The Olivet Discourse

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Bible Versions
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(Note: All underlining of Scripture quotations for emphasis has been added by the author.)

Introduction

Many Christians assume that the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24 and 25) is concerned with end-of-the-world events. Supposedly some of what Jesus describes may relate to the Jewish War, but much remains unfulfilled. Yet we hear Jesus himself solemnly declaring that ALL he describes will transpire in that generation (24:34).[1] So we need to ask: Is it legitimate to split the Discourse into "70 AD" and "end-of-the-world" sections?

Context: The disciples are asking Jesus about the temple's destruction at "the end of the age" (24:1-3). They want to know when he will return to conclude the current age and usher in the messianic kingdom. William Barclay comments:

> Some verses [of Matthew 24] paint pictures taken from the Jewish conception of the Day of the Lord. … The Jews divided all time into two ages — this present age, and the age to come. The present age is wholly bad and beyond all hope of human reformation. It can be mended only by the direct intervention of God. When God does intervene, the golden age, the age to come, will arrive. But in between the two ages there will come the Day of the Lord, which will be a time of terrible and fearful upheaval, like the birth-pangs of a new age.[2]

The Jews divided history into two periods: "this age", and "the age to come" (cf. Mt 12:32).
The first age would conclude with the Day of the Lord — a time of great distress and upheaval.
Messiah would finally make his appearance and inaugurate the new age — he would usher in the promised kingdom. A whole new order would come about.

It is clear, therefore, that the disciples' question relates to Jesus' return as King and Judge — his "coming in his kingdom", to use language that Jesus had previously employed (Mt 16:28; cf. Mk 9:1).
The very last thing on the disciples' minds was the demise of planet Earth.

[1] When Jesus declares, "Truly, I say to you, …" he is stating something important that requires our special attention.
[2] William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 2* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1957). Via the Bible Portal website: https://bibleportal.com/commentary/chapter/william-barclay/matthew/24.

"The end of the world" — a misleading phrase

The King James Version renders the disciples' question as follows (24:3):
Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?
The KJV translators frequently rendered the Greek noun αἰών (*aiōn*) as "world".
Hence the following phrases: "this world"/ "the end of the world"/ "the world to come" (and similar).
This mistranslation has engendered much confusion for commentators and Bible students alike.

Aiōn, from whence derives our English term "eon", properly refers to an extended period of time.
It is usually rendered by modern Bible versions as "age".
In these versions we instead encounter the phrases "this age"/ "the end of the age"/ "the age to come", etc.
Examples: Matthew 12:32; 13:39-40, 49; 24:3; 28:20; Ephesians 1:21; Hebrews 6:5; 9:26.[3]

God's eternal kingdom

This age, *end of the age*, and *age to come* all reflect the Jewish belief in the world's two great eras:
The hopelessly evil pre-messianic age, and the subsequent good age under Messiah's rule.
From the Old Testament:
Messiah will usher in the universal, eternal, and righteous reign of God (e.g., Psalm 72; Isa 9:6-7; 11:1-10).
He will rule from the heavenly Zion: next to Yahweh, over the world but not on it (Ps 2:6; 110:1-2; Dan 7:13-14).
And he will rule in the context of ongoing rebellion (Ps 2:9).

Has this new age arrived?
Answer: Definitely, for the following reason:
In Jesus the throne of David has been fully restored and God's kingdom has come.
See Luke 1:32-33; Matthew 16:28; Mark 9:1; Acts 2:30-36; Hebrews 1:3-13; Revelation 11:15; 12:5.
The dramatic judgment of Jerusalem was "the sign of the Son of Man in heaven" (Mt 24:30, KJV) — the signal proof that Jesus was enthroned alongside Yahweh (cf. Mt 26:64; Ps 110:1-2; Dan 7:13-14).

Who will see these signs?

To whom was Jesus speaking in his Olivet Discourse?
Answer: He is addressing the disciples "privately" (24:3).
Therefore, the apostles would be the ones to witness all that Jesus relates in his Discourse:
YOU (apostles) must resist being led astray (24:4); YOU will hear of wars, famines, and earthquakes (24:6-7);
YOU will be persecuted (24:9); when YOU see the "abomination" you must flee Judea (24:15-18);
YOU are not to go after false messiahs (24:23-26); YOU will "see all these things" (24:33).

Jesus is not describing events to transpire in 2000 years' time. His contemporaries would be the ones to witness their fulfillment (24:34).

[3] Not that one should invariably translate *aiōn* as "age", for in certain contexts "world" indeed makes the better sense and is probably the intended meaning. Examples of the latter could include Matthew 13:22; Luke 16:8; 18:30; 20:34-35; 1 Timothy 6:17; 2 Timothy 4:10; Hebrews 1:2; 11:3.

The gospel proclaimed in all the world

Matthew 24:14:

> *"And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout <u>the whole world</u> as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come."*

Doesn't this mean that the gospel must be proclaimed throughout the entire world before Jesus returns?
Answer: Yes, and no; it depends on the meaning of "world".
The Greek term translated "world" here is *oikoumenē* (Strong's G3625). It most often refers to the inhabited or civilized world — the Roman Empire and its surrounds.
Note the same term's signification in Luke 2:1; Acts 11:28; 17:6; 19:27.
The Jews "from every nation under heaven" present at Pentecost came from the nations of the Roman Empire and its immediate surrounds (Ac 2:5, 9-11).

Adam Clarke notes that, by AD 70, the gospel had been proclaimed not merely in Asia Minor, Greece, and Italy, but also "as far north as Scythia; as far south as Ethiopia; as far east as Parthia and India; and as far west as Spain and Britain."[4] Therefore, already in the first century the gospel had been proclaimed far and wide.

Paul himself viewed the gospel as having been proclaimed throughout the known world in his day:
Colossians 1:6, 23:

> [6] [the gospel] *has come to you, as indeed <u>in the whole world</u> it is bearing fruit and increasing …*
>
> [23] *… the gospel that you heard, which has been <u>proclaimed in all creation under heaven</u>, and of which I, Paul, became a minister*.

Paul worked tirelessly; through him "all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord …" (Ac 19:10).
What was his message?
Answer: It was the declaration that, through Jesus, God's kingdom has come — therefore repent and believe.[5]
Unsurprisingly, this "testimony" to the nations was rejected, leading to widespread persecution (24:9).

Apocalyptic Imagery

The description of the sun being darkened, etc. (24:29) is <u>figurative language</u> that derives from the OT prophets. Such prophetic/apocalyptic language almost invariably has reference to Yahweh's coming through the agency of a foreign army to judge and punish a nation. The whole social and moral order collapses as a result.
See Isaiah 13:10; 34:4; Jeremiah 4:23-26; Ezekiel 32:7-8. Joel 2:31; 3:15.
In Isaiah 19:1 Yahweh "rides in a swift cloud and is coming [against] Egypt". The reference is to one or another of the Assyrian invasions of Egypt (from 671 to 663 BC).
The Jews would have readily understood Jesus' description of his coming in judgment, riding (like Yahweh) on the clouds (24:30). To all intents it served as a claim to deity.
In AD 70 God sent the Roman army under Titus to judge and destroy Jerusalem, punishing the city for its history of persecution and murder of his Son. And thereby fulfilling Matthew 22:7; 23:35-38.

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[4] From Clarke's *Commentary on the Bible*, notes for Matthew 24. Via the Bible Hub website: https://biblehub.com/commentaries/clarke/matthew/24.htm.
[5] The gospel is the good news concerning the arrival of God's kingdom (Mt 24:14). This is what the early Christians proclaimed. See Acts 8:12; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31.

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 always be watchful.

Response:
One should be very cautious in claiming that Matthew 24:35 introduces a new section.
For a start, this view demands that the *Parousia* ("coming") of 24:37, 39 differs from the *Parousia* ("coming") of 24:3, 27. But no, the *Parousia* refers to Christ's one and only Second Coming — in AD 70.
Consider, further, 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.

Heaven and earth will pass away

What should we make of Jesus' declaration about heaven and earth passing away?
Matthew 24:35 (my translation):
"Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will <u>certainly not</u> pass away."

Does this not show that Jesus, in this Discourse, is concerned with the end of the world?

Response:
No, Jesus is merely adding force to what he has already said, especially to the warning of the preceding verse:
Matthew 24:34 (my translation):
"I tell you the truth, this generation will <u>certainly not</u> pass away until all these things take place."

We could paraphrase Jesus thus:
"The dreadful events I have foretold will absolutely transpire before this generation has passed on.
Indeed, it is easier for the entire universe to pass away than for my own words to fail."[6]

In 24:34 Jesus solemnly promises that these things will happen to their generation, and in 24:35 he adds force to his threat by declaring his words to be more certain than the stability of the created order.[7]

Note the underlined words common to both verses above:
"Certainly not" conveys the sense of the double negative οὐ μὴ (*ou mē*, "no not") found in the Greek text of both verses. From the Bible Hub website:

> The particles οὐ μὴ in combination augment the force of the negation, and signify **not at all, in no wise, by no means**.[8]

No one knows the day or the hour

Some scholars who recognize the unity of the Olivet Discourse claim that Jesus contradicts himself when he declares that no one can know the time of his return (24:36), but equally, that it will certainly transpire before his generation has all passed away (24:34).[9]

Response:
There is no contradiction between the two time statements.
A pregnant woman knows the general time of her delivery, but not the specific day or hour.
Labor pains will come on suddenly, yet not entirely unexpectedly.
There is the need to have "bags packed and ready" — to be ready to go at a moment's notice to the hospital.
In this regard, it is probably no coincidence that Jesus, in Matthew 24:8, likens the trials preceding his return to a woman's birth pains.

The Last Judgment

The Judgment of the Sheep and Goats (Mt 25:31-46) shows Jesus enthroned, judging the nations gathered before him. The New Testament explicitly declares that this Judgment would transpire in the 1st century.
See Matthew 16:27-28; Hebrews 10:25, 37; James 5:7-9; 1 Peter 4:5, 7, 17; Revelation 11:18; 22:10-12.
But of course, Jesus' reign is ongoing. His judging and disciplining of individuals and nations continues.[10]
For us today, post-70 AD, judgment takes place throughout our lives and at our moment of death (Heb 9:27).
Only at death is each person's eternal destiny fixed.

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[6] Albert Barnes paraphrases Matthew 24:35 thus: "You may sooner expect to see the heaven and earth pass away and return to nothing, than my words to fail." From Barnes' *Notes for the Whole Bible*, notes for Matthew 24. Via the Bible Hub website: https://biblehub.com/commentaries/barnes/matthew/24.htm.
Jesus said something similar concerning the Mosaic Law in Luke 16:17 (HCSB): *"But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one stroke of a letter in the law to drop out."*

[7] Note the similar appeal Yahweh himself makes in Jeremiah 31:35-36 to the fixity of the created order.

[8] From the Bible Hub website, entry for Strong's G3361 (*mē*): https://biblehub.com/greek/3361.htm.

[9] One scholar who claimed that Jesus was inconsistent is C.S. Lewis. See the following article on this website: *"But of that day and that hour knoweth no man" (Mark 13:32)*.

[10] See the following article on this website: *The Sheep and Goats Judgment*. Especially note Appendix 1 to that article: *Jesus' ongoing judgment of the nations*. See also Appendix 2: *What happened at "the end of the age"?*