of the Lord hereafter.

"Remember, again, that in all these prophecies we have a perspective of continually unfolding fulfilments presented to us."[4]

According to this explanation, the simple promise ye shall see me contains three separate fulfilments.

The first occurred at the resurrection.

The second took place at Pentecost.

The third remains to be completed at the final coming of Christ.

Thus, one act of seeing is divided into three distinct experiences, separated by long intervals of time.

And the final fulfilment, according to this interpretation, remained outstanding even after eighteen centuries had passed.

Yet our Lord expressly declared that His disciples would see Him again in a little while.

Can such an explanation be reconciled with those words?

Surely not.

It is difficult to regard this as sound biblical interpretation.

It appears rather to be an exercise in mysticism, introducing complexities that the language itself does not contain.

Nothing so artificial could reasonably have occurred to the disciples when they heard Jesus speak.

Indeed, it is surprising that any careful interpreter should consider such an explanation necessary.

The Disciples Understood His Departure

It is true that the disciples were initially puzzled by our Lord's repeated reference to a little while.

They did not immediately understand what He meant.

But their uncertainty was removed when He explained His departure more plainly.

He declared:

I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world: again, I leave the world, and go to the Father.

John 16:28

Here the sequence is perfectly clear.

Jesus had come from the Father into the world.

He was now preparing to leave the world and return to the Father.

But His departure was not the end of His relationship with His disciples.

He had already promised that He would come again.

Bring together the following declarations, and we have the substance of His teaching concerning the Parousia.

First:

And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.

John 14:3

Second:

I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you.

John 14:18

Third:

A little while, and ye shall not see me: and again, a little while, and ye shall see me, because I go to the Father.

John 16:16

These promises agree in their essential meaning.

Christ would depart from His disciples.

He would go to the Father.

But He would not abandon them.

He would come again and receive them to Himself.

And that coming would take place after only a little while.

If language is capable of expressing definite ideas, these words surely affirm that the return of our Saviour to His disciples was to be speedy.

Footnotes

3. Dean Alford, The Greek Testament, commentary on John 14:3.

4. Dean Alford, The Greek Testament, commentary on John 16:16.

St John to Live Till the Parousia

John 21:22

Jesus saith unto him, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? follow thou me.

It would serve little purpose to examine all the different interpretations that scholars have proposed for this passage.

The words have been made so complicated that, had they been a riddle from the ancient Sphinx, they could scarcely have caused more perplexity.

Readers who wish to explore these various interpretations will find several of them discussed in Lange's commentary.[5]

Yet the words themselves are remarkably simple.

The difficulty has largely arisen because commentators have been unwilling to understand Christ's coming as a definite event that would take place within the lifetime of the generation then living.

Our Lord had repeatedly declared that He would come in His kingdom, come in glory, judge His enemies and reward His faithful servants.

He had also expressly stated that these events would take place before that generation had passed away.

Nevertheless, many theologians seem almost determined to avoid accepting His words in their natural sense.

They insist that He must have meant something different, or something more, than His language plainly expresses.

But once we accept our Lord's declaration that His coming would occur during the lifetime of some of His disciples, the difficulty surrounding His words to Peter disappears.

Recall what Jesus had already said:

For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works.

Verily I say unto you, There be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom.

Matthew 16:27–28

With this declaration in mind, let us consider the circumstances recorded in John 21.

The Question Peter Asked

Our Lord had just revealed to Simon Peter the manner in which he would eventually die and glorify God.

Peter then turned and noticed the disciple whom Jesus loved.

With his characteristic impulsiveness, he asked:

Lord, and what shall this man do?

John 21:21

Peter wanted to know what would happen to John.

But the question went beyond what he needed to know.

Our Lord therefore did not give him a direct answer.

Instead, He replied:

If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? follow thou me.

John 21:22

This answer is especially significant.

It assumes that John might possibly remain alive until the coming of the Lord.

Indeed, the words seem to suggest that this was probable, although they do not expressly declare that it would certainly happen.

The other disciples understood the reply to mean that John would live until Christ returned.

They went further and concluded that John would never die.

The evangelist records:

Then went this saying abroad among the brethren, that that disciple should not die: yet Jesus said not unto him, He shall not die; but, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee?

John 21:23

John is careful to distinguish between what Jesus actually said and what the disciples inferred from His words.

Our Lord had not expressly declared that John would never die.

He had said only that, if it were His will, John might remain until His coming.

It is this further conclusion, that John would never die, which the evangelist refuses to affirm.

But notice what he does not say.

He does not suggest that it was impossible for John to live until the Parousia.

Nor does he object to the expectation that the coming of Christ might occur during John's lifetime.

He simply repeats the words of Jesus and allows them to stand.

What the Disciples Understood

It is particularly important that we have here a record of how Christ's words were understood by the disciples themselves.

They evidently believed that John might live to witness the Lord's coming.

And from this they drew the additional conclusion that he might never experience death.

John corrects that additional inference, but he does not deny the possibility of living until the Parousia.

This distinction deserves careful attention.

To many modern readers, the idea that a disciple could remain alive until Christ returned may appear extraordinary.

But it was by no means unreasonable in the light of the teaching received by the apostles.

Indeed, the expectation that some believers would still be alive at the Parousia appears repeatedly in the New Testament.

Paul, writing to the Corinthians, declares:

Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed,

1 Corinthians 15:51

Here Paul speaks of believers who would undergo a transformation without first passing through death.

He expresses a similar expectation in his First Epistle to the Thessalonians:

For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep.

1 Thessalonians 4:15

The possibility of Christians remaining alive until the coming of the Lord was therefore part of apostolic teaching.

Paul also expresses his desire, not to be stripped of his earthly body through death, but to be clothed with the life that belongs to the resurrection.

He writes:

For we that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened: not for that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life.

2 Corinthians 5:4

In other words, Paul speaks of the possibility of being transformed rather than dying.

Such teaching helps us understand why the disciples drew the conclusion they did concerning John.

They knew that some believers might remain alive until the Parousia.

They also knew that those who were alive at that time would experience a great transformation.

Their interpretation of Christ's words was therefore consistent with the expectations of the apostolic Church.

The Promise of Christ's Return

The disciples may also have remembered what Jesus had promised them on the evening of the Passover supper.

He said:

And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.

John 14:3

How could they naturally understand this promise as referring simply to their deaths?

Jesus had spoken of His own departure and His own return.

He had promised to come again and receive them to Himself.

The initiative belonged to Him.

He would come to them.

They may also have remembered His prediction on the Mount of Olives:

And he shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

Matthew 24:31

Our Lord had expressly declared that these events would take place before the existing generation had passed away.

The disciples therefore had good reason to expect that some among them would live to witness the Parousia.

When Jesus spoke of John remaining until His coming, they were not hearing an idea entirely new to them.

It agreed with what they had already been taught.

Indeed, if the coming of Christ were not to take place until the end of the physical world, in the commonly accepted sense of that expression, the reply to Peter would become difficult to understand.

It would amount to something like this:

Suppose I choose that John should live for a thousand years, or even longer. What concern is that of yours?

Such a reply would seem extravagant, if not absurd.

Yet the disciples evidently took their Master's words seriously.[6]

The natural conclusion is that they expected His coming within a period that John might reasonably live to see.

Conclusions from the Passage

We may therefore draw six conclusions from this important passage.

1. There was nothing incredible or unreasonable in the supposition that John might live until the coming of the Lord.

2. Our Lord's words suggest that John would probably live to witness that coming, although they do not expressly promise that he would.

3. The disciples understood Christ's reply as suggesting something further: that John would never die.

4. John himself gives no indication that living until the Parousia was impossible or incredible. He simply refuses to affirm that Christ had promised him exemption from death.

5. The expectation that John might live until the Parousia agrees with our Lord's repeated teaching that His coming, the judgment of Israel, the destruction of Jerusalem and the close of the age belonged to the same approaching period.

6. According to Christ's own declarations, all these events were to occur within the lifetime of the existing generation.

We therefore find in this passage another important confirmation of the nearness of the Parousia.

The disciples believed that Christ might return within their lifetime.

Our Lord's words concerning John were entirely consistent with that expectation.

And the evangelist's careful explanation preserves the distinction between the possibility of John remaining until Christ's coming and the unsupported conclusion that he would never die.

Having now examined the principal passages concerning the Parousia in all four Gospels, we are in a position to bring together their general teaching on this important subject.

Footnotes

5. Lange, Commentary on the Gospel of St John, discussion of John 21:22.

6. If the coming of Christ were understood as an event that could not take place until the end of the physical world, our Lord's reply would imply the extraordinary possibility that John might live for a thousand years or more. Yet the disciples clearly regarded His words as a serious statement, not an absurd or meaningless suggestion.

SUMMARY OF THE TEACHING OF THE GOSPELS RESPECTING THE PAROUSIA

Having examined the four Gospels and considered the passages that speak of the Parousia, or coming of the Lord, it will be useful to bring together the principal conclusions of our investigation.

We can now see how consistently the evangelists present the same great event and how clearly they indicate the period in which it was expected to take place.

The following fourteen points summarise their teaching.

1. John the Baptist Announces the Approaching Judgment

The connection between Old and New Testament prophecy is established through the ministry of John the Baptist.

John was the promised Elijah foretold by Malachi. He announced that divine wrath was approaching and warned the Jewish nation of the judgment soon to come upon it.

2. Jesus Announces the Nearness of the Kingdom

The herald was soon followed by the King Himself.

Jesus proclaimed that the kingdom of God was at hand and called upon the nation to repent.

His message confirmed the urgency of John's warning and announced the approaching fulfilment of God's purposes.

3. Judgment Is Pronounced upon the Unbelieving Cities

The cities privileged to witness the presence and mighty works of Christ, but which nevertheless rejected His message, were warned of an exceptionally severe judgment.

Our Lord declared that their punishment would be more intolerable than that of Sodom and Gomorrah.

4. The Coming of Christ Is Placed within the Mission to Israel

Jesus expressly assured His disciples that His coming would take place before they had completed their work of preaching throughout the cities of Israel.

The prediction therefore places the Parousia within the period of their own ministry.

5. The End of the Age Is Not the Destruction of the Earth

Our Lord foretold a judgment at the end of the age, expressed in Greek as synteleia tou aiōnos.

This phrase does not signify the destruction of the physical earth or the end of human history.

It refers to the consummation of the age then drawing to its close: the Jewish dispensation.

6. Some of the Disciples Would Live to Witness the Parousia

Jesus expressly declared that He was about to come in glory, in His kingdom, and accompanied by His angels.

He also assured His hearers that some of those standing before Him would not die until they had witnessed His coming.

His words therefore placed the event within the lifetime of some of His disciples.

7. The Parables Foretell the Approaching Judgment of Israel

In several parables and discourses, our Lord described the judgment that was approaching Israel and connected it with His coming.

These include the parable of the importunate widow (Luke 18), the parable of the pounds (Luke 19), the parable of the wicked husbandmen (Matthew 21), and the parable of the marriage feast (Matthew 22).

Each contributes to the solemn picture of the approaching judgment.

8. The Existing Generation Is Held Responsible

Jesus repeatedly condemned the wickedness of the generation to which He preached.

He declared that the accumulated guilt of former ages, including the blood of the prophets, would be required of that generation.

The judgment was therefore directed towards the people then living, whose rejection of Christ brought their nation's guilt to its climax.

9. The Resurrection and Judgment Accompany the Parousia

The resurrection of the dead, the judgment of the world and the casting out of Satan are represented

as events associated with the Parousia.

They are not presented as belonging to unrelated periods, but as connected with the same approaching consummation.

10. Christ Promises to Return in a Little While

Our Lord assured His disciples that He would come again to them.

He spoke of their separation as lasting only a little while and promised that they would see Him again.

His language therefore encouraged them to expect a speedy return.

11. The Prophecy on the Mount of Olives Concerns Jerusalem and Israel

The prophecy delivered by Jesus on the Mount of Olives forms one connected and continuous discourse.

Its subject is the approaching destruction of Jerusalem and the judgment of Israel.

Our Lord expressly established the time of its fulfilment in Matthew 24:34, Mark 13:30 and Luke 21:32.

In each account, He declared that the existing generation would not pass away before the predicted events had taken place.

12. The Closing Parables Belong to the Same Judgment

The parables of the ten virgins, the talents, and the sheep and the goats are integral parts of the same prophetic discourse.

They describe different aspects of the judgment associated with Christ's coming.

We therefore understand their fulfilment as belonging to the judgment of Israel at the close of the Jewish age.

13. The Disciples Are Commanded to Watch and Pray

Throughout His teaching, Jesus urged His disciples to remain watchful, prayerful and prepared.

They were to live in continual expectation of the Parousia because its precise time was unknown.

Although the event would take place within their generation, its arrival would be sudden and unexpected.

14. John Is Given Reason to Expect That He Will Witness the Parousia

After His resurrection, our Lord spoke to Peter concerning the possibility that John might remain alive until His coming.

The disciples understood these words as suggesting that John would live to witness the event.

This expectation agrees with the repeated declarations of Jesus concerning the nearness of His return.

Taken together, these fourteen conclusions present the consistent teaching of the Gospels concerning the Parousia.

The coming of the Son of Man, the judgment of Israel, the resurrection of the dead and the close of the Jewish age are represented as belonging to one great consummation.

Our Lord repeatedly declared that this consummation would occur within the lifetime of the generation then living.

It is upon this testimony of the Gospels that our understanding of the Parousia must rest.

APPENDIX TO PART I

NOTE A. ON THE DOUBLE-SENSE THEORY OF INTERPRETATION

The following extracts are drawn from theologians of different periods, countries and Christian traditions.

Together, they provide strong evidence of widespread opposition to the loose and arbitrary methods of interpretation adopted by many German and English commentators.

Their common argument is that Scripture should be understood according to its natural and intended meaning, rather than being given additional or hidden meanings that the language itself does not support.

Melanchthon

Melanchthon lays down this principle:

Unam quandam ac certam et simplicem sententiam ubique quaerendam esse.

That is:

"One definite and simple meaning of Scripture is in every case to be sought."

The duty of the interpreter, therefore, is to discover the meaning intended by the inspired writer, rather than to search for several different meanings beneath the same words.

Maresius

Maresius expresses the same principle with even greater force:

"Far be it from us to make God speak with two tongues, or to attach a variety of senses to His Word, in which we ought rather to behold the simplicity of its divine author reflected as in a clear mirror.

Only one meaning of Scripture, therefore, is admissible: that is, the grammatical, in whatever terms, whether proper or tropical and figurative, it may be expressed."

He refers to Psalm 12:6 and Psalm 19:8 in support of his argument.

His point is that Scripture possesses one intended meaning, whether the language is literal or figurative.

Figures of speech do not justify the introduction of additional meanings unrelated to the author's intention.

A figurative expression may require interpretation, but it does not follow that it possesses two separate and equally intended senses.

Dr John Owen and Dr John Brown

Dr John Brown quotes a memorable statement by Dr Owen:

"If the Scripture has more than one meaning, it has no meaning at all."

Brown comments that this observation is full of good sense and applies just as much to biblical prophecy as to every other part of Scripture.

— Dr John Brown, The Sufferings and Glories of the Messiah, p. 5, note.

Moses Stuart

Moses Stuart develops the argument more fully.

He asks us to consider the consequences of allowing Scripture to possess two different meanings.

What ordinary book is written with a double meaning, unless it is deliberately composed as a collection of riddles?

And even a riddle has one true solution.

The ancient pagan oracles sometimes employed deliberately ambiguous language.

One famous example is the Latin saying:

Aio te, Pyrrhe, Romanos vincere posse.

The words could be understood to mean either that Pyrrhus would defeat the Romans or that the Romans would defeat Pyrrhus.

Such ambiguity allowed the oracle to appear correct whatever happened.

But can we accept this kind of uncertainty in the declarations of the living God?

If the same words of Scripture can convey both a literal meaning and a hidden meaning, who is qualified to determine what that hidden meaning is?

If the interpreter is not inspired, by what principles can such a meaning be established?

The ordinary rules governing human language provide no answer, because we do not apply this method of interpretation to other books.

Stuart therefore concludes:

"For these and such-like reasons, the scheme of attaching a double sense to the Scriptures is inadmissible. It sets afloat all the fundamental principles of interpretation by which we arrive at established conviction and certainty, and casts us on the boundless ocean of imagination and conjecture without rudder or compass."

— Moses Stuart, Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews, Excursus XX.

Professor Benjamin Jowett

Professor Jowett states the same principle with particular clarity:

"First, it may be laid down that Scripture has one meaning, the meaning which it had to the mind of the prophet or evangelist who first uttered or wrote to the hearers or readers who first received it."

He continues:

"Scripture, like other books, has one meaning, which is to be gathered from itself, without reference to the adaptations of fathers or divines, and without regard to a priori notions about its nature and origin."

He then defines the proper work of the interpreter:

"The office of the interpreter is not to add another [interpretation], but to recover the original one: the meaning, that is, of the words as they struck on the ears or flashed before the eyes of those who first heard and read them."

— Professor Jowett, Essay on the Interpretation of Scripture, Section I, paragraphs 3–4.

These statements express a principle of great importance.

The interpreter must first ask what the words meant to those who originally heard or read them.

The object is not to discover how many later applications can be attached to a passage.

It is to recover the meaning that the inspired writer intended to communicate.

This requires careful attention to language, historical circumstances and context.

Canon J. C. Ryle

Canon Ryle expresses his conviction in equally definite terms:

"I hold that the words of Scripture were intended to have one definite sense, and that our first object should be to discover that sense, and adhere rigorously to it.

I believe that, as a general rule, the words of Scripture are intended to have, like all other language, one plain definite meaning, and that to say that words do mean a thing merely because they can be tortured

into meaning it, is a most dishonourable and dangerous way of handling Scripture."

— Canon J. C. Ryle, Expository Thoughts on St Luke, Vol. I, p. 383.

Here, then, we have the united testimony of respected theologians belonging to different periods and traditions.

They agree that Scripture must be interpreted according to its natural and intended meaning.

They reject the practice of assigning additional meanings merely because the language can be made to accommodate them.

Their testimony is especially important when applied to biblical prophecy.

For if we allow prophetic language to possess a second meaning whenever its plain meaning does not agree with our expectations, we abandon the very principles by which its true meaning can be established.

The same rules of interpretation must apply to prophecy as to every other part of Scripture.

We must seek the meaning intended by the sacred writer, respect the language in which that meaning is expressed, and refuse to introduce hidden interpretations for which the text itself provides no authority.

Note B. On the Prophetic Element in the Gospels

The following passage is taken from an article by W. R. Greg, published in the Contemporary Review in November 1876.

Greg examines the predictions concerning the destruction of Jerusalem and the second coming of Christ. Although he questions the supernatural authority of these prophecies, his observations are important because he recognises the clear limitations of time expressed in our Lord's words.

W. R. Greg's Examination of the Prophecies

Let us turn to the predictions concerning the destruction of Jerusalem.

As is well known, these predictions appear in all the Gospel narratives, which agree remarkably closely with one another. This agreement suggests that the evangelists drew upon a common and established tradition.

In these accounts, the predictions of Jerusalem's destruction are closely connected with prophecies concerning the second coming of Christ and the end of the world.

Mr Hutton fully acknowledges this apparent mixture of subjects.

The portion relating to the destruction of Jerusalem is remarkably definite and corresponds very closely with what actually happened.

The other portion, however, is expressed in grand and less precise language, referring chiefly to extraordinary natural phenomena and catastrophic events.

Because the predictions concerning Jerusalem are so accurate, many critics conclude that the Gospels must have been written during or after the siege and destruction of the city.

Mr Hutton, however, draws the opposite conclusion from the apparent combination of the two subjects.

He argues that the prophecy must have existed in its present recorded form before Jerusalem was destroyed.

His reasoning is that, if the city had already fallen while the other predicted signs of Christ's coming had failed to appear, the Gospel writers would surely have recognised the difficulty.

They would then have separated the two predictions or adjusted their accounts to agree with what history had revealed.

The fact that they did not do so suggests, in Mr Hutton's opinion, that the prophecies were recorded

before the event.

But the real difficulty lies elsewhere.

As the prediction stands in the Gospels, Christ appears distinctly to declare that His second coming would follow immediately after the destruction of Jerusalem.

He also states that this generation, meaning the generation He was addressing, would not pass away until all the predicted events had been fulfilled.

Mr Hutton believes that this limitation of time applies only to the destruction of Jerusalem.

He is entitled to hold that opinion, and considered by itself it is not an unreasonable suggestion.

Nevertheless, under the circumstances, it seems a somewhat forced interpretation.

There are three reasons for this.

First, the interpretation appears necessary only because Mr Hutton begins with the conviction that the prophetic knowledge of Jesus could not possibly have been mistaken.

Second, it assumes that the Gospel accounts accurately preserve the words of Jesus, even though Mr Hutton himself acknowledges that the predictions appear to combine different subjects in a confusing manner.

Third, and most importantly, the declaration concerning this generation is not the only passage indicating that Jesus expected His second coming to take place soon.

There are several other predictions in which He appears to express the same conviction.

These predictions also show that He communicated this expectation to His disciples.

According to Matthew 24:29, the coming was to follow immediately after the tribulation associated with Jerusalem's destruction.

But Jesus went further.

He declared that some of those who heard Him would live to witness His coming.

These statements occur independently of the prophecy concerning Jerusalem and cannot therefore be explained away as part of its supposed confusion.

For example:

Matthew 16:28

> Verily I say unto you, There be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom.

Matthew 10:23

> Verily I say unto you, Ye shall not have gone over the cities of Israel, till the Son of man be come.

John 21:22

> Jesus saith unto him, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? follow thou me.

Similar statements are found in the other Synoptic Gospels.

We are therefore confronted with a serious difficulty.

If Jesus did not make these declarations, then the Gospel narratives must be remarkably inaccurate.

But if He did make them, His prophetic knowledge cannot have been what Mr Hutton supposes it to have been.

There can be little doubt that the disciples themselves confidently expected Christ to return within a comparatively short period.

They also believed that this expectation rested upon the authority of their Master.

Evidence of this belief may be found throughout the apostolic writings.

Consider, for example:

1 Corinthians 10:11 and 15:51

Philippians 4:5

1 Thessalonians 4:15

James 5:8

1 Peter 4:7

1 John 2:18

Revelation 1:1–3 and 22:7, 10, 12

These passages reveal the conviction that the coming of Christ and the approaching consummation were near at hand.

Mr Hutton himself acknowledges this expectation as frankly and fully as we have described it.

— W. R. Greg, Contemporary Review, November 1876.

Modernised rendering of the original extract.

Russell's Response

Those who maintain that our Lord predicted the destruction of the physical world before the generation then living had passed away must face a formidable objection.

The sceptic's argument is difficult to answer if the prophecy is understood in that way.

Indeed, it cannot be overcome without resorting to forced and unnatural interpretations, or making admissions that would seriously undermine the authority and inspiration of the Gospel narratives.

For if Jesus predicted that the material world would come to an end during that generation, and it did not happen, the difficulty is obvious.

But we do not accept that this was what He foretold.

We fully acknowledge the natural meaning that Mr Greg finds in the language of Jesus.

We also acknowledge that the apostles understood their Master's words as referring to an approaching event.

On these points, we agree with the critic.

Where we differ is in the conclusion to be drawn.

Mr Greg regards the expectation of an early coming as mistaken and therefore sees it as evidence against the supernatural prophetic knowledge of Christ.

We reach precisely the opposite conclusion.

The mistake, we maintain, lies not in the prediction of Jesus, nor in the expectation of His disciples, but in the assumption that the prophecy concerned the destruction of the physical world.

Our Lord was speaking of the judgment of Jerusalem and Israel, the close of the Jewish age, and the events associated with His Parousia.

These were the events He declared would take place within the lifetime of the existing generation.

And these were the events that reached their fulfilment in the great catastrophe that overtook Jerusalem.

We therefore appeal to the prophecy on the Mount of Olives, not as evidence that Jesus was mistaken, but as a remarkable demonstration of His supernatural foresight.

The very precision of its language, and the definite limitation of time within which its fulfilment was promised, provide powerful testimony to the truth of His prediction.

The End of Part 1 Part 2 and Three to follow.