

Jesus' teaching on the signs of his coming

Introduction

As with other aspects of eschatology, this matter of looking for signs of the return of Christ has been brought into disrepute by people jumping to naive conclusions as to what constitutes a sign. But it should not be forgotten that it was Jesus himself who pointed out the signs to look for and expected his followers to take note of them so that, as Paul put it, they would not be surprised by his return. Far from being naive, then, it is actually a Christian obligation to look for signs of the second coming. But it has to be done carefully.

It is clear that Christians are meant to live in the light of the imminence of Christ's return but this does not mean speculating on dates.

C E B Cranfield writes: "The Parousia is near ... not in the sense that it must necessarily occur within a few months or years, but in the sense that it may occur at any moment and in the sense that, since the decisive event of history has already taken place in the ministry, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ, all subsequent history is a kind of epilogue, an interval inserted by God's mercy in order to allow men time for repentance, and, as such an epilogue, necessarily in a real sense short, even though it may last a very long time."¹

R C H Lenski, comments on Mark 13:29, "Even so when you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door." He says: "The meaning of Jesus is that every sign advertises the end as being 'near'. From the days of the apostles to our own time these advertisements read to the same effect. Just when the end will arrive no man knows. We are always to be ready for its coming since all the signs have already occurred again and again. 'At the doors' is in apposition to 'near' and states just how near: ready to step in at any moment."²

In Matthew 24 Jesus foretold that not one of the huge stones (some of them 12 feet by 18 feet) of the Temple would be left on another. The disciples ask: "when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" (verse 3). Within 40 years the Temple was destroyed, the prophecy being fulfilled literally. Then Jesus turned to signs of the End. These signs can helpfully be grouped into different categories.

A. General signs of the End

It is helpful to think of the signs in Jesus' prophecy in the same way as we experience signs on a motorway. The "General Signs" as we have called them are the regular reminders that the distant destination is getting nearer: "London 100 London 90." These are the long-distance, often-repeated signs. They regularly remind us of the End, which is what Jesus wanted them to be. However these general signs can become more specific as we approach the destination e.g. worldwide evangelism has been facilitated by modern communications. This is a new factor which can be taken to indicate that we are now much nearer to the return of Christ. (They are the "Late Signs" as we have called them. These are spectacular events which immediately precede the return of Christ). Note that he sees messianic imposters, worldwide strife, famines and earthquakes as "the *beginning* of birth-pains." They are recurring pointers towards his return and reminders that the End is near.

1. Imposters

"Jesus answered: 'Watch out that no-one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many'" (Matt 24:4-5 so Mk.13:5-6).

a. Historical Fulfilment

There is no evidence of false messiahs in the early church. Theudas whose desert rebellion was crushed in 44-46 AD (Acts 5:36), Judas the Galilean (Acts 5:37), the Egyptian who left the desert with 30,000 men and was defeated by Felix on the Mt of Olives (Acts 21:38), seem not to have claimed messiahship.

Josephus: "These were such men as deceived and deluded the people under pretence of divine inspiration ... and these prevailed with the multitude to act like madmen, and went before them into the wilderness, as pretending that God would there show them the signals (signs) of liberty." (Wars 2.13.4)

Josephus tells of 6000 refugees were burnt to death in the temple during the first Jewish War of AD 70 being deceived by a "false prophet, who had on that day announced to the people in the city that God had commanded them to go to the Temple to receive the signs of their salvation (Jewish Wars 6.5.2#285).

Josephus also tells of many Samaritans gathering on Mt Gerizim to see a false prophet reveal sacred vessels buried by Moses. Pilate had them slaughtered.

But in 133-5 Simon bar Kosiba, called Bar Kochba ("son of a star") was acclaimed by Rabbi Akiba as the messiah.

b. Modern Fulfilment

False messiahs are very common today and are increasing in number. Thousands of new cults (gurus, incarnations, avatars) have begun since the middle of the 20th century. Modern communications help them to spread their influence and many people have become involved. A non-Christian spirituality has spread far and wide in what was the "Christian" world. With many people it is not active involvement in some sort of religious group but more of an underlying outlook which accepts this New Age or pagan spirituality and sometimes actively explores it, perhaps in the form of therapies, or meditation.

The New Age Movement can be defined as a loose network of groups and individuals working for wholeness, unity, peace and harmony with nature on the basis of eastern religion, superstition, spiritism or witchcraft. In very brief outline the New Age Movement tends to promote the following views:

- i. A pantheistic view of God as a power within to be manipulated. Pantheism identifies God with the universe or forces of nature.
- ii. An adoptionist, syncretistic view of Christ. Adoptionism teaches that Jesus was not divine until he was "adopted" by the divine Christ Spirit at his baptism. Syncretism sees Christ as manifested in different forms in different religions.
- iii. A denial of the idea of sin and therefore of the need of atonement through the cross. All morality is relative, there are no absolute moral rules.
- iv. A consumer approach to spirituality – seeking benefits from manipulating the supernatural.
- v. A promotion of the occult, spiritism and witchcraft, though often clothed in non-traditional terminology.

Earth mysticism “Once a photograph of the Earth, taken from *the outside*, is available...a new idea as powerful as any in history will be let loose.” This prophetic statement was made by Fred Hoyle, the astronomer, in 1948. I first read it in a book called "The Home Planet" which contains almost 150 beautiful photographs of the earth taken from space by astronauts and cosmonauts.

So far over 200 people from 18 nations have travelled in space and seen the beauty of the whole earth. And the experience has clearly had a most profound effect on them. As the book says, their reaction is a mixture of awe, exhilaration and fear. It has “forever altered their consciousness of themselves, of Earth, and of our place in the cosmos.”

The book records, in their own words, the space-travellers' mystical and religious experiences. Some of it is phrased in New Age terminology, some of it Christian. All of it is inspiring and poetic. They were all deeply impressed by the unity of the world, as one planet. As a Syrian cosmonaut put it, “From space I saw Earth - indescribably beautiful with the scars of national boundaries gone.”

Similarly, Jacques-Yves Cousteau wrote in the Foreword, “Our planet is one.... borderlines are artificial.... humankind is one single community on board spaceship Earth.” “The meaning of space conquest is symbolised by the famous set of pictures taken from the moon, celebrating the birth of global consciousness that will help build a peaceful future for humankind...”

Seeing the beauty of the Earth, the space travellers were, understandably struck by the vital importance of conservation.

A West German astronaut wrote, “For the first time in my life I saw the horizon as a curved line. It was accentuated by a thin seam of dark blue light - our atmosphere. Obviously this was not the ocean of air I had been told it was so many times in my life. I was terrified by its fragile appearance.” A Russian cosmonaut spoke of “a feeling of personal responsibility to preserve the only planet we have.”

But the profound experience can lead in the direction of pantheism. Edgar Mitchell wrote, “My view of our planet was a glimpse of divinity.” “There seems to be more to the universe than random, chaotic, purposeless movement of a collection of molecular particles.” “On the return trip home [from the moon], gazing through 240,000 miles of space toward the stars and the planet from which I'd come, I suddenly experienced the universe as intelligent, loving, harmonious.”

More helpful was James Irwin's reaction to the beauty of the earth. “Seeing this has to change a man, has to make a man appreciate the creation of God and the love of God.”

Obviously, some of these reactions are positive. But there is a very widespread development of a more pantheistic spirituality around our global village. In more extreme forms it moves into Gaia worship. (Gaia is the earth goddess).

Syncretism (the amalgamation of religions) There is huge pressure developing on this front. Religion is seen as having potential for division and violence. Bringing the religions together and discouraging exclusive claims to truth is seen as important to world peace.

In our research of this trend I spoke at a multi-religious event, although we left before the multifaith worship began. It was led by a Roman Catholic layman in a semi-darkened room around a sheet on which the symbols of the various faiths had been drawn in sand. After readings from various faiths and candles being lit all the sand symbols were merged into one. As the liturgy stated, it was “mixed into an amorphous mass indicating our commitment to commune in making the world more peaceful, more spiritual.”

This sort of spirituality and syncretism is totally alien to the teaching of Christ. One could call it anti-Christ. The word “anti” means “in place of” rather than “consciously antagonistic towards.” As I said above, with many people it is not active involvement in some sort of religious group but more of an underlying outlook. But this outlook is ripe for being totally deceived by what Paul describes as: “The coming of the lawless one ... in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders” (2 Thess 2:9). It needs to be stated though that many theologians have moved away from syncretism and seek rather to understand other religions better.

2. World-wide strife

Jesus says: “You will hear of wars and rumours of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom” (Matt 24:6-7). “When you hear of wars and revolutions, do not be frightened. These things must happen first, but the end will not come right away There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven” (Lk.21:9, 11)

The rabbis and apocalyptic literature taught ‘the sufferings of the Messiah,’ social and national trouble which would precede his birth.

a. Historical Fulfilment

Writing of the period following Jesus’ prophecy, the Roman historian Tacitus said: “The history on which I am entering is that of a period rich in disasters, terrible with battles, torn by civil struggles, 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 ... Italy was distressed by disasters unknown before or returning after the lapse of the ages ... Beside the manifold misfortunes which befell mankind there were prodigies in the sky and on the earth, warnings given by thunderbolts, and prophecies of the future, both joyful and gloomy, uncertain and clear.” (Histories 1,2,3)

Rome had four emperors in one year after Nero died in 68: Galba, Otho, Vitellus and Vespasian.

b. Modern Fulfilment

Wars. One author counted 300 wars in Europe in the last 300 years, each one growing in intensity.³ In the last hundred years we have had the two worst wars of all history when 40 million people died. We now have the capability of destroying our world in nuclear war. Marxist and other revolutions have swept the world.

Pandemics. With modern travel the possibility of global pandemics is a real one. AIDS and swine flu are examples. The World Health Organisation has established “a global network of scientific surveillance centres to monitor disease independently. It reports that the growth in international travel is making the spread of disease across continents faster than ever ... At a WHO conference in Geneva, delegates reported that the lives of ‘countless millions of people’ are being threatened by new or re-emerging diseases, including those caused by antibiotic-resistant strains, and the international exchange of foodstuffs and live animals. WHO adds that the diseases have grown alarmingly over the past 20 years.... Dr James Le Duc, of WHO’s division of Communicable Diseases, said: ‘These examples vividly illustrate that the world remains extremely vulnerable to new and re-emerging infections, and emphasizes the need for increased vigilance...In March 1994 the WHO said that the bubonic plague or Black Death that killed millions across Europe in the Middle Ages was re-emerging in Africa, Asia, South America and even America ...’⁴

3. Famines and earthquakes

Jesus continued: “There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of birth-pains” (Matt 24:7-8). We have already noted that he sees messianic imposters, worldwide strife, famines and earthquakes as “the *beginning* of birth-pains.” They are recurring pointers towards his return and reminders that the End is near.

a. Historical Fulfilment

In the period immediately following Jesus’ prophecy there was famine in Judaea in the reign of Claudius AD 45-47 (Acts 11:27-30); an earthquake in Laodicea in AD 61 and Pompeii in AD 62. Vesuvius erupted in 79 AD.

b. Modern Fulfilment

World poverty is worsening. The division between rich and poor nations is widening. Global warming will make things worse.

4. Persecution and Apostasy

Jesus went on: “Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved” (Matt 24:9-13).

Verses 10-12 are peculiar to Matthew and list apostasy, treachery, internal hatred, heresy, lovelessness.

a. Historical Fulfilment

Stephen, Peter, Paul, James, Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp, Justin Martyr and Origen were all prominent martyrs. Tacitus called the Christians the odium generis humani = “the hate of the human race” (Annals 15.44).

Hendrickson speaks of the traditional “ten” persecutions from Nero to Diocletian. The last began on the festival of Terminalia, Feb.23, 303⁴

However Douglas Hare writes: “As far as we can tell from the evidence there was no extensive persecution involving murder or execution from the time of Nero’s bloodbath to Trajan’s reign in the early second century (the alleged persecution under Domitian in the period 90-96 CE., seems to be the figment of later imagination). We should assume therefore that the predictions of apostasy, betrayal, and hatred of verse 10 are likewise unfulfilled except for isolated cases.”⁶

Various NT epistles were written to combat false teaching eg. Galatians, Colossians, 1 Timothy, 2 Peter and Jude.

b. Modern Fulfilment

Persecution. It is clear that there is apostasy, treachery, internal hatred, heresy, lovelessness *all within the modern church.* There are also false prophets who preach error. It is also true that more Christians have been persecuted for their faith the last century than in all the previous centuries put together.

F D Bruner comments: "In the end, something about the church will receive such attention in public discourse and will seem so culpable in people's eyes that a world-wide persecution will be the result. Perhaps a cause will be the church's intolerance of other gods and absolutes. Bengel, felt this persecution even in the eighteenth century, commenting on the word 'hated' in our verse: 'The Christian religion is peculiar in being hateful to the corrupt world, which tolerates all divisions of opinion.' Pluralism is sometimes a god, and when devotion to it assumes religious proportions, disciples of the one God have always been sacrificial lambs. This is Jesus' etiology of hate."⁷

Many will fall away. "Real Christians will be a minority group ... When the world turns its spotlight on the church there will be much to expose. There is much that is despicable in the church ... The true and false exposure of the hypocrisies of the church and so her worldwide loss in popularity will translate into a 'let's get out of this lie' for many people who are not personally devoted to Jesus Christ himself ... For many people the Great Apostasy will seem not like apostasy at all but like a coming clean, like a release from pretension."⁸

Apostasy. So often the modern church exercises no discipline and tolerates serious false teaching and behaviour on the part of its leaders. One example is The Sea of Faith Network, whose founder member is Don Cupitt, an Anglican priest who was Dean of Emmanuel College, Cambridge. The organisation believes that: "God has no 'real', objective or empirical existence, independent of human language and culture; God is 'real' in the sense that he is a potent symbol, metaphor or projection, but He has no objective existence outside and beyond the practice of religion. Non-realism therefore entails a rejection of all supernaturalism - miracles, afterlife and the agency of spirits."⁹

The Rev Anthony Freeman, another Anglican priest, published a book called *God in Us* in which he said he had experienced a "reverse conversion experience", after which he stopped believing in an literal, objective, personal God. He would claim he does believe in God as "the sum of our values and of our spiritual experiences: the ideal." In other words, God is merely an idea or ideal in the minds of human beings. He (or rather it) has no objective existence. "There is nothing out there," says Anthony Freeman, "or if there is, we can have no knowledge of it." He appears not to notice that this totally rejects Jesus as the revelation of God and Scripture as revelation. But, then, he denies the divinity of Christ. He continues: "God is not a big Father Christmas. He is not an off-the-shelf supernatural person.... God is not a person, not a being at all I don't think of God as a supernatural person I can talk to. I don't believe in prayer as a way of twisting God's arm to make him do things. There is evidence, though, of prayer working but it is by human empathy and the power of positive positive thinking."

When he published his book he was vicar of St Mark, Staplefield and Diocesan Director of Post Ordination Training: compulsory training for young clergy. The Bishop sacked him immediately from this post, which left him only doing half his job, as vicar of Staplefield. He was given a year to change his views, which did not happen and he became the first Church of England clergyman to be sacked for his theological views in the 20th century.

Immediately 65 clergy wrote to *The Independent* condemning the sacking. "Mr Freeman is not being offered another post," they wrote, "despite his willingness to make he required Declaration of Assent, and he has been refused Permission to Officiate in [Chichester] Diocese."

The Declaration of Assent is the legally-required statement a clergyman has to make. It states: "I ... declare my belief in the faith which is revealed in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the catholic [ie. universal] creeds and to which the historic formularies of the Church of England bear witness..." Yet the Scriptures, creeds, 39 Articles etc., clearly teach about an objective God who is three persons and Jesus who is divine and the supreme revelation of God.

Anthony Freeman, speaking of the Church of England's line between acceptable and unacceptable beliefs, said, "If I knew where the line was, I suppose I could decide whether I'm on the right side of it. And if I weren't I would have, with integrity, to leave. But there is no line. The only way you begin to find where the line is, is when you write a book and get into trouble." The letter to *The Independent* continues, "The bishop's action reverses a long Church of England tradition that tolerates and values a wide range of views. It poses a danger to freedom of expression within the Anglican ministry." Despite the Bishop's disciplinary action, this story, in the context of the Sea of Faith, indicates how far apostate views have spread amongst clergy. It also shows how far the clergy tolerate such apostate views.

There are also dangerous signs in the World Council of Churches. In the 1991 WCC Assembly delegates on their way to the opening worship passed through the smoke of burning leaves - a pagan cleansing ritual. On the second day, with two painted Aborigines dancing in the background, a South Korean theologian Chung Hyun Kyung invoked the spirits of the dead. One delegate, Vijay Menon, a convert from Hinduism, was amongst those who protested. "Pagan culture has infiltrated the WCC. I left that behind to become a Christian."

Another cause of concern is the change in WCC terminology concerning relationships with other faiths. In 1963 the council spoke of 'Christian witness to men of other faiths.' Then 'witness' was dropped and it was 'Christian encounter with men of other beliefs.' In 1967 this became 'Christians in dialogue with men of other faiths.' Then in 1970 'Christians' was dropped and the theme was 'Dialogue between men of living faiths.' In 1977, this was renamed 'Dialogue in Community.'¹⁰

5. Worldwide evangelism

Jesus says: "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (Matt 24:14).

a. Historical Fulfilment

Paul claimed by the late fifties that the gospel had gone out "into all the earth ... to the ends of the world (oikoumene)." (Rom.10:18). R H Glover estimates that there were half a million believers by the end of the apostolic age.¹¹

Craig Blomberg writes: "Everything necessary for Christ's return [the preliminary nine signs in vv.1-14] was accomplished within the first generation of Christianity, so that every subsequent generation has been able to believe that Jesus would come back in their time."¹²

Between 100 and 313 the gospel continued to spread, e.g. there are 174,000 martyrs buried in the catacombs of St Sebastian, Rome. 313-800 Western Europe was evangelized by Ulfilas, Patrick, Columba, Augustine, Willbrord and Boniface. (But Islam banished the faith from much of Asia and N Africa). Between 800-1517 Norway, Iceland and Greenland were evangelized. From 1517-1792 there were many missionary societies taking the gospel to the West, e.g. N America. Then from 1792 William Carey took the lead in world-wide missionary expansion.

b. Future Fulfilment

W F Albright and C S Mann comment on v.14 "Then the end will come": "It is simply not possible to refer this saying to the fall of Jerusalem ... While it is true that the events of AD 70 were of cataclysmic dimensions to Jews and Jewish Christians alike, it is equally true that 'the end' (to telos) in vs.6 cannot easily be reconciled with the view outlined in the first sentence of this. NOTE. Disorder, chaos and persecution did not end with the sack of the city

and the destruction of the temple. Moreover, the Pauline use of telos in 1 Cor. 15:24 specifically refers 'the end' to the time of the final judgment."¹³

With modern telecommunications it is possible to evangelize the world today, more than ever before. This, alongside such factors as nuclear, biological and chemical weapons and global pandemics facilitated by modern travel, could be seen as one of the late signs in this category of "General Signs."

B. Late signs of the End

1. The re-establishment of Israel

In Luke's account, Jesus says: "When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those in the city get out, and let those in the country not enter the city. For this is the time of punishment in fulfilment of all that has been written. How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! There will be great distress in the land and wrath against this people. They will fall by the sword and will be taken as prisoners to all the nations. Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled" (Luke 21:20-24)

It seems quite clear that the first part of this prophecy has been fulfilled literally. Jerusalem was surrounded by armies and laid desolate in AD70. Many Jewish people did fall by the sword and many others were scattered to all nations. Jerusalem has been under Gentile rule for 2000 years. It is therefore to be expected that the last part of the prophecy will be fulfilled, namely that Jerusalem will no longer be under Gentile control, i.e. it will be under Jewish control, and this marks "the times of the Gentiles [being] fulfilled."

Having been on the council of the Church of England's 200 year old organisation reaching out to Jewish people especially in Israel for 20 years, being its General Director living in Jerusalem for over three years, I have a fair knowledge of the situation in Israel. Having become, during that time, passionate about reconciliation, peace and justice for both the Israelis and Palestinians, I am under no illusions about the faults of both people groups. Fulfilling my role in Jerusalem was not easy, nor was reaching out to the Jewish community after 2000 years of Christian anti-Semitism. I am neither a starry-eyed Christian Zionist nor a blinkered pro-Palestinian fanatic. Rather I am pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian because I believe God is.

However, after much experience and reflection, my considered opinion is that the re-establishment, survival and development of the State of Israel (for all the pain and controversy associated with it) is a very remarkable thing. So is the unique survival of the Jewish people without a land for almost 2000 years. Although my critical faculties are in good working order, I find it beyond belief to think that the relationship between this and Jesus' prophecy in Luke 21:24 is purely coincidental. Probably many genuine answers to prayer can be seen as coincidences. But, as Archbishop William Temple put it, "When I pray, coincidences happen, and when I don't, they don't."

I therefore see that the re-establishment of the State of Israel (for all its anti-Christian attitudes, secularism and, at times, injustice) and the end of Gentile control over Jerusalem as an important late sign of the End, a fulfilment of Jesus' prophecy.

2. The desolating abomination

Jesus predicted: "So when you see standing in the holy place 'the abomination that causes desolation', spoken of through the prophet Daniel- let the reader understand- then let those

who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let no-one on the roof of his house go down to take anything out of the house. Let no-one in the field go back to get his cloak. How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! Pray that your flight will not take place in winter or on the Sabbath” (Matt 24:15-20).

a. Historical Fulfilment

The original ‘abomination that causes desolation’ was the altar of Zeus Ouranios (Baal Shammaim) erected by Antiochus Epiphanes on the site of the altar of burnt offering on December 25th 168 BC. Then Pompey conquered Jerusalem and entered the holy of holies in 63 BC.

Gundry says that the "holy place" means the land of Israel in 2 Macc.2:18 but here it probably means temple.¹⁴

- i. AD 40 Caligula (Gaius Caesar, AD 12-41) planned to put a statue of himself in the temple. Massive Jewish pressure led Petronius to urge the emperor to change his mind. Caligula had already done so but replied that Petronius should kill himself. But in January 41, before Caligula's letter was delivered the emperor was assassinated.
- ii. The Zealots held the temple, making it an armed fortress. They admitted the Idumeans and 8,500 people were slaughtered in the building. Josephus said: “These men, therefore, trampled upon all the laws of men, and laughed at the laws of God; and as for the oracles of the prophets they ridiculed them as the tricks of jugglers ... For there was a certain oracle of those men, that the city should then be taken and the Sanctuary burnt, by right of war, when a sedition should invade the Jews, and their own hands should pollute the Temple of God.” (*Josephus, Wars 4.5.1-2; 4.6.3*)
- iii. Even before 66 AD Jews throughout Syria and Palestine were victims of violence and pogroms. In the war of 66 AD over 97,000 Jews were enslaved. In the Roman siege (April-September 70) 1,100,000 were killed. There was cannibalism. Josephus tells of Mary from Perea who was starving in Jerusalem, who seized her child, an infant at the breast, killed it and roasted it for food (*Jewish Wars, 6.3,4#201-211*)

Josephus says that Titus was very impressed with the fortifications in Jerusalem and said: “God, indeed, has been with us in the war. God it was who brought down the Jews from these strongholds; for what power have human hands or engines against these towers?” (*War 6.411*) A statue of Titus was erected on the site of the ruined temple in AD 70. (Masada fell in 73/74).

- iv. Eusebius (4th century): “The people of the Jerusalem church were commanded by an oracle given by revelation before the war to those in the city who were worthy of it to depart and dwell in one of the cities of Perea which they call Pella.” (*Eccl.Hist. 3.5.3*). Epiphanius said the flight began just before the Roman siege.

But scholars doubt all this.

- The Christians would have had to break through Roman lines.
- The people of Pella were bitterly anti-Jewish and therefore anti-Christian.
- Pella could not have accommodated all the refugees.
- If the escape had been earlier the Christians would have run into hostile Jewish freedom fighters.
- Pella was not mentioned by Jesus.
- Pella was not in mountains but at the base of low foothills in Transjordan 17 miles south of the Sea of Galilee.

Hare writes: “The flight of which verses 16-20 speak is not any historical event, and most certainly not the escape of refugees from the burning capital in the summer (not winter) of 70 CE.”¹⁵

After Bar Kochba the Romans erected a temple to Jupiter on temple site.

b. Future Fulfilment

Robert Mounce, Douglas Hare and Robert H Gundry see the “desolating abomination” as relating to the Antichrist. Gundry says: “All things considered, a reference to the image of some evil, deified figure such as the Antichrist seems best.” He continues: “Antinomianism in the church is seldom brazen. Those who teach it usually offer a theological justification: the claim to have had direct and recent communications with Christ, so that no attention needs to be paid to his traditional teaching, which the new communications outdate. In Matthew's time these communications were said to have taken place in the desert.”¹⁶

Dr Robert Smith comments: “One strand of Christian interpretation came to identify the desolating sacrilege as the antichrist and to think of the sudden, awesome eruption of evil at the center of power in the church. One thing wrong with that tradition is that it is usually imagined that the evil was erupting or would erupt in someone else's church, while Matthew calls readers to vigilance about their own behavior, their own style of leadership, and their own community.”¹⁷

Professor Daniel Patte comments on v.15: “This statement refers either to the profanation of the Temple (the literal meaning of ‘holy place’) or to the profanation of the community of disciples (the new ‘holy place’), or more likely to *both*: both belong to this time when sufferings have begun and when it is not yet the end.”¹⁸

Paul expands on the theme of the “desolating abomination” in Thessalonians: “Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come. Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for [that day will not come] until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshipped, so that *he sets himself up in God's temple*, proclaiming himself to be God. Don't you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things? And now you know what is holding him back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time. For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendour of his coming. The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders, and in every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness” (2 Thessalonians 2:1-12).

We have already seen the outlook encouraged by the New Age Movement, earth mysticism and syncretism is ripe for being totally deceived by such a figure. But we also live in an age of rebellion. Authority counts for little. The autonomy of the individual rules. Human rights protect that autonomy. This leads to stricter controls by those in authority as evidenced by the many areas of life now regulated by law. The modern spirit of rebellion seems to relate to what Paul prophesies about the Antichrist.

3. The Great Distress

Jesus foretells: "For then there will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now- and never to be equalled again. If those days had not been cut short, no-one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened" Matt 24:21-22). Traditionally this period has been called "the Great Tribulation" and related to the great suffering outlined in the Book of Revelation.

a. Historical Fulfilment

Blomberg believes the great tribulation is the whole period from AD 70 until the Parousia. But he adds: "As with the 'abomination that causes desolation' in v.15, seeing Jesus' reference to the great tribulation as beginning in AD 70 does not exclude a later application of this expression to the period of time described in Revelation 7-19 - the final stages of this entire interadvent period. Revelation 7:14 seems to suggest precisely such an intensification of horrors immediately preceding the end of the age. God's intervention plays out in repeated patterns of activity on ever grander and more awful scales."¹⁹

There was a widespread expectation that there would be great distress before the Messiah came to set up the kingdom of God.²⁰

b. Future Fulfilment

Gundry, who sees the abomination as the image of antichrist, relates the passage to the seventieth week of Daniel.²¹ Dr John Meier says: "Matthew can see in these events a paradigm of the great sacrilege and suffering which Christians believed would precede the return of Christ (cf. Rev.12-13; 2 Thess. 2:3-4)."²²

4. False Christs

Jesus says: At that time if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or, 'There he is!' do not believe it. For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect- if that were possible. See, I have told you ahead of time. So if anyone tells you, 'There he is, out in the desert,' do not go out; or, 'Here he is, in the inner rooms,' do not believe it. For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Wherever there is a carcass, there the vultures will gather" (Matt 24:23-28).

a. Historical Fulfilment

Some say that Jesus may be ruling out the Essene view that only in desert communities like theirs will he be found and the zealot view since inner rooms or storehouses were used to hide Zealot weapons. There was a common Jewish tradition that believed the messiah would be hidden on earth until his manifestation.

Bruner comments:⁸⁶⁷ "The teachings of the rabbis in and shortly after Jesus' time emphasized that the Messiah would not be clearly recognized but that he would have to persuade the Israelites, with great difficulty, to recognize him as their king and savior."²³

b. Future Fulfilment

However, it seems from Jesus' words that this is a reference to a much more serious manifestations of false Christs or false prophets very near the End, maybe related to the Antichrist.

C. The End

1. Cosmic disturbance

Jesus prophesies: "Immediately after the distress of those days 'the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken'" (Matt 24:29). "There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near" (Luke 21:25, 26, 28).

Brooks writes: "At this point the dual reference of the discourse becomes undeniable - at least for readers since AD 70 ... Certainly the darkening of the sun at Jesus' crucifixion (15:33) does not constitute fulfilment of [Mark 13] v.24b, although it too is a symbol of divine wrath."²⁴

"The falling of the stars refers to a shower of meteorites, and the shaking of the heavenly powers to God's displacing 'the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places'" (Eph.6:12) according to Gundry.²⁵

Are these symbolical or astronomical? Sometimes in Scripture they are symbolical. But what about the possibility of a major asteroid/comet impact on earth? Since 1975 the American Department of Defense has recorded 136 airburst explosions caused by material falling into the earth's atmosphere. These explosions were less than a quarter of the power of the Hiroshima bomb. But one scientist estimates that once every year there is an explosion four times that of the Hiroshima bomb. In June 1908 an object exploded over Siberia with the force of up to 1000 times the Hiroshima bomb and devastated a huge area of about 1000 square miles. Oxford scientist Victor Clube calculates that such events should happen on average every century. He added, "We have no means at the moment of predicting them. They may happen tomorrow, they may happen 100 years hence..." Geologists have already recognised almost 200 craters around the world.

The Bible talks of the catastrophe of the flood and of similar destruction in the Book of Revelation. But for many years, following the nineteenth century scientist Thomas Huxley, the scientific world rejected such 'Catastrophism' as superstition.

But Victor Clube stated, "It has become very clear that all the planets, and the Earth in particular, are in a catastrophic environment, and so Huxley was wrong. It's as simple as that. But he managed with the aid of many experts to convince us all that the world was truly uniformitarian [always developing by gradual geological processes] and we were all basically safe. We have a great deal of new thinking to go in for now."

So it isn't unscientific to speak, as the Bible does, of catastrophic "signs in the heavens" and of "a great star, blazing like a torch, [falling] from the sky."

The average scientific calculation is that each of us has a one in 20,000 chance of being killed by an asteroid or comet (the same as for an air crash). But, in any case, we know that the whole universe is in God's hands.

"The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light." Lenski comments: "The world will be plunged into impenetrable darkness, and then, coming out of heaven, the Son of Man ... will appear in superearthy brilliance and glory."²⁶

2. The Parousia

“At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory” (Matt 24:30).

There are various interpretations of “sign”. Some say it is the cross (so Didache 16:6; Gospel of Peter 39; Apoc of Peter 1; Epistula Apostolorum 16; Jerome and Cyril of Jerusalem (perhaps the latter two were influenced by Constantine's story). Others say it is the Son of Man himself (so many commentators, cf. Isa.11:10, 12) which seems the most likely interpretation. Others say it is a mystery.

“We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words” (1 Thess. 4:14-18).

3. The Rapture

“And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other” (Matt 24:31).

Michael Green relates it to the winning of people from all over the ancient world.²⁸

Dispensational Pre-millenarianism (see [The Main Millennial Views](#), [Different Millennial Views](#), [Dispensationalism Charts](#)) teaches that the church is “raptured” up into heaven by Jesus who appears in the clouds but doesn't descend to earth, so that it misses the Great Distress (Tribulation) in the world. There does not appear to be support for this rather escapist view in Scripture. The “rapture” of the saints (“we who are still alive and are left will be caught up (raptured) together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air 1 Thess 4:17) is more likely to be like the wecloming of a king by a city in the ancient world. When they saw the king approaching, the elders of the city and others would go out to meet him, then lead him in a splendid procession back into the city. This interpretation would mean the Lord appearing in the clouds, the saints beig caught up to meet him and returning to earth with him.

Bruner comments: “The Rapture occurs *after* the cosmic, visible coming of the Son of Man ... The decision about Dispensationalism's eschatology can be made by the decision to understand Scripture either as a gospel or as a puzzle. Does Scripture basically have a straightforward message about the coming Messiah', a message that is not complicated and labrynthic? Or does Scripture contain instead (or in addition) a series of cryptic, mysterious messages that can only be decoded by especially gifted prophetic teachers?”²⁹

The trumpet was the traditional summons home of the diaspora Isa.27:13. So it would seem that the saints are not raptured secretly, but in an obvious and earth-transforming way, at the time of the Second Coming – which also leads to the judgment of the rest of the earth's inhabitants.

Appendix : Was Jesus mistaken about the imminence of his return?

Jesus stated: “Now learn this lesson from the fig-tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door. I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.” (Matt 24:32-35).

What did he mean by the last sentence. That generation of people, his audience, has long since passed away and the End has not come. Was Jesus mistaken? It is neither necessary nor theologically acceptable to draw this conclusion. We should instead note:

The Multiple Reference of Prophecy

It is clear that biblical prophets made predictions which seem to have more than one fulfilment, sometimes separated by long periods of time. An analogy can be drawn with climbing a mountain. As the climber ascends, he thinks the peak ahead of him is the highest peak (final destination). But as he gets higher he sees it is actually a lower peak beyond which is a valley before the final ascent to the highest peak. So the climb is much longer than it appeared because he couldn't see that valley. The prophets often seemed to see two peaks as very close together when actually they are separated by a wide 'valley' of time.

F D Bruner comments: “The emphasis in Matthew's version of the sermon is certainly on the end of the world, but the destruction of Jerusalem is everywhere that end's classic precursor. This, Jesus' sermon about *current* events, especially the imminent destruction of Jerusalem, becomes a window through which to see Jesus' view of end events, especially the coming of the Son of Man ... The destruction of Jerusalem was the *prototype* of the end of the world ... we most profitably read Matthew's sermon when we read it in this iridescent way, seeing both Jerusalem's end and Jesus' coming in most texts, not always being sure which of the two events is meant ...”³⁰ So Hendrickson.

Leon Morris points out that Jesus was discouraging speculation that he would return soon (vv.6, 8, 14, 23-28). He adds: “We should not overlook the important fact that he said quite plainly that he did not know the date of his coming back (v.36). If he did not know it, how could he say confidently it would occur within a few years?”³¹

Robert Mounce writes: “Biblical prophecy is capable of multiple fulfillment.”³² Similarly, Gundry writes: “Double fulfilment of biblical prophecy is a common phenomenon.”³³

Possible interpretations of Matt 24:34

There have been various interpretations of this passage:

1. **“This generation” means “this race”** (i.e. Israel): So Hendrickson.³⁴ But this is linguistically much less likely than “generation” (Blomberg³⁵). Gundry points out that in Matthew 23:35-36 Jesus says this generation murdered Zechariah - a murder which had happened several hundred years earlier.
2. **“This generation” means “this kind of people”**: ie an evil and adulterous generation.
3. **“This generation” means “Christian believers”**:
4. **“This generation” means “a future generation”** in which all the signs occur.
5. **Jesus is referring to the destruction of the Temple in AD70.** D A Carson writes: “‘This generation’ can only with the greatest difficulty be made to mean anything other than the

generation living when Jesus spoke.”³⁶ He must therefore be referring to the destruction of the Temple.

6. **Jesus was not including the Parousia.** Blomberg says that “all these things” must refer to everything in vv.1-26 but not the Parousia.³⁷
7. **Jesus meant “these things” must *begin* to happen in his contemporary generation.** Mounce comments: “If *genetai* (*happened*) is taken as an ingressive aorist, the sentence would indicate that before the generation alive at the time had died, all things described in connection with the end *will have started to take place.*”³⁸ Similarly Carson writes: “All that v.34 demands is that the distress of vv.4-28, including Jerusalem's fall, happen within the lifetime of the generation then living. This does *not* mean that the distress must end within that time but only that ‘all these things’ must happen within it.”³⁹

Donald English says: “The best solution to hold together all the diverse considerations in [Mark 13] seems to be that which joins to the destruction of Jerusalem and the ultimate Parousia as two parts of God's one activity, the former prefiguring the latter. The ‘signs of the end’ begin when Jesus' ministry is complete and Jerusalem's destruction was terrible evidence of the end times. Jesus' generation would see that, and proleptically would be recipients of the promise of the rest.”⁴⁰

Possible Interpretations of Matthew 10:23

Jesus says: “I tell you the truth, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes.” There are several interpretations:

1. Jesus was mistaken (Albert Schweitzer said that Jesus expected the parousia before the apostles' mission was over, but was disappointed. Later Jesus attempted to bring in the kingdom by his vicarious suffering but was finally disappointed). This is an unacceptable comment on Jesus.
2. Matthew misplaced the second part of the passage: there is no evidence for this.
3. It means “before the Son of Man catches up with you.”
4. The reference is to the coming in judgment in AD66-70.

Neither 3 or 4 seems implied by the context.

5. Refers to Jesus revealing himself as risen Lord to the disciples (so Tasker and Mounce) or at Pentecost.
6. The Jews would be evangelized right up to the parousia (so Blomberg)

Maybe both 5. and 6. are true given multiple reference of prophecy.

David Hill comments: “It is probable that we have here an example of that ‘shortening of historical perspective’ which is so frequently in the prophets. ‘When the profound realities underlying a situation are depicted in the dramatic form of historical prediction, the certainty and inevitability of the spiritual processes involved are expressed in terms of the immediate imminence of the event’ (Dodd, Parables, p.71)”⁴¹

Leon Morris writes: “...the term ‘Son of man’ appears to be derived from the vision in which ‘one like a son of man came to the Ancient of Days’ (Dan.7:13). In other words, the coming may be Jesus' coming to the Father rather than his return to his return at the end of the age.”⁴²

Robert Mounce adds: “One thing we do know is that by the time Matthew wrote, the mission of the Twelve was history and the parousia had not taken place.”⁴³

Appendix 2: The “Fig tree”

Jesus said: “Now learn this lesson from the fig-tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door. I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away” (Matt 24:32-35).

No commentators see it as Israel. Michel Green says "It is ... exegetically very questionable to read so large an inference out of so slight an allusion in a parable."⁴⁴

Most trees in the Holy Land are evergreen. But the almond and the fig lose leaves in the winter. The almond's return early spring and the fig's late spring. The fig therefore is the harbinger of summer. The harvest is in the summer and harvest symbolizes the end of the world and judgment.

Carrington comments: “It appears that the fig-tree was actually used as a means of measuring off the seasons of the year. Rabbi Simeon the son of Gamaliel, a first century Rabbi, is reported to have said, ‘From the putting forth of leaves till there be green figs is fifty days; from the green figs till the buds fall off, fifty days; and from that time till the figs are ripe, fifty days’: it is the summer half of the year from Passover to Tabernacles.”⁴⁵

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NOTES

¹The Parable of the Unjust Judge and the Eschatology of Luke-Acts, © 1963 *Scottish Journal of Theology*. Originally published in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 16:3 (1963), pp. 297 - 301. Reprinted with permission. p.300f.

²R C H Lenski, *The Interpretation of St Mark's Gospel*, Augsburg, Minneapolis, 1961, p. 587.

³Hendrickson, *The Gospel of Mark*, Banner of Truth, Edinburgh, 1976, p. 516f.

⁴The Times 26.5.94

⁵Hendrickson op. cit., p.523.

⁶Douglas Hare, *Matthew – Interpretation Bible Commentary*, John Knox Press, Louisville 1993, p. 276.

⁷FD Bruner, *Matthew*, vol. 2, *Word Biblical Commentary*. Dallas: Word Books, 1985, p. 850.

⁸Bruner, op. cit., p. 852.

⁹Sea of Faith Network website www.sofn.org.uk.

¹⁰To avoid any misunderstanding I should point out that I favour dialogue with people of other faiths and am myself involved at the invitation of the Bishop of Norwich in a group of clergy which dialogues with the Muslims at the University of East Anglia. I firmly believe that Jesus is the only Saviour but I also believe it is important to reach out in peace and love to our brothers and sisters in other faith groups, and so in a small way to counter the suspicion, fear and violence which characterises the attitudes of some towards those of other faiths.

¹¹R H Glover, *The Progress of Worldwide Missions*, New York, 1925, p.39. Quoted in Hendrickson, op. cit. p. 855.

¹²Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, *New American Commentary*, Holman Reference, 1992, p.357

¹³W F Albright and C S Mann, *Matthew*, *The Anchor Bible*, Yale University Press, New York, 1971, p.292f.

¹⁴Robert H Gundry, *Matthew: a Commentary on his Literary and Theological Art*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1982 p. 482.

¹⁵Douglas Hare, op. cit. p.277.

¹⁶Gundry, op. cit. p. 482, 485.

¹⁷Robert Smith, *Augsburg Commentary on Matthew*, Augsburg Fortress Publishers 1989, p. 285f.

¹⁸Daniel Patte, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Abingdon Press 2003, p. 338.

¹⁹Blomberg, op. cit. p. 359.

²⁰Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, *Pillar New Testament Commentary*, Eerdmans 1992, p. 599.

²¹Gundry, op. cit. p. 484.

- ²² John Meier, *Matthew, New Testament Message*, Veritas, Dublin, 1980, p.283
- ²³ Bruner, op. cit. p. 867.
- ²⁴ James A. Brooks Holman, *Mark, The New American Commentary*, Holman 1991 p. 215.
- ²⁵ Gundry, op. cit. p. 487.
- ²⁶ Lenski, op. cit. p. 584.
- ²⁸ Michael Green, *Matthew for Today*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1998, p. 234
- ²⁹ Bruner, op. cit. p. 873.
- ³⁰ Bruner, op. cit. p. 843.
- ³¹ Morris, op. cit. p. 594.
- ³² Robert Mounce, *Matthew, New International Biblical Commentary*, Hendrickson 1991, p. 228.
- ³³ Gundry, op. cit. p. 491.
- ³⁴ Hendrickson, op. cit., p. 868.
- ³⁵ Blomberg, op. cit., p. 364
- ³⁶ D A Carson, *Matthew, Expositors Bible Commentary*, Zondervan 1984 quoted in Gundry, op. cit., p. 364
- ³⁷ Blomberg, op. cit., p. 364
- ³⁸ Mounce, op. cit., p. 228.
- ³⁹ Carson, op. cit., quoted in Morris op. cit., p. 612
- ⁴⁰ Donald English, *The Message of Mark*, IVP, Leicester, 1992, p.209.
- ⁴¹ David Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New Century Bible, Oliphants, London, 1972
- ⁴² Morris, op. cit., p. 257.
- ⁴³ Mounce, op. cit., p. 95.
- ⁴⁴ Green, op. cit., p. 234.
- ⁴⁵ Philip Carrington, *According to Mark: A Running Commentray on the Oldest Gospel*, Cambridge University Press, 1960, p. 291f