The Immediacy of the Olivet Prophecy and the Preterist-Amillennialist Hermeneutic

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The Olivet Prophecy is, along with St John’s Apocalypse and Paul’s statements to the Church in Thessalonica, one of the three major prophecies in the New Testament. While visiting the bustling city of Jerusalem with His disciples, the disciples become enamored by the architecture and magnitude of all that was transpiring around them. They mention this to Christ who then shocks them by predicting that this city would be razed to the ground. He says that “not one stone will be left upon another.” At this statement the disciples, shaken by such a dismal proclamation, ask “when will these things be, and what is the sign of thy coming and the end of the ages.” This question seems to set the context for the remainder of the prophetic statements that follow. The majority of the remaining statements deal directly with the catastrophic destruction of Jerusalem. This seemingly until verse 29, in Matthew’s Gospel, when Christ says “immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun shall be darkened and the moon shall not give its light, then shall appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven. …..”. It is these statements of Christ that have caused difficulty with this passage, and have been the catalyst of several theories as to what is being predicted here. The reason being that these statements, along with the questions asked of the disciples earlier, seem to tie these events to the end of time and the return of Christ. This creates a problem because of the immediacy of the events related, and the eminency of their prediction. This is made strong in verse 34 when Christ says “this generation shall not pass until all of these things are fulfilled.” This places a parenthesis around this prediction and ties it to the time statements given here. What Christ says here must take place within that generation.

With regards to the fall of Jerusalem, this prediction comes to pass with frightening accuracy. It has been noted that Christ makes this prophetic prediction during what would be one of the great areas of peace of the Roman empire; The Pax Romana, an unprecedented period of peace in world history. Yet within 40 years of His prophecy the Roman army besieged Jerusalem, and the Jewish Temple, a wonder of the ancient world, is burned to the ground. This ushering in the time of so-called Imperial Peace (70-192). Yet, as historian Walter Goffart states, “peace is not what one finds in its pages”3. Christ’s prophecy proves to be world-shaking. The problem presents itself however in the statements of Christ that seem to tie these events to Christ’s

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1 The prophecy given by Christ on the Mount of Olives recorded in Matt 24; Luke 21; Mark 13
2 Matt 24:3 συντελείας τοῦ αἰῶνος “the consummation of the ages”
consummate return and the end of time. It is a bit of a strange conundrum, on the one hand we have powerful witness to the Christian faith in the vindication of prophecy, yet on the other a seeming failure.

This is what C. S. Lewis referred to as “the most embarrassing verse[s] in the Bible.” In order to resolve these difficulties, we have numerous theories that have been put forth. One theory is to divide this prophetic passage into sections based on the original questions asked by the disciples. Thus, making the first portion to pertain to the question “when will these things be”, but the apocalyptic statements pertain to the portion of their question pertaining to the end of the age. Yet this is an exegetically unsatisfying interpretive approach (see footnote).

First of all, Christ says that the apocalyptic statements are to come to pass “immediately after the tribulation of those days.” Secondly, He says that all of the things he predicted would come to pass in that generation. This makes dividing those statements or placing them into the future at odds with what we read in the text. Whatever approach we take to these passages, they must be placed contextually as applying to things that happen within the generation that He addresses.

Another approach has been to take these statements within their time context and in doing so place the end of the age and coming of Christ in the first generation. This approach reinterprets the phrases “end of the age” and “coming of Christ” to mean mystical/invisible realities. Thus, allowing their fulfillment without the expectation of an actual end of time and physical return of Christ to earth. This would seem to alleviate the so-called “embarrassment”. This approach however is unsatisfying as well.

As one takes into account the numerous statements that permeate the New Testament, one finds that a mystical/spiritual approach, alone, does not answer the promises of the Christian faith and hope. There is no doubt that a very real, yet mystical, presence of Christ is to be found proclaimed present-tense on the pages of the New Testament. The Christians are said to have “risen with Christ” and they “sit in heavenly places.” They have “passed from death to life” and have “tasted of the age to come.”

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4 C. S. Lewis. (1960). The World’s Last Night: And Other Essays

5 Here we address the application of the questions asked rather than the concept of specific questions. We will address this further latter in the essay.

6 Col 3:1

7 Eph 2:6

8 1 John 3:14

9 Heb 6:5
This is admittedly true, and has taken a major position in Christian soteriology throughout the history of the faith. In this regard we may truly say that Christ has never left or forsaken the Church, but has always been with her. This sort of mystical return of Christ to the Church is related to the disciples in St. John’s Gospel where Christ says “you have heard me say I am going away and coming again...the world will see me no more, but you will see me because I go to the Father”. To which the disciples ask “Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us and not the world?” Clearly here Christ speaks of a mystical presence with the Church; one that will be apparent to the initiated but hidden from the world at large.

If these were the only statements of Christ, then one would be compelled to affirm the position that has come to be known as Full Preterism. This approach affirms all that we have said, yet limits all action of God prophetically to the past. Thus the fall of Jerusalem and mystical presence of Christ in the life of the Church would, in their estimation, be the consummate state of affairs. There would be nothing to take place in the future other than a perpetual reaction to the past-tense realities. The issue of course, as we mention earlier, is that there are many other statements in holy scripture that strongly affirm the renovation of the cosmos and the bodily resurrection of the dead; not to mention their consistent affirmation by Christians of all times.

Of course, Full Preterists have put forth theories to attempt to alleviate this tension, yet these theories create more problems than they solve. To deny the renovation of the cosmos and resurrection of the body leaves one vulnerable to eternal dualism and the anti-material concepts of ancient gnostic heresies. Further, it creates tremendous issues with Christian soteriology as well as philosophical impossibilities as concerns the ongoing nature of the cosmos. In the Full Preterist schema the most real and concrete part of human existence, the physical world, becomes arbitrary. This also leads one to question what purpose the incarnation of Christ would have had at all? Why would God need to become flesh in order to redeem humankind from a world that he was not created to live in? While exploring these difficulties is beyond the scope of our present work, I hope we have shown why this approach leaves us with more problems than answers.

While Full Preterism has plenty of “holes to fill”, it may have inadvertently highlighted the solution to the issue of immanency in regards to the Olivet prophecy. First of all, the typical approach among preterists of all ilk’s concerning the passages of scripture dealing with the darkening of the sun and moon, falling stars, etc., has been to demonstrate the very common

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10 The Didache 10 describes the ancient celebration of the Eucharist as ending with the prayer “Let grace come and let this world pass away. Hosannah to the God of David. If any man be holy, let him come! if any man be not, let him repent: Maranatha (“Our Lord! Come!”), Amen.” This shows the centrality of Parousia to this central Christian rite. Further, the phrase “let this world pass away” itself refers to the mystical act of the Eucharist. In this mystical rite the Christian tastes of the world to come.


12 Here we would appeal to the Vincentian Canon “Moreover, in the Catholic Church itself, all possible care must be taken, that we hold that faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by all.” (Commonitory ch. II, §6; NPNF Series II Vol. XI p. 132).
use of this sort of phraseology in the Old Testament to describe catastrophic events. What can be demonstrated very clearly from studying Old Testament prophecies is that very often hyperbolic language is used to create the emotional impact that these events should be understood to have had. We often read such passages without ever thinking once that they should be taken as a literal historical account. We do not presume that God rides in chariots, and wears clouds. We do not think that the mountains really danced etc. These phrases are a particular mechanism of Hebraic literature. When we study these from the Old Testament it becomes clear that, not only is Christ using such language, His particular words allude to specific imagery. We must remember the original instance that leads to these statements, His disciples were told of the destruction of the Temple. What could it have meant when the Christ of prophecy, in turn, predicts the fall of the Temple and Holy City? Only one thing in their minds, the end of the ages and the ushering in of the Messianic Age. And it is just this that Christ describes and promises will take place within their generation. Yet Christ is careful to note that “the end is not yet.” To bring it to a point, Christ is not predicting the end of time in their generation, but rather the fall of Jerusalem and the birth of the New Covenant; although it is not certain that the disciples made such a distinction when asking Him to explain this prediction.

It is after Christ makes the statement “this generation shall not pass until all of these things be fulfilled” that He makes the following statement “but of that day and hour knoweth no man...”. The original question remember was “when shall these things be, and what shall be the sign of thy coming and the end of the ages?” It seems probable that the disciples believed these things to be one event, but the statements of Christ that follow seem to explain that they were not the same thing. In fact, Christ pointedly tells them that the tribulation leading up to the fall of Jerusalem was not the end. It is not unreasonable to think that this would include the fall of Jerusalem itself. These events, this great tribulation, was not the end of all things. It was not the end of the ages, but rather it would be the “sign that the Son of Man was in heaven.”

It is to this that Christ then contrasts “but of THAT DAY knoweth no man,” It would be difficult to demonstrate why Christ would spend so many words telling us about THAT DAY, if no one knew about that day. It seems reasonable to assert that here Christ directs His attention to what they intended in their question – when will the end of the ages come? It is helpful to compare this to the discourse between Christ and the disciples in Acts. They want to know when (perhaps if) Christ will “restore the Kingdom to Israel.” Here it seems again that they are leading with their questions. When will Christ restore Israel the nation and make them a world power? Certainly this was soon to come seeing that Christ had fulfilled the messianic prophecies and risen from death itself! But what does He say “It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samar’iia and to the end of

13 Matt 24:30
14 Matt 24:36
the earth.”

15 Why the mystery? If this all takes place in 70AD (within 40 years) at the time of a prophetic fulfillment given by Christ Himself, why not simply say, as he does in Luke’s Gospel “when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies”? No, this is clearly something different. I would contend that it was not for them to know, because it was NOT to take place in their lifetime. Unlike the prophecies of the fall of Jerusalem and the ushering in of the New Christian Age, that day was hidden in the Father’s own wisdom and governed by His own timing. It would not be too much of a stretch to suggest that that day corresponds to the “last day” that Jesus speaks of in John 6. “And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have life in the age; and I will raise him up at the last day.”

16 Here Christ speaks of life that will endure through the age, and then that they will be raised at the “last day.” Here it seems that Christ speaks of two points that address the resurrection and life of the world to come. The Christian life certainly brings one into the life of the world to come in a very present tense reality. Yet we would wait for something more than the mystical life of the present, we look for that time when we shall also be raised up. This takes place on the last day. It is hard to argue here that there are other days to come after the last day, and here we would argue that that day, in the Olivet Prophecy, is the last day of John chapter 6.

What we would then contend based on our proceeding discussion of the Olivet Prophecy that the words of Christ up until the phrase “this generation shall not pass until all of these things be fulfilled”, including the apocalyptic language, deal with the fall of Jerusalem and the consequential victory of the Gospel and New Covenant. We would then contend that Christ’s words “but of that day knoweth no man...” refers to that last day of the present state of this cosmos and corresponds to the end of time and will bring into effect that time when we are raised into bodies fit for that world. We would contend that the phraseology that states “the sun shall be darkened...”, etc., is not speaking of the end of the world, but of the end of Jerusalem and the temple. What we are asserting then is that one can consistently affirm the fulfillment of all the predictions of Olivet Prophecy that were to be fulfilled within that generation, while at the same time affirm that the consummation of all things (which is called the end of time or second coming of Christ) has yet to be realized within the context of time and space as we know it. This being consistent with the view that we would call Preterist-amillennialism (or the polemical partial preterism).

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15 Acts 1:6-8

16 John 6:40 “may have life age-during, and I will raise him up in the last day.’ YLB

17 From the Nicene Creed: I believe in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

18 1 Cor 15:35-58