

Matthew 23

In our discussions last week, we started the last part of Matthew 23, which sets the context for the prophetic section of Matthew 24–25 in which Jesus outlines future events. Our basic interpretive issue is contained in verses 29–39, where Jesus begins with “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!” It seems pretty clear that Jesus is pronouncing judgment upon the leaders of Israel. But as we go down into the passage, we experience a momentary pause over whether Jesus is still referring to the leaders of the Jews as the group whom Jesus is talking to at that moment of time. Consider the uses of the word “you”

- 29 – Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!
- 29 – You build the tombs ...
- 31 – You testify against yourselves, that you are the sons ...
- 33 – You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape ...
- 34 – Therefore, I am sending you ... some of them you will kill ... some of them you will scourge
- 35 – So that upon you may fall ...
- 35 – whom you murdered ...
- 36 – I say to you ... this generation
- 37 – I wanted to gather your children, ... you were unwilling
- 38 – until you say ... “BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD!”

Now at first glance there seems to be no issue with the “you” referring to the scribes and Pharisees ... up until we reach the last part of verse 35. Jesus refers to Zechariah, the son of Berechiah ... “whom *you* murdered.” Who is the “you” Jesus is referring to here? Is He still referring to the scribes and Pharisees that He was talking to? This can be a difficult question to answer as we are not positive on the identification of Zechariah that Jesus mentions. There are perhaps three possibilities ...

1. Zechariah referred to in 2 Chronicles 24:20–21
 - a. This Zechariah was indeed killed in the “court of the house of the Lord.”
 - b. This Zechariah was the son of Jehoiada
 - c. This incident seems too far removed from the context ... from Abel to Zechariah, Jesus seems to be referring to a much larger time frame
2. Zechariah the prophet
 - a. He is called “Zechariah the prophet, the son of Berechiah” ... Zechariah 1:1
 - b. Zechariah was certainly one of the later prophets (Malachi perhaps the last)
 - c. After Malachi the Lord sent no prophets until John the Baptist, seems to fit the larger time frame
3. Some other Zechariah
 - a. Conjecture is the Jews killed someone named Zechariah, son of Berechiah in Jesus lifetime
 - b. He was aware of it ... but ...
 - c. No historical evidence exists for this contemporary (from Jesus’ time) murder.

Contextually, the second view seems the most reasonable given Jesus obvious reference to a long and complete period of Jewish murders. If we assume that Jesus was referring to Zechariah the prophet (the only view that makes sense, though the third one is possible), how are we to understand His statement “whom you murdered?”

Is my contention that beginning with verse 34, and with the use of “Therefore ...” ... Jesus is actually morphing into a prophetic description of what is coming on the horizon for the Jewish nation. One indication of this is the switch from present/past tense verbs to the future tense ... “you will kill ... you will persecute ...” It is my conjecture that the “you” starting in verse 34 cannot be restricted to mean ‘you alive at the time of Jesus words here.’ Why? Because of verse 39 ... “For I say to you, from now on you will not see Me until you say, ‘BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD!’”

Let us consider the ramifications of interpreting the “you” in verses 29–39 as the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus day. Jesus would be saying, in some sense, they (the scribes and Pharisees) killed Zechariah; though we are not totally clear what sense that is. Perhaps Jesus meant that the Jews of His day are *representative* of the type of Jews who killed the prophets in the past, as

demonstrated by what they are about to do to Him. But that seems like a very nuanced interpretation ... but let's set that problem aside; there is a larger one. If the "you" continues to refer to the scribes and Pharisees, how are we to understand the "you" in verse 39? The proclamation "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord" is a Messianic proclamation from Psalm 118:26. What did Jesus mean when He said "you will not see me until you say ...?" Since this proclamation is a recognition that Jesus is the "coming One," i.e., the Jewish Messiah ... it seems clear at face value that Jesus is predicting that the Jews will not see Him again until they recognize Him as their Messiah. It is apparent that the "you" here in verse 39 cannot refer to the scribes and Pharisees as they never recognized Jesus as their Messiah. Indeed, they were about to put Him to death in the next few days. In addition, the "you" of verses 34–39 could not refer merely to the generation during Jesus' day (specifically including those alive during the 70 AD destruction of Jerusalem in the preterist view). Why? Even if we allow an allegorical interpretation of the destruction of Jerusalem as the Second Coming, the Jews alive during this judgment did not repent and recognize Jesus as the Messiah. I.e., the same problem persists if we take the "you" to mean the 40-ish year generation of Jews living in the time of Christ.

This is where the lexical data from last week is an aid. Recall that the word γενεά has a varied meaning, one of which is "those descended from a common ancestor *race, clan, descendants, as an ethnic group kind.*" 'This generation' could be a reference to the Jews as a race. All these things will come upon the Jews as a race. But then we have the problem of bringing this definition forward into 24:34 ... "this generation will not pass away until all these things take place." In what sense will the Jews pass away as a race? This seems like a contradiction of the Abrahamic covenant that states the Jews will be a perpetual people forever. The point is ... there are theological and interpretive issues here in Matthew that genuine Christians disagree on. Choosing one interpretation often requires some interpretive gymnastics eventually and occasionally we may have to be content doing less interpretive gymnastics than the other guy. Here, in my opinion, if you restrict the "you" and "generation" of Matthew 23:29–39 merely to the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' day, you have an insurmountable problem in verse 39 ... "until you say 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

Verse 37 also hints that Jesus is not merely highlighting the scribes and Pharisees in his latter statements. He mentions that His people killed the prophets and, in spite of that, He still wished to gather the nation together. But, He says, "you were unwilling." Again, He did not mean merely the scribes and Pharisees, He used the "you" in some collective sense to refer to the Jews of all time.

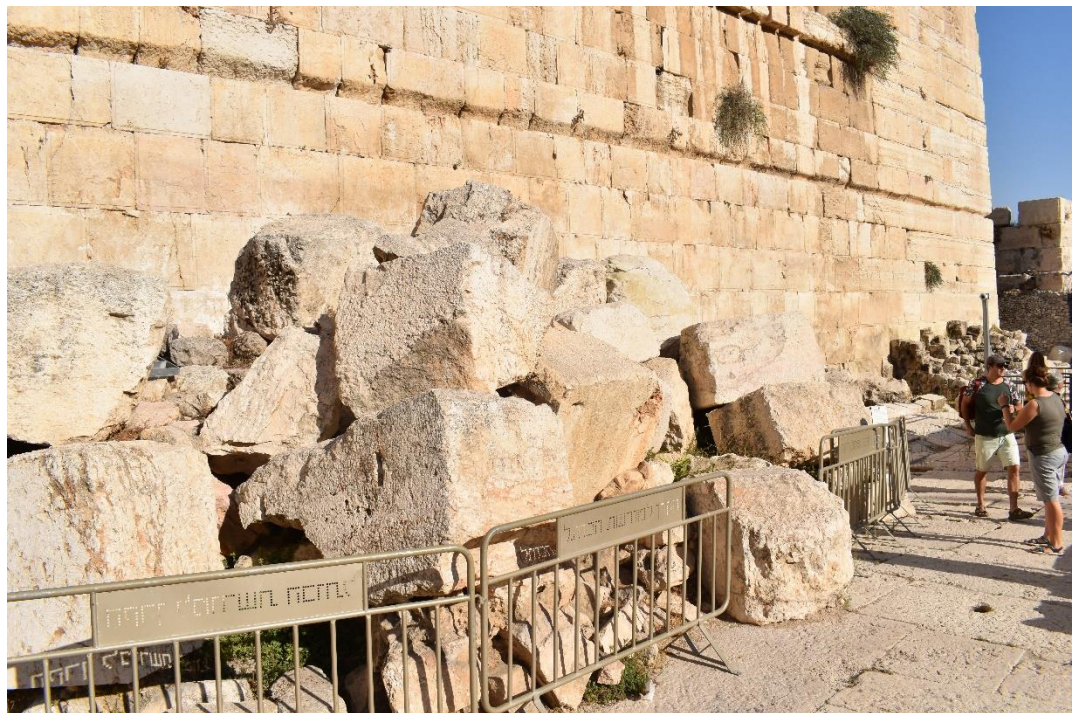
The final comment is on verse 38 ... "Behold, your house is being left to you desolate." Recall Jesus, after arriving in Jerusalem at the Triumphal Entry, cleansed the temple of the moneychangers (probably for at least the second or third time during His life). The Jews turned the temple into a place of commerce instead of a place of worship. Jesus makes a prediction of the destruction of the temple here in verse 38. The prediction came true in 70 AD at the hands of the Roman legion. This is the context for the statements Jesus made in answer to the disciples' questions in Matthew 24.

Matt 24 – The Setting

As Jesus and the disciples were leaving the temple, it is apparent they were on their way to the Mount of Olives. It is at this point that the disciples were enamored by the temple structure itself.

In Luke's version of this event, he adds the detail that "some were talking about the temple, that it was adorned with beautiful stones and votive gifts." Luke 21:5.

Jesus own perspective on the temple is now revealed. His comments are similar in each



gospel account ... “not one stone here will be left upon another which will not be torn down.” (Matt. 24:2, Mark 13:2, Luke 21:6). Jesus response to their comments would have no doubt taken them by surprise and they certainly pondered this as they were walking to the Mount of Olives. As is often the case, Jesus later revealed the meaning of a saying or parable to the disciples and He does exactly that in this instance as well.

The Questions

Here is where we need a little patience from our interpretive process. Do we a priori expect that each gospel writer phrased the disciples’ questions exactly the same way? No, there is always room for stylistic expression of the human writer. That is obvious in that Matthew tells us the disciples came to Him privately but Mark reveals it was Peter, James, John, and Andrew; and Luke just says “they questioned Him.” Therefore, let’s look at each gospel rendering of the questions to fully understand what was asked.

Matt 24:3 “Tell us, when will these things happen, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?”

Mark 13:4 “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are going to be fulfilled?”

Luke 21:7 “Teacher, when therefore will these things happen? And what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?”

The first interpretive issue is ... how many questions did the disciples ask; two, three, or more? It seems clear that there are at least two questions. The first one is consistent in the gospels ... “when will these things happen?” They are specifically asking when the destruction of the temple will take place ... “not one stone upon another.” When will that happen? Clearly this first question relates to the destruction of the temple, which was completely fulfilled in the Roman destruction of 70 AD.

Then there is a variation in how the other question(s) are asked. Matthew renders this second question as a two-fold single question; perhaps indicating that in the mind of the disciples, the answers to this two-phased question were intimately linked together. What about the wording in Mark and Luke? The addition of “all” in the Mark account does not seem to be a mere extension of the first question. The Lukan question seems to be a little different. “What will be the sign that these things are about to take place?” What does these things refer to? In light of the first question, it seems the second question asked in Luke also relates to the destruction of the temple.

Given that Jesus in Matthew 23 predicted the destruction of the temple and He here reiterates that view by the “one stone upon another” statement, what did the disciples understand of the relationship between the destruction of Jerusalem (the temple specifically) and His coming? It is clear from their questions that the disciples have some pre-understanding of the events that Jesus would talk about. They asked about the relationship between the destruction of Jerusalem and His coming. What did they understand about the relationship between all these events? Since their questions relate to the destruction of Jerusalem, His coming, and the end of the age ... where would they have gone in the OT to get that understanding?

It is very likely their understanding of these events came from Zechariah 12–14, for it really provides the background for the disciple’s questions. These chapters in Zechariah depict that the gathering of the nations against Jerusalem and the coming of Messiah are related events. When Jesus mentions the destruction of the temple here in 24:2, it is likely they linked all three events (the destruction of the temple (Jerusalem), His coming, end of the age) as occurring around the same event, the coming of the Messiah. Stanley Toussaint¹ gives a cogent account of their pre-understanding ...

In their minds they had developed a chronology of events in the following sequence: (1) the departure of the King, (2) after a period of time the destruction of Jerusalem, and (3) immediately after Jerusalem’s devastation the presence of the Messiah. They had good scriptural ground for this since Zechariah 14:1-2 describes the razing of

¹ Toussaint, Stanley, D., *Behold the King: A Study of Matthew*, Portland:Multnomah Press, 1980.

Jerusalem. The same passage goes on to describe the coming of the Lord to destroy the nations which warred against Jerusalem (Zechariah 14:3-8). Following this the millennial kingdom is established (Zechariah 14:9-11).

In the disciple's mind, all three events were related to the return of the Messiah. Pentecost² reiterates this understanding

The questions showed that they had arrived at certain conclusions. . . . To these men Christ's words concerning the destruction of Jerusalem was the destruction predicted by Zechariah that would precede the advent of the Messiah. In Jewish eschatology two ages were recognized: the first was this present age, the age in which Israel was waiting for the coming of the Messiah; the second was the age to come, the age in which all of Israel's covenants would be fulfilled and Israel would enter into her promised blessings as a result of Messiah's coming.

The disciples were certainly correct in their understanding of the Messiah's coming, but they were wrong to associate Jesus' prediction of the coming judgment of Jerusalem and the temple with that coming.

Next week we will provide an outline for the structure of Jesus' answer to the disciples and provide some relevant background into some Jewish eschatological concepts.



² Pentecost, Dwight J., *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ: A Study of the Life of Christ*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981.