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The Lord's prophecy concerning Jerusalem

Matthew 24; Luke 21

Two things are familiar to most attentive readers of Scripture. Who has not observed the variations often occurring in the accounts of the same event given by the different evangelists? These variations, over which the infidel ignorantly trumpets as proofs of their human imperfection, are to the believer among the clearest marks of their divine perfection. The object of the Spirit, who records the same event or the same discourse with these striking variations, is to bring out in each case a different phase of truth; and in all instances the variation in the narrative or the report is in divine harmony with the scope of the various gospels He has inspired.

A second thing, obvious to careful readers, is that many, if not most, prophecies have a double fulfillment. David and Solomon were each, in different ways, types of Christ. Hence many prophecies, especially in the Psalms, while referring directly to them, point forward, in a far fuller and more important sense, to the Lord, whom they partially foreshadowed. So, too, the prophecies about Babylon, while foretelling the capture of the city by Cyrus, have clearly a wider range, carrying us on to the final overthrow of that Gentile rule of which Babylon was the golden head.

These observations will help us to understand the variations between Matthew and Luke in their accounts of our Lord's prophecy concerning the temple and Jerusalem. In the earlier part of this prophecy (Matt. 24:4-28; Luke 21:8-24), though it is clear

that the two evangelists are recording the same discourse, yet such are the differences that it is difficult to suppose they are speaking of the same event. If, however, our Lord's words have a double application, both the resemblances and the variations are at once explained. Such is actually the case. The earlier part of this prophecy refers, first to the capture of Jerusalem by Titus, and then to the troubles preceding the coming of the Son of man. The Spirit led Luke to record all that related to the former event, and Matthew all that related to the latter. In two reports of the same discourse thus given there must clearly be a close resemblance of arrangement and language; some expressions, applicable to both events, common to both narratives; others, much alike, yet varied to harmonize with the object which each reporter had in view; others again, occurring in one and omitted in the other, according as they bear, or do not bear, on his general design. Such are the resemblances and differences found in a comparison of the two passages before us.

Indeed the questions which draw forth the discourse, as related by the two evangelists, are very different. In Matthew, Jesus had just spoken of the Jews' house being left desolate, and of His own departure till they should receive Him as coming "in the name of the Lord." Then, being pointed to the temple, He foretells its ruin, on which the disciples ask, "When shall these things be? And what shall be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?" Here the leading thought is as to "the end of the age," and the Lord's reappearance after His predicted withdrawal. In Luke, however, Jesus has not been speaking of His departure or return, but simply foretelling the overthrow of the temple. He is therefore asked, "When shall these things be? And what sign will there be when these things shall come to pass?" The disciples are therefore asking about two quite distinct things. No doubt they really asked about both, but here in the question, as afterwards in the prophecy, Luke confines his report to matters relating to the destruction of the temple, while Matthew, in harmony with the context and his usual dispensational character, gives attention chiefly to the later events connected with the Lord's return and the end of the age.

But if, it may be objected, our Lord is, in Matthew's report, speaking of events in distant ages, how could He use the second person, saying, "Take heed that no one deceives you;" and again, "You will hear of wars and rumors of wars"? In the first place the words had a present application, as seen in Luke, and were therefore spoken in the second person, which form is naturally retained even where the remoter application is more prominent. Again, the disciples, in asking about the Lord's return and the end of the age, were regarded as Jews asking about their own national affairs, so that this form of address was perfectly suitable. Men constantly

speak of "our victories," or "our prospects," in referring to the deeds or prospects of their countrymen in past or future generations. And if such a mode of speech is intelligible in ordinary discourse, in prophecy it is not only intelligible, but habitual. Thus Isaiah says, "Strangers shall stand and feed your flocks, and the sons of the foreigner shall be your plowmen and your vinedressers. But you shall be named the Priests of the Lord" (Isa. 61:5-6). Everybody knows that this does not mean the Jews of Isaiah's day, but of far-distant generations, and yet nobody finds any difficulty from the prophet's writing in the second person. The same principle will apply to our Lord's discourse.

There is evidently a great resemblance between the condition of things accompanying the siege of Jerusalem by Titus, to which Luke refers, and the final troubles of the Jews, to which Matthew refers. The features which have long since become history as to the earlier events will re-appear in the future. False christs, wars, commotions, and fearful natural phenomena, are common to both periods. In the first few verses, therefore (Luke 21:8-11; Matt. 24:4-8), there is but slight variation between the reports. The only material differences are that in Luke, whose thoughts were on events but few years distant, our Lord is recorded to have said that "the time has drawn near," while Matthew, who refers to the later fulfillment of the prophecy, omits these words; and again that Matthew says the false prophets "will deceive many," alluding to the great national apostasy at the end of the age, whereas Luke, while giving the warning, records no such prediction, for the Christians in Jerusalem were in fact not deceived by the pretensions of the impostors who arose at the time of the revolt against Rome.

The next section of the prophecy, in both accounts (Luke 21:12-19; Matt. 24:9-14), foretells the sufferings of the faithful, and though both periods are marked by great persecutions, there is a far wider difference in the reports of this part of the discourse than of the former. Matthew, speaking of the persecution of the faithful witnesses before Christ's advent, says, "Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations (or "all the Gentiles") for My name's sake" (v. 9). This is what the believing Jews will suffer on account of their testimony to the coming Messiah in the last days; but it would be incorrect as an account of what the early Christians endured. They were not hated by the Gentiles as Gentiles, but by all men, whether Jews or Gentiles; and indeed their chief sufferings and persecutions came from the Jews. To these sufferings our Lord refers in Luke, where the description is far more general. "But before all these things, they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and rulers for My name's sake. But it will turn out for you as an occasion for testimony" (vv. 12-13).

Comparing this passage with Matthew, there are two important differences. The persecution in Matthew is contemporaneous with the wars and disturbances previously spoken of, for our Lord says, "Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and kill you." In Luke, however, the persecution spoken of precedes the fightings and commotions mentioned in the earlier verses, and our Lord's language is, "But before all these things, they will lay their hands on you and persecute you." This distinction is in accordance with facts. The great persecution of the Christians by the Jews was not during the civil wars which ended in the fall of Jerusalem, but before them, and this is the subject alluded to in Luke. On the other hand, the great persecution of the faithful Jews by the Gentiles, which is the subject spoken of in Matthew, will be during the terrible wars and convulsions preceding the Lord's glorious appearing. The second difference is that while Matthew ascribes the hostility to the Gentiles, saying, "and you will be hated by all nations for My name's sake," Luke speaks of a persecution arising in part at least from the Jews, for he says that they should be delivered up to the synagogues, as well as be brought before kings and rulers. He therefore adds (v. 17), "And you will be hated by all for My name's sake."

So, too, though hatred, persecution, and betrayal are spoken of in both evangelists, the character is different. Luke is foretelling the sufferings which the early Jewish Christians should endure at the hands of their countrymen and nearest relatives, and his prophecy is simply a description of what shortly after took place, "You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, relatives and friends; and they will send some of you to your death" (v. 16). In Matthew, however, the persecution spoken of is a very different one, originating from the Gentile oppressors of the nation before the Lord's advent in power. Here, therefore, the feature of family dissension is omitted, and the prophecy simply says, "And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another" (v. 10).

The remainder of the reports of this section of the prophecy are entirely different, each of the evangelists recording matters altogether omitted by the other. Luke says, "Therefore settle it in your hearts not to meditate beforehand on what you will answer; for I will give you a mouth and wisdom which all your adversaries will not be able to contradict or resist" (vv. 14-15). This was a special promise given to the disciples, which we see strikingly and repeatedly fulfilled in the Acts of the Apostles. But there is nothing to show that such will be the case with the Jewish believers in the last days. They will be silenced, banished, almost destroyed, and only delivered from entire extinction by Christ's sudden and glorious appearing. In Matthew, therefore, there is nothing at all answering to this portion of the prophecy as recorded by Luke.

On the other hand, Matthew names features of the last time showing no correspondence with events in Luke's prophecy. He says, "Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold. But he who endures to the end shall be saved" (vv. 11-13). Here prominence is given to false prophets and their deceptions. In Luke, where the warning is intended for believers, before the siege of Jerusalem, these are not mentioned. But to the Jews awaiting Christ's return, the danger from this source will be exceedingly great, and therefore the warning is emphasised, and the extent of the deception clearly foretold. Again, in Matthew we are told that "because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold. But he who endures to the end shall be saved."

Luke, who is recording the parts of the prophecy relating to the events before the destruction of Jerusalem, entirely omits these verses, because no such apostasy as that which is here foretold then took place. But such an apostasy will form one great feature of the days spoken of in Matthew's prophecy, when numbers, who begin to wait for the coming of the Messiah, will grow cold, and faint under the persecution and oppression to which they will then be subjected. The verse, "He who endures to the end shall be saved," is often used to show that believers have only a conditional security depending on their own faithfulness. It has, however, nothing to do with the subject, but refers only to the Jews waiting for a national redemption before the Messiah's advent. Some of these, God's elect, will stand faithful to the end. Others, seduced by false christs or false prophets, or wearied out with the sufferings besetting the path of the faithful, will turn aside and perish with the unbelievers.

Again Matthew adds, "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations (or all the Gentiles); and then the end will come" (v. 14). In Luke the "end" contemplated is the destruction of Jerusalem, and it is well known that before that event the gospel was not preached to all the Gentiles. In his report, therefore, these words are wholly omitted. But in Matthew the "end" is that about which the disciples had asked, "Christ's coming, and the end of the age." And before that event the gospel will be preached to all the Gentiles. It is not, however, the gospel of God's grace, but "the gospel of the kingdom," a term never applied to Christianity. It refers to the proclamation of the kingdom of the Messiah that will go forth before His appearing. This goes forth to all the nations, or Gentiles, as apart from the Jews; a distinction obliterated under Christianity, but of the utmost moment when the Lord is about to establish His earthly kingdom, with Jerusalem as the centre of His government – and Israel as the head of the nations. Thus in all details, notwithstanding the striking

resemblances, the variations in the reports of the two evangelists show that they are really dealing with quite different subjects. The still more striking difference between the "abomination of desolation," and the siege of Jerusalem by the Romans, we must reserve for consideration later on.

The Destruction of Jerusalem and the Abomination of Desolation

We lately glanced at the earlier verses of our Lord's prophecy concerning these events as recorded in Matthew and Luke, noting the variations in their reports, and tracing these variations to the different objects before the mind of the writers. The prophecy itself had, like many others, a twofold application, referring immediately to the approaching destruction of the city and temple; and remotely, but no less directly, to the events preceding the establishment of the Messianic kingdom. Matthew then speaks only of the later event; Luke is specially occupied with the earlier; while, therefore, the resemblance between the two is very close, the differences are also very striking. Thus Matthew speaks of the faithful being hated of the Gentiles, of false prophets arising and deceiving many, of the love of many growing cold, of the salvation of those who endure to the end, and of "the gospel of the kingdom" being first preached to all the nations. This agrees with what Scripture elsewhere teaches about the last days before Christ's appearing, but is inapplicable to the Christians before the siege of Jerusalem. Luke therefore omits these parts of the prophecy, but says that the time draws near. He speaks of a persecution arising largely from the Jews, and records a special promise of wisdom in addressing the tribunals, while he fixes the date of the persecution before the wars previously foretold; in all which he differs from Matthew, but exactly coincides with what occurred before Jerusalem was taken by the Romans.

It is in the next part of the discourse, however (Matt. 24:15-28; Luke 21:20-24), that the most marked differences appear. The prophecy, as recorded in Luke, simply foretells what occurred about forty years later. "But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation is near. Then let those in Judea flee to the mountains, let those who are in the midst of her depart, and let not those who are in the country enter her. For these are the days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled. But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! For there will be great distress in the land and wrath upon this people. And they will fall by the edge of the sword, and be led away captive into all nations. And Jerusalem will be trampled by Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled" (vv. 20-24). Nothing can be simpler. The prediction is exact, and the directions given are precisely those followed by the

Christians residing in the city when Titus's army approached Jerusalem. No exhortation is given to special haste, and in fact no occasion for special haste existed. Every reader knows that the Christians, forewarned by this prophecy, left the city; that the city was destroyed, and its inhabitants either killed or carried into slavery. Jerusalem then became a prey to the Gentiles, who have ruled over it and kept it in subjection ever since. This closes the earlier portion of Luke's prophecy.

Matthew, however, speaks not a word about Jerusalem being "surrounded by armies," but about "the abomination of desolation" standing "in the holy place." "Therefore when you see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place (whoever reads, let him understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let him who is on the housetop not come down to take anything out of his house. And let him who is in the field not go back to get his clothes. But woe to those who are pregnant and to those with nursing babies in those days!" (vv. 15-19). Some have thought that the abomination of desolation standing in the holy place referred to the Roman standards brought into the temple. But this only took place at the end of the siege, when all chance of flight had long been cut off. For the true meaning of the phrase we must turn to the prophecies of Daniel, to which reference is here made. Daniel receives a communication concerning the time when "your people (the Jews) shall be delivered" (Dan. 12:1). Among the marks of this salvation approaching it is said that "from the time that the daily sacrifice is taken away, and the abomination of desolation is set up, there shall be one thousand two hundred and ninety days. Blessed is he who waits, and comes to the one thousand three hundred and thirty-five days" (vv. 11-12). Did any special blessing come to the Jews or to the Church 1336 days after the fall of Jerusalem? Or, if the days be taken as years, was there, after that number of years, say at the date A.D. 1405, any event which is pointed to in this prophecy? If not, then the setting up of the abomination of desolation is clearly not the destruction of Jerusalem.

What, then, does it signify? Daniel, in another prophecy, names a period of seventy weeks, which is to end in the restoration of Jerusalem and the people of Israel. These weeks are universally understood as periods of seven years. After sixty-nine of these, Messiah is cut off without receiving the kingdom. This brings us to the death of Christ, leaving one week yet unfulfilled. The series is then interrupted for an indefinite period, during which "the city and the sanctuary" are destroyed by a Gentile power, and war and desolations are determined to the end. This exactly answers to the trampling of Jerusalem by Gentiles "until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled," as foretold by Luke. But after this interval we read the history of the remaining week; that is, the last period of seven years, as yet unfulfilled before the

restoration of the people and city; "and in the middle of the week," we are told, some person or power "shall bring an end to sacrifice and offering. And on the wing of abominations shall be one who makes desolate" (Dan. 9:24-27). Now, that this is the same thing as the setting up of the abomination of desolation is clear, for in the passage already quoted that event is contemporaneous with the making of the sacrifice and the oblation to cease. The time, if not the nature, of the event is therefore obvious. It is in the middle of the last week, or about three-and-a-half years, before the deliverance of the Jews and the restoration of Jerusalem by the setting up of Messiah's kingdom.

Details, giving us a fuller insight into the character of this period, are supplied in the book of Revelation, where we read that "the holy city" will be trodden underfoot by the Gentiles for "forty-two months" (Rev. 11:2) – the half of the seven years spoken of by Daniel; that the faithful remnant of God's earthly people are persecuted by a ruler who continues forty and two months; that this ruler receives idolatrous worship, and an image or abomination is set up to which all are required to bow down; that the faithful then flee into the wilderness, where they are sheltered by God for the same period of three and a half years (Rev. 12:6, 14). This exactly corresponds with that we read in Daniel, and with the events connected with this setting up of the abomination of desolation as foretold in Matthew. There is, however, nothing in these prophecies connecting itself with the siege of Jerusalem as foretold in Luke.

Indeed the only resemblance in this part of the prophecy, as recorded by Matthew and Luke, is that in both cases the faithful are warned to flee. But even here the differences are remarkable. No doubt, even in the less hasty flight spoken of by Luke, before the Roman army reached Jerusalem, women in the condition named in the prophecy would find escape difficult or impossible. The lament over their fate is, therefore, common to both; but here the resemblance ends. In Luke the flight is not to the mountains, nor marked by extreme haste. In fact the Christians retired with no special rapidity to the city of Pella. But when the abomination of desolation is set up, not an instant must be lost, the flight must be with all speed, and even the most trifling delay will be fatal. The place of refuge, too, is not a sheltering city, but "the mountains," for the rage of the idolatrous power will pursue them, and it is only as shielded by God that they can escape its fury. Both the rapidity of the flight and the sojourn in the desert are typified in the Revelation, where "to the woman were given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness" (Rev. 12:14).

Of all this there is no trace in the prophecy as recorded in Luke. But if we turn to Luke 17:30, 31, where the Lord is speaking of "the day when the Son of Man is

revealed," we find the exhortation: "In that day, he who is on the housetop, and his goods are in the house, let him not come down to take them away. And likewise the one who is in the field, let him not turn back." Here the language of the two evangelists is almost identical; but in this case Luke is not speaking of the siege of Jerusalem, but of the revelation of the Son of man. This makes it clear, therefore, that Matthew is speaking of the same time.

Matthew's prophecy goes on, "And pray that your flight may not be in winter or on the Sabbath. For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be. And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect's sake those days will be shortened" (vv. 20-22). To this there is nothing answering in Luke's record. Nor could there be. We can understand the scruples of godly Jews, under the law, such as those who will be awaiting the Messiah's return, about making their flight on the Sabbath. But what hindrance would the Jewish Sabbath have been to the flight of the Christians before the siege of Jerusalem? Again, terrible as were the sufferings connected with the siege of Jerusalem, this was not the most awful crisis in the history of the people. Daniel expressly says that "there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation, even to that time. And at that time your people shall be delivered" (Dan. 12:1). Our Lord was obviously alluding to this time; for not only does He quote Daniel's very words, but it is clear that there cannot be two periods of unparalleled suffering. But the time spoken of by Daniel immediately precedes the deliverance of the people. The Lord, therefore, is here speaking, not of the siege of Jerusalem, but of His own return for the salvation of Israel. How, moreover, could it be said that the sufferings connected with the fall of Jerusalem threatened the destruction of all flesh, or were shortened for the elect's sake? It is manifestly, therefore, of another period and other sufferings that our Lord is here speaking.

The rest of that part of Matthew's prophecy now before us warns against the deceptions of false christs. "Then if anyone says to you, Look, here is the Christ, or there; do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will arise and show great signs and wonders, so as to deceive, if possible, even the elect. See, I have told you beforehand. Therefore if they say to you, 'Look, He is in the desert!' do not go out; or, 'Look, He is in the inner rooms!' do not believe it. For as the lightning comes from of the east and flashes to the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. For wherever the carcass is, there the eagles will be gathered together" (vv. 23-28). All this is omitted in Luke. Nothing of the kind occurred before the siege of Jerusalem, and it formed no part, therefore, of the prophecy as reported by him. On the other hand it is, as we learn from other Scriptures, exactly the state of things

which will prevail before Christ's appearing in power and glory for the establishment of His world-kingdom.

The remainder of the prophecy, as handed down by the two evangelists, refers to this great event. In Luke, however, this portion of the discourse begins abruptly, without note of time; for, in fact, he passes by a rapid transition from the siege of Jerusalem to the coming of Christ. But in Matthew the continuity of this last event with what has gone before is unmistakably marked, for his report goes on without break. Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken. Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory" (vv. 29-30). Thus again it is clear that while Luke, in his report, has been speaking of the siege of Jerusalem, Matthew has had before him a totally different subject; namely, the events immediately preceding the revelation and kingdom of Jesus Christ.

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