

Matthew 24: Is Double Fulfillment Possible?

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Some prophecy teachers, while acknowledging a fulfillment of Matthew 24 in the first century, predict a future *second* fulfillment, but this time, with worldwide implications. Apparently, this is the position of Dr. Oral Roberts. Immediately after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, he stood up before the students and faculty of Oral Roberts University and suggested that Matthew 24 was about to be fulfilled. Roberts must believe in a first-century fulfillment, at least to some degree, simply because it's undeniable. History records that the destruction of the temple mentioned by Jesus in the first two verses took place in A.D. 70. So Roberts' futuristic scenario requires a second fulfillment: a new temple and its subsequent destruction. This might sound plausible initially; however, on closer examination, a verse-by-verse double-fulfillment proposal is exposed as absurd. Keith A. Mathison of R. C. Sproul's Ligonier Ministries says the double-fulfillment theory cannot be "ruled out."¹ Actually, it can *easily* be ruled out. We might wonder whether those who promote the double-fulfillment theory ever took the time to test it by reading over the text even once. How could this be fulfilled twice?

This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come. (v. 14, NASB throughout unless otherwise noted.)

Will the "great commission" be fulfilled twice? Does "the end" come twice? If it does, then, the first one wasn't the end.

A modern second fulfillment is usually presented as a worldwide catastrophe, but notice verse 20: "...pray that your flight will not be in the winter, or on a Sabbath." What relevance would this have today? Outside modern-day Israel, relatively few people in the world keep the Sabbath. And what if they do? In ancient times, the gates of Jerusalem were shut on the Sabbath preventing escape (Neh. 13:19, 22; Jer. 17:21, 24). However, this is not a problem for anyone today. Most Christians probably live out their *entire lives* without *ever* praying their "flight" will not take place on the Sabbath. Mark's account adds this: "...be on your guard; for they will

deliver you to the courts, and you will be flogged in the synagogues" (Mark 13:9). How could this be fulfilled worldwide in our time? Today's Sanhedrin has no jurisdiction outside Israel. There are likely very few Christians in the world, if any, who worry about being "flogged in the synagogues."

Will there be two "great" tribulations? "For there will be greater anguish than at any time since the world began. And it will never be so great again" (Matt. 24:21, NLT). Since this anguish would "never be so great again," how could it occur twice? Some might protest that such language is hyperbolic; it was not intended to be taken literally. Perhaps that is true. But then, the same people should be able to understand that the rest of Matthew 24 is replete with the same Old Testament-style hyperbole. They should not require a second fulfillment just because some events did not occur exactly as Jesus described them.

Will the "elect" be gathered twice? "He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other" (v. 31). This is referring to the "last trumpet" of 1 Cor. 15:51-52: the resurrection and the moment when the living Christians would be "caught up" and "changed." If Matthew 24 was to be fulfilled twice, then, clearly, the resurrection must have occurred during the first fulfillment within the lifetimes of Christ's listeners. But if all God's people in Hades were resurrected in the first century, and now Christians go straight to heaven at death, how could any saints be resurrected from Hades in the future?

Jesus never said Matthew 24 would be fulfilled twice, and there's no rule anywhere in the Bible saying prophecy should be interpreted this way. The double-fulfillment concept is simply an untenable fabrication created in desperation, probably deemed necessary because its adherents expect literal fulfillments of the highly figurative, cosmic predictions in Matthew 24 and other places, which of course, have never occurred (and never will). In some cases we find types and antitypes in scripture. For instance, Israelite worship under the Old Covenant was a type or "shadow" of things to come under the New Covenant (Col. 2:16-17). However, *the New Covenant does not create more shadows* for greater

¹ *When Shall These Things Be?* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2004), 180.

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fulfillments later. Here is another example of biblical typology:

Old Testament types: Sodom, Egypt, Babylon
New Testament antitype: Jerusalem

Sodom, Egypt, and Babylon were probably the three most detestable place names from Israel's past. To this day, Sodom symbolizes sexual perversion (sodomy). Egypt and Babylon represented sin and captivity. However, by the first century, the sins of God's own people, the Jews, had become so repugnant that in Revelation, he called Jerusalem by all three names: "...the great city which mystically is called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified" (Rev. 11:8); "BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH" (Rev. 17:5).² It's possible, if not probable, Jesus intended to draw the Babylon parallel when he described Jerusalem's destruction in Matthew 24:

...THE SUN WILL BE DARKENED, AND THE MOON WILL NOT GIVE ITS LIGHT (v. 29)

The same pronouncement was made against Old Testament Babylon:

The sun will be dark when it rises
And the moon will not shed its light. (Isa. 13:10)³

Jerusalem had become the antitype of Babylon. Jerusalem's destruction would be the antitype of Babylon's destruction.

It's all fulfilled. There is no *third* fulfillment. The destruction in Matthew 24 is not a type of something in the future; it's the antitype of something from the past. The New Testament does not create new types requiring future antitypes. Types and antitypes might be considered double fulfillments by some, but if a double-fulfillment rule should be applied to all biblical predictions without exception, we should

expect two Messiahs, two crucifixions, two judgments, two kingdoms, etc. It gets ridiculous.

Evidently, many influential Bible teachers spend little time testing the double-fulfillment idea before teaching it to trusting Christians. They routinely predict events which actually occurred long ago. For instance, some prophecies require a Roman Empire, but since it no longer exists — and hasn't for over 1,500 years — they predict a "revived" one. However, if they would give up their literal-fulfillment requirements (stars falling from heaven, etc.) and fully accept the first and only fulfillments of New Testament prophecies, there would be no need for any such flimsy double-fulfillment theories, and credulous Christians could be spared a lot of useless speculation.

Objection

Objection: Pastor John Hagee says prophecy should be interpreted by the double-fulfillment model because of "the law of double reference."⁴

Answer: Those who promote the law of double reference are unable to show where in the Bible this "law" is mentioned. It is a law only because they say it is, not because of any biblical directive.

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² "How the faithful city has become a harlot" (Isa. 1:21).

³ We say, "possible" because although Jesus seems to be quoting Isa. 13:10, similar predictions were made elsewhere that do not apply to Babylon. Ezekiel used the same language in a prophecy against Egypt (Ezek. 32:7-8). Other prophets referred to "the nations" (Joel 3:9, 15), "Zion" (Joel 2:1-2, 10, 31) and "Israel" (Amos 7:15; 8:9). Darkness is commonly associated with God's judgments.

⁴ John Hagee, *From Daniel To Doomsday* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc, 1999), 181.