

The Destruction of Jerusalem: A prophetic and historical look at the destruction of perhaps the last standing symbol of Judaism.

By Peter Nieman Martin, Sr.

I humbly thank God and his Son Jesus Christ for this opportunity to contribute to the cause of Christ. In these fall years of my life, I have come to appreciate the value of time and effort dispensed in that allotted time. King Solomon stated it ever so correctly in Ecclesiastes when he said, “Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the grave, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom (NIV 9:10)” I deeply hope that heaven approves of this effort and that it benefits you as far as furthering your scriptural knowledge is concerned. To God and his Great Son goes all of the glory!

Introduction

We live in uncertain political, economic, and social times. Given the nature of these climates, one may feel emboldened to use these times as possessing signs for the end of the world based on Matthew 24. While a correct understanding of Matthew 24 can be a powerful ally, a misunderstanding can be a nightmare. The purpose of this paper is to provide a correct understanding. I will use the following means to guarantee its accuracy: (1) a correct treatment of all scripture used, (2) outside sources uniquely aware of the events by being present during these events, and (3) notable scholars who have spent literally decades studying the matter. I will depend heavily on the work of Flavius Josephus, a first century Jewish historian and priest who led the revolt against Roman oppression in Galilee. He was captured by the Romans at the fall of Yoyopata in 67, and held as a prisoner until the year 69. He returned to Jerusalem with Titus in the year 70, becoming an eyewitness to the final siege of Jerusalem. David Padfield supplied this information about Josephus. I am fully away of my responsibility as the editor of this paper: the final responsibility is mine. Where possible, I will double-check the work of the scholars to verify their sources as accurate before citing them.

The questions that triggered the responses in Matthew 24 were these: “Tell us, when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and the end of the age (vs. 3, NIV)?” The temple was so impressive an edifice that the disciples could not separate its destruction from the second coming of Christ. In other words, they thought that only the second coming could trigger such an event. The Lord had to correct their thinking. It is now that the interpretation problem arises because there are forty-eight verses of testimony, so where does the destruction of Jerusalem account end and the second coming event begin? If we can solve this issue, then prove it, we will have accomplished a great deal. Within those forty-eight verses, there lies a text that serves as a “line drawn in the sand”—a point that neatly separates the destruction of Jerusalem from the destruction of the world. Matthew 24:35 sates, “I tell you the truth, this

generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.” There are two phrases that beg clarification—“this generation” and “All things.”

A demonstrative pronoun in a singular and present sense plus a noun represent “this generation.” In a grammatical context, the people who formed the then existing generation would cover those who were living at the time of the time of this discourse, and those who would be born to it. Therefore, the framing of the time for the generation would be between the personal ministry of the Lord and the year 70. An adjective, a demonstrative pronoun, and a noun represent the second phrase—“all these things.” The things of which Jesus spoke in verse four through thirty-three are the things that sum up “all these things.” Inasmuch as Jesus in one discourse and at one time enumerated “all of these things” to his disciples—it must needs be that the demonstrative pronoun these (plural/ present) is used. I will be happy to answer any questions regarding this comment.

The Lord in the fourth verse of Matthew 24 issues a warning. **“Watch out that no man deceives you.”** It is at this point that he lays out the signs to watch for. The fifth verse states, **“For many will come in my name, claiming, I am the Christ, and will deceive many,”** and **the eleventh verse, “and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people.”**

Josephus in his Antiquities of the Jews, Book 20, Chapter 5, Section 1, said

“Now it came to pass, while Fadus was procurator of Judea, that a certain magician, whose name was Theudas, persuaded a great part of the people to take their effects with them, and follow him to the river Jordan; for he told them he was a prophet, and that he would, by his own command, divide the river, and afford them an easy passage over it; and many were deluded by his words. However, Fadus did not permit them to make any advantage of his wild attempt, but sent a troop of horsemen out against them; who, falling upon them unexpectedly, slew many of them and took many of them alive.”

I wish to make this as complete as possible, so please bear with me while I continue to deal with the false prophets and the havoc they placed on the victims of the destruction of Jerusalem. In ***The Wars of the Jews***, book six, chapter five, and section two, Josephus said,

The Romans now set fire to all the surrounding buildings, the remains of the portices and gates, and the treasure chambers where vast sums of money had been deposited. They then moved on to one surviving portico at the outer court where 6,000 women and children had taken refuge. They had gathered there because a false prophet who had told them that God commanded them to go to the temple where they would

receive guarantee of deliverance. Before Caesar had made up his mind what to do with these people, the soldiers set fire to the colonnade and not a soul escaped. Numerous false prophets deluded the people at this time. They were hired by the tyrants to urge the people to wait for help from God, and so keep them from deserting. But before the siege, however, portents (bad omens) had appeared, foretelling the impending devastations, but the Jews had disregarded the warnings of God.

Not only were false prophets present, there were wars and rumors of wars. The issue of wars and the rumors of wars are validated by Josephus also in **The wars of the Jews**. From 66-70, war was certainly evident all through the region. According to the historian, 20,000 Jews were massacred, and those that escaped death were imprisoned and sentenced to hard labor. This happened in the year 66. Two thousand Jews were killed in Syria the same year. To quote Josephus regarding Galilee, he had this comment: Galilee from one end to the other became a scene of fire and bloodshed: no horror, no calamity was it spared; the only refuge for hunted inhabitants was the town which Josephus had fortified.” From another contemporary source, Tacitus, a Roman historian, said, *“The history of which I am entering is that of a period rich in disasters, terrible with battles, torn by civil struggle, horrible even in peace. Four emperors fell by the sword; there were three civil wars, more foreign wars, and often both at the same time.”*(The Histories, 1:2) This history also embraces nation rising up against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. What of the earthquakes in divers places—did they happen during this period? J. Marcellus Kik, in his noted work, An Eschatology of Victory, made the following statement on page 93: *“And as to earthquakes, many are mentioned by writers during a period just previous to 70. There were earthquakes in Crete, Smyrna, Miletus, Chios, Samos, Laodicea, Hierapolis, Colosse, Campania, Rome, and Judea. It is interesting to note that an earthquake occurring on February 5, 63, damaged the kith of Pompeii.*

Jesus had spoken of famines in Matthew 24:7, and Josephus had witnessed them saying:

“As the famine grew worse, the frenzy of the insurgents kept pace with it, and every day, both these horrors burned more fiercely. For since no where was grain to be seen. Men would break into houses, and if they found some they mistreated the occupants for having denied their possession of it. If they found none, they tortured them as if they had concealed it more carefully. Proof whether they had food or not was provided by the physical appearances of the wretches. Those still in good condition were deemed to be well-provided with food, while those who were already wasting away were passed over, for it seemed pointless to kill persons who would soon die of starvation. (Book 5, chapter 10, section 2).”

Jesus’ predictions were flawless. Things were unfolding as he said they would. The ninth verse of Matthew 24 states, *“Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and*

you will be hated by all nations because of me.” Peter, James, Paul, and James the lesser were all victims of this passage. In the tenth verse, Jesus says, *“At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other.”* Foy E. Wallace, Jr., in his book *God’s Prophetic Word* (a defense against the false doctrine of premillennialism), *“This is the Lord’s warning of many apostasies, when the faith of the disciple would fail, as under pressure of persecution many should become offended. Such apostasies were everywhere in evidence prior to the destruction of Jerusalem.”* In examining A. R. Fausset’s *Critical and Expository Bible Cyclopedia* on the matter of when the epistle to the Hebrews was written, I discovered that it was written about the year 63. Given the gravity of the times, I conclude that Hebrews 10:25 has a stronger context than just meeting on Sunday!

Jesus continues his discourse on the destruction of Jerusalem by saying, “Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but he who stands firm till the end will be saved. And the gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come (Matthew 24:12-14).” Had the gospel been preached to the Roman world prior to the year 70? The Letter to the Colossians may indeed serve as the answer to the question. It was written along with letters to the Philippians, Ephesians, and Philemon (AD 56-57, 60-61) during Paul’s imprisonment at Rome. In Colossians 1:23, Paul said, *“If you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that had been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.”* Indeed, preachers had preached the gospel to all nations as a testimony.

The “end” which verse thirteen addresses is not the end of the world! That conclusion is impossible. Consider the next verse. “So when you see standing in the holy place ‘the abomination that causes desolation,’ spoken of through the prophet Daniel—let the reader understand.” Daniel’s prophecy (Daniel 9:27) regarding the destruction of Jerusalem is what Jesus is speaking of, and not the destruction of the world. He is talking about Roman soldiers under the command of General Titus surrounding Jerusalem. Therefore, the “end” really signifies the beginning of these horrible events. This brought to completion the end of the Jewish age. The law was nailed to the cross. The last vestige standing—the temple—would soon be destroyed. There would be nothing left of Judaism. The way of Christianity was clear!

At this point, I want to deal with difficult passages to clear a good path to understanding. I will do this by question and answer method.

Question. What does Matthew 24:24 suggest?

Answer. Let us examine the passage. *“If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened.”* Who are the elect? What do “those days” represent? The disciples of Christ represent the “elect,” and “those days”

represent the length of time the destruction would last. Josephus presents us with a horrific eyewitness account. Speaking of the Roman soldiers going into the lanes of the city, he said,

But as they went in numbers into the lanes of the city, with their swords drawn, they slew those whom they overtook, without mercy, and set fire to the houses whither the Jews were fled, and burnt every soul in them, and laid waste a great many of the rest; and when they were come to the houses to plunder them, they found in them entire families of dead men, and the upper room full of dead corpses, that is of such that died by the famine: they, then stood in a horror at this sight, and went out without touching anything. But although they had this commiseration (great sorrow) for such as were destroyed in that manner, yet had they not the same for those that were still alive, but they ran everyone through whom they met with, and obstructed the very lanes with their dead bodies, and made the whole city run down with blood, to such a degree indeed that the fire of many houses was quenched with these men's blood (The Wars of the Jews, Book 6, Chapter 8). I want to show the toll on men's lives this destruction took by examining briefly Josephus's account in Book 6, Chapter 9, and Paragraph 3. He said, "Now the number of those that were carried captive during this whole war was collected to be ninety-seven thousand; as was the number of those that perished during the whole siege eleven-hundred thousand (One million, one hundred thousand), the greater of whom were indeed of the same nation [with the citizens of Jerusalem], but not belonging to the city itself; for they were come up from all the country to the feast of unleavened bread, and were on a sudden shut up by the army..." It is evident that those days needed to be shortened given this horrific accounting of events.

Question. Do you believe that the text which says, "For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even to the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Wherever there is a carcass, there the vultures will gather," has reference to the destruction of Jerusalem? It seems that the reference would better fit the second coming.

Answer. I believe without a doubt that these two verses (27 and 28) have reference to the destruction of Jerusalem for the following reason: the language is figurative. Verse 27 represents the Roman armies, and the 28th verse represents the Jews. Again, referring to **God's Prophetic Word**, the book by Foy E. Wallace, Jr., he states that the verses "describe the swiftness of the events and the suddenness of all the occurrences connected with the siege of Jerusalem. The illustration of the eagles gathering where the carcass is found is a figurative description of the Romans as the eagles swarming over Jerusalem and Judea as the carcass, to loot and spoil the city and all the land of Judea."

Question. Brother Martin, what are you going to do with Matthew 24:30, 31? It is a complicated text.

Answer. True, it is a complex passage that seems to throw tremendous weight in the direction of the second coming; however, I will side on the destruction of Jerusalem for the following reasons: in his paper entitled **Matthew 24**, David Padfield stated, “*Please not that Jesus did not say, “And then shall appear the Son of Man in heaven’ or “then shall appear the sign in the heavens of the Son of Man. The phrase is literally: “And then shall appear the sign of the Son of Man in the heaven (Berry’s Interlinear). The phrase “in heaven” denotes the locality of the Son of Man, not the locality of the sign. The destruction of Jerusalem itself served as a sign of the fact that the Son of Man was ruling in heaven because it was a fulfillment of His prediction (Deuteronomy 18:20-22).”* In his defense against the false doctrine of Premillennialism, Brother Wallace had to grapple with Matthew 24. His comments regarding the 30th and 31st verses bear reading. He said,

The sign of the Son of Man in heaven was a signal, the evidence of divine visitation and intervention in the downfall of Jewish authorities and in all the transpiring events. The mourning of all the tribes of the earth refers to the lamentation of the Jewish families all over the world because of the destruction of their city and their temple and their state. The coming of the Son of Man in the clouds of heaven is not a reference to the second coming of Christ but to the coming foretold by Jesus to Caiphas in Matthew 26:64. “Hereafter shall ye see the Son of Man sitting on the right hand of power and coming in the clouds of heaven.” Jesus told Caiphas that he would see it; he would be a living witness to these events. The reference to the Son of Man “coming with power and great glory” and “sitting on the right hand of power” is emphasis on the magnitude of things that occurred. The Son of Man came in power in the transpiring events.” In regards to the 31st verse, Wallace said, “*Here is the universal expansion of Christianity after the destruction of Jerusalem. The angels of this verse were emissaries of the gospel. The gathering of the elect from the four winds meant that these messengers would carry the gospel to every nook and corner of the inhabited world.*”

I strongly contend that the 34th verse proves beyond a shadow of doubt that the events of Matthew 24:26-33 happened within the lifetime of that generation Jesus addressed. I am in total agreement with the evidences Brother Wallace has provided in his interpretation of this difficult passage.

Question. Why do people use these scriptures to show the signs for the end of the world?

Answer. Matthew 24 is an unusual chapter—part of which speaks of great doom prophesied by Daniel and Jesus; the other part addresses the second coming of Christ ushered in by no signs but signaling the end of the world. There are two dangers in interpreting the chapter. One will either use the entire chapter to represent the fall of

Jerusalem or the second coming of Christ. In the case of the latter, this would be why people (in my humble opinion) use the scriptures to show signs for the end of the world. On the other hand, it is critical that people have the right understanding so that they will not use the newspapers and CNN as predictors of the end of the world. Jesus has already dealt with the second coming on the other side of verse 35.