

Olivet Discourse Omitted By John

In his Gospel record John emphasizes Jesus' conversations and discourses. He dealt with the things Jesus said more than what he did. Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell more about his actions. Neither of these three synoptic writers heard Jesus' discourse on the Mount of Olives, yet they recorded his alarming predictions. John, along with Peter, James, and Andrew, composed the audience for the Olivet discourse (Mark 13:3; Matt. 24; Luke 21), yet John makes no reference to it in his Gospel!

Does that strike you as puzzling? Why would he omit Jesus' prophecies about the overthrow of the nation of Israel and the destruction of their magnificent temple and the capital city of Jerusalem, all of which Jesus said would transpire in the lifetime of some who lived at the time? If John wrote either of his three epistles or Revelation after the destruction of Jerusalem, as is generally contended, how can we explain his lack of even mentioning this tremendously significant event in Jewish and Biblical history?

There is a satisfactory answer to this question. The answer is: He wrote about those events in far greater detail and imagery in Revelation, the Apocalypse! He did not depend upon his memory of Jesus' discourse but received visions and revelations in panoramic view portraying "what must soon take place" for "the time is near" (Rev. 1:1-3).

The late date (possibly 98 AD) for the writing of Revelation is set in such theological concrete that most students are not swayed by the overwhelming internal evidence that it was written before the destruction of Jerusalem. But, just for a starter, let us consider two parallel passages.

"Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, every one who pierced him; and all the tribes of the earth will wail on account of him" (Rev. 1:7) In Matthew 24:30, Jesus stated, "...then will appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory." Jesus continued, "So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away till all these things take place" (v. 33-34). Either these are both referring to the same event which would transpire in their generation, or Jesus is coming on the clouds with the same accompanying effects twice! Take your pick!

These both refer to the "parousia," or presence of the Lord as he brought retribution against those tribes (Israel) who rejected him and called for his crucifixion. The destruction of their holy city, Jerusalem, and the unspeakable pain and bloodshed would be so evident that the Lord's hand in it could not be denied, hence, it is expressed as "every eye shall see him." Some of those who "pierced" him would still be living to "wail/mourn" because of their deed.

James Stuart Russell compared the Olivet discourse and Revelation. "What do we find in our Lord's prophecy? First and chiefly the "Parousia"; then wars, famines, pestilence, earthquakes; false prophets and deceivers; signs and wonders; the darkening of the sun and moon; the stars falling from heaven; angels and trumpets, eagles and carcasses, great tribulation and woe; convulsions of nature; the treading down of Jerusalem; the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven; the gathering of the elect; the reward of the faithful; the judgment of the wicked. And are not these precisely the elements which compose the APOCALYPSE? This cannot be accidental resemblance, -- it is coincidence, it is identity. What difference there is in the treatment of the subject arises from the difference in the method of the revelation. The prophecy is addressed to the ear, and the Apocalypse to the eye: the one is a discourse delivered in broad day, amid the realities of actual life, -- the other is a vision, beheld in a state of ecstasy, clothed in gorgeous imagery, with an air of unreality as in objects seen in a dream; requiring to be translated back into the language of everyday life before it can be intelligible as actual fact." (The Parousia, p. 375-376).

I could do no better than to quote at length from Russell's great work published in 1878. "But is it intelligible? The answer to this is, Was it written to be understood? Was a book sent by an apostle to the churches of Asia Minor, with a benediction on its readers, a mere unintelligible jargon, an inexplicable enigma, to them? That can hardly be. Yet if the book were meant to unveil the secrets of distant times, must it not of necessity have been unintelligible to its first readers -- and not only unintelligible, but even irrelevant and useless. If it spake, as some would have us to believe, of Huns and Goths and Saracens, of medieval emperors and popes, of the Protestant Reformation and the French Revolution, what possible interest or meaning could it have for the Christian churches of Ephesus, and Smyrna, and Philadelphia, and Laodicea? Especially when we consider the actual circumstances of those early Christians, -- many of them enduring cruel sufferings and grievous persecutions, and all of them eagerly looking for an approaching hour of deliverance which was now close at hand, -- what purpose could it have answered to send them a document which they were urged to read and ponder, which was yet mainly occupied with historical events so distant as to be beyond the range of their sympathies, and so obscure that even at this day the shrewdest critics are hardly agreed on any one point? Is it conceivable that an apostle would mock the suffering and persecuted Christians of his time with dark parables about distant ages? If this book were really intended to minister faith and comfort to the very persons to whom it was sent, it must unquestionably deal with matters in which they were practically and personally interested. And does not this very obvious consideration suggest the true key to the Apocalypse? **MUST IT NOT OF NECESSITY REFER TO MATTERS OF CONTEMPORARY HISTORY?** The only tenable, the only reasonable, hypothesis is that it was intended to be understood by its original readers; but this is as much as to say that it must be occupied with the events and transactions of their own day, and these comprised within a comparatively brief space of time."

Russell continues: “This is not a mere conjecture, it is certified by the express statements of the book. If there be one thing which more than any other is explicitly and repeatedly affirmed in the Apocalypse it is the NEARNESS of the events which it predicts. This is stated, and reiterated again and again, in the beginning, the middle, and the end. We are warned that ‘the time is AT HAND,’ ‘These things must SHORTLY come to pass,’ ‘Behold, I come QUICKLY,’ and ‘Surely, I come QUICKLY.’ Yet, in the face of these express and oft-repeated declarations, most interpreters have felt at liberty to ignore the limitations of time altogether, and to roam at will over ages and centuries, regarding the book as a syllabus of church history, and almanac of politico-ecclesiastical events for all Christendom to the end of time. This has been a fatal and inexcusable blunder. To neglect the obvious and clear definition of the time so constantly thrust on the attention of the reader by the book itself is to stumble on the very threshold. Accordingly this inattention has vitiated by far the greatest number of apocalyptic interpretations. It may truly be said that the key has all the while hung by the door, plainly visible to every one who had eyes to see; yet men have tried to pick the lock, or force the door, or climb up some other way, rather than avail themselves of so simple and ready a way of admission as to use the key made and provided for them.” (The Parousia, p.366-267).

As the apostle John would send copies of his completed message, or speak to others about it, no doubt, he did more than just read it to other disciples. We would expect that he would have explained the various symbols and actions which he had written about. He would give the key to understanding the apocalyptic messages he had written. Undoubtedly, some such key to make clear the mysteries of his revelation accompanied it as it was carried to the disciples.

The next question follows logically. If John intended that the seven churches of Asia understand the truth that he wrote, why would he clothe it in veiled and dramatic symbols and exaggerated imagery? Didn't the Spirit know that even we today would still be searching in vain for the meanings nearly two thousand years later? If disciples have been unable to decipher its symbols throughout the centuries, then of what value has the Revelation been?

Nations, especially in time of war, send encrypted information to those officials in charge of operations, but those who receive the messages have been informed previously of the key to interpretation of the vital information. Otherwise, it would be of no value. In fact, it would be confusing without the code by which to decipher it. At the same time, if the enemy intercepts the coded message, it will not be intelligible to them unless they have stolen the code..

In similar manner, Jesus shared “insider” information with disciples. When he began to speak in parables early in his ministry, “Then the disciples came and said to him, ‘Why do you speak to them in parables?’ And he answered them, ‘To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.’ ... ‘This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not

hear, nor do they understand”” Then Jesus explained the meaning of the parable giving his chosen disciples the key to interpretation of it. (Read all of Matt. 13:1-20).

Didn't God want everybody to know and understand his message? Why would he make some blinded to it? Jesus' prophecies in Matthew 24 and John's prophecies in Revelation, if clearly stated, would have named living persons of perverse nature through whom the overthrow of their nation was to come. If their names had been used, being enemies of Jesus, they could have deliberately proved Jesus to be wrong by reversal of their roles. Also, as with Jesus, Paul, and Peter, care was taken to avoid any appearance of aligning the spiritual kingdom as an enemy of the civil government.

Yes, John omitted mention or allusion to Jesus' discourse on the Mount of Olives recorded in the Synoptic Gospels, but nothing was lost because of it, for he gave a much fuller account in Revelation of what was soon to transpire.

No, I shall not attempt to display point-by-point parallels of Jesus' prophecies on the Mount of Olives and John's imagery in Revelation. If I could do that accurately, it would only satisfy our curiosity, for those things depicted transpired at the time of the "parousia" in the "last days" of God's dealing with a racial nation and the full identification of his spiritual nation. Now he lives in us who are his spiritual Temple and his New Jerusalem.

(Cecil Hook, July 2001) []