

The Greatest Story Never Told

The Fulfillment of Matthew 24:1-35

Anyone comparing our Savior's words [in Matt. 24] with the rest of the historian's (Josephus') record of the war cannot fail to be astonished or to confess the divine character of the Savior's prediction.

As to what happened to the whole nation after the Savior's passion and the mob's begging the release of the robber-murderer (Barabbas) and the removal of the author of life, there is no need to add to the records. But it would be right to add facts that showed the kindness of a gracious Providence in delaying the destruction of the Jews for forty years after their crime against Christ. All that time, most of the apostles, including the first bishop, James himself, called the Lord's brother, were still alive, and their remaining in the city provided powerful protection for the place. For God was still patient, hoping that they might finally repent of their misdeeds and find pardon and salvation, but also sending miraculous warnings of what would happen if they failed to repent. ¹

– Eusebius, fourth century A.D.

The drama described in Matthew 24 is possibly more sensational than any event in Scripture except for the two epics --- the Exodus out of Egypt and the Crucifixion-Resurrection story.

The event is the deliverance of Jewish Christians from what was arguably the world's worst massacre. Over one percent of Roman civilization was killed during the Jewish revolt against Rome. The figures are not exact, but tragically, ten percent of all living Jews died between the initial revolt against the Romans in the summer of A.D. 66 and the destruction of Jerusalem in late A.D. 70.

Yet, the great church historian Eusebius believed that the story was “marvelously strange.” He also believed that it put on display the graciousness of God and his long-suffering for first century Jews.

¹ *Eusebius: The Church History*, trans. Paul Maier (Kregel: Grand Rapids, 1999) Book 3, Chapter 7

This story recounts a true episode in Jewish history in which Jesus of Nazareth made advance preparations for his followers, mostly Jews themselves, to escape from this doom. These preparations were unveiled about forty years ahead of time. This saga involved frustrated plots, delirious madmen, unmentionable horrors and many of the things that make for a great blockbuster movie --- except that it is true. In the end, this historical story climaxes with astonishment and hope.

It is doubtful that Steven Spielberg or James Cameron will produce what could be called *Exodus II*, or *The Other Great Escape*. Yet, it may be the greatest story in human history that has not yet been told in churches or in classrooms. What makes this story all the more worth learning is that Jesus Christ revealed the outcome to his disciples two or three days before his death. It begins in Matthew 24.

A Shocking Disclosure

Jesus left the temple and was walking away when his disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings. "Do you see all these things?" he asked. "I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down."

As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. "Tell us," they said, "when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" (Matthew 24:1-3)

During Jesus' final trip to Jerusalem, he drew large crowds as daily he "was teaching at the temple, and each evening he went out to spend the night on the hill called the Mount of Olives" (Luke 21:37). Opinions vary, but there were between a few hundred thousand and one million Jews in the city at this time. It was certainly congested when "all the people came early in the morning to hear him at the temple" (Luke 21:38). The wide area around the temple area alone could hold hundreds of thousands alone.

Let us join Jesus and his disciples as they went to find a solitary place. Jesus had just uttered his final scathing rebuke in the midst of the masses at the temple (Matthew 23). They passed some of the great buildings of the city in about a twenty-minute walk between the temple gathering and their destination. They certainly saw the Herodian temple from a few different angles. This structure would even arrest much attention today -- it had base stones that reached almost 700 tons.

The disciples probably hoped to break a tense moment after Jesus' sermon. Acting more like pilgrims coming home, they took note of the cherished monuments of the city, especially the "beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God." Perhaps the disciples were implying 'Look how much the Jews love God --- they make great buildings to him. They even have beautiful gifts prepared for him.' It appears as if their sentimentality was being brought out into the open by Jesus' harsh words for Jerusalem.

Nonetheless, Jesus did not change a beat from his earlier discourse about the prevalent religiosity in Jerusalem recorded in Matthew twenty-three: "Do you see all these great buildings? ... the time will come when not one stone will be left on another."

Unbelievable! Impossible! The reactions were probably varied among the twelve. It would be an enormous undertaking to bring these magnificent structures down, especially to bring every stone down. Why? Who? When?

This was one of the places that the disciples were most likely to develop reservations toward Jesus. Any good Jew knew that the temple figured into the Messiah's plan (Malachi 3:1-2, Isaiah 60-66). Why would Jesus envision the destruction of the place of Jewish devotion? He might have even been thought unstable for making such brash sounding declarations. Certainly, the disciples did not bargain for such a revolution when they made a decision to follow Jesus.

They would have a few moments to reflect upon Jesus' words until they reached their destination. It appears that they were eluding their enemies and the Mount of Olives would provide the many quiet places. As they exited the East-gate and crossed the Brook Kidron, Jesus and the disciples walked up a hill where they would ask the most relevant question of their lives. This one they wanted to hear sitting down.

Once they arrived at a quiet place, they overlooked the temple and many of the structures that Jesus said would be demolished. The best view of the city would have been from this prominent mount in the east when they said, "Tell us when will this happen, ... What will be the sign that these things are about to take place?"

From the manner in which these questions are phrased, alongside with a comparison with Mark's and Luke's accounts, it appears that the disciples believed that "these things" (the fall of Jerusalem, Jesus' coming, end of the age) were going to "take place" together. Due to

rampant speculation about the “end times” in our own age, we want to pay special attention to the answer to the disciples’ question. Did Jesus answer three separate questions or one question that had three ramifications?

Counterfeits Are Coming

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. (Matthew 24:1-3)

It became apparent right away that Jesus had a concern for the safety of his flock. Rather than answering the question right in the first sentence, he cautioned them regarding their chief danger in the future --- imposters and false messiahs. In fact, he mentioned impostors more than he did any other danger.

Jesus basically said, “Don’t be seduced.” Numerous candidates qualifying as such deceivers appeared in Jerusalem within a generation of Jesus’ death. John of Gischala, who seduced a young generation of Jews while making the prudent Jews mourn; Eleazar, a rebel leader; and Simon bar Giora all presented themselves as king, savior or anointed leader. John and Simon definitely promoted themselves along popular Jewish expectations of a messiah. Once, during the war, a rebel named Menahem came into Jerusalem after a military victory and dressed like a king. He became a ruthless tyrant over a large section of Jerusalem. All these deceivers were avid recruiters of weak-willed Jews. Nearly every one of these pretenders died as a result of his fanaticism.

In this way, rival political and messianic factions carved out areas of Jerusalem for themselves and their followers. These cunning figures appeared to have disguised their intentions, using religion as a guise for their rebellious political and military purposes. Never was the city united except in brief moments during full assaults by the Romans near the end of the war. Josephus, an eyewitness and participant on both sides of the war, recounted this intense and dangerous division:

... there were three treacherous factions in the city, the one parted from the other. Eleazar and his party, that kept the sacred firstfruits, came across John in their cups. Those that went with John plundered the populace, and went out with zeal against Simon. This Simon had his supply of provisions from the city, in opposition to the seditious. (Josephus, *Jewish Wars*, 5.1.1, 4)

In addition to the factions inside of Jerusalem, there were physical and spiritual dangers outside the immediate area: “religious” bandits and charismatic desert prophets. The “religious” thieves claimed they robbed the rich and benefited the poor and were quite popular among the lower-class Jews in the outlying hills. Despite this popularity among the poor, they were both numerous and ruthless, posing a real threat to Christians.

International Conflict Will Continue

You will hear of wars and rumors 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. (Matthew 24:6-7a)

Numerous nations and kingdoms were at war but it did not require a prophet to state this. Jesus was informing his disciples not to be alarmed by wars, revolutions and related rumors. Jesus said, “such things must happen, but the end is still to come.” Wars and revolutions were not signs of the end; instead, “the end will not come right away” (Luke 21:9). By heeding Jesus’ words, they would avoid unnecessary panic at the news of the internal revolutions and border wars that constantly occurred during the lifetime of the apostles.

Therefore, the disciples could exhibit an unusual calm, saving their strength for real threats. In fact, while others would experience great fear at the news of outside uprisings and even skirmishes between Jewish peasants and the Romans, the disciples of Jesus knew that they still had some time. The real signs of the imminent end came next.

Birth Pains

Jesus goes on to say that “There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All *these are* [italics mine] the beginning of birth pains” (Matthew 24:7b-8). By combining Matthew, Mark and Luke it is obvious that while wars were normal news, the coming birth pains indicated something was about to be born.

There will be great earthquakes in various places, famines, pestilences in various places and fearful events and great signs from heaven. All these are the beginning of birth pains.

Just before Jerusalem was besieged, the Roman writer Seneca observed about **earthquakes**:

How often have cities in Asia, how often in Achaia, been laid low by a single shock of an earthquake! How many towns in Syria, how many in Macedonia, have been swallowed up! How often has Paphos collapsed! Not infrequently are news stories brought to us of the utter destruction of entire cities. (Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales, volume 2)

In the middle of the first century Judea, Crete, Miletus, Chios, Samos, Laodicea, Hierapolis, and Colosse all experienced earthquakes. The general frequency of all four signs – earthquakes, famines, plagues, and omens – escalated just after the middle of the first century.

The word **famine** is very plentiful in Josephus', famous work, *The Jewish Wars*, in accounts of Judea between A.D. 66 and A.D. 70. These famines produced widespread **pestilence** (sickness or disease) in the city. There were hundreds of hundreds of thousands of putrefied bodies deposited around the city during that time.

Disaster, hunger and sickness were forthcoming, but the **fearful events** surely brought more panic. Other ominous signs occurred in Judea. Josephus states,

...a prodigious storm in the night, with the utmost of violence, and very strong winds, with the largest showers of rain and continual lightnings, terrible thunderings, and amazing concussions and bellowings of the earth, that was in an earthquake. These things were a manifest indication that some destruction was coming upon man, when the system of the world was put into this disorder; and any one would guess that these wonders foreshowed some grand calamities that were coming. (Josephus, *The Jewish Wars*, 4:4:5)

Some of the recorded events seem more credible than others. Allegedly there were comets, visible chariots in the sky, quakes, strange lights, strange voices from the temple announcing the departure. Following are a few more examples:

... they did not attend nor give credit to the signs that were so evident, and did so plainly foretell their future desolation, but, like men infatuated, without either eyes

to see or minds to consider, did not regard the denunciations that God made to them. Thus there was a star resembling a sword, which stood over the city, and a comet, that continued a whole year. Thus also before the Jews' rebellion, and before those commotions which preceded the war, when the people were come in great crowds to the feast of unleavened bread ... so great a light shone round the altar and the holy house, that it appeared to be bright day time; which lasted for half an hour. (Josephus, *Jewish Wars*, 6:5:3)

Josephus was not a Christian, though his own interpretations often concurred with Jesus' vision, especially on the notion that God had abandoned the Jewish people of that age and was punishing them for spiritual reasons.

Opposition Will Accompany Evangelism

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. (Matthew 24:9-13)

By the looks of the later epistles, there were many former followers of Jesus in the audience by the early A.D. 60s. Epistles like *Jude* help corroborate the sad situation that Jesus described here and the increasing number of detractors. The combined depiction of Mark and Luke suggests that at first the plan to kill the disciples would be frustrated because their detainment by the enemy gave them a new opportunity to preach:

“They will deliver you to the local councils, synagogues and prisons. You will be flogged in the synagogues and on account of me you will stand before governors and kings. *This will result in your being witnesses to them.*”

The book of Acts deliberates on the imprisonment of the three leading apostles and the deaths of Stephen and James. Other remarks in Scripture imply that disciples were being handed over to the authorities or killed in this era (Hebrews 10:32-39, 1 Peter 4:4, Revelation 6:9ff). But it was during the period between 60 and 70 A.D. that some of the darkest moments for the church occurred.

Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. 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.

Hatred towards the Christians in Asia was already rabid in places like Ephesus (Acts 19:19-41, 28:22) by A.D. 50. However, the greatest depiction of the “love of most growing cold” occurred in Jerusalem during the siege. When we read Josephus’ account of families being divided during the siege, we should remember that Jewish disciples were in Jerusalem for some time. Of course, they would be among the minority who desired peace.

“There was a bitter contest between those that were fond of war, and those that were desirous for peace. At the first this quarrelsome temper caught hold of private families, who could not agree among themselves; after which those people were the dearest to one another broke through all restraints with regard to each other, and everyone associated with those of his own opinion, and began to stand in opposition to one another so that the rebellious arose everywhere, while those that were for innovations, and were desirous for war, by their youth and boldness, were too hard for the aged and prudent men.” (Josephus, *Jewish Wars*, 4:3:2)

Jews abandoned family relations to support their fanatical persuasions such as Zealotry or general Jewish Banditry. Most of the Jews being abandoned were older peace-loving elders and Christians. By the war’s end Josephus had concluded that “Not since the world began was there ever a generation more prolific in crime than this bastard scum” referring to the rebel Jews within the city walls (Josephus, *Jewish Wars*, 5:10:5). The descriptions of unbridled spite among one's own countrymen in Jerusalem between A.D. 66-70 are abundant. Even the Romans were shocked over how the Jews treated one another.

The End of the Age in Judea

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. (Matthew 24:14)

As Jesus had said, the end was near --- but what was it the end of? Matthew recorded other references from Jesus about the end of **the age** (Matthew 13:39, 40, 49, 24: 3, 28:20). Jesus also referred to “this age” in Matthew 12:32. Paul uses the term to describe the

period that produced rulers who could kill Christ (1 Corinthians 2:8). He elsewhere used it to describe his own generation in an uncomplimentary manner (2 Corinthians 4:4).

When modern readers take the end of the age to be the end of the world (planet earth), they miss the local dynamic of the original historical setting. Why would unrelated lands such as Peru, China and India be affected by the judgment upon a singular generation of Jews who have rejected their messiah? Jesus said it would be the end of the “age,” not the world. The “world” (Greek, *oikoumene*, dwelling, inhabited land) would be evangelized in conjunction with this prophecy --- not ended.

Even the term “world” was often used with a limited target. In Luke 2:1 and Acts 11:28 it meant the Roman world --- not Alaska and Australia. The target audience of these signs is the Jewish people of the land of Palestine, and the target audience of evangelism was the civilized world of the Roman Empire. Luke monitored evangelism within the Roman Empire through his travels with Paul. He implied that the region evangelized by the church was the world of the Roman Empire (Colossians 1:6, 23).

The “end of an age” occurred in the past. Ezekiel 7 elaborates on such an end. The end envisioned by Jesus was the “end of an age” in Palestine, namely the end of sacrifices and temple conventions. This era is commonly called Second Temple Judaism. The ramifications and the shock of this judgment would also reverberate throughout the world of *Diaspora* Jews.

As Christians gave their testimony throughout the whole Roman world, tension was building in Jerusalem. By A.D. 62, James the brother of Jesus was martyred. Many knew him as James the Just, and he had a longstanding esteem among the Jews. His death was clearly an indicator of the hostilities that would follow.

A backlash was building in reaction to the mistreatment of Jews by Florus, the procurator of Judea. Herod Agrippa II and the older and wiser Jews feared an end to safe relations with the Romans. They thought that justice would be achieved through diplomacy and patience. Nevertheless, the zealous, younger and more bitter Jews believed that revenge could attain justice. They caused a spark igniting a fire that brought about the end of an age. In their pride, they took on the Roman Empire and thus brought about the war that led to the end.

The Abomination that Causes Desolation

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. (Matthew 24:15-16)

When Jewish disciples living in Jerusalem saw the “abomination that causes desolation” it would be time to evacuate the city. There is a definite sequence --- abomination, desolation, fleeing to the mountains. But what was that abomination? Certainly there were several scandalous things that would have repulsed the Christians. Which abomination would cause God to abandon the city?

Theoretically, the “**abomination**” can be argued many ways; numerous deeds done between A.D. 66-70 qualify as candidates for describing as "abominable". The Gospel of Mark records Jesus saying the abomination would be something “standing” where it did “not belong” (Mark 13:14). There are various possibilities for an “abomination standing where it does not belong,” but only two will be mentioned here.

The abomination to the Jews. When the Romans came they probably held shields that had marks called ensigns where the figure of an eagle was displayed. From other sources it is known that the Jews considered all such ensigns idolatry. In an event just prior to Jesus’ ministry, Jews under Pilate’s rule demonstrated that they would stop at nothing to challenge the Romans from displaying them. They were especially vehement about the shields bearing the ensign within eyesight of the temple. Nonetheless, this offense might be a legalistic interpretation of Scripture; God was more likely to be offended by the second abomination.

An abomination to God. Jerusalem became the magnet for all Jews fleeing Galilee and other places in Palestine. Normally Jerusalem held 80,000 people in this decade; however, Josephus informs us that some 3,000,000 fled into the city to hide behind its walls for protection against the Romans. The city was typically divided into segments of the Zealots, other contenders, and the richer establishment of Jews who desired peace with the Romans. These factions sometimes joined forces with each other. The city was practically never one people and mostly divided along three party lines. This situation put all the holy places up for grabs.

Ananus, a chief priest, thought death was his friend because he did not live to see what the rebels were planning for the Holy of Holies. Just before his murder he said,

Certainly it had been good for me to die before I had seen the house of God full of so many abominations, or these sacred places, that ought not to be trodden at random, filled with the feet of these blood-shedding villains (Josephus, *Jewish Wars*, 4:3:2).

The temple was the location of a massacre. It was eventually dismantled and renovated for war purposes, and its sacred objects were melted. Surely to God it was an abomination that causes desolation. There was bloodshed of fellow Jewish countrymen within the temple walls. Even the Holy of Holies, the place of God's presence, was trespassed and desecrated. Not only were these men not priests or Levites, these unsavory characters were often still wet with blood when they habitually desecrated the Holy of Holies. It was an abomination that in the most sacred area of temple Judaism, murderers were standing where they did not belong.

An irony had occurred. Barely four decades earlier, mainline Jews rejected Jesus as their king. Jesus had been born to be king (John 18:37). Pilate recognized him as the King of the Jews. Yet, when he was crucified for believing himself to be king the people claimed that Caesar was their king (John 19:15). Surely they did not know what would happen when they finally said to Pilate, "Let his blood be on us and our children" (Matthew 27:25).

The next generation not only shed innocent blood like their fathers had done, they accepted murderers as kingly figures. The murderers Simon Bar Giora and John of Gishala permitted the most despicable things to occur in God's temple. Jews had rejected the true king, and their children accepted the bogus kings who brought about their desolation.

Even the Gentile general Titus was saddened over this atrocity. He hoped to leave the temple of the Jews intact, and according to Josephus, Titus said,

How then can we avoid shedding of tears, when we see the Roman donations in our temple, while we nonetheless see those of our own nation taking our spoils, and plundering our glorious metropolis, and slaughtering our men, committing enormities from which those Romans themselves would have abstained? To see those Romans never going beyond the bounds allotted to profane persons, nor

venturing to break in upon any of our sacred customs; nay, having a horror on their own minds when they view at a distance those sacred walls; while some that have been born in this very country, and brought up in our customs, and called Jews, do walk about in the midst of the holy places, at the very time when their hands are still warm with the slaughter of their own countrymen. (Josephus, *Jewish Wars*, 4:3:10).

However, the fever was so uncontrollable in the final days of the war that terrible things happened that were out of Titus' control. The soldiers ravaged the temple for gold, much of which was already gone, apparently stolen by other Jews or hidden by the priests. Titus observed his own soldiers becoming savage, acting contrary to his orders. Ultimately, the temple was destroyed along with the walls of Jerusalem, leaving the city desolate.

The term “**desolation**” means that Jerusalem would become like a wasteland. The Christians would probably be in the city just long enough to know when the prophecy was being fulfilled, not long enough to see it completed. Discerning Jews knew from Scripture and other events under Grecian rule that the abomination meant God had abandoned Jerusalem, leaving it completely susceptible.

There were only a handful of opportunities in which Jews could easily evacuate the city, or “**flee to the mountains**” as Jesus had commanded. The occasions where the city was not under watch or the Romans allowed for safe surrenders were relatively few. Based on historical factors, conjecture and the limited data of Acts 4:4 and 21:20, scholars suggest that there were as many as twenty thousand disciples in Jerusalem at its peak. Only a few opportunities allowed for Jewish disciples to migrate rapidly to the hills of Judea, the best of which happened around A.D.68.

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. For then there will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again. (Matthew 24:17-21)

Terrible things were beginning to happen, and Jesus wanted his disciples to leave without even a scratch. Ultimately the horrors within Jerusalem's walls are too great to mention in detail, but severe famine, at least one record of cannibalism, and outrageous murdering sprees and war resulted in the deaths of about 600,000 common Jews. Jesus and Josephus both describe the siege of Jerusalem as the worst horror ever in the history of Judaism. It would be "dreadful" for "pregnant women and nursing mothers."

At the opportune time of escape there would not even be time to go down from the rooftop where the disciples were presumably standing watching for the signs. The south side of the city was the poorer side of Jerusalem filled with small houses that were quite close together. If this were {Steve, the subjunctive case should be used in an "if" clause} the quarter where the disciples were stationed, theoretically they could have traversed over rooftops towards a city gate.

The exact gate and initial route of the disciples' departure is unknown. It appears they were to head for the mountains. Later, through other signs, they would be gathered from the four winds. The first concern was to find a safe haven in the numerous hills of Judea. Judea is extremely hilly, putting the foreign Romans at a disadvantage, whereas the disciples knew their own land.

Days Will be Cut Short

If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened. (Matthew 24:22)

Jesus wanted the disciples to remember this escape plan he had told them "ahead of time." He may have even "cut short" the horrors for a moment allowing for their escape. Josephus describes one possible moment of escape in A.D. 66 involving Cestius Gallus, governor of Syria. Agrippa and he were attempting to crush the rebellions throughout Palestine. Once when Cestius was leading the attack he retreated his forces and literally walked away from the city when it was most vulnerable. In the words of Josephus,

... [had Cestius] but continued the siege a little longer, had certainly taken the city; but it was, I suppose, owing to the aversion God had already at the city and the sanctuary, that he hindered from outing and end to the war that very day (Josephus, *Jewish Wars*, 2:19:6).

Cestius could have taken Jerusalem but he was hindered “without any reason in the world,” stated Josephus. However, Christian interpreters wondered if this was a divinely planned opportunity for the Christians to flee to the mountains (Matthew 24:16). Perhaps Cestius did not hinder his own effort, but the Lord himself “cut short” the day. Only after a careful examination of the timing of the various abominations and the opportunities for escape could one guess the actual departure of the Christian Jews.

Regardless of when the Lord cut those days short, early in the war or later, they would still be in a hurry. The promised rescue was contingent on obeying the vision to “flee” and not merely leave Jerusalem.

Don't Be Mesmerized On the Way

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. (Matthew 24:23-26)

Jesus was concerned not only about their escape from Roman soldiers but also about the heretical and cultic threats associated with religious pretenders. On their way out of the region there were numerous places that Jewish cults set up camp. The previously mentioned threats of bizarre sects might include even the Qumran community near the Dead Sea. Mainline Jews in the hills who were allied to Jews in the city were probably hoping for opportunities to recruit Jews to join forces against the Romans. Such things might have tempted Jewish Christians who were weak in the faith but zealous for the Jerusalem.

Jesus was the opposite of the secretive messiah-types who were clandestine about their ministries. Their secrecy is one reason that scholars don't know much about them; nonetheless, they remained a threat to anxious Christians who were fleeing for safety. It is easy in hindsight to judge the early Christians as naïve, but they were susceptible because of all that they had gone through. The message from Jesus was: ‘Do not settle with desert sects or secretive cults --- keep going. The signs will be obvious.’

On one significant occasion during the war, a false prophet exposed himself and tempted the Jews with deceptive miracles. Josephus states,

A false prophet was the occasion of these people's destruction, who had made a public proclamation in the city that very day, that God commanded them to get upon the temple, and that there they should receive **miraculous signs** of their deliverance. Now there was then **a great number of false prophets** suborned by the tyrants to impose on the people, who denounced this to them, that they should wait for deliverance from God; and this was in order to keep them from deserting, and that they might be buoyed up above fear and care by such hopes. **Now a man that is in adversity does easily comply with such promises; for when such a seducer makes him believe that he shall be delivered** from those miseries which oppress him, then it is that the patient is full of hopes of such deliverance. Thus were the miserable people persuaded by these deceivers ... (Josephus, *Jewish Wars*, 6:5:2-3) {Steve, note **the emphasis** is yours if it is}

The threats that Jesus spoke of were obviously very real. He certainly told them ahead of time. Spiritual dangers existed in the appeals of powerful religious figures in the hills surrounding Jerusalem. They appealed to the Jewish disciples' longstanding sentiments about the city itself, enticing them to join others in defending the City of David from the safety of the nearby hills. Any Christian Jew who was reared on the stories of David in 1-2 Samuel and of Judas Maccabees would remember that brave renegades were mustered in the hills of Judea to rescue the city.

Patriotic temptation, the lure of false prophets and kings, and banditry posed threats to naïve believers. Jesus desired that his disciples to be sharp and elude the very real temptations.

Jesus Christ Approaches

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. "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." (Matthew 24:27-29)

Jesus was going to be quite obvious during his rescue operation. His “coming” (Greek *parousia*) was going to be visible, like lightning can be observed as far as the eye could see. This prescription was only guaranteed for those who were obeying the vision.

There is nothing in the language that suggests that anyone outside of this area where the elect were hiding would have known what these signs meant. It is also unlikely that those beyond the hills of Judea (Matthew 24:16) would have seen these signs. They were only intended for those whom the Son of Man was leading --- the fleeing elect. Only the Christian-Jews educated on the vision from Jesus who were hiding in the hills of Judea would have known how to interpret the signs. Thus, this particular “coming” was for those in the mountain areas waiting to be rescued --- not anyone else.

There would have been two points of interest on this route. At one end was a disaster symbolized by the carcass where the eagles (or vultures) gathered. The eagle represented the scavenger Romans and the carcass represents Jerusalem. The readers were to distance themselves from the carcass -- Jerusalem. It appears that they were to head toward the area that the sign was leading them. Where was safety to be found?

In the very least, they saw something indicating the presence of Jesus and were drawn towards the sign.

The Gathering of the Elect

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. 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. (Matthew 24:30-31)

There are three key ingredients to this part of the vision of Jesus. There was going to be great grief, the sign of the Son of Man in the skies over Judea, and the gathering of the elect.

Great Mourning. If we compare Luke and Matthew here we can see the reasons behind great anxiety and grief in Palestine. Perhaps a shift occurred in Jesus’ vision to a time earlier in the revolt when widespread anxieties originated in Galilee. There might be a

connection between Luke's quote of Jesus and Josephus' description of horrors that occurred in the Sea of Galilee.

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 (Luke 21:25-25).

One might then see the lake all bloody, full of dead bodies, for not one of them escaped. And a terrible stink, and a very sad sight there was on the following days over that country; for as for the shores, they were full of shipwrecks, and of dead bodies inflamed by the sun, and putrefied, they corrupted the air, insomuch that the misery was not only to the unhappiness of the Jews, but to those that hated them, and had been the authors of that misery. This was the upshot of the sea-fight. (Josephus, *Jewish Wars*, 3:10:9).

Josephus was relating of a Roman conflict at the north end of the Sea near Magdala. It is natural to assume that when the "roaring and tossing of the sea occurs" that Jesus would appear at any moment based on the phrase "at that time the Son of man will appear" (Matthew 24:30). But if the imagery of the sea relates to the bloody massacre in the Sea of Galilee, the period of mourning may have extended for months or even years.

The Sign of the Son of Man. There is nothing in Jesus' words so far that must have meaning outside of Palestine, especially Galilee and Judea. Unfortunately, modern translations usually render these texts with a sense of universalism. One need not span the globe and future human history for meaning. For instance, read the New International Version,

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. 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 (Matthew 24:30-31).

Consider the following adaptation, which is equally literal and true to the text.

At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the *ethnicities* of the *land* will *grieve*. They will *perceive* the Son of Man *approaching* on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. 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 *skies* to the other (*italicized* substitutions are mine).

This rendering makes it clear that the passage would be completely and literally fulfilled in the region of the original listener. There were clear reasons that the original hearers and readers needed signs from the Lord. They needed direction where to go. As mentioned before, safe abodes were rare and false prophets, cults, and sects were abundant.

Additionally, the people of the various ethnicities were grieving because the unburied dead reached enormous proportions and everyone was at risk. All the people of Palestine, whether they were visiting Jews dispersed among the nations, appalled Gentiles, or the local inhabitants were naturally stricken with terror. Josephus reports numerous accounts where fear and sadness overtook people during these years.

It was near the end of the anxiety and uncertainty that the signs of Jesus were manifested above the skies. Just what the signs looked like we will never know. Nonetheless, we can imagine that these Christian-Jews perceived that their situation was similar to how the Lord once led the ancient Israelites.

.. the LORD your God, who went ahead of you on your journey, in fire by night and in a cloud by day, to search out places for you to camp and to show you the way you should go. (Deuteronomy 1:29-33)

The Gathering of the Elect. Eusebius, the church historian, provides the only details of the gathering of the elect. His fuller account informs us of a collection of Christians in Pella of Perea.

Meanwhile, before the war began, members of the Jerusalem church were ordered by an oracle given by revelation to those worthy of it to leave the city and settle in a city of Perea called Pella. Here they migrated from Jerusalem, as if, once holy men had deserted the royal capitol of the Jews and the whole land of Judea, the judgment of God might fall on them for their crimes against Christ and his apostles, utterly blotting out all that wicked generation (*Eusebius: Church History*, 3:5)

Some history and geography is helpful here. Herod Agrippa II was the most spiritual of all of the Herods. Perea was under his domain. He encountered the apostle Paul at least once and appeared to respect Paul to some degree. He certainly was well acquainted with the nature of the Christian cause. Before the revolt, he and his sister Bernice tearfully begged the Jews not to fight the Romans. Due to the fact that Herod would be around long after the war, he was oriented towards creating asylums for peace-seekers. There are strong reasons to believe that the land of Perea across the Jordan was where various sorts of peace-seeking Jews fled during the war. It is known that Judea and Galilee were unsafe for any Jews, let alone the more despised Christian Jews.

Eusebius argued that every element of the great tribulation and historical peculiarities of Matthew 24 was fulfilled throughout A.D. 66-70. He was born near the end of the third century and was the first Church historian. He uses the writings of earlier Christians and Josephus to establish his point. To Eusebius, Jesus came through on his promise to rescue the Jewish disciples, gathering them from the dispersed areas from the four winds, and settling them in the town of Pella in Perea. What is more, other early Christian authors concur on the point that Jesus' warnings and escape plan applied directly to the events of this decade.

What exactly did they see on the clouds? The exact nature of Jesus' appearance is beyond the scope of this survey of Matthew 24. Whatever the disciples saw, extra-biblical evidence suggests that Jesus delivered his brave disciples who stayed in Jerusalem until the prophecy was fulfilled. Only the foreknowledge provided through Jesus' words would have encouraged them to follow the "sign of the Son of Man" across the Transjordan toward Perea, the closest haven for Jews seeking refuge.

Within One Generation

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. (Matthew 24:32-35)

As certainly as the fig tree can be read by looking at its twigs and leaves, one could have known that the deliverance of Jesus was near (vs. 32), but not known the day or hour (vs.

36). The language used by Jesus puts a first century constraint on the threefold episode --- the end of that age, the coming of Jesus and the elimination of the glorious buildings of the temple and leveling of Jerusalem's walls.

The end of the age occurred. No one doubts that the end of that age occurred. Judaism as defined through Moses and David ended. Some have attempted to restore Judaism to its temple-based sacrifice system based on the Law of Moses, yet every attempt to has failed. Again, the original religion as instituted under Moses and developed under David is no longer practiced today. That end had come by the end of A.D. 70.

Jerusalem's buildings were destroyed. No one doubts that Jerusalem's chief buildings were leveled in A.D. 70. Even the city's walls were flattened to humiliate the Jews in their defeat. Not one stone was left on another for that reason. Some of the foundation stones were left and some of the top stones were reused, but eyewitnesses to the revolt confirm Matthew 24:1-3. The temple will never be rebuilt. In our own day, if someone successfully removed the Muslim Dome to rebuild the temple, Arab nations would likely overtake Israel within a matter of days.

Every early Christian who wrote about Jerusalem's fall inferred or spoke of the fulfillment of Matthew 24. Hegesippus, a second century Christian writer, and Eusebius were quite clear that Jesus came back and rescued the disciples.

The main reason that some doubt Jesus' *parousia* (visitation) and the redemption-rescue of the Christians is that very ingenious systems of interpretation have been paraded before the modern Christian reader. Erroneous ideas have been put forth in works of fictions, movies, and thousands of doctrinal books since about 1830 when dispensational premillennialism originated with J.N Darby. But if dispensational premillennialism were true, a temple must yet be rebuilt in Jerusalem only to be destroyed again. It would make God anti-Semitic to punish modern Jews for the sins of first century Jews.

In any event, Matthew 24:1-35 concerned the generation of Jews who had known and crucified Jesus, and it was their rebellious children that brought upon themselves a war with the Romans (Read Luke 17:25, 19:41-44, 21:22-24, Matthew 27:21-25). Even Josephus confirms the notion that Jews brought this war upon themselves by opposing God, permitting evil, following evil leaders and ignoring signs and omens.

Spiritual Issues

Jesus compared this “end of the age” to the flood in Noah’s day. People carried on with their lives ignoring and not involving God. Neither generation knew what was going to happen to them. God’s judgment was a flood in Noah’s day; in New Testament times it was a gruesome, devastating war.

By the end of the Jewish revolt, the Romans were not accepting truces or taking prisoners. It was a fight to the death. Fleeing Jews, Christian or otherwise, were in grave danger. Eventually Jews were suspected of carrying gold in their stomachs. When captured, their intestines were sliced open on the spot. Perhaps Jesus inferred such dangers when he said,

On that day no one who is on the roof of his house, with his goods inside, should go down to get them. Likewise, no one in the field should go back for anything. Remember Lot’s wife! Whoever tries to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it. I tell you, on that night two people will be in one bed; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding grain together; one will be taken and the other left (Luke 17:31-34).

The hesitant disciple who gets caught up in the affairs of Jerusalem rather than following the escape plan offered by Jesus is compared to Lot’s wife. Just as she was turned into a pillar, unfocused and uncommitted Jewish Christians might be eliminated at the hands of ruthless Roman soldiers.

The closing section of Matthew 24 suggests that the escaping Jews fled to and remained in the mountains (verse 16). They carried on life in the mountains and presumably considered the many cautions of Jesus, waiting until the Lord rescued them. They were to stay “ready” and be obedient to their master, the Lord Jesus Christ. Most of Jesus’ final parables relating to waiting, watching and being ready applied exactly to the situation in which the disciples found themselves between A.D. 60-70.

Conclusion

The majority of the signs that Jesus spoke of actually took place within eyesight of where he was positioned with his disciples. Eusebius states about the conclusion of the war, “This all happened in the second year of Vespasian’s reign in accordance with the

prophecies of Christ, who foresaw them, by divine power, as if already present and wept over them” (*Eusebius: Church History*, 3:7, referring to Luke 19:42-44, 21:20-24). From where he stood, Jesus could have pointed to most of the spots where the vision was to be fulfilled. Jesus was at the destruction ahead of time. As it turns out, prophecy in scripture is corroborated by history, geography, eyewitness accounts and church tradition.

This is a faith-building story. Sadly, because most Christians don't know 'the greatest story never told' they skip right over the passage for a variety of reasons. Perhaps it is because we don't go deep enough in our study. For others, this story of judgment against some first century Jews has been distorted in the worst possible way to include all Jews of all time. The controversies of such a harsh judgment and difficult apocalyptic language keep modern readers from appreciating this story. Others miss this great story because they embrace the Left Behind theology.

It is my hope that I have aptly introduced you to a story that demonstrates the power of Jesus to rescue faithful disciples in unbearable situations. If this is new material to you, perhaps you will see God's power in a much more dramatic way.

We still wait for a larger and much more grand and personal return of Christ, but we should not miss the fact that he has a habit of intervening in the affairs of Christians in various ways at various times.