

Having looked at Old Testament prophecies in part 1, we will shift our focus to passages from the New Testament.

MATTHEW 24:3

"And as he sat upon the mount of Olives, the disciples came unto him privately, saying, Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?" - Matthew 24:3

The disciples' question could be interpreted in two ways, either as "When will you establish your kingdom?" or "When will you come again and establish your kingdom?". However, considering the context of Matthew 24, only the latter interpretation - "When will you come again and establish your kingdom?" - seems to fit. This is because Jesus' response indicates a significant time-gap between the 'now' and 'then', suggesting that the establishment of His kingdom wasn't an immediate event, but rather one that would require His return.

The disciples did not exhibit any signs of being frazzled or taken aback by the suggested delay in the establishment of the Kingdom. This lack of surprise suggests that such a delay could have been part of their understanding of the Messianic reign. This implies that the disciples possibly held an expectation of a timeframe, a sequence of events, that included an interval between the Messiah's first coming and his return to establish the Kingdom. This understanding would align with the concept of a "second coming" and provides further evidence that such an idea could have been part of first-century Jewish Messianic thought.

Could the disciples have held a standard Jewish messianic interpretation of the first century, and is their questioning aligned with this understanding? If so, we need to consider the following factors:

1. The mindset of the disciples must be in line with first-century Jewish thought. If their thinking was an outlier, then our position would not be plausible. That is, there must be a **CONTEXTUAL ALIGNMENT** of the disciples thinking with their first-century Jewish neighbors.
2. The disciples had heard about Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection, who they believed to be the Messiah. However, they hadn't fully understood or accepted this teaching yet. This would suggest that the concept of the Messiah's death, burial, and resurrection wasn't part of first-century Jewish thought. Thus, there must be a **CONCEPTUAL MISALIGNMENT** between Jesus' teaching and first-century Jewish thought.
3. Given that the disciples are asking about Jesus' return to establish the kingdom, it's reasonable to assume that the prevalent Jewish belief of the day was a Messiah who rises from among the people, lives with them, leaves, and then returns for a later victory. That is, there must be an **ESCHATOLOGICAL EXPECTATION** of a second coming.

If these assumptions hold true, then it's plausible that the idea of a "second coming" was part of first-century Jewish messianic thought.

Now let's try to lend support to these three ideas.

CONTEXTUAL ALIGNMENT

Everything we know about the disciples' messianic expectation aligns with the first-century Jewish expectation. From their question in Acts 1:6, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" to their wrangling for position in the coming kingdom (see Mark 10:37), demonstrates their anticipation of a messianic kingdom. Moreover, their early statements about Jesus being the "King of Israel" (John 1:49) further underlines their belief in a messianic reign. This

understanding aligns perfectly with Jewish thought, as informed by the Hebrew prophets, revealing a consistent expectation of a coming Messiah who would establish a kingdom.

This is important because it sheds light on the interpretation of Matthew 24:3 and the expectation of the coming of the Messiah. The apostles' understanding aligns with a standard Jewish interpretation of the Messianic reign, indicating their beliefs were not radical outliers but shared by their contemporaries.

CONCEPTUAL MISALIGNMENT

Beginning in Matthew 16 and onward (Matthew 16:21, 17:22-23, 20:17-19), Jesus taught about His death, burial, and resurrection. However, from the onset of this revelation, the disciples outright rejected this thinking. For instance, in Matthew 16:22-23, Peter rebuked Jesus for suggesting such a fate, only to be sternly corrected by Jesus for not being mindful of the things of God. Further, Luke 18:31-34 is explicit, stating that the disciples did not understand any of these things, and that the meaning was hidden from them. This gives support to our earlier ideas (Chapter 5) that the Hebrew Scriptures are not explicit about the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, and that these things can only be seen after the fact. Since neither the first-century Jew nor the apostles expected a death and resurrection, their question about the Lord's "coming" (Matthew 24:3) must be understood as coming from outside our Christian concept of a post-resurrection reign.

ESCHATOLOGICAL EXPECTATION

The disciples' response to Jesus' predictions of leaving them provides valuable insight into their understanding of the Messiah's mission. The Gospel of John records several instances where Jesus spoke about going away, yet the disciples do not object to these statements. This contrasts sharply with their reaction to Jesus' predictions of His death. For example, in John 14:2-3, Jesus says, "In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also." Here, Jesus clearly speaks of leaving and returning, yet the disciples don't protest.

This lack of objection suggests that the idea of the Messiah leaving and then returning was not outside of their expectations. This understanding may have been influenced by passages such as Psalm 110, which describes the Lord saying to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool." This verse could be interpreted as the Messiah being at the right hand of God before returning to vanquish His enemies.

These observations point to a two-phase ministry of the Messiah that aligns with first-century Jewish thought. The first phase, characterized by miracles and teachings, aligns with prophecies such as Isaiah 35:5-6 and Deuteronomy 18:15, 18. The second phase, characterized by a return in judgment and reign, aligns with prophecies such as Daniel 7:13-14.

Therefore, it can be inferred that the concepts of a first and second coming of the Messiah are consistent with the expectations of the disciples and first-century Jewish thought. This suggests that when the disciples inquired about the Lord's coming in Matthew 24:3, their questions were rooted in established messianic beliefs rather than being innovative or outside mainstream thought.

While the explicit idea of a Messiah who dies, is resurrected, and then ascends only to return later might not have been the predominant expectation, the components of this narrative—miraculous works, teaching, ascension, a time of absence, and eventual triumphant return—can be found scattered throughout Jewish scripture and messianic hopes.

“Which also said, Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven.” - Acts 1:11

Jesus had previously stated in Matthew 24:30-31 that the Son of Man would come in the clouds, echoing the words of Daniel 7:13-14. This pronouncement was made prior to His death and resurrection. However, even after these significant events, the disciples' expectation of the Messiah's return remained unchanged.

They continued to anticipate a glorious return, as foretold by Jesus Himself. This is evident in Acts 1:11, where the angels confirmed to the disciples that Jesus would return in the same manner as they had seen Him ascend into heaven. This ascension was a visible, physical event, implying that His return would be equally tangible and observable.

What had changed from Matthew 24:3 to Acts 1:11 was the disciples' understanding of the events of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. They now understood that the Messiah had to suffer and die before His glorious return. Yet, they still held onto the hope of His return, as taught by Jesus and confirmed by the angels. This demonstrates the consistency of the Messianic expectation, from the teachings of Jesus to the witness of the angels, even in the light of the new understanding of the death, burial, and resurrection of the Messiah.

Despite spending 40 days with the risen Lord, who used that time to discuss the kingdom (Acts 1:3), the disciples did not alter their understanding of either the return or the kingdom. They maintained a standard first-century Jewish interpretation, with the key difference being that they identified Jesus as the Messiah. The later concept of a "spiritual kingdom" or "kingdom in our hearts" is as much a fabrication by the later Christian community as the notion of Jesus Christ's spiritual return in 1914 is by Jehovah's Witnesses. The Kingdom of God is not present today, but will arrive during the second coming.

There are certain sects within the Chasidic Jewish community that hold an expectation of the return of a deceased Rabbi who they believe was, or could potentially be, the Messiah. This belief is particularly prominent among followers of the late Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, also known as the Lubavitcher Rebbe.

Rabbi Schneerson, who led the Chabad-Lubavitch movement until his death in 1994, was a significant figure in Orthodox Judaism and is widely respected for his teachings and contributions to Jewish thought. During his lifetime, some of his followers began to view him as the potential Messiah. This belief has persisted among a subset of Chabad-Lubavitch followers, despite Rabbi Schneerson's passing.

These followers assert that Rabbi Schneerson will return as the Messiah, pointing to various interpretations of Jewish law and mystical texts to support their claim. This belief mirrors the concept of the "second coming" found in Christian eschatology, although it should be noted that this is not a mainstream belief within Judaism and is specific to certain Chasidic groups.

However, the expectation of the return of a deceased rabbi is not without controversy. Within the wider Jewish community, this belief has been met with skepticism and in some cases, outright rejection. Critics argue that it contradicts traditional Jewish teachings about the Messiah. Nevertheless, the belief persists among certain Chasidic groups, underscoring the diversity of thought within Jewish eschatological expectations. However, the point remains that, in at least some modern Jewish thought, the death or absence of a potential Messiah does **NOT** invalidate that individual from Messianic potential.