

The Futurist Interpretation of Revelation: Evidence from the Seal Judgments' Reliance on the Olivet Discourse

by Brian C. Collins¹

Many Christians find Revelation to be a difficult book. The symbolism seems impenetrable and the variety of viewpoints daunting. A path through the thicket can be found by paying close attention to Revelation's use of previous Scripture—especially in key passages that set trajectories for the interpretation of later parts of the book.² Revelation 6 is one of those key passages.

Commentators from a variety of viewpoints recognize that the seals draw from the Olivet Discourse and that the first four seals parallel the “beginning of birth pangs” in that discourse (Matt 24:5–8; Mark 13:5–8).³ This observation may not seem to help the interpreter of Revelation because interpretations of the Olivet Discourse vary. Some limit the referent of Jesus' teaching exclusively to the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70⁴ or almost exclusively to that fall (with the eschatological part coming after Matthew 24:36 || Mark 13:32).⁵ At the opposite extreme are interpreters who hold the discourse to be entirely eschatological.⁶ A common view takes part of the discourse to be historical (referring to the events of AD 70 and to the entire era from the destruction of Jerusalem to the return of Christ) and part of the discourse to be eschatological.⁷ A final approach recognizes that the Olivet Discourse

¹ Brian C. Collins (PhD, Theology) is biblical worldview lead specialist at BJU Press. He has contributed to Mark L. Ward Jr., et al., *Biblical Worldview: Creation, Fall, Redemption* (Greenville, SC: BJU Press, 2016), the *Lexham Survey of Theology*, ed. Brannon Ellis and Mark Ward (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2018), and the *Lexham Context Commentary*, ed. Douglas Mangum and Steven Runge (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2020). Brian serves as an elder at Mount Calvary Baptist Church in Greenville, SC.

² In an earlier article I argued that the use of Scripture in the prologue indicated that the book should be interpreted from a futurist paradigm. Brian Collins, “The Futurist Interpretation of Revelation: Intertextual Evidence from the Prologue,” *Journal of Biblical Theology & Worldview* 2, no. 1 (Fall 2021): 33–52.

³ Moses Stuart, *A Commentary on the Apocalypse* (Andover, MA: Allen, Morrill, and Wardwell, 1845), 159; Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1–7* (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 416; G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 373; Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 276; Peter J. Leithart, *Revelation 1–11*, ITC (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), 272–73; Buist Fanning, *Revelation*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 245.

⁴ John Owen, *The Works of John Owen* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1812), 9:138–39; N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996), 339–66.

⁵ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 500–46; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 890–947; Charles L. Quarles, *Matthew*, EBTC (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2022), 602–3.

⁶ Noted in Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: P&R, 1962), 489–91, and D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” *EBCRev*, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 9:552.

⁷ John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists* (n.d.; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 118–51; John Peter Lange, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (n.d.; reprint, Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2008), 418; Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, NAC (Nashville: B&H, 1992), 353–64; Carson, 556–57. This approach is superior to the preceding

looks with a kind of bifocal vision at the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 and at the eschatological Day of the Lord.⁸ Anthony Hoekema explains this view:

As we read the discourse . . . we find that aspects of these two topics are intermingled; matters concerning the destruction of Jerusalem (epitomized by the destruction of the temple) are mingled together with matters which concern the end of the world—so much so that it is sometimes hard to determine whether Jesus is referring to the one or the other or perhaps to both. . . . The passage, therefore, deals neither exclusively with the destruction of Jerusalem nor exclusively with the end of the world; it deals with both—sometimes with the latter in terms of the former. . . . Though the tribulation, persecution, suffering, and trials here predicted are described in terms which concern Palestine and the Jews, they must not be interpreted as having to do only with the Jews. Jesus was describing future events in terms which would be understandable to his hearers.⁹

The remainder of this article is a defense of the view that the first part of the Olivet Discourse refers to both a typological Day of the Lord in AD 70 and to the eschatological Day of the Lord.¹⁰ This interpretation of the Olivet Discourse is then used to guide the interpretation of Revelation 6.

Setting and Question (Matthew 24:1–3; Mark 13:1–4; Luke 21:5–7)

The setting for the Olivet Discourse and the inciting questions from the disciples place the Olivet Discourse in the context of eschatological judgment. All three Gospels note that Jesus had pronounced

two, but it suffers from three defects. First, the lack of agreement as to what is historical and what is future casts some doubt on this approach. Second, Blaising observes that this approach “renders the discourse somewhat confused.” Jesus is supposed to be addressing questions about the Temple’s destruction and his return at the end of the age. But for Carson and Blomberg the discourse “begins instead with general remarks about the church age, abruptly returns to the intended agenda with the abomination of desolation, and then rockets forward to the topic of the parousia.” Craig Blaising, “A Case for the Pretribulation Rapture,” in *Three Views on the Rapture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 38. Third, these interpretations tend to neglect connections to the OT passages that locate the entire discourse within the framework of the eschatological Day of the Lord. Blaising, 39.

⁸ Jonathan Edwards, *The “Blank Bible,”* The Works of Jonathan Edwards (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 864; John A. Broadus, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (1886; reprint, Valley Forge, PA: Judson, n.d.), 480; Henry Alford, *Alford’s Greek New Testament* (n.d.; reprint, Grand Rapids: Guardian, 1976), 1:235; Geerhardus Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2016), 5:285; Ridderbos, 477–95; Blaising, 39–41.

⁹ Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 149. This view reaches back to the church fathers. It is summarized well by the author of the *Incomplete Commentary on Matthew*: “The Lord does not say distinctly which signs pertain to the destruction of Jerusalem and which to the end of the world, namely, so that the same signs may seem to pertain both to the manifestation of the destruction of Jerusalem and to the manifestation of the end of the world because he did not explain to them in order like a history how the things were to be done, but in a prophetic manner he predicted to them the things that were to be done.” Thomas C. Oden and Gerald L. Bray, eds., *Incomplete Commentary on Matthew (Opus Imperfectum)*, Ancient Christian Texts (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2010), 372–73. This view has commended itself to other interpreters throughout the ages. It was noted by Thomas Aquinas in his commentary on Matthew (and may have been his view). Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. Matthew*, trans Paul M. Kimball (Camillus, NY: Dolorosa, 2012), 764–90. Thomas lists various interpretations without specifying his preference, so it is not entirely clear whether this is his view or not.

¹⁰ I will draw on commentaries from a variety of perspectives. Citation of a commentary in support of the position for which I am arguing does not imply that the commentator would agree with the overall argument I am making.

judgment on the Jewish leaders, and Matthew records that Jesus had proclaimed, “Your house is left to you desolate” (23:38).¹¹ Jesus’ final departure from the Temple may have implied a verdict of judgment upon it: as Yhwh left the temple prior to the exile (Ezek 10), so the Messiah left the Temple.¹² The judgment aspect of Jesus’ departure may have been apparent to the disciples, and the disciples’ praise of the Temple buildings may have been a response to Jesus’ pronouncement against the Temple.¹³

Jesus responded to the disciples’ praise of the Temple by predicting, “There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down” (24:2 || 13:2 || 21:6). This statement provoked questions from the disciples: “When will these things be?” (24:3 || 13:4 || 21:7). They were clearly asking Jesus when this Temple destruction would take place.

Matthew pairs this question with another, given in two parts: “And what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (24:3). Here the disciples linked the destruction of the Temple with the eschatological advent of Christ. Mark records the disciples making the same link: “And what will be the sign when *all these things* are about to be *accomplished*?” (13:4).¹⁴ This question alludes to Daniel 12:6–7 (note the emphasized words), a passage about bringing eschatological events to their completion.¹⁵ According to Luke, as Jesus was leaving the Temple, the disciples asked him, “And what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?” (21:7). The plural “things” may indicate that more than just the Temple is in view,¹⁶ though it may merely indicate that Luke is more focused on the Temple destruction in his account of the discourse.¹⁷

Clearly the disciples linked the destruction of the Temple and the Son of Man’s coming at the end of the age. Further, it was appropriate for Jesus to link the two events in his answer to the disciples: “The events accompanying those judgments upon the guilty city will be the foreshadowing of the Final

¹¹ Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*, copyright ©2016 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

¹² Oden and Bray, 370; Aquinas, 762; Calvin, *Harmony*, 115; France, *Mark*, 495; Mark L. Strauss, *Mark*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 568; O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Prophets* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004), 297.

¹³ Henry Barclay Swete, *The Gospel according to Saint Mark* (New York: Macmillan, 1898), 295; Peter G. Bolt, *The Cross from a Distance: Atonement in Mark’s Gospel*, NSBT (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004), 92.

¹⁴ C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel according to St. Mark: An Introduction and Commentary*, Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1959), 393–94. The *italics* indicate where Mark’s wording parallels wording in the Greek text of Daniel.

¹⁵ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 390; Edward Adams, *The Stars of Heaven: Cosmic Catastrophe in the New Testament and Its World*, Library of New Testament Studies (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 140.

¹⁶ I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 762; Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 1663.

¹⁷ David E. Garland, *Luke*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 828; James B. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Luke*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 595. When the Gospels are compared, Luke’s presentation focuses the reader’s attention on the typological fulfillment in AD 70 whereas Matthew’s presentation focuses on the anti-typical fulfillment in the final Day of the Lord. Bock, *Luke*, 206.

Judgment at His second advent.”¹⁸ Since the Temple was a microcosm of the cosmos,¹⁹ it was fitting for the judgment on the Temple to symbolize the judgment on the cosmos.

The Beginning of Birth Pangs (Matthew 24:4–8; Mark 13:5–8; Luke 21:8–11)

Many interpreters understand these verses to describe the entire inter-advent period.²⁰ They think that Jesus’ statement “but the end is not yet/immediately” (24:6 || 13:7 || 21:9) indicates that this section cannot present the events of the eschatological Day of the Lord.²¹ It is best, however, to understand these verses as referring typologically to the first century and ultimately to the final Day of the Lord.²²

The first-century, typological referent to “the end” is the destruction of the Temple.²³ These verses were clearly fulfilled typologically in the years between Christ’s ascension and the destruction of the Temple in AD 70. Blomberg summarizes these typological fulfillments:

Various messianic pretenders arose, most notably Theudas (Acts 5:36; Josephus, *Ant.* 20.97–99, 160–72, 188, who describes other false claimants as well). The war of Israel against Rome began in A.D. 66–67 and was preceded by the growing hostility incited by the Zealots. Famine ravaged Judea, as predicted in Acts 11:27–30, datable to ca. A.D. 45–47 by Josephus, *Ant.* 20.51–53. Earthquakes shook Laodicea in A.D. 60–61 and Pompeii in A.D. 62 (cf. also Acts 16:26).²⁴

The anti-typical end “must be taken as referring to the end of the *dolores Messiae*,” that is the end of Messianic pangs (see v. 8), which signify the time of great trouble that precedes the Son’s return to earth.²⁵ Geerhardus Vos observed,

As an infant cannot be born without pains, so too the rebirth of the entire earthly creation, which coincides with the end, will occur under terrible labor pains. The beginning of those pains consists of wars, sicknesses, famines, and earthquakes. In itself all of this would not yet be something special, but Luke 21:11 tells us that this will be accompanied by “terrible things and great signs

¹⁸ Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 523.

¹⁹ Vern S. Poythress, *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1991), 18–23; G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, NSBT (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004), 31–36.

²⁰ Carson, 557, 559; Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 567; Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 874. Even some who adopt a bifocal approach in subsequent verses see these verses as focused exclusively on the entire inter-advent period. David L. Turner, *Matthew*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 565.

²¹ Cranfield, 396; Blomberg, 353–54.

²² Cf. Aquinas, 764–65; John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 962–63; Blaising, 41, 45n39.

²³ Garland, 829.

²⁴ Blomberg, 356; cf. Aquinas, 764–65; Edwards, *Mark*, 391–92.

²⁵ Heinrich August Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Gospel of Matthew* (Edinburgh: T & T. Clark, 1884), 129.

from heaven,” thus by something absolutely extraordinary, so that it will be easy to distinguish them from ordinary disasters and distresses.²⁶

The language of “birth pains” may allude to Isaiah 13:8, another passage that intertwines a typological and eschatological Day of the Lord.²⁷ Further confirmation of this view is found in Paul’s allusion to the Olivet Discourse in his description of the onset of the Day of the Lord as “labor pains (1 Thess 5:3).²⁸ Since Paul clearly had the eschatological Day of the Lord in view, it is best to recognize that eschatological Day of the Lord as a referent of the birth pangs.

Luz captures the meaning of this section of the discourse well when he states, “Thus begin the ‘pangs’—that is, the tribulations of the last days. . . . Thus all of that is not yet the end, but it does deal with the beginnings of the end.”²⁹

Persecution (Matthew 24:9–14; Mark 13:9–13; Luke 21:12–19)

These verses turn to the issue of persecution. There is a seeming discrepancy between Matthew and Luke at this point. Matthew begins this section with “then,” whereas Luke begins with “but before all this.” Luke’s time reference is clearest. Before the false messiahs, wars, earthquakes, famines, and heavenly signs, Jesus’ followers would be persecuted by both Jews and Gentiles. Acts recounts that this persecution began as soon as the church was formed. Acts even uses the words of Jesus’ prophecy to describe this persecution:

“Lay hands on you” (Acts 4:3; 5:18; 12:1; 21:27); “persecute” (Acts 9:4–5; 22:7–8; 26:14–15); “hand over” (Acts 8:3; 12:4; 21:11; 22:4; 27:1; 28:17); “to synagogues” (Acts 6:9; 9:2; 19:8–9; 22:19; 26:11); “jails” (Acts 5:19–25; 8:3; 12:4–17; 16:23–40; 22:4, 19; 26:10); “kings” (Acts 9:15; 12:1; 25:23–28:28); “governors” (Acts 23:24, 26, 33; 24:1, 10; 26:30; see also 13:7; 18:12).³⁰

Luke’s account of the discourse affirms that this persecution will be an opportunity to bear witness to the gospel—which Acts also recounts (4:5–12, 33; 7:1–60; 23:11).³¹ Divine empowering to present this witness without forethought may be exemplified by Stephen (Acts 7).³² These verses, then, clearly

²⁶ Vos, *Dogmatics*, 5:285.

²⁷ Paul R. Raabe, “The Particularizing of Universal Judgment in Prophetic Discourse,” *CBQ* 64 (2002): 654–55; Adams, 43–44; cf. Blaising, 45–46.

²⁸ George Milligan, *St. Paul’s Epistle to the Thessalonians* (London: Macmillan, 1908), 65; Ernest Best, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, BNTC (London: Continuum, 1986), 208; Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 234; G. K. Beale, *1–2 Thessalonians*, IVPNTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), 137; W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel of Saint Matthew*, ICC (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 3:340, 342.

²⁹ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2005), 192. Note that Luz also acknowledges first-century applicability.

³⁰ Garland, 830n11; cf. Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, NAC (Nashville: B&H, 1992), 516–17.

³¹ Garland, 831.

³² Edwards, *Luke*, 600.

describe the persecution of the church as described in Acts before the events leading up to the destruction of the Temple in AD 70.³³

Matthew's account is significantly different from Luke's. In both Matthew and Luke, Jesus' followers are delivered up, hated for his name's sake, and put to death. But the wording is different, and within the Olivet Discourse Matthew does not mention the Jewish features (Sanhedrin/councils, synagogues) that Mark and Luke do. The true Matthean parallel to Mark and Luke at this point occurs in Matthew 10:19–21, not in the Olivet Discourse.³⁴

In Matthew's version of the Olivet Discourse, Jesus indicated that in conjunction with or following the initial birth pains, persecution would come.³⁵ This persecution would be exacerbated as people "fall away" from the faith and then "betray" believers. Paul alludes to this part of the discourse as well: "In 2 Thess 2:3 (built on the Olivet Discourse) this becomes the 'apostasy' or 'rebellion' that accompanies the appearance of the 'man of lawlessness.'"³⁶

To close out this section, Jesus said, "And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (24:14; cf. 13:10). With regard to the type, this prophecy refers to the spread of the gospel throughout the known

³³ Mark's account is similar to Luke's. He adds that the followers of Jesus would be beaten in synagogues, which also occurred in the earliest days of the church (Acts 5:40; 22:19; 2 Cor 11:24). Strauss, 574.

³⁴ The parallel between Matthew 10:19–21 and Mark and Luke's account of the Olivet Discourse can be accounted for by the fact that Jesus, as he traveled from place to place, probably often said similar things on different occasions. N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God (London: SPCK, 1992), 422–23; Carson, 283. It may be that because Matthew had already presented his readers with the content found in Mark and Luke's version of the Olivet Discourse, he omitted that material here. The omission allows Matthew to emphasize the eschatological aspect of the discourse. While Luke emphasized the first-century aspect, Matthew presented readers with a part of the discourse not fully represented in Mark and Luke.

Interestingly, Matthew 10:17–22 has an eschatological element to it as well. By verse 17 Jesus was looking beyond the initial mission given to the Twelve. Blomberg, 174; Davies and Allison, 2:179, 181–82; Luz, *Matthew 8–20*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2001), 89; Nolland, 425. The phrase "you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes" is obviously not true if it refers to the Twelve's evangelistic mission during Jesus' earthly ministry. There are two plausible interpretations that both have a long pedigree. Hilary of Poitiers proposed that conversion of Israel would not take place until just before the Second Advent. Hilary of Poitiers, *Commentary on Matthew*, Fathers of the Church (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2012), 119. Many modern commentators have similarly concluded that these verses indicate that the "mission to Israel" will not be complete before the Second Coming. Blomberg, 176; Davies and Allison, 190. Another option is that these words "do not denote the *mission* but the *flight* of the disciples. This is clear from the beginning of this verse, 'When they persecute you in this city, flee ye into another.'" Ridderbos, 509; cf. Nolland, 427, and similarly, Oden and Bray, 179.

The eschatological nature of Matthew 10 casts the parallels in Mark 13 and Luke 21 in another light. Though Luke certainly emphasizes the typological fulfillment in his presentation, the eschatological element should not be thought to be entirely absent in Luke and Mark. Mark in particular has two eschatologically oriented parallels with Matthew in this section: the gospel will be preached to all the nations (13:10), and the one who endures to the end is the one who is saved (13:13).

³⁵ Meyer, 131–32.

³⁶ Osborne, *Matthew*, 875–76.

world of that day.³⁷ For instance, Paul could say that the gospel was prospering “in the world” (Col 1:6) and even that it “has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven” (Col 1:23).³⁸

However, the typological fulfillment of this saying does not exhaust its significance. Alford argues that despite the typological fulfillment, “in the wider sense, the words imply that the Gospel shall be preached *in all the world, literally taken*, before the great and final end come.”³⁹ The OT prophets looked forward to the day when the nations would be gathered to worship God, and there may be an allusion to that here.⁴⁰ Hays says, “One suspects that Isaiah hovers somewhere in the background (passages such as Isa 2:2-4, 49:6, 57:6-8; 60:1-3; cf. Ps 22:27-28).”⁴¹ Revelation also predicts the world-wide proclamation of the gospel (Rev 5:9-10; 7:9; 14:6), and the ultimate fulfillment of this prophecy will come to pass during the Day of the Lord predicted by Revelation.

Many understand Matthew 24:4-14, Mark 13:5-13, and Luke 21:8-19 to describe the entire inter-advent period. It is certainly true that false Christs, wars, famines, earthquakes, and persecution have existed since the church was established until the present. These verses do not, however, give a disjointed list of events that will happen in a scattered fashion over a lengthy period of time. The events in these verses occur together and form a pattern that was fulfilled first in AD 70 and which will be ultimately fulfilled in the eschatological Day of the Lord.

The Abomination of Desolation (Matthew 24:15-22; Mark 13:14-20; Luke 21:20-24)

Jesus then directed the disciples’ attention to Daniel’s prediction of the abomination of desolation (Daniel 8:13; 9:27; 11:31; 12:11).⁴² Many have tried to identify a first-century fulfillment for the abomination of desolation. Keener observes that “Josephus indicated that the shedding of priestly blood in the sanctuary (Jos. *War* 4.147-201; 4.343; 5.17-18; cf. 2.424) was the desecration.” Intriguingly, he observes, “Very close to three and a half years after the abomination (cf. *War* 6.93) the temple was destroyed and violated even more terribly.”⁴³

However, Mark indicates that the abomination of desolation is a person: “When you see the abomination of desolation standing where *he* ought not to be” (13:14, emphasis added). Though some

³⁷ Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man*, trans. William Crookshank (London: Tegg & Son, 1837), 407-8 (4.15.13); Alford, 1:238; Blomberg, 356.

³⁸ Paul was probably indicating, with expansive language, that the gospel had gone to all the nations and was continuing to spread among them. John Davenant, *An Exposition of St. Paul to the Colossians* (1627; reprint, Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2005), 265. The expansive language was used because Paul was stating that “the gospel had *in principle* already been preached world-wide,” even though in practice it is still in process of spreading worldwide. N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, TNTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1986), 89.

³⁹ Alford, 1:238.

⁴⁰ Nolland, 967.

⁴¹ Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), 95.

⁴² The statement “let the reader understand” [24:15 || 13:14] is probably the Lord’s. Ridderbos, 478. The Greek phrase cited in Matthew and Mark appears in exactly the same form in Daniel 12:11 in at least one version of the Greek text.

⁴³ Keener, 576; cf. Carson, 562; Osborne, *Matthew*, 883; Strauss, 579.

suggest that “he” is a reference to the one who does the desolating or to an inanimate idol,⁴⁴ the referent is best understood to be the abomination. Davies and Allison propose that 2 Thessalonians 2:3–4 is based on this teaching of Jesus,⁴⁵ and James Edwards suggests that the abomination “refers to ‘the man of lawlessness’ as conceived in 2 Thess 2:3–4, who will exalt himself in the temple as God.”⁴⁶ He observes the close correlation between 2 Thessalonians 2:3–4 and Mark 13:14:

The “man of lawlessness” corresponds to the man *standing* (masculine participle) in v. 14; and the description of him parodying God in the temple correlates with “‘the abomination that causes desolation’ standing where he *does not belong*.” Both texts depict a blasphemous Antichrist who will do a scandalous deed that will trigger the return of the Lord. Both texts also warn disciples against mistaken eschatological assumptions, especially against being deceived by signs and wonders.⁴⁷

Thus Mark “indicates that Jesus foresaw the rise of a terrible antagonist, an Antichrist, who at some future time will unleash a severe tribulation on the people of God, which in turn will usher in the return of the Lord.”⁴⁸ This fits well with the eschatological context of Daniel 12:11, the OT passage to which Jesus alluded.⁴⁹

The typical event that prefigures this eschatological abomination of desolation is the destruction of Jerusalem (with its Temple) in AD 70 (Luke 21:20).⁵⁰ Some commentators on Matthew and Mark argue that the destruction of Jerusalem cannot be the abomination of desolation because there would have been no time to flee as the text proposes (people needed to flee the city before it fell).⁵¹ If, however, the *abomination of desolation* is a future event while the *desolation of Jerusalem* in AD 70 is the type of that desolation, the problem is resolved. The flight in Matthew and Mark would refer to the far future event and the flight in Luke would refer to the AD 70 event.⁵² In Matthew and Mark people flee when they see the abomination of desolation, whereas in Luke they are to flee when Jerusalem is compassed with armies—before the desolation of Jerusalem.

Ridderbos, while granting that the events of AD 70 “are in a general way the partial fulfillment of the prophecy, as far as the destruction of the temple is concerned,” notes that the abomination of desolation in Matthew and Mark is eschatological: “It is even more striking that, both in Mark and

⁴⁴ Strauss, 579.

⁴⁵ Davies and Allison, 3:346.

⁴⁶ Edwards, *Mark*, 398.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 398.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 399.

⁴⁹ Tremper Longman III, *Daniel*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 287.

⁵⁰ Ridderbos, 495; Garland, 832.

⁵¹ Carson, 562; Strauss, 579.

⁵² Stein, 519–20; Bock, 1675–78.

Matthew, the tribulation with respect to this abomination is clearly connected with the last days.” The abomination is closely tied to a tribulation that is said to “immediately” precede the coming of Christ.⁵³

In the description of the days of vengeance and distress that follow the desolation, Luke’s focus remains on the events surrounding the AD 70 destruction of Jerusalem (21:21–24).⁵⁴ This is most clearly indicated in the prediction that the Jews will be “led captive among all the nations, and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled” (21:24).⁵⁵ This statement requires time to unfold. It certainly describes what happened after AD 70 until the present. The “times of the Gentiles” will persist until Christ returns to judge the nations.⁵⁶ Notably, Luke also omits the statements in Matthew and Mark that people should not turn back to retrieve forgotten items (24:17–18 || 13:15–16), though he does elsewhere include a record of Jesus giving this warning in the context of his eschatological coming (Luke 17:31).⁵⁷ Nor does Luke speak about an “unprecedented tribulation” the way Matthew and Mark do (24:21–22 || 13:19–20).⁵⁸

The details fit well with the fall of Jerusalem. Jews had fled to Jerusalem during the Jewish War,⁵⁹ but Jesus predicted that those who are in Jerusalem should leave the city. Those in the country should not enter the city since God’s vengeance was being poured out on the city (21:22).⁶⁰ As Bock observes, “The focus of these remarks from the Lucan perspective is the events of A.D. 70, but it must be remembered that these remarks are part of a pattern of judgment, so that they apply to the latter period as well.”⁶¹

Matthew and Mark focus on the eschatological tribulation, as interpreters from the patristic period onward have recognized. The author of the *Incomplete Commentary on Matthew* observed, “But this is more fitting to understand about the end of the world, which that tribulation [in AD 70] prefigured. Then there will truly be a tribulation as never was.”⁶² Though some seek to restrict Matthew and Mark to AD 70, Peter Bolt observes:

⁵³ Ridderbos, 494. Carson rejects the eschatological interpretation of 24:15–21 because “the details in vv. 16–21 are too limited geographically and culturally to justify that view” (561). However, the focus of the entire passage is on Jerusalem. This does not entail a denial that the eschatological events have a wider scope. It is simply that this passage has a particular focus.

⁵⁴ Ridderbos, 495.

⁵⁵ Geldenhuys, 528–29.

⁵⁶ Geldenhuys, 528; Edwards, *Luke*, 605. The times of the Gentiles may have both a negative connotation (they trample on the city) and a positive one in the broader canonical context (the gospel goes to the nations during this period) (cf. Matt 24:14; Mark 13:10; Rom 11:25). Garland, 834; Edwards, *Luke*, 605.

⁵⁷ Bock, 1678.

⁵⁸ Ridderbos, 495; Bock, 1679.

⁵⁹ Garland, 832.

⁶⁰ Or, possibly, should not enter Judea; cf. the Christians who “prior to the siege of Titus . . . had fled from Jerusalem and Judea to Pella in Transjordan.” James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Luke*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 604.

⁶¹ Bock, 1679.

⁶² Oden and Bray, 388.

Jesus' language sounds rather excessive if this is what is being referred to—despite the fact that France (2002: 521) argues that it 'does not outrun the detailed and lurid description of the siege in Josephus (Jewish War, e.g. 5.424–438, 512–518, 567–572; 6.193–213)'. Evans (2001: 322) is surely right when he says that “unless we view this statement as unbridled hyperbole, the warning that the period of tribulation will be so severe that unless shortened it will extinguish human life argues that the prophecy portends more than the Jewish war . . . [At that time] the fate of the whole of humanity did not hang in the balance.”⁶³

This is not to minimize the events of AD 70, which truly foreshadowed the eschatological tribulation. Strauss's summary of Josephus's description of the terrors of AD 70 reveals the depth of suffering that occurred at the first-century destruction of Jerusalem:

Outside the city the Romans crucified so many Jews that they ran out of wood for crosses. Inside there was extreme infighting, murder, famine, disease, and even cannibalism. Thousands were slaughtered when Romans breached the walls (J.W. 6.3.3 §§193–195; 6.8.5 §§403–406). In all Josephus claims that 1,100,000 died during the siege and 97,000 were taken captive (J.W. 6.9.3 §§420–421). These numbers must surely be exaggerations, but they well illustrate the horrible sufferings the city experienced.⁶⁴

Nonetheless Bolt's argument stands. It is bolstered by Jesus' allusion to Daniel 12:1, an eschatological text: “And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time” (in connection with Exod 10:14; 11:6; Joel 2:1–2).⁶⁵ Osborne argues that Matthew 24:21 (cf. Mark 13:19) is not exclusively eschatological but refers to “the destruction of Jerusalem as a foreshadowing of the final events of history.”⁶⁶ This may be so, but the accent in Matthew and Mark is upon the future.

Beware False Christs (Matthew 24:23–28; Mark 13:21–23)

Matthew and Mark record Jesus' warnings against being led away by false Christs. Jesus' coming will be evident, not hidden. With regard to the time of these warnings' applicability, Alford observes, “These verses have but a faint reference (though an unmistakable one) to the time of the siege: their principal reference is to the latter days.”⁶⁷ There is a parallel in Josephus to the near applicability and

⁶³ Bolt, 103n4, brackets and ellipses Bolt's; cf. Nolland, 975. Bolt's position, that the tribulation is a reference to the death of Christ, is not accepted.

⁶⁴ Strauss, 582.

⁶⁵ Nolland, 975; Osborne, *Matthew*, 886.

⁶⁶ Osborne, *Matthew*, 886; cf. Strauss, 582.

⁶⁷ Alford, 1:241; cf. Osborne, *Matthew*, 887; with reference to the future alone Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel according to Saint Mark*, BNTC (London: Continuum, 1991), 317; Davies and Allison, 3:351–52.

a parallel in 2 Thessalonians⁶⁸ that would apply to the period after the eschatological abomination of desolation:

Josephus echoes this language when he speaks of various messianic imposters in the first century who deceived the masses, pretending to do “wonders and signs” (τέρατα καὶ σημεῖα; *Ant.* 20.8.6–7 §§167–172). Paul similarly says that the “man of lawlessness,” who sets himself up in God’s temple as God, will use “all sorts of displays of power through signs and wonders” (ἐν πάσῃ δυνάμει καὶ σημεῖοις καὶ τέρασιν; 2 Thess 2:9). The impressive nature of these false miracles will be such to deceive, “if possible, [even] the elect.”⁶⁹

In contrast to the deceptions, Christ’s second coming will be visible—like lightening that flashes across the sky (24:26). There will be no mistaking it.

Christ’s coming will also be like vultures gathered over a corpse. Of the eight possible interpretations listed by Davies and Allison, the most likely are either, “The coming of the Son of man will be as public and obvious as eagles or vultures circling over carrion” or “The eschatological tribulation will be concluded by vultures destroying the flesh of the wicked dead, as in Ezek. 39:17; Sib. Or. 3:644-6 and Rev. 19:17-18).”⁷⁰ The former is more likely, but the similarity of the latter to Revelation 19:17–18 should not be dismissed.⁷¹

The Coming of the Son of Man (Matthew 24:29–31; Mark 13:24–27; Luke 21:25–28)

With these verses, the sermon transitions from its bifocal vision of the already (AD 70) and the not-yet to an exclusive focus on the not-yet. For Luke, verse 24 functions as a hinge verse. The times of the Gentiles stretch from the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 until the coming of the Son of Man—the topic of 21:25–28. Matthew and Mark transition by describing the tribulation that follows the abomination of desolation in terms readers now know apply most directly to the final, eschatological tribulation (24:21–22 || 13:19–20). Matthew and Mark then locate these verses “immediately after the tribulation of those days” (24:29) and “in those days, after that tribulation” (13:24).⁷²

These verses are the most challenging for the preterist reading of the Olivet Discourse. France argues that Matthew 24:4–35 || Mark 13:5–31 is entirely focused on the disciples’ questions regarding the destruction of the Temple. The topic does not shift to the second coming of Christ until Matthew

⁶⁸ Davies and Allison, 3:352.

⁶⁹ Strauss, 583.

⁷⁰ Davies and Allison, 3:355–56.

⁷¹ Luke’s version of the Olivet Discourse does not parallel Matthew and Mark at this point. However, Luke records that Jesus had taught some of these same things earlier in his ministry (Luke 17:23–24).

⁷² William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 474. Keener helpfully states the matter in a way that identifies the ambiguities the original hearers and readers would have had in separating out the near and far fulfillments: “‘Immediately’ ties the tribulation of ‘those days’ to the unidentified final tribulation, a tribulation that may follow it by only a few years (as some of Matthew’s audience could still have held) or, on a more modern reading, can only be identified as the final one by the fact that the parousia concludes it.” Keener, 583.

24:36 || Mark 13:32. Thus, for France, the coming of the Son of Man in the clouds is not the return of Christ but his heavenly enthronement.⁷³ France argues that the cosmic language of Matthew 25:29 || Mark 13:24–26 (cf. Luke 21:27) is OT language for “far-reaching political change” and that Daniel 7, in its original context, is about the enthronement of the Messiah in heaven, not his return to earth.⁷⁴ What is seen is not the Son of Man literally returning in the clouds but the effects of his enthronement: “the destruction of the temple (expressed in the strongly ‘visual’ imagery of vv. 24b–25) and the gathering of the international people of God (v. 27).”⁷⁵

The difficulties of this view are manifold. First, the statement that the Son of Man will be seen coming in the clouds is best taken to refer to his actually being seen by people rather than being “seen” in the events of AD 70, since Acts 1:11 sets the precedent for what coming in the clouds will be. It will be something visible. Second, for Jesus to come “with power and great glory” (24:30; cf. 13:26; 21:27) most likely indicates that his coming is visible. Third, the accompanying allusion to Zechariah 12:10–12 confirms the eschatological timing of this event. Fourth, this event is pictured as lightning that “comes from the east and shines as far as the west” (24:27), which indicates that the coming of Christ referred to is a visible and unmistakable coming.⁷⁶ Fifth, the singular “heaven” in Matthew is used to indicate “the visible (earthly) world,” and the plural is used to indicate the “invisible (divine) realm.”⁷⁷ The use of the singular “heaven” in verse 30 indicates that the Son of Man is appearing in the visible heaven.⁷⁸ Sixth, the imagery is derived from OT passages about God’s end-time coming.⁷⁹ Seventh, Marshall rightly notes that “the cosmic signs cannot be interpreted as purely political events.”⁸⁰ Edward Adams’s survey of “cosmic catastrophe language” in Jewish apocalyptic literature demonstrated that “in all those texts [which “employ global and/or cosmic catastrophe language”], more than local socio-political change . . . is in view. In many cases, the final judgment is envisaged.”⁸¹ In some cases, the “heavenly disorders” are “preliminary,” but even so, “in all cases, actual celestial abnormalities seem to be in view.”⁸² Eighth, David Turner notes that the “global language” of Matthew 24 points toward an eschatological coming. Ninth, Turner also warns about the danger of minimizing the full scope of Jesus’ eschatological teaching:

⁷³ France, *Mark*, 498, 500–1; France, *Matthew*, 293–24; cf. R. T. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament* (1970; reprint, Vancouver, Canada: Regent College Publishing, 1998), 230–39; cf. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 354–65; Quarles, 628–33.

⁷⁴ France, *Mark*, 500–1, 534; cf. France, *Matthew*, 396, 923; cf. Quarles, 629–30.

⁷⁵ France, *Mark*, 535.

⁷⁶ These first four observations are all drawn from Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 807–9.

⁷⁷ Jonathan T. Pennington, *Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 132.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁷⁹ Adams, 150–52.

⁸⁰ Marshall, 777; cf. Adams, 156.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 96

⁸² *Ibid.*, 98.

One difficulty with preterism is its truncation of Jesus's eschatology, which brings the reign of heaven to earth (6:10) and renews the world (19:28). If all this has already occurred, one wonders at the underwhelming denouement of the glorious future promised by the biblical prophets, John, and Jesus himself.⁸³

In light of these considerations, it is best to understand Matthew 24:30 || Mark 13:26 || Luke 21:27 as referring to the second coming of Christ.⁸⁴

This marks the end of the first section of the Olivet Discourse. This section unfolds the pattern of the Day of the Lord, with an eye both to its type in AD 70 and its ultimate fulfillment. The next major section, Matthew 24:32–25:30 || Mark 13:28–37 || Luke 21:29–33, consists of instruction about how one should think and live in light of the Day of the Lord just described.

Parousia Parables (Matthew 24:32–25:30; Mark 13:28–37; Luke 21:29–33)

The first reflective instruction comes in the form of a parable. When a fig tree (or any tree) puts its leaves out, it is clear that the summer is near. When all these things are seen, Jesus' disciples should know that Jesus is near, at the very door. This is straightforward enough, but it is complicated by Jesus' explanation: "Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place" (24:34 || 13:30 || cf. 21:32).

⁸³ Turner, 584.

⁸⁴ Broadus, 490; Cranfield, 406; Carson, 568; Blomberg, 362–63; Bock, 1686; Davies and Allison, 3:361–62; Nolland, 983; Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 202; Keener, 585–86. The strongest preterist counterargument is that Daniel 7:13 identifies the Son of Man's coming in the clouds as the Son of Man's coming up to the Father's throne in heaven rather than his returning to earth. However, certain contextual factors in Daniel 7 make it more likely that an eschatological coming is primarily in view. Goldingay observes that the perspective of Daniel 7 has been earth-focused, that "the opening phrase of v. 9 implies a continuity of perspective," that the reference to the Ancient of Days "coming" (v. 22) implies an earthly setting for the thrones, and that final judgment scenes often have an earthly location. John Goldingay, *Daniel*, rev. ed., WBC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 361. The fact that war will be made on the saints until the Ancient of Days comes (to earth) implies that the timing of the coming is eschatological. Longman, 198; Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 3:53; cf. 3:189–90; cf. E. J. Young, *Daniel* (1949; reprint, Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1978), 158, 159. Thus, when the Son of Man comes with the clouds of heaven to the Ancient of Days, he is coming from heaven to earth. Daniel's vision of the Son of Man coming with the clouds is a vision of the Second Coming. See Andrew E. Steinmann, *Daniel*, CC (Saint Louis: Concordia, 2008), 359–60.

Daniel 7 has numerous links with both Psalms 2 and 110. The beastly kingdoms of Daniel 7 correspond to the raging nations in Psalm 2. In all three passages the Son of Man is enthroned over the kings of earth, and the kings who oppose the Son are crushed. In Daniel 7 and Psalm 2 there is blessing for those who follow the Son (Ps 2:12; Dan 7:18, 22, 27). Steinmann, 360. These psalms refer, in part, to the reign of Christ that commenced at his ascension. Steinmann, however, notes a major difference between the two Psalms (2 and 110) and Daniel 7. In Daniel, "the Messiah is not pictured as ruling until after the beasts are shorn of their power, whereas in these two psalms, the Messiah's reign begins the process of defeating the nations." Steinmann, *Daniel*, 360. The similarities and divergences of these passages point to the inaugurated but not yet consummated nature of the kingdom. Psalms 2 and 110 include both the inauguration (Pss 2:1–7; 110:1–4) and the consummation (Pss 2:6, 8–12; 110:5–7) of Christ's reign. Daniel 7:8–14, 20–27 is about the consummation, but some of its imagery can be applied to the enthronement of Christ that followed his resurrection and ascension. Indeed, God himself applied this imagery to Christ's current enthronement by having Christ ascend into a cloud (Acts 1:9).

Critical scholars have argued that since Christ did not return within the lifetimes of the generation then living, his prophecy proved false.⁸⁵ This is an utterly impossible interpretation. As if to foreclose it in the most emphatic terms, Jesus followed the prediction of verse 24:34 || 13:30 with the assertion, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away” (24:35 || 13:31).

For preterists, this verse is the lynchpin of their interpretation:

The key to understanding the entire discourse is found in verse 34 which says, “Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.” . . . 1. Every other time the phrase “this generation” is used in Matthew (11:16; 12:41, 42, 45; 23:36), it clearly refers to the generation of Jews to whom Jesus was speaking. 2. In the immediately preceding context, the same phrase clearly refers to the generation of Jews to whom Jesus is speaking (23:36). 3. The phrase is used in Matthew 24 in a discourse that is a response to a specific question by the disciples regarding the time of the temple’s destruction (24:1–3).⁸⁶

Mathison’s arguments are aimed at those who would explain “this generation” to refer to “the nation of the Jews”⁸⁷ or to “the people of this particular disposition and frame of mind who are averse to Jesus and his words.”⁸⁸ Understanding “this generation” to refer to the generation of Jesus’ day does not necessitate a preterist interpretation, however. Herman Bavinck explains:

The words “this generation” (ἡ γενεα αὐτη, *hē genea hautē*) cannot be understood to mean the Jewish people, but undoubtedly refer to the generation then living. On the other hand, it is clear that the words “all these things” (παντα ταυτα, *panta tauta*) do not include the parousia itself but only refer to the signs that precede and announce it. For after predicting the destruction of Jerusalem and the signs and his return and even the gathering of his elect by the angels, and therefore actually ending his eschatological discourse, Jesus proceeds in verse 32 to offer a practical application. Here he states that just as in the case of the fig tree the sprouting of leaves announces the summer, so “all these things” are signs that the end is near or that the Messiah is at the door. Here the expression *panta tauta* clearly refers to the signs of the coming parousia, not to the parousia itself, for else it would make no sense to say that when “these things” occur, the end is “near.” In verse 34 the words “all these things” (*panta tauta*) have the same meaning. Jesus therefore does not say that his parousia will still occur within the time of the generation then living. What he says is that the signs and portents of it, as they would be visible in the destruction of Jerusalem and concomitant events, would begin to occur in the time of the generation then living. Of this Jesus is so sure that he says that while heaven and earth will pass away, his words will by

⁸⁵ Davies and Allison, 3:367–68; Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 208.

⁸⁶ Keith A. Mathison, *Postmillennialism: An Eschatology of Hope* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1999), 111–12; cf. Quarles, 635.

⁸⁷ Vos, *Dogmatics*, 5:287.

⁸⁸ Ridderbos, 502.

no means pass away. For the rest, however, Jesus abstains from all attempts at further specifying the time.⁸⁹

The generation that Jesus was speaking to would experience “all these things” in terms of the type. After AD 70 no further events must be fulfilled before the return of Christ. From that time, Christ is at the door and could step through at any time. The objection to this view is that some of the things mentioned clearly are eschatological.⁹⁰ Nonetheless, even the eschatological items have their typical counterparts. This remains a possible explanation.⁹¹

Then Jesus said something that seems in tension with the mention of signs throughout the discourse, including in the preceding parable: “But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only” (24:36 || 13:32). The subject has changed (indicated by “but concerning”)⁹² from the coming narrowly conceived in its culmination to the entire complex event that the discourse has been about. The day referred to in these verses is the Day of the Lord. Strauss observes, “‘That day’ often has eschatological significance, referring to judgment day—the eschatological ‘day of the Lord’ (Joel 3:18; Amos 8:3, 9, 13; 9:11; Obad 1:8; Mic 4:6; Zeph 1:9–10; 3:11, 16; Zech 9:16; Matt 7:22; Luke 10:12; 1 Cor 3:13; 2 Tim 1:12, 18; 4:8). This meaning is likely in light of the close parallel between the parable of the return of the owner of the house that follows (vv. 34–36) and the return of the Son of Man (vv. 26–27).”⁹³

There is thus no contradiction between 24:36 || 13:32 and the signs mentioned in the discourse. The signs are all interior to the Day of the Lord. But 24:36 || 13:32 concerns the commencement of the eschatological Day of the Lord.

Matthew 24:36 and Mark 13:32 also set the theme for the following illustrations and parables. It is important to keep in mind that in the illustrations and parables “coming” refers not simply to the climactic coming of the Son to earth but to the entire Day of the Lord as a coming in judgment that culminates in the Son’s return to earth. This accounts for the fact that earlier in the discourse certain very specific signs are mentioned whereas in this section the total unexpectedness of the coming is emphasized. The commencement of the coming will be totally unexpected, but once the coming commences the Day of the Lord judgments will serve as signs of the nearness of the culmination of that coming in the visible appearance and return of Christ to earth.

⁸⁹ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 4:687.

⁹⁰ Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 3:367.

⁹¹ Nolland, 989; Osborne, *Matthew*, 899. It is also possible that “the generation that sees ‘all these things’” is “perhaps some future generation.” Noted in Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 3:367. The “this” refers not to the generation hearing Jesus speak but to the generation about whom Jesus was ultimately speaking. When they see these things take place, they know the return to earth has drawn near.

⁹² Strauss, *Mark*, 595.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 595; cf. Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Mark*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 336–37.

The Olivet Discourse and the Seal Judgments

A reader inclined to accept the preceding interpretation of the Olivet Discourse would be predisposed to read Revelation's description of the six seals either with the same bifocal vision or within a futurist framework. Within the context of Revelation 6, the futurist reading is more compelling since the focus of the seals is not Jerusalem but the entire earth.⁹⁴ In addition, the four horsemen allude to Zechariah 6:1–8, which pictures horses and chariots (instruments of war) emerging from God's presence (the two bronze mountains recalling the two bronze pillars at the entrance of the temple)⁹⁵ to execute judgment on the nations, especially on Babylon to the north and probably on Egypt to the south.⁹⁶ These nations are representative of all the idolatrous nations, and the judgment is eschatological.⁹⁷ Thus both of the major passages alluded to by the first four seals are eschatological in nature.

From the earliest interpretations of Revelation to the present, many have identified the rider on the white horse as Christ.⁹⁸ A futurist could understand this of Christ beginning his conquest of earth as the Day of the Lord commences.⁹⁹ In chapter 19 Christ also rides a white horse, wears a crown, and makes war, and many interpreters think it is most reasonable to expect consistency between these symbols rather than to explain them as representing different persons.¹⁰⁰ In addition, white is always

⁹⁴ See Thomas R. Schriener, *Revelation*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2023), 271.

⁹⁵ Andrew E. Hill, "Zechariah," in *Minor Prophets*, CBC, ed. Philip W. Comfort (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2012), 171; Anthony R. Petterson *Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi*, AOTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity 2015), 176; cf. Eugene H. Merrill, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 188; George L. Klein, *Zechariah*, NAC (Nashville: B&H 2008), 185; Al Wolters, *Zechariah*, HCOT (Walpole, MA: Peeters, 2014), 173; Mark J. Boda, *The Book of Zechariah*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 360.

⁹⁶ Wolters, 172; Boda, 376. Wolters and Boda seem to identify the historical fulfillment of this judgment with events that began several years before these visions. Cyrus's conquest of Babylon occurred with little turmoil or devastation upon Babylon. But several revolts in Babylon upon Darius's rise to power led to more serious consequences, including the execution of over 2,000 Babylonians in the year before this vision. Wolters, 179; Boda, 357, 358. Subsequent to this vision Darius ended a revolt in Egypt, which may account for the chariots that headed south. See Merrill, 105; Boda, 109. The difficulty with this interpretation is that in Zechariah 1 the Angel of Yhwh responded to the report of the nations' rest with the cry "how long." This statement was made in relation to a seventy-year span of time that would be completed when the Temple was rebuilt. It would seem odd, therefore, for the fulfillment of the later vision of judgment to precede both the first vision of the nations at rest and the end of the seventy years.

⁹⁷ There is contextual precedent for an eschatological reading in preceding visions (cf. 2:11–12; 3:9) and in the following unit (6:9–15). Duguid opts for an eschatological reading by linking this vision with the immediately preceding one. "In that vision, idolatry was driven (carried) out of God's land to the land of Babel, where a temple was prepared for it (5:5–11). . . . Now the focus shifts to answer the question: 'Will these idolators possess Babylon for ever, in an ongoing enmity to God? Will there always be a threatening location from which to launch regular attacks on God's people from the uttermost north. . . ?' No, God will judge the idolatrous nations, here represented by Babylon and Egypt, for their idolatry. Iain M. Duguid, *Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi*, EPSC (Carlisle, PA: Evangelical, 2010), 124.

⁹⁸ Irenaeus of Lyons, "Irenaeus against Heresies," in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo: Christian Literature, 1885), 1:493. [4.21.3] Victorinus of Petovium, "Commentary on the Apocalypse," in *Latin Commentaries on Revelation*, ACT (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2011), 10; Schreiner, *Revelation*, 267.

⁹⁹ William De Burgh, *An Exposition of the Book of Revelation* (Dublin: Hodges, Smith, and Co., 1857), 142; Joseph A. Seiss, *The Apocalypse*, 8th ed. (New York: Cook, 1901), 315–16.

¹⁰⁰ De Burgh, 142; Schreiner, *Revelation*, 267; noted in Beale, *Revelation*, 375.

used in Revelation for that which is holy.¹⁰¹ Christ is also identified as the conqueror in Revelation 3:21; 5:5; 17:14.¹⁰² A futurist following this interpretation would understand Christ, in chapter 6, “going forth to his work of conquest,” while in chapter 19 “we have his appearing to strike the last blow.”¹⁰³ This harmonizes with the Olivet Discourse, which can speak of the entire Day of the Lord sequence as the *coming* of Christ (Matt 24:39).

However, Jesus began the Olivet Discourse with the words, “See that no one leads you astray. For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and they will lead many astray.” Given the close connection between the four horsemen and the beginning of birth pangs in the Olivet Discourse (Matt 24:4–8), the connection of the first horseman with the Antichrist is the best interpretation.

In both Zechariah 6 and Revelation 6, the horses function as a unit, signifying similar realities.¹⁰⁴ This means that the white horse must signify some calamity. Either of the futurist interpretations proffered above would be consistent with this observation, but the common view that the white horse symbolizes Christ advancing his kingdom through the gospel is not compatible with it.

The second item in Jesus’ list of birth pangs is, “And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars.” The red horse and the rider with a sword most likely represent wars that will commence at the beginning of the eschatological Day of the Lord.¹⁰⁵

The imagery of the third seal signifies famine, which Jesus included among the birth pangs that marked the onset of the Day of the Lord (Matt 24:7).¹⁰⁶ This judgment follows logically upon conquest and warfare. Warfare often leads to the destruction of land and thus to famine.¹⁰⁷ It is also the birth pang that Jesus mentioned after mentioning war.

¹⁰¹ Schreiner, *Revelation*, 267; noted in Beale, *Revelation*, 372.

¹⁰² Noted in Beale, *Revelation*, 375. Further confirmation of the unity of these two horsemen is found in Psalm 45, which speaks of the Messiah as a rider with a sword and arrows. De Burgh, 143; noted in Beale, *Revelation*, 375.

¹⁰³ De Burgh, 142.

¹⁰⁴ Beale, *Revelation*, 376. Note that Beale connects the first seal with “(1) the antichrist, (2) governments that persecute Christians, or (3) the devil’s servants in general” (377).

¹⁰⁵ Victorinus, 11; De Burgh, 141, 146–47; Thomas, 426; Fanning, 244. Note also that the reference to the sword, in the second seal, followed as it is with famine and pestilence in the third and fourth seals, may constitute an allusion to Ezekiel 14:12–19. In that passage Yhwh stated emphatically that “when a land sins against me,” he could punish it by famine, wild beasts, sword, and pestilence. The application was made to Jerusalem, but the principle was stated generically. It should not surprise readers to find these judgments in the ultimate Day of the Lord. De Burgh, 144–45; Beale, *Revelation*, 372–73. Beale also sees an allusion to Ezekiel 21:14, noting, “The phrase ‘a great sword’ (μάχαιρα μεγάλη or ρομφαία μεγάλη) occurs apparently in only three OT passages: Isa. 27:1; Jer. 32:24 (25:38); and Ezek. 21:14.” The prophets apply “the sword judgment to both Israel and the nations.” Beale, *Revelation*, 380. Beale links the church and Israel and identifies the referent of the second seal as purifying persecutions. However, judgments on disobedient Israel do not neatly correspond to the persecution and martyrdom of Christians. It is more likely that the Day of the Lord judgments that disobedient Israel faced historically are typological of the Day of the Lord judgments that the disobedient nations will face.

¹⁰⁶ Victorinus, 10–11 (Victorinus specifically links this famine to the time of Antichrist); Andrew of Caesarea, “Commentary on the Apocalypse,” in *Greek Commentaries on Revelation*, ACT (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2011), 133–34; De Burgh, 146; Thomas, 430; Brian J. Tabb, *All Things New: Revelation as Canonical Capstone*, NSBT (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2019), 147 (it is unclear where Tabb locates this famine chronologically).

¹⁰⁷ Osborne, *Revelation*, 280.

The fourth seal is a continuation of the birth pangs that mark the beginning of the Day of the Lord. Victorinus observed, “The Lord had foretold these very things” when he mentioned pestilences in the Olivet Discourse (Luke 21:11).¹⁰⁸

When the Lamb opened the fifth seal, John saw not another horse but martyrs. Nevertheless, the seals continue to follow the pattern of the Olivet Discourse.¹⁰⁹ Following his recitation of the beginning of birth pangs, Jesus said, “Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death” (Matt 24:9). Beale observes that the phrase “rest a little longer” “appears to allude to an imminent end of history.”¹¹⁰ At last the final judgment, long delayed, has drawn near.

When the sixth seal was opened, John saw events that recall Jesus’ description of events “immediately after” the “great tribulation” and just preceding the return of Christ (Matt 24:29–30, cf. 24:21).¹¹¹ However, unlike in the Olivet Discourse, Christ does not immediately appear. Instead, Revelation 7 initiates a delay in the narrative. The return of Christ is foreshadowed by the sixth seal, but Revelation delays the account of his return until chapter 19.

Conclusion

The connections between the Olivet Discourse and the seal judgments do not prove a futurist interpretation of Revelation. Other interpretations of the Olivet Discourse remain possible. Some may remain convinced that the first part of the Olivet Discourse describes events that span the inter-advent period. These interpreters will be inclined to understand the first five seals as referring to the inter-advent period. This does not necessarily tell against an overall futurist interpretation of Revelation. A futurist could see a transition to the eschatological Day of the Lord take place with the sixth seal.

Nonetheless, this article has sought to make the case that the best interpretation of the Olivet Discourse understands its first section to be about both the events culminating in the destruction of the Temple in AD 70 and about the eschatological Day of the Lord of which those events were types. On this understanding of the Olivet Discourse, the best interpretation of seal judgments is a futurist interpretation.

¹⁰⁸ Victorinus, 11; cf. Caesarius of Arles, “Exposition on the Apocalypse,” in *Latin Commentaries*, 75; Thomas, 435; Fanning, 245. This seal also alludes to Ezekiel 5:16–17 and 14:12–20, which mention famine (5:16; 14:12–14), wild beasts (5:17; 14:15–16), sword (5:17; 14:17–18), and pestilence (5:17; 14:19–20). Stuart, 158; Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, rev. ed., NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 145; Beale, *Revelation*, 383; Osborne, *Revelation*, 283; Ian Boxall, *The Revelation of Saint John*, BNTC (London: Continuum, 2006), 112; Tabb, 147; Fanning, 244.

¹⁰⁹ Alford, 4:620 (claiming a partial fulfillment in AD 70 and an ultimate eschatological fulfillment); Thomas, 441 (eschatological fulfillment); Beale, *Revelation*, 390; Boxall, 114; Fanning, 244 (eschatological fulfillment).

¹¹⁰ Beale, *Revelation*, 395. For Beale, this allusion “presents a theological problem” since this “little longer” extends throughout the entire inter-advent period. He resolves this problem by noting that “time in heaven . . . may be reckoned differently than time on earth” (ibid.). However, the futurist interpretation does not suffer a difficulty here. The eschatological Day of Yhwh began with the opening of the seals. These initial birth pangs may not seem like a final judgment of the wicked (given that the first seal marked the ascendancy of Antichrist), but if the martyred saints would but “rest a little longer” they would see justice executed.

¹¹¹ James M. Hamilton Jr., *Revelation*, PTW (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 184; cf. Fanning, 249.