Double Fulfillment of Prophecy?

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Introduction

This article examines whether New Testament (NT) prophecies sometimes involve double fulfillment.
The clear time statement found in Matthew 24:34 implies that all that Jesus relates, at least up to that point, would be fulfilled in the 1st century.
This includes the fall of Jerusalem (Mt 24:15ff.; cf. Lk 21:20-24) and Jesus' return on the clouds (24:30).

But many futurists — especially (so-called) partial preterists — insist that Jesus' first-century coming in judgment was merely a type and guarantee of his final coming at the end of history.
Why do many Christians promote double fulfillment?
For two main reasons:
First, because of preconceived ideas about the nature of the Parousia.
Jesus' final coming will (supposedly) be spectacular. Everyone will see it — there's no way it might be missed. Thousands of angels will attend his return; bodies will be rising from graves and people will be escorted or dragged to the place of judgment. Then to cap it all, planet Earth will be incinerated.
Indeed, not something that could (or should) be missed!
Second, if Jesus' declarations in Matthew 16:27-28 and 24:34 are accepted at face value, the implications are disturbing. It would mean that the entire Christian Church has been wrong for 1900+ years.
The Church Fathers; the early Creeds and Councils; the Protestant Reformers, Confessions and Catechisms; much-loved hymns; finally, all the Bible colleges with their learned gurus — all have been (and are) in error.
And so, rather than exhibiting a Berean open mindedness (Acts 17:11), futurists refuse even to entertain the possibility that the Church might have been wrong.[1]

It should be obvious that the onus is on those who believe in double fulfillment to prove their case.
But as I hope to show, their position is exegetically indefensible.
We will examine, first, the principle of double fulfillment.
Then we will focus on the Olivet Discourse itself to point out the fallacies of that approach.

[1] Many opponents of (full) preterism are employed in a church or college teaching role and so have certain "standards" to uphold — quite literally, their denominational "forms of subscription" that they have signed and sworn loyalty to. Their loyalty to God's word is secondary. They love praise from men more than God's approbation (John 12:42-43). Thus they opt for the status quo.

Double fulfillment in the Old Testament

In the Old Testament (OT) there is certainly double fulfillment of many prophecies.
Often there is an initial fulfillment around the prophet's own time (or soon after), and then a much later, more definitive, fulfillment as well. One can think here of the Virgin-Birth prophecy of Isaiah 7:14.
Judging from the following verses (Isa 7:15-16), there was probably an initial fulfillment already in Ahaz's day.[2]

Double fulfillment is clearly seen in the latter chapters of Isaiah.
There we find prophecies concerning King Cyrus of Persia, who is twice mentioned by name:
Cyrus will be God's agent to deliver his people from exile in Babylon, so they can rebuild their city and temple.[3]
Yet this final section looks beyond Cyrus:
Isaiah's prophecies are punctuated with several "Servant Songs" that foretell the coming of One who will definitively save and restore.[4] True redemption — from sin, condemnation, Satan and hell — is found in Christ.

Double fulfillment may apply in Daniel as well. Certain prophecies concerning an abomination that causes desolation, along with an associated cessation of the daily temple sacrifices, were fulfilled twice:
Daniel 8:13 and 11:31 were fulfilled in the time of Antiochus and the Maccabees.
But Daniel 9:27 and 12:11 remained to be fulfilled in the Jewish War with Rome — see Matthew 24:15.

The New Testament is God's final, definitive revelation

It's fair to say that things were indistinctly revealed under the Old Covenant.
According to Peter, even the inspired prophets did not fully understand their own prophecies that foretold the salvation to come to us under the New Covenant (1Pet 1:10-12).

We also see this lack of clarity in the Mosaic Law:
The Law served a didactic role. It was adapted for a spiritually immature people, mere children, minors.
It functioned as a guardian or tutor to teach Israel some important "elementary principles" (Gal 4:1-7; cf. 4:3, 9).
The Law's "types and shadows" anticipated the person and work of Christ (Col 2:16-17; Heb 10:1).
Paul speaks of the inadequacies of the Old Covenant in 2 Corinthians 3:14-16:
Unbelieving Israelites who read their Old Covenant Scriptures have, as it were, a veil over their hearts.
For those Scriptures make little sense apart from Christ; the veil is removed only when one turns to him in faith.[5]
It's important to recognize that the entire Mosaic Covenant has now been abrogated through fulfillment in Christ (Eph 2:15; Heb 8:13).[6]

Note, also, how Paul in Ephesians 3:3-6 speaks of a "mystery" relating to gospel truths that were not clearly revealed in the Old Testament. While it was always God's intention to include the Gentiles, it was not entirely clear that they would be admitted and accepted on an equal basis with Israel, as fellow-heirs of God's ancient promises. Yet such is the case, as Paul discusses in the previous chapter (Eph 2:11-22).

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[2] The Hebrew term *ʿalmāh* (in Isaiah 7:14) means "young woman", thus allowing for a non-supernatural fulfillment in Ahaz's day.
[3] See Isaiah 41:2, 25; 44:28; 45:1-5, 13; 46:11; 48:14-15. Cyrus is specifically named in Isaiah 44:28 and 45:1.
[4] These Songs are found in Isaiah 42:1-7; 49:1-9; 50:4-9; 52:13 – 53:12. To these we might add Isaiah 61:1-3 and 63:1-6, since these, too, relate to the work of Yahweh's Servant.
[5] One is here reminded of Augustine's comment: "In the Old Testament the New lies hidden, and in the New the Old is made clear."
[6] God's moral law, codified in the Mosaic Law, remains in force. We obey the law as it comes to us via Christ and the New Covenant Scriptures — as these interpret and expound the law for us (1Cor 9:20-21; Mt 22:36-40; Eph 6:1-3).

In contrast to the diverse forms of revelation in the OT, God has now clearly spoken to us in his Son (Heb 1:1-2).
Old Covenant types and shadows are fulfilled in their antitype: the person and work of Christ.
Moreover, his teaching constitutes the definitive revelation; we must listen to him as he interprets the Law and the prophets (Mt 17:5; Ac 3:22; cf. Mt 5:17-48; 12:1-14; 19:2-9; Mk 7:8-19; 10:).
But here is what I wish to emphasize:
The clarity of the New Covenant revelation — in Christ and the NT Scriptures — means that double fulfillment is almost certainly NOT a feature of NT prophecy.
Double fulfillment belonged exclusively to the Old Covenant age of types and shadows and mysteries.
Which leads us naturally to the next section.

We must pay careful attention to Jesus' words!

All of us, futurists and preterists of all shades, need to listen carefully to Christ and his teaching.
We should note that on three separate occasions Jesus promised that he would return within the lifetimes of some to whom he spoke.
See Matthew 10:23; 16:28; and 24:34.
Each promise is introduced with a phrase that emphasizes the importance of what follows:
"Truly, I say to you, …" (Mt 16:28; 24:34); "for truly, I say to you, …" (Mt 10:23).[7]
The phrase means, "I assure you" (HCSB), or "I tell you the truth" (NET, NIV 1984).[8]

The phrase clearly demands the reader's special attention:
What follows is often the key that unlocks the whole meaning of a passage. It helps us rightly interpret it.
We are therefore to take particular note of these time constraints — not to ignore or explain them away.
The notion of double fulfillment, however, allows one to shift the focus away from any first-century fulfillment to the "real" fulfillment to transpire at the end of history.
In this way, the committed futurist circumvents what Jesus plainly intends.
This approach belittles Jesus' solemn pronouncements; it subtracts and detracts from his word.[9]

Olivet divided?

Some scholars split the Olivet Discourse into separate "70 AD" and "end-of-the-world" sections.
The demarcation is usually placed between Matthew 24:34 and 24:35.
According to this view, the ALL of verse 34 relates only to what has been described thus far: wars, famines, earthquakes, persecutions, apostasy, the "abomination", the flight from Judea, the Tribulation, false messiahs, the Son of Man's "sign" and his coming on the clouds, the trumpet-gathering of his elect. These events all transpired before or during the Jewish War (66-70 AD).
Then, verse 35 supposedly introduces a new section (24:35 – 25:46) that describes Jesus' final coming in judgment at the end of history. Here there are no warning signs: life continues normally; no one can possibly know the timing so we must be forever watchful.

[7] The synoptic parallel passages also include the phrase, or something very similar. See Mark 9:1; 13:30, and Luke 9:27; 21:32.
[8] "Truly, I say to you, …" (*amēn legō hymin*, …) is employed 26 times in Matthew, along with a further four times (in Matthew) with the connective "for" (*amēn gar legō hymin,* …) — "For truly, I say to you, …" The equivalent in John is: "Truly, truly, I say to you, …" — employed 25 times.
[9] Note that imminence statements are also found in Revelation 1:1, 3; 22:6, 10.
To which we could add the Lord's own promise that he would come back "soon" in Revelation 3:11; 22:7, 12, 20.

Response:

One should be very cautious in claiming that Matthew 24:35 introduces a new section.

Consider some of the parallels in Luke 17:

	Luke:	*Corresponding section in Matthew:*
False messiahs; Son of Man like lightening:	17:23-24	24:26-27 (by AD 70)
As in the days of Noah:	17:26-27	24:37-39 (end of the world)
People fleeing from housetops, fields:	17:31	24:17-18 (by AD 70)
One taken, one left:	17:34-35	24:40-41 (end of the world)
Vultures gathered around the corpse:	17:37	24:28 (by AD 70)

Here, Luke has both rearranged the order of events and intermingled parts from both (supposed) sections of the Discourse. Unlike modern scholars, Luke has failed to discern any change in topic.

Note that Luke places Jesus' statements here (in chapter 17) outside of his reporting of the Olivet Discourse, which is found in Luke 21:5-36.

Further considerations:

In Matthew 24, the Parousia (translated "coming") of verses 37 and 39 is exactly the same as the Parousia ("coming") of verses 3 and 27.

Indeed, in verses 27, 37 and 39 we have the exact same phrase:

"…, so will be the coming [parousia] of the Son of Man."

There are not two separate Parousias.

Parousia always refers to Christ's one and only Second Coming — in AD 70.[10]

Other Scriptures confirm that the Final Judgment transpired in the 1st century:

- James declares that Jesus was coming soon to judge (Jas 5:7-9).
- In 1 Peter 4:17 the apostle declares that THE judgment was already starting, beginning with his readers.[11] See also 1 Peter 4:5, 7.
- The Sheep and Goats Judgment of Matthew 25:31-46 is exactly the same judgment that Jesus spoke about in Matthew 16:27-28, and that John wrote about in Revelation 22:10-12.[12]
- The author of Hebrews notes that his Jewish readers could sense their nation's impending doom:
  Hebrews 10:25: *… and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.*
  Note also Hebrews 10:37 (HCSB): *For yet in a very little while, the Coming One will come and not delay*.

An important point is this:

The fact that the Sheep and Goats Judgment transpired by AD 70 shows that the time limitation of Matthew 24:34 applies to the entire Olivet Discourse. And not just to the preceding section (24:1-33).

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[10] The term *Parousia* in connection with Jesus' return is found in Matthew 24:3, 27, 37, 39; 1 Corinthians 15:23; 1 Thessalonians 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23; 2 Thessalonians 2:1, 8; James 5:7-8; 2 Peter 1:16; 3:4; 1 John 2:28.
Parousia (Strong's G3952) is properly translated as "arrival" or "presence".
It means "arrival" in 1 Corinthians 16:17 and 2 Corinthians 7:6-7. It means "presence" in 2 Corinthians 10:10 and Philippians 2:12.
Therefore, the early Christians looked forward to Jesus' "personal arrival and ongoing presence" with them.

[11] 1 Peter 4:17 (Greek text): τὸ κρίμα (*to krima*) = THE Judgment. This is an anaphoric article which points the reader back to a judgment already mentioned — that of the living and the dead in 1 Peter 4:5.
The following translations include the definite article: CJB, Darby, DLNT, GW, JUB, LEB, NABRE, NCB, NEB, NOG, YLT.

[12] The judgments of Matthew 16:27-28 and Matthew 25:31-46 are one and the same:
Both have Jesus' coming in glory, with his angels, dispensing rewards, on his throne/in his kingdom.