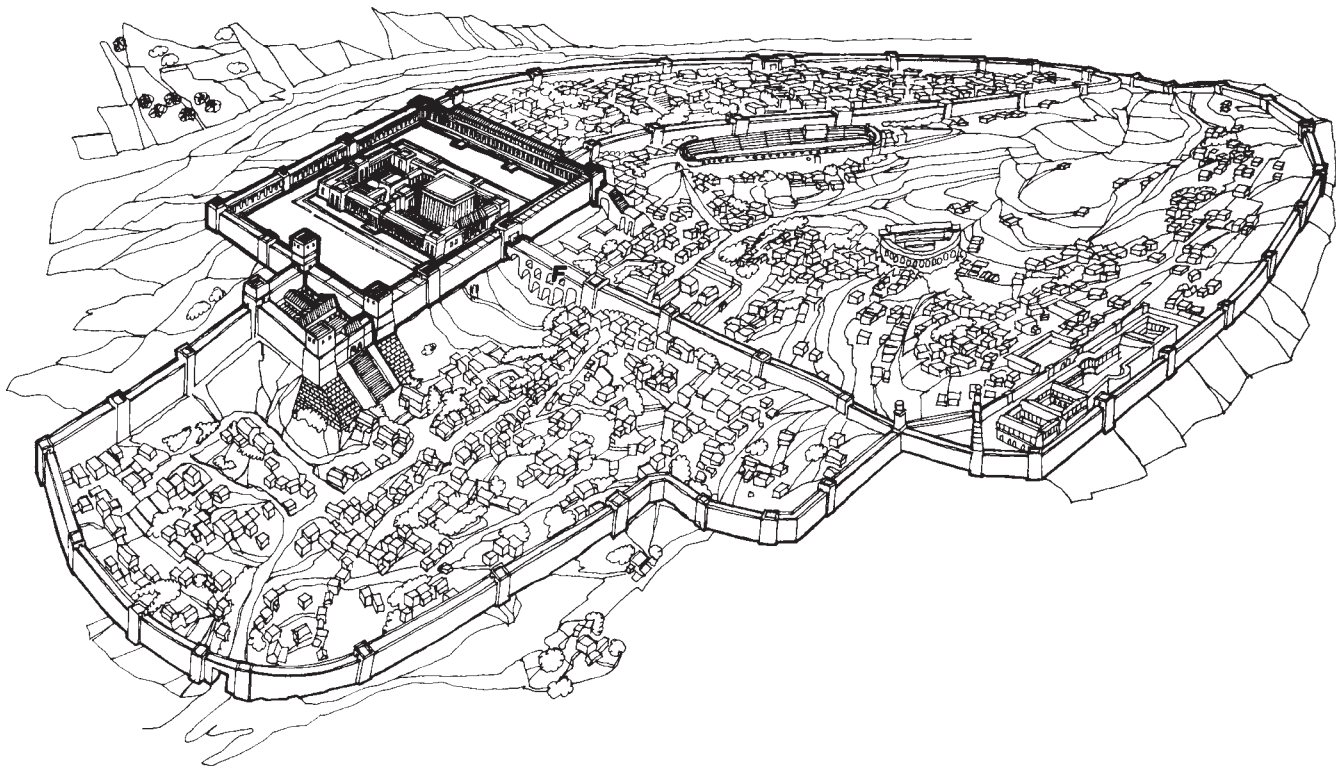


Matthew 24 And The Destruction Of Jerusalem



“Then Jesus went out and departed from the temple, and His disciples came up to show Him the buildings of the temple. And Jesus said to them, ‘Do you not see all these things? Assuredly, I say to you, not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down.’ Now as He sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, ‘Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?’” (Matthew 24:1-3)

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THE 24TH CHAPTER OF THE gospel of Matthew is one of the most abused passages in the Bible. Premillennialists use this chapter as a springboard for all sorts of fanciful teaching and wild speculation. We want to examine the context of this chapter and see how it was fulfilled at the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.

On the Tuesday before His crucifixion, our Lord went into the temple and denounced its inhabitants as being the “sons of those who murdered the prophets,” a “brood of vipers,” and those destined for the “condemnation of hell” (Matt. 23: 31, 33). Jesus ends this scathing rebuke with these words: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! See! Your house is left to you desolate; for I say to you, you shall see Me no more till you say, ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!’” (Matt. 23: 37–39).

As Jesus left the temple, “His disciples came to Him to show Him the buildings of the temple” (Matt. 24:1). While gazing upon the Herod’s temple, Jesus told the disciples that the day was coming when “not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down” (Matt. 24:2). After crossing the Kidron Valley, Jesus and His disciples sat on the mount of Olives. His disciples came to

Him privately and asked, “when will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?” (Matt. 24:3).

The destruction of the temple was such a notable event that the disciples could only think of it happening in connection with the second coming of Christ. Jesus clears up their misunderstandings and answers their questions in order. He tells them about the various signs which would be given prior to the destruction of the temple. Then Jesus explains there will be no signs given prior to His return and the end of the world. The events described in Matthew 24 are also recorded in Mark 13: 1–37 and Luke 21:5–36.

Key To The Discourse

It is my contention that everything spoken in Matthew 24:4–36 relates to the destruction of Jerusalem, and that the remainder of the chapter deals with the second coming of Christ. After explaining all of the signs that would be given prior to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, Jesus said, “Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things are fulfilled” (Matt. 24:34). Jesus warned His followers that Jerusalem would be destroyed within their own generation.

Joseph Henry Thayer defines the Greek word for “generation” as “**1.** a begetting, birth, nativity... **2.** passively, that which has been begotten, men of the same stock, a family ... the several ranks

in a natural descent, the successive members of a genealogy ...
b. *metaph. a race of men very like each other in endowments, pursuits, character; and esp. in a bad sense a perverse race ...*
3. *the whole multitude of men living at the same time:* Mt. xxiv. 34; Mk. xiii. 30; Lk. i. 48 ...xxi. 32 ...
4. *an age* (i.e. the time ordinarily occupied by each successive generation), the space of from 30 to 33 years...” (*Greek-English Lexicon Of The New Testament*).

W. E. Vine says the word is “connected with *ginomai*, to become, primarily signifies a begetting, or birth; then that which has been begotten, a family; or successive members of a genealogy ... or of a race of people, possessed of similar characteristics, pursuits, etc., (of a bad character) ... or the whole multitude of men living at the same time, Matt. 24:34; Mark 13:30; Luke 1:48; 21:32 ... Transferred from people to the time in which they lived, the word came to mean an age, i.e., a period ordinarily occupied by each successive generations, say, of thirty or forty years...” (*Vine’s Expository Dictionary Of Biblical Words*).

A generation is a period of time somewhere between thirty or forty years. Jesus gave the Olivet discourse in about 30 A.D. The city of Jerusalem was destroyed by Titus, the Roman General, in 70 A.D.

Flavius Josephus

In this article we will be quoting at length from the first century historian Flavius Josephus, a

Jewish priest who led a revolt against Roman oppression in Galilee. He was captured by the Romans at the fall of Yotapata in 67 A.D., and held as a prisoner in Cæsarea till 69 A.D. He returned to Jerusalem with Titus in 70 A.D. and became an eyewitness to the final siege of Jerusalem. Josephus was made a Roman citizen by Vespasian. An excellent biography of Josephus by Steve Mason recently appeared in *Biblical Archaeology Review* (Sept./Oct. 1997, pp. 58–69).

Let us now examine the signs Jesus said would appear prior to the destruction of Jerusalem.

False Christs

Jesus warned His disciples that “many will come in My name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and will deceive many” (Matt. 24:5). As predicted by Jesus, many false prophets did arise.

Josephus claimed that “there was an Egyptian false prophet that did the Jews more mischief than the former; for he was a cheat, and pretended to be a prophet also, and got together thirty thousand men that were deluded by him; these he led round from the wilderness to the mount which was called the Mount of Olives, and was ready to break into Jerusalem by force from that place.” (*The Wars Of The Jews*, 2:3:5).

Josephus also wrote: “Now it came to pass, while Fadus was procurator of Judea, that a certain magician, whose name was Theudas, persuaded a great part of the people to take their efforts with them, and follow

him to the river Jordan; for he told them he was a prophet, and that he would, by his own command, divide the river, and afford them an easy passage over it; and many were deluded by his words.” (*The Antiquities Of The Jews*, 20:5:1).

Wars And Rumors Of Wars

The disciples were warned that they would “hear of wars and rumors of wars,” and yet Jesus told them, “See that you are not troubled” (Matt. 24:6). Today, every time a firecracker goes off in Jerusalem some preacher will start sweating and tell his congregation that the end of the world is at hand—you would think the Middle East had never experienced conflict before. It is hard to picture a time more trying than just prior to the destruction of Jerusalem.

Tacitus, a well-known Roman historian, said of this period: “The history on which I am entering is that of a period rich in disasters, terrible with battles, torn by civil struggles, horrible even in peace. Four emperors fell by the sword; there were three civil wars, more foreign wars, and often both at the same time.” (*The Histories*, 1:2).

Josephus tells of a day in which “the people of Cæsarea had slain the Jews that were among them on the very same day and hour [when the soldiers were slain], which one would think must have come to pass by the direction of Providence; insomuch that in one hour’s time above twenty thousand Jews were killed, and all Cæsarea

was emptied of its Jewish inhabitants.” (*Wars*, 2:18:1).

Famines And Pestilences

The destruction of Jerusalem was to be preceded by a time of “famines and pestilences” (Matt. 24:7). You do not have to leave the pages of the New Testament to find the fulfillment of this. Luke, writing by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, recorded that, “in these days prophets came from Jerusalem to Antioch. Then one of them, named Agabus, stood up and showed by the Spirit that there was going to be a great famine throughout all the world, which also happened in the days of Claudius Cæsar.” (Acts 11:27–28).

Josephus tells of queen Helena’s relief effort for Jerusalem. “Now her coming was of very great advantage to the people of Jerusalem; for whereas a famine did oppress them at that time, and many people died for want of what was necessary to produce food withal, queen Helena sent some of her servants to Alexandria with money to buy a great quantity of corn, and others to Cyprus, to bring a cargo of dried figs...” (*Antiquities*, 20:2:5). Tacitus wrote: “Many prodigies occurred during the year. Ominous birds took their seat on the Capitol; houses were overturned by repeated shocks of earthquake, and, as the panic spread, the weak were trampled underfoot in the trepidation of the crowd. A shortage of corn, again, and the famine which resulted, were construed as a supernatural warning.” (*The*

Annals of Imperial Rome, 12:43). Pestilences usually accompany periods of famine.

Earthquakes

In addition to the havoc brought about by famine and pestilences, our Lord said that great earthquakes would shake the region prior to the siege of Jerusalem (Matt. 24:7).

J. Marcellus Kik said, “And as to earthquakes, many are mentioned by writers during a period just previous to 70 A.D. There were earthquakes in Crete, Smyrna, Miletus, Chios, Samos, Laodicea, Hierapolis, Colosse, Campania, Rome, and Judea. It is interesting to note that the city of Pompeii was much damaged by an earthquake occurring on February 5, 63 A.D.” (*An Eschatology Of Victory*, p. 93).

Fearful Events From Heaven

In Luke’s account of the Olivet discourse he records the warning of Christ that “there will be fearful sights and great signs from heaven” (Luke 21:11).

Josephus tells of one time when “there broke out a prodigious storm in the night, with the utmost violence, and very strong winds, with the largest showers of rain, with continual lightnings, terrible thunderings, and amazing concussions and bellowings of the earth, that was in an earthquake. These things were a manifest indication that some destruction was coming upon men, when the system of the world was put into this disorder; and anyone would guess that these wonders foreshad-

owed some great calamities that were coming.” (*Wars*, 4:4:5).

On another occasion Josephus wrote: “Thus there was a star resembling a sword, which stood over the city, and a comet that continued a whole year. Thus also, before the Jews’ rebellion ... so great a light shone round the altar and the holy house, that it appeared to be bright day time; which light lasted for half an hour ... Moreover, the eastern gate of the inner [court of the] temple, which was of brass armed with iron, and vastly heavy, and had been with difficulty shut by twenty men, and rested upon a basis armed with iron, and had bolts fastened very deep into the firm floor, which was made of one entire stone, was seen to be opened of its own accord about the sixth hour of the night.” (*Wars*, 4:4:5).

The Gospel Preached To All Nations

Prior to the destruction of Jerusalem the “gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations” (Matt. 24:14). This came to pass in the first century. Paul wrote to the Christians at the city of Colosse and spoke of gospel “which was preached to every creature under heaven” (Col. 1:23).

“Tradition assigns the following fields to the various apostles and evangelists: Andrew is said to have labored in Scythia; hence the Russians worship him as their apostle. Philip spent his last years in Hierapolis in Phrygia. Bartholomew is said to

have brought the gospel according to Matthew into India. The tradition concerning Matthew is rather confused. He is said to have preached to his own people, and afterward in foreign lands. James Alphaeus is said to have worked in Egypt. Thaddeus is said to have been the missionary to Persia. Simon Zelotes is said to have worked in Egypt and in Britain; while another report connects him with Persian and Babylonia. The evangelist John Mark is said to have founded the church in Alexandria.” (Lars P. Qualben, *History Of The Christian Church*).

Stand Before Kings And Rulers

Jesus told the apostles to “watch out for yourselves, for they will deliver you up to councils, and you will be beaten in the synagogues. And you will be brought before rulers and kings for My sake, for a testimony to them” (Mark 13:9).

Again, You do not have to leave the pages of the New Testament to see the fulfillment of this prophecy.

Peter and John were brought up before the Sanhedrin (Acts 4). Stephen was stoned to death by an angry Jewish mob (Acts 7: 54–60). Herod Agrippa “killed James the brother of John with the sword. And because he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also” (Acts 12:2).

Paul stood before Gallio, proconsul of Achaia (Acts 18:12), Felix, a Roman governor (Acts 24), and King Agrippa (Acts

25). Paul was finally allowed to present his case before Cæsar himself.

Abomination Of Desolation In The Holy Place

Jesus warned his disciples, that, “Therefore when you see the ‘abomination of desolation,’ spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place (whoever reads, let him understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.” (Matt. 24:15–16).

Josephus, a first century historian, tells of the sad state into which the temple fell prior to the arrival of Titus, the Roman general. “And now, when the multitude were gotten together to an assembly, and every one was in indignation at these men’s seizing upon the sanctuary, at their rapine and murders but had not yet begun their attacks upon them ... Agnus stood in the midst of them, and casting his eyes frequently at the temple, and having a flood of tears in his eyes he said, ‘Certainly, it had been good for me to die before I had seen the house of God full of so many abominations, or these sacred places that ought not to be trodden upon at random, filled with the feet of these bloodshedding villains...’” (*The Wars Of The Jews*, 4:3:10).

Prior to the destruction of Jerusalem the temple became a gathering place for wicked men. Jesus instructs the disciples that when they see such “abomination of desolation” they were to “flee to the mountains.” This passage does not refer in any

way to some future return of our Lord. When this “abomination of desolation” took place, those in “Judea” were to flee to the mountains—not folks living in America today!

Jerusalem Surrounded

In Luke’s account of the discourse, Jesus also told the disciples that “when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation is near. Then let those in Judea flee to the mountains, let those who are in the midst of her depart, and let not those who are in the country enter her.” (Luke 21:20–21).

Here the disciples are warned that when the Roman army was approaching Jerusalem they were to flee for their lives. Christians received ample warning about the approaching invasion. Josephus said, “And now Vespasian had fortified all the places round about Jerusalem, and erected citadels at Jericho and Adida, and placed garrisons in them both ... And now the war having gone through all the mountainous country, and all the plain country also, those that were at Jerusalem were deprived of the liberty of going out of the city; ... Now as Vespasian was returned to Cæsarea, and was getting ready, with all his army to march directly to Jerusalem, he was informed that Nero was dead ... Wherefore Vespasian put off at first his expedition against Jerusalem, and stood waiting whither the empire would be transferred after the death of Nero ... the

Roman empire being then in a fluctuating condition, and did not go on with the expedition against the Jews...” (*The Wars Of The Jews*, 4:9:1, 2).

When the legions of Rome finally got to Jerusalem they camped at the Mount of Olives (*The Wars Of The Jews*, 5:2:3). Immediately after their arrival a trench was cast about Jerusalem. A nine mile long wall was constructed in three days that totally enclosed the city (*The Wars Of The Jews*, 5:12:2).

Great Tribulation

Jesus warned His disciples that when the Roman army arrived, those in Judea should flee to the mountains and “let him who is on the housetop not come down to take anything out of his house. And let him who is in the field not go back to get his clothes. But woe to those who are pregnant and to those with nursing babies in those days! And pray that your flight may not be in winter or on the Sabbath. For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be.” (Matt. 24:17–21).

It is amazing how many people today try to apply these words to a future return of our Lord! What possible difference would it make if Jesus returns on Saturday or Sunday? What difference could it make if He comes in winter or summer? However, if you were trying to flee from an invading army it would make a great deal of difference, for the gates of the city

would be closed on the Sabbath and there would be no way for you to escape. Fleeing from an invading army would be a lot easier if you did not have a nursing child to tend to.

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

Over one million Jews died at the destruction of Jerusalem—another 97,000 were carried away as slaves!

The Stars Will Fall From Heaven

“Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken” (Matt. 24:29). Premillennialists will often use this passage to “prove” that Matthew 24 is talking about the return of Christ instead of the destruction of the holy city. They will often say, “Just look outside at night—the stars are still in the heavens right now.”

To those unfamiliar with prophetic language the premillennialists sometimes sound convincing. However, a short trip through the Old Testament will show how similar language was used to describe the fall of monarchs and nations. Look at the following examples of God’s righteous judgment and see how he describes the fall of national leaders:

- Babylon (Isa. 13:10, 13)
- Edom (Isa. 34:4–6)
- The Peoples (Isa. 51:5–6)
- Judah (Jer. 4:1–6, 23–28)
- Egypt (Ezek. 32:7–8)
- The Nations (Joel 3:15–16)
- Nineveh (Nah. 1:1–5)
- Israel (Amos 8:1–2, 9)

The Sign Of The Son Of Man

In Matthew 24:30, Jesus said, “Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” (NKJV).

Please notice that Jesus did not say, “And then shall appear the Son of Man in heaven” or “then shall appear the sign in the heaven(s) of the Son of Man.” The phrase is literally: “And then shall appear the sign of the Son of Man in the heaven” (*Berry’s Interlinear*). The phrase “in heaven” denotes the locality of the Son of Man, not the locality of the sign.

The destruction of Jerusalem itself served as a sign of the fact the Son of Man was ruling in heaven, because it was the fulfillment of His prediction (cf. Deut. 18:20–22).

One Stone Not Left Upon Another

At the very beginning of the Olivet discourse, while looking at the temple, Jesus said, “Do you not see all these things? Assuredly, I say to you, not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down.” (Matt. 24:2).

Titus, the Roman general, did not want to destroy the temple. In a speech to the Jewish defenders of the city he said, “I appeal to my own army, and the Jews that are now with me, and even to you yourselves, that I do not force you to defile this sanctuary; and if you will but change the place whereon you will fight, no Roman shall either come near your sanctuary, or offer any affront to it; nay, I will endeavor to preserve you your holy house, whether you will or not.” (*Wars*, 6:2:4).

However, after the city was taken, he “gave order that they


should now demolish the entire city and temple ... but for all the rest of the wall, it was so thoroughly laid even with the ground by those that dug it up to the foundation, that there was left nothing to make those that came thither believe it had ever been inhabited.” (Josephus, *The Wars Of The Jews*, 7:1:1). Truly, the words of the prophet came to pass, “Therefore because of you Zion shall be plowed like a field, Jerusalem shall become

heaps of ruins, and the mountain of the temple like the bare hills of the forest” (Micah 3:12).

Significant Contrasts

Sign after sign was given so the disciples would know in advance about the destruction of Jerusalem. Warnings were given so men could flee during those abnormal times when a limited, local judgment of God would fall upon Jerusalem.

We now look for the final

return of our Lord, “but of that day and hour no one knows, no, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only” (Matt. 24:26). Jesus will return during normal times and without prior warning. Instead of a limited judgment upon a rebellious nation, “all the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats” (Matt. 25:32). 



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