

Christian church either to wait for such, or to work for them.'

So Fairbairn the elder argues competently with Fairbairn the younger! It is for each reader to choose which view he believes to be most in accord with the rest of Holy Scripture and which is most glorifying to God. It is to be noted that (despite some popular opinions to the contrary) it is the second view which exalts the urgency and complete decisiveness of the gospel of the new covenant. The important matter to be determined, however, is what did our Lord and the apostles intend the first Christians (and subsequent generations) to believe about this matter?

It is to be noted that Fairbairn's later views — if true — have big implications for us. He would assert something like this — 'The whole Jewish problem has arisen in the world, because the chosen nation is now the nation that is under the curse of God. The whole problem remains because they have refused the Messiah and continue to refuse Him. The problem can be removed only when the Jews come to the Messiah. Therefore the preaching of the gospel to the Jewish people and *their complete conversion* to Christ is the urgent duty of the Church today.'

Quotations are taken from *The Prophetic Prospects of the Jews*, by the Rev. Patrick Fairbairn, edited by Prof. A. Pieters: Eerdmans (Grand Rapids, Michigan).

## AN INTERPRETATION OF THE DISCOURSE ON THE MOUNT OF OLIVES

By the REV. J. STAFFORD WRIGHT, M.A.

*Principal of Tyndale Hall, Bristol*

**E**ACH of the Synoptic Gospels has a version of the discourse which our Lord gave on the Mount of Olives shortly before His crucifixion. The precise interpretation of the elements in the discourse has puzzled all commentators, and this article makes no claim to remove all the difficulties. In essence it does not even profess to be original, but it sets out my own comments on a division of the discourse that appeared in the now defunct *Princeton Theological Review*, where an article by Edgar M. Wilson in 1928 gives what strikes me as a most sane approach. All that I have in front of me in writing this article are the headings that I put into my Bible when I read the original, and Dr. Wilson is in no way responsible for the way in which I have here set out my comments. Those who wish to read the original will find a copy in the Library of Tyndale House, Cambridge.

One feels that the most satisfying commentary on the discourse is one that can set the three accounts side by side, and can divide up each one into sections that cover the same theme in the same order in each account. This is better than an interpretation that takes each Synoptic version separately and unfolds it without overmuch reference to the possible parallels.

Obviously we must first note the occasion of the discourse and the questions that it purports to answer. The disciples had commented on the glories of the temple, and Jesus Christ had replied that it would be totally destroyed. The disciples then enquire as follows (quotations from RV): 'When shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world (age)?' (Mt. xxiv. 3). 'When shall these things be? and what shall be the sign when these things are all about

to be accomplished?' (Mk. xiii. 4). 'When therefore shall these things be? and what shall be the sign when these things are about to come to pass?' (Lk. xxi. 7). These separate forms indicate that the disciples asked first about the time when the temple would be destroyed, and whether there would be any signs to indicate that the destruction was approaching. Matthew's specific mention of the second coming and the end of the age shows that the disciples at this time probably supposed that the destruction of the temple and the coming would occur at the same period. If they thought this, it does not follow that Christ did not distinguish the two events in His answer, though the disciples may still not have seen how to disentangle the two things even after He had spoken. Only the unfolding of history enables us to make the clear separation that we desire. We are, however, in a better position than the disciples, since we have seen the fulfilment of the words about the destruction of the temple, which took place in AD 70. In this article we will assume that the Synoptists have each given an entirely accurate summary of Christ's words, and that we are not concerned with alterations and adaptations after Jerusalem was destroyed. The Synoptists wrote accurately even though they did not understand all that the words meant.

Bearing in mind that Christ is dealing with the two subjects, which we now know to be separate in point of time, we turn to a possible division of the discourse into consecutive sections.

#### **Warnings against being led astray by false prophets or by great calamities (Matthew xxiv. 4-8; Mark xiii. 5-8; Luke xxi. 8-11)**

This is a suitable opening to the discourse. Wars and troubles will always bring forth a crop of strange prophecies, foretelling impending doom, or offering Messiah-saviours. The worse the trouble, the more obvious it is to the devout believer that God cannot allow things to continue much longer without intervening; and if intervention is bound up with the coming of the Messiah, then any messianic pretender will have some following for his claims. Later in the discourse there is more about the coming of the true Messiah. Meanwhile the disciples are warned not to expect every war and every persecution to be the herald of the end. There will be many wars, tumults, famines, earthquakes, and pestilences, which will bring to birth many sufferings for Christians and for the world, and none of them means necessarily that the end is at hand.

#### **Persecution foretold and help promised (Matthew xxiv. 9-14; Mark xiii. 9-13; Luke xxi. 12-19)**

We are still in the whole period of the Christian era, and go beyond the fall of Jerusalem, since Matthew xxiv. 14 and Mark xiii. 10 speak of the fact of the preaching of the gospel among all nations which has not even yet been fulfilled. Superficially there might seem to be a difference between 'then' in Matthew xxiv. 9 and 'before all these things' in Luke xxi. 12. Personally I think that 'all these things' are the events connected with the destruction of Jerusalem, and not the wars etc. Note the use of the phrase in the disciples' question as given in Mark xiii. 4. If so, Matthew's 'then' is intended to add a further woe to the natural disasters; there will be special suffering for Christians because they are Christians. Yet God's strength will always be sufficient. The phrase in Matthew and Mark, 'He that endureth to the end, the same shall be saved', has the interesting parallel in Luke, 'Not a hair of your head shall perish. In your patience (endurance) ye shall win your souls (lives)'. Either Christ said both sentences, or we have two versions in Greek of

what He said in Aramaic. On the whole I prefer the second theory, and, if so, Christ is saying that many Christians by standing firm will win acquittal or release, though He has already warned them that some will be put to death. To us this ambivalence seems strange, yet it would be little different from such a promise as is made in Psalm xci. 5-7, which clearly is not absolute.

### **The destruction of Jerusalem and dispersion of the Jews (Matthew xxiv. 15-28; Mark xiii. 14-23; Luke xxi. 20-24)**

From the general sufferings of Christians up to the time of the end, the Lord turns to the other part of the question, i.e. concerning the fall of Jerusalem. The link of thought is that Christians will have their own special troubles without also becoming involved in the sufferings of Jerusalem. Since Jerusalem and Judaea would be important Church centres, Christians should know when to leave the doomed area. Matthew and Mark record the word about the abomination of desolation, which the reader of the book of Daniel is told to understand in this connection, while Luke has the alternative, 'Jerusalem compassed with armies'. As with most of the talks in the Gospels and Acts, the New Testament record is selective and it is probable that Luke selects the sentence that would be better understood by Gentile readers showing that the abomination referred to is the Roman army penetrating into the holy city. Then there must be no delay, but immediate flight into the hills. For the Jews in the city there will be the most terrible suffering, though even this will have some limit so that not all are killed. Yet they will be scattered in many lands, and their tribulation will continue all through the era of Gentile power. This comes out clearly in Luke xxi. 24. Then comes a further warning in Matthew and Mark about false Messiahs and false prophets, perhaps having special reference to the close of the age, though true all through the Christian era. The warning about a supposed secret presence of Christ is specially applicable to Jehovah's Witnesses. The climax of history is the visible appearance of the Lord in glory. The coming is compared to the lightning and to the carcass which attracts the vultures. If these two comparisons are parallels, the meaning of the second is that the coming will be visible to all, just as the carcass attracts the attention of all the vultures; there are, however, other possible interpretations.

### **The second coming of Christ (Matthew xxiv. 29-31; Mark xiii. 24-27; Luke xxi. 25-28)**

Matthew and Mark speak of the signs of the coming as occurring 'immediately, after the tribulation of those days', or, 'in those days, after that tribulation'. Here it is absolutely necessary to read Luke in order to understand from verse 24 that the tribulation for the Jews extends from the destruction of Jerusalem until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled. Although I do not hold the so-called dispensational views of the taking up of the Jews again at the time of the end, or during the Millennium, I think it is quite possible that the deliverance of Jerusalem in 1917 is applicable to these words, and that this marked some stage in the ending of the Jewish tribulation. Yet I would not be dogmatic, and it may be that the Jews will meet with fresh sufferings for many centuries yet. I do not want to be numbered among the false prophets who seize on troubles and signs as indications of the Lord's near return, but to our generation it must seem as though there had never been such confusion and perplexity on earth, nor such activity in the heavens. The final proof, however, will be the sign of the Son of man in heaven, which, according to Matthew,

immediately precedes the coming of Christ Himself. Here those of us who believe in a literal appearance, seen by all mankind, must be practical and definite. The bright glory of Christ must in some measure hang in space for a period of at least twenty-four hours if all the peoples of the earth are to see Him. Some people hold such rigid theories about the rapture of the Church that it is impossible to make any suggestion without treading on somebody's toes; but the implication of Matthew xxiv. 26, 27 to me is that it is while the non-Christians are looking on the Son of man descending that the angels gather the Church to be with Him. This would link up with 1 Thessalonians iv. 16, 17, and would not separate the rapture from the coming to earth by more than a very short time: the two events become part of the one process.

**Watching for the events of this generation**  
(Matthew xxiv. 32-35; Mark xiii. 28-31; Luke xxi. 29-33)

In his article Edgar Wilson holds that this section refers to the fall of Jerusalem, while the next refers to the coming of Christ. Although I cannot dismiss entirely the interpretation of 'this generation' as 'the generation that sees the beginning of the last signs', I think that there is much to be said for the other view. The key phrase, all 'these things' has occurred in the disciples' question, and there definitely means the destruction of Jerusalem (Mk. xiii. 4). Thus when Christ here says, 'this generation shall not pass away, until all these things be accomplished', it is natural to take Him as referring to the destruction of Jerusalem, and not to the coming.

There is no difficulty over this in Matthew and Mark, since, as the RV margin shows, the translation of the previous verse may be, 'know ye that it is nigh'. Luke, however, specifically says, 'know ye that the kingdom of God is nigh'. This saying is easier to interpret if the whole section refers to the second coming, but the New Testament teaching about the kingdom is by no means as simple as is sometimes supposed. This is too big a subject to take up here. But, briefly, the kingdom of God was 'among' the Jews when the King was on earth (Lk. xvii. 21 in the light of such verses as Mt. iii. 2). The kingdom came with power at Pentecost, and Acts is the record of its ever-increasing power (Mk. ix. 1 in the light of such verses as Acts i. 3, xxviii. 31; Heb. xii. 28). Yet the prayer, 'Thy kingdom come', is not fully answered until the second coming (Rev. xi. 15). However there is a further important factor, which is the overlap period of Judaism, Jewish-Christianity, and Christianity, during the New Testament period. It was the Hebrew people who had originally been taken up to be 'a kingdom of priests' (Ex. xix. 6), and the fresh work of establishing the kingdom was done by the Jewish Messiah. The New Testament gives the process of the disentangling of the new from the old, and this was by no means as easy as we Gentiles imagine it ought to have been. It was not until the final destruction of Jerusalem that the nature of the kingdom forced itself upon all reasonable Christians: it was to be built around the Jerusalem which is above (Gal. iv. 26; Heb. xii. 22). So, in speaking of the coming destruction of Jerusalem, Christ may well have viewed it as the coming of the kingdom of God.

**Watching for the coming of Christ**  
(Matthew xxiv. 36-51; Mark xiii. 32-37; Luke xxi. 34-36)

The phrase in Matthew and Mark, 'But of that day and hour', may be a deliberate distinction between the all 'these things' and the second coming. Certainly this section is concerned with the second coming, and the

need to be ready for it. While Christ has already said that there would be certain signs in heaven and earth, they are not of such a nature as to compel belief. Thus Christians must always be ready. Inasmuch as the second coming is the time of judgment and assessment, this warning is applicable in a secondary sense to Christians of every era. None of us knows the date of our death; we cannot live carelessly today on the assumption that we shall have tomorrow for reformation. If we should die today, we should go to the judgment seat at the second coming all unprepared to meet the Lord (2 Cor. v. 10).

The well-known problem of our Lord's ignorance of the date of the coming (Mk. xiii. 32) is again too big to discuss here. It can best be understood in the light of modern understanding of the field of the unconscious. In imperfect man the gateway of memory and of intruding thoughts is improperly controlled; in Jesus Christ, the perfect Man, only those thoughts emerged into consciousness that His Father wished to emerge. Any teaching that was not given to Him would not be known. I have written more fully of this in my book, *What is Man?*

In looking back over the discourse it would seem that we can give a reasonable interpretation that takes account of the twofold form of the disciples' question, and that allows each of the Gospel versions to record the answer in sections that correspond to each other.

## GLOSSARY OF WORDS USED IN DISCUSSION ON PROPHECY

### *Preterist*

A principle of interpretation of the Apocalypse which holds that the entire meaning of the book is to be found in the past, that is to say, in the opening centuries of Christian history.

### *Historicist*

A principle of interpretation of the Apocalypse based on the view that the book is a chronological unfolding of the story of Christianity from the first advent of Christ to the second.

### *Futurist*

A principle of interpretation of the Apocalypse based on the view that everything after the close of chapter iii belongs to a period at the end of the Christian era. Those who hold the 'secret rapture' theory regard the events of these last nineteen chapters as occurring only after the Church has been removed from the scene of history.

### *Idealist*

A principle of interpretation of the Apocalypse based on the view that the symbolic language represents the recurring conflict between the powers of light and darkness in every age.

### *Millennium*

This word means one thousand years, and is the name given to what is described in Revelation xx.

### *Pre-millennialism*

A method of interpreting prophecy which holds that the second coming of Christ must precede the millennium.