

Interpretive Views of Matthew 24

There are four main views of eschatology that seek to impart their own theological understanding of the Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24. We want to provide a basic understanding of each. The following definitions are from Wikipedia (slightly edited):

Idealist View

In the context of Christian eschatology, idealism (also called the spiritual approach, the allegorical approach, the nonliteral approach, and many other names) involves an interpretation of the Book of Revelation that sees all or most of the imagery of the book as symbolic. Idealism is common among Reformed theologians and it is associated with amillennialism. There exist degrees of Idealism, the most radical form sees it as entirely symbolic, while a more moderate view may allow for some historical fulfillment of events. Idealism was common in medieval writers and is still taught by some modern theologians.

Historicist View

Historicism is a method of interpretation of biblical prophecies which associates symbols with historical persons, nations or events. The main primary texts of interest to Christian historicists include apocalyptic literature, such as the Book of Daniel and the Book of Revelation. It sees the prophecies of Daniel as being fulfilled throughout history, extending from the past through the present to the future. It is sometimes called the continuous historical view. Commentators have also applied historicist methods to ancient Jewish history, to the Roman Empire, to Islam, to the Papacy, to the Modern era, and to the end time.

Preterist View

Preterism is the view or belief that interprets some (partial preterism) or all (full preterism) prophecies of the Bible as events which have already been fulfilled in history. This school of thought interprets the Book of Daniel as referring to events that happened from the seventh century BC until the first century AD, while seeing the prophecies of the Book of Revelation, as well as Christ's predictions within the Olivet Discourse, as events that happened in the first century AD. Preterism holds that Ancient Israel finds its continuation or fulfillment in the Christian church at the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. The AD 70 destruction of Jerusalem is seen by preterists as being allegorically portrayed in the Book of Revelation. The term preterism comes from the Latin *praeter*, which is a prefix denoting that something is 'past' or 'beyond'.

Futurist View

Futurism is the eschatological view that interprets much of the Book of Revelation, the Book of Ezekiel, the Book of Daniel (and the other prophets) as portraying future events in a literal, physical, apocalyptic, and global context. By comparison, other Christian eschatological views interpret these passages as past events in a symbolic, historic context (preterism and historicism), or as present-day events in a non-literal and spiritual context (idealism).

Futurist beliefs usually have a close association with premillennialism and dispensationalism.

The Historical Development of Eschatological Views

Thomas Ice gives an excellent summary of views which provide the framework for the interpretation of Matthew 24. His chapter in reference 1 provides the following development¹

The early post-apostolic fathers tended to see prophecy as indicating imminent future events. They could best be classified as inconsistent futurists, since they almost always understood prophetic events and personalities as future (e.g. the Antichrist, the rebuilding of the temple, and the mark of the beast). But upon occasion they spoke as if they believed they were in the Great Tribulation (a characteristic of Historicism). Since futurism is the product of the most consistent application of a literal interpretation to the text of scripture, it began to wane as allegorical interpretation rose to dominance when the fourth century passed into the fifth. Because of the merger of church

¹ Ice, Thomas and Demy, Timothy, *When the Trumpet Sounds, Today's Foremost Authorities Speak Out on End-Time Controversies*, Harvest House Publishers, Eugene, Oregon, 1995, Chapter 1, **Back to the Future: Keeping the Future in the Future**.

and state under Constantine, many church leaders wanted to suppress the literal interpretation of premillennialism, which cast the Roman Empire in the role of a villain. In fact, Jerome (345–420), Augustine (354–430), and others began to teach that the golden age of Revelation 20 did not have to wait for the second coming of Christ, as taught by premillennialists. Instead, it had already been established through the church’s defeat of pagan Rome and the rise of Christianity to virtual dominance within the Empire. Thus, the seeds of preterism, historicism, and idealism were brought forth as allegorical interpretation replaced literal interpretation of prophecy.

Three Futurist Views

Within the context of the futuristic view of Matthew 24 there exists three main frameworks for organizing the content of the Olivet Discourse. In each of these futuristic views, Matthew 24:15 is the main point of agreement within the framework of Daniel’s seventy weeks prophecy. Verse 15 represents the mid-point of the seven-year tribulation since Jesus references the Abomination of Desolation (Dan. 9:27; 11:31; 12:11).

The first view, called the inter-advent view, is espoused by John Walvoord. This view sees Matthew 24:4–14 as general signs that are being **fulfilled continuously** within the church age. He would see the contents of verses 4 through 14 as “describing the general characteristics of the age leading up to the end, while at the same time recognizing that the prediction of difficulties, which will characterize the entire period between the first and second coming of Christ, are fulfilled in an intensified form as the age moves on to its conclusion.”²

Notice how this perspective is very “historicist” in its outlook. This view is very popular with futurists in our camp. It assumes that prophetic history is moving along in a general manner following the contents of Matthew 24 verses 4 through 14 and will culminate with the last generation who will witness the extremes of all of these events, including the Second Coming of Christ.

The second futurist view that provides the framework for Matthew 24 sees **verses 4 through 14 as the first half** of the future seven-year tribulation period, the Abomination of Desolation in verse 15 as the mid-point, and then **verses 16 through 28 as the second half** of the tribulation, with the Second Coming of Christ depicted in verses 29 through 31.

The final basic futuristic view of Matthew 24 sees verses 4 through 14 as encompassing the **entire** future seven-year tribulation period. In this view, Matthew then pivots to specific details concerning the last half of the tribulation in verses 15 through 31. For several reasons, I believe this last view is the correct one.

Let us first read the section in Matthew under consideration. (READ MATTHEW 24:4–14)

There are two main reasons why I believe this final view is correct. The first pertains to a concept mentioned in verse 8; namely, birth pangs.

Significance of Birth Pangs

One of the many insights that the Dead Sea Scrolls have brought to Biblical studies is the unveiling of what the ancient Jewish rabbis believed about the coming of the Messiah. They believed that the coming of the Messiah would be preceded by a time of great suffering for the Jewish people (recall Daniel). This period of time was believed to be seven years (again, from Daniel). As the Dead Sea Scrolls were translated, it was discovered that the time of distress that will precede the advent of the Messiah was called “the birth pangs of the Messiah.” Burrows³ summarizes this belief

A prominent feature of Jewish eschatology, as represented especially by the rabbinic literature, was the time of trouble preceding Messiah’s coming. It was called “the birth pangs of the Messiah,” sometimes more briefly translated as “the Messianic woes.”

² Walvoord, John F., *Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come*, Chicago: Moody Press, 1974.

³ Burrows, Millard, *Burrows on the Dead Sea Scrolls*, Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1978.

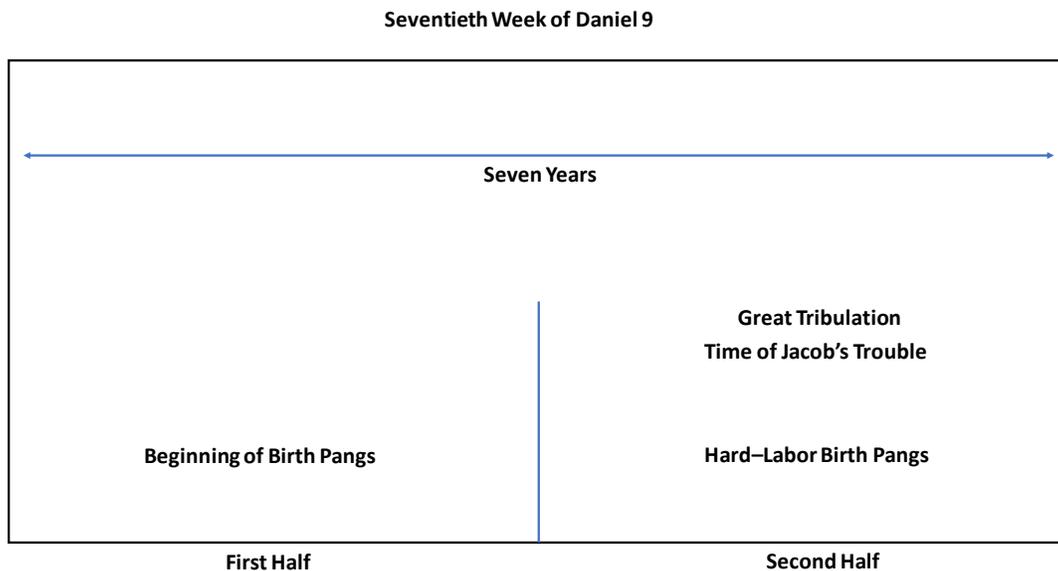
Given that ancient Judaism believed in a coming tribulation period for the Jews prior to the coming of the Messiah, are there any biblical texts that support this notion of birth pangs being associated with tribulation? Yes; let us consider Jeremiah 30. Beginning in verse 3, the Lord through Jeremiah is highlighting His future restoration of the nation of Israel but begins that restoration section with the severe judgment of His people. Notice the imagery that is being conveyed:

⁵ "For thus says the LORD, 'I have heard a sound of terror, of dread, and there is no peace. ⁶ 'Ask now, and see if a male can give birth. Why do I see every man *with* his hands on his loins, as a woman in childbirth? And *why* have all faces turned pale? ⁷ 'Alas! for that day is great, there is none like it; and it is the time of Jacob's distress, but he will be saved from it.

Notice several things. First, men will be in such travail that it will be likened to a man experiencing birth pangs, which is certainly used as an illustration. Hands on his loins, faces turning pale ... the judgment is being illustrated by the physical pain that a woman experiences in childbirth. Second, the time that is being mentioned here in judgment will be unlike any other time in history ('there is none like it'). Since there can only be one time that is a time of "distress such as never occurred since there was a nation until now," this time period is equivalent to that mentioned in Daniel 12:1 and Matthew 24:21. Finally, this time is called "The time of Jacob's Trouble." Since we understand that Matthew 24:15–28 covers the time period of the second half of the future tribulation period, this time is associated with birth pangs. Birth pangs is an apt description of the second half of the tribulation; as a woman experiences severe birth pangs in the latter stage of labor before giving birth to a child. Before the birth of the Messianic age, the nation of Israel will experience hardship that is likened to birth pangs.

One of the reasons why I reject the inter-advent view of Matthew 24:4–14 is the labor of a woman is a relatively short time experience. It seems unlikely that Jesus would use the birth pangs metaphor to describe general characteristics during the several thousand years of the current church age. The imagery of birth pangs doesn't fit a large time frame.

Notice also that verse 8 says that these things (verses 4–7) are merely the **beginning** of birth pangs ... with birth pangs proper implied to follow in verses 9 through 14. This suggests the following breakdown of the seven years when compared with our Daniel framework:



If we jump ahead to Matthew 24:29, we see that Jesus will return in the Second Coming "after the tribulation of those days," and usher in the Messianic age. Thus, the Bible teaches, as well as ancient Judaism, that the coming Messianic age will be preceded by seven years of birth pangs.

It is also a fact that birth pangs are associated prophetically with the Day of the Lord. Consider 1 Thessalonians 5:2–3. We will cover that in a little more detail when we study Thessalonians later in the fall, Lord willing.

To summarize, the reason why I believe Matthew 24:4–14 pertains to the entire future seven-year tribulation period is the association of this period with birth pangs. Again, the imagery is that the events in 24:4–7 are “*merely* the beginning of birth pangs” and the items that follow up until verse 14, and reiterated in 21–28 are the hard labor birth pangs.

The second reason why I believe that Matthew 24:4–14 pertains to the entire future seven-year tribulation period is use of the term “the end” by the Lord Jesus in verses 13 and 14. In verse 13, Jesus says “the one who endures to the end, he will be saved.” What end is He talking about? The end of this present age that concludes with the salvation of the remnant of Israel alive at the Second Coming. What about the next verse ... “and then the end shall come?” Again, it must be the end end. The “end of the age” is what Jesus is talking about. We know that the end of the age does not come in the first half of the tribulation period, it comes at the end of the second half in association with the Second Coming. (See our Daniel framework)

This is why I see verses 4–14 as a summary of the **entire** future seven-year tribulation period. The birth pangs concept in verse 8 and the “end” language of verses 13 and 14.

Matthew 24:4–8

Recall the context that leads to Jesus words here in Matthew 24. The disciples asked two questions, “when will these things happen,” which, in the immediate context of Jesus mentioning “not one stone will be left upon another” suggests the first question concerns the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. Now, notice that this destruction is not mentioned anywhere in Matthew 24. In fact, the temple is merely mentioned in passing in verse 15 ... “standing in the holy place.” But if we hop over to Luke 21, we see detailed information concerning this destruction. For example, verse 21:20 ... “when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then recognize that her desolation is near.” Notice also verse 23 ... “there will great distress upon the land and wrath to this people ...” Notice Luke just records “great distress” and he does not modify that with anything like “such as has never been nor ever will be.” Whereas Matthew tells us at the end the Jews will be saved ... here in Luke 21:24 ... “and they will fall by the edge of the sword, and be led captive into all the nations, and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles ...” Do you see the stark differences between some of the items in Luke verses Matthew. This is why I believe Matthew does not address the disciples first question, because there are no details concerning the destruction of Jerusalem or the temple; this devastation of the first question is only answered in Luke. More about this when we study Luke in the Fall, Lord willing.

What are the characteristics of the first half of the tribulation period in Matthew 24:4–8?

- 24:4–5 → False Christs who will mislead many
- 24:6 → wars
- 24:7 → famines
- 24:7 → earthquakes

Since Jesus mentions that these are the beginning of birth pangs, we expect to see these in the first half of the future seven-year tribulation period. Now, consider the inter-advent position again. If all of these things are characteristic of the church age, how are they signs of His coming and the end of the age? You see the issue? The disciples specifically asked Jesus what would be the sign of His coming. There have always been false Christs, wars, famines and earthquakes in the church age. If these are commonplace, how are they signs of His coming?

It is my conjecture that these apparently common events can only be a sign of His coming if they occur at a specific time and have a severity to them which is distinguishable from those common place events that have always been. So, in this sense, it is irrelevant **if some** of these signs exist today and are increasing in frequency, or even in severity. It is not a certainty that an increase in frequency or severity of these signs is a guarantee that His return is near. It should give us pause when we hear a famous prophecy teacher say “we are seeing prophecy fulfilled before our own eyes today.” Why? ... because ...

These signs must appear in the first half of the tribulation period, which does not begin until when ... ? When does the tribulation begin? The signing of the future covenant with the antichrist.