

## THE SABBATH IN MATTHEW 24:20

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### *Introduction*

A cursory reading of Matt 24:20 indicates that Jesus counseled those of his believers who would be caught in the Roman war in Judea to flee at that time, but to pray that their flight did not have to occur in winter or on the Sabbath. Given the fulfillment of these circumstances during the Jewish war of A.D. 66-73, it appears that Jesus was giving his believers advice that they were to pray that they would still be able to keep the Sabbath even in those coming times of war. This in turn suggests that Jesus considered the Sabbath to be binding upon Christians of that future time. Does, then, a more detailed examination of the text and the historical circumstances support or run contrary to such a cursory reading? A number of explanations of this passage have been published in the literature.

### *Commentary Literature*

Y.-E. Yang

Y.-E. Yang, who has identified nine different approaches to the reference to the Sabbath in Matt 24:20,<sup>1</sup> provides a convenient starting point. In addition, these points may be subdivided according to their Jewish or Christian orientation.

### *Jewish Solutions*

- A. Christians would not travel on Sabbath in Judea for fear of persecution by the Jews. This view is held by A. Schlatter<sup>2</sup> and E. Hirsch.<sup>3</sup>
- B. Christians would not travel on Sabbath in a location outside of Judea for fear of persecution by the Jews. This is

<sup>1</sup>Yong-Eui Yang, *Jesus and the Sabbath in Matthew's Gospel*, *JSNT Sup* 139 (Sheffield, 1997), 230-241.

<sup>2</sup>A. Schlatter, *Der Evangelist Matthäus* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1959), 706.

<sup>3</sup>E. Hirsch, *Die Frühgeschichte des Evangeliums*, II (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1941), 313.

- held by G. N. Stanton,<sup>4</sup> criticized by Wong.<sup>5</sup>
- C. Not fleeing on the Sabbath would have been a conciliatory move by Christians toward Judaism. This view is held by G. Barth,<sup>6</sup> criticized by Stanton.<sup>7</sup>
- D. The passage is a fragment of apocalyptic taken over from a Jewish source but not necessarily endorsed by Matthew or his redactor. This view is held by G. Strecker<sup>8</sup> and W. Rordorf,<sup>9</sup> criticized by Yang.<sup>10</sup>

### *Christian Solutions*

- A. This passage is a reference to a Judaizing practice among Christians who kept the Sabbath strictly. This view is held by E. Klostermann,<sup>11</sup> criticized by Yang.<sup>12</sup>
- B. This reference has been connected eschatologically with the end time. This view is held by E. Lohse,<sup>13</sup> criticized by Stanton<sup>14</sup> and Yang.<sup>15</sup>
- C. This passage is an irrelevant anachronism for a practice no longer observed in Matthew's day. This view is held by R.

<sup>4</sup>G. N. Stanton, "Pray that Your Flight may not be in Winter or on a Sabbath': Matthew 24.20," in *A Gospel for a New People: Studies in Matthew*, ed. G. N. Stanton (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1992), 192-206. This study was previously published in *JSNT* 37 (1989):17-30. Yang's list of theories basically comes from Stanton.

<sup>5</sup>E. K. -C. Wong, "The Matthean Understanding of the Sabbath: A Response to G. N. Stanton," *JSNT* 44 (1991):3-18.

<sup>6</sup>G. Barth, "Matthew's Understanding of the Law," in *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew*, eds., G. Bornkamm, G. Barth, and H. J. Held, trans. P. Scott (London: SCM Press, 1963), 92.

<sup>7</sup>Stanton, 196.

<sup>8</sup>G. Strecker, *Der Weg der Gerechtigkeit*, *FRLANT* 82 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962), 18.

<sup>9</sup>W. Rordorf, *Sunday*, trans. A.A.K. Graham (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968), 68, 120.

<sup>10</sup>Yang, 231.

<sup>11</sup>E. von Klostermann, *Das Matthäusevangelium*, *HNT* 3 (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1927), 194.

<sup>12</sup>Yang, 239.

<sup>13</sup>E. Lohse, "Sabbaton," *TDNT*, VII, 29-30.

<sup>14</sup>Stanton, 196-197.

<sup>15</sup>Yang, 232.

Walker,<sup>16</sup> criticized by Stanton,<sup>17</sup> Yang,<sup>18</sup> and U. Luz.<sup>19</sup>

- D. This reference was a concession to weak members. This view is held by Wong,<sup>20</sup> criticized by Yang.<sup>21</sup>

### Physical Obstacles to Sabbath Flight

Physical obstacles to Sabbath flight included shutting the gates of the city, difficulty in obtaining provisions, and suspension of services to travelers. This view was proposed by R. Banks<sup>22</sup> and adopted by Yang after his review of the evidence.<sup>23</sup>

### The Continuing Sabbath Commandment Obligation

A number of commentators see the Matthew passage as a genuine reflection of Sabbathkeeping at the time of the Roman war. R.V.G. Tasker wrote: "Because wintry conditions and a strict observance of the law of sabbath-observance would greatly impede such a flight, the disciples were to pray that climatic conditions would be favourable and that it would not have to be made on a sabbath."<sup>24</sup> D. A. Hagner observes: "While the point of the reference to the sabbath is hardly clear, probably what is meant is that an urgent flight on the sabbath would make any sabbath observance impossible. . . . This apparently would still have been a serious matter for the Jewish-Christian membership of Matthew's church."<sup>25</sup> Floyd Filson noted that only Matthew "reflects Jewish-Christian faithfulness in keeping the Sabbath and dread at having to break it, but implies that even if the crisis comes on a

<sup>16</sup>R. Walker, *Die Heilsgeschichte im ersten Evangelium*, FRLANT 91 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967), 86.

<sup>17</sup>Stanton, 197.

<sup>18</sup>Yang, 233.

<sup>19</sup>U. Luz, "The Disciples in the Gospel according to Matthew," *Int* 46 (1992): 98-128.

<sup>20</sup>Wong, 3-18.

<sup>21</sup>Yang, 234, 239, including n. 54.

<sup>22</sup>R. Banks, *Jesus and the Law in the Synoptic Tradition*, SNTSMS 28 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 102.

<sup>23</sup>Yang, 238-241. Yang, 245, n. 28, also cites other scholars who have held this view; Meier (1980), Gundry (1982), and Blomberg (1992).

<sup>24</sup>R.V.G. Tasker, *The Gospel according to St. Matthew*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 224.

<sup>25</sup>D. A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, WBC, vol. 33B (Dallas: Word, 1995), 701-702.

Sabbath, instant flight is necessary."<sup>26</sup> In a similar vein, D. J. Harrington observed that "it indicates that for Matthew and his community Sabbath observance remained a live issue. In winter travel in Palestine was difficult because of the rain and its filling of the wadis. On the Sabbath a Jew was not allowed to take long journeys, and so would face a 'crisis of conscience' if this were to happen on the Sabbath."<sup>27</sup>

### *The Text of Matthew*

Yang summarizes:

First of all, the speaker obviously is Jesus himself, even though the source of the saying is not definitely identifiable. The audience are the disciples in front of Jesus who are in Judea (cf. vv. 1-4, 15, 20), though the readers of the Gospel may be the community either within or outside Judaea who had lived in either the pre- or post-70 period. Those who are exhorted to pray are once again the disciples; and the flight referred to in v. 20 is the prospective flight by the same disciples, which the readers may either anticipate that they will participate in like the disciples (if the Gospel was written before 70 C.E.), or simply look back on as past history (if written after 70 C.E.). . . . Those who bring the persecution seem to be Gentiles, since the (non-Christian) Jews as well as the disciples are expected to flee (vv. 16-19).<sup>28</sup>

On the matter of the date of Matthew's Gospel and the Sabbath passage in 24:20 Yang concludes: "Furthermore, I have shown that a pre-70 Palestine setting provides a best explanation for Matthew's inclusion of the additional phrase."<sup>29</sup> These conclusions provide a reasonable basis from which to pursue the reason for the inclusion of this phrase about the Sabbath.

### *Options*

Most of the reasons cited above for the inclusion of the Sabbath phrase have been aptly criticized in previous studies. Of the interpretations cited above only three remain as distinct possibilities: (1) that the disciples were not to flee on the Sabbath because of fear of the Jews (Schlatter and Hirsch), (2) that they were not to flee on the Sabbath because of physical difficulties that they would encounter (Banks and Yang), or (3) that they should pray that they would not have to flee on

<sup>26</sup>F. V. Filson, *The Gospel according to St Matthew*, Black's New Testament Commentary, 2d ed. (London: Black, 1971), 255.

<sup>27</sup>D. J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Sacra Pagina Series, vol. 1 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 337.

<sup>28</sup>Yang, 238.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 241.

the Sabbath in honor of the Sabbath commandment (Tasker, Hagner, Filson, and Harrington).

### Option I

Of these three remaining solutions, the first can be disposed of readily. There are two basic reasons why the Christians in Jerusalem and Judea would not have needed to be afraid of persecution by the Jews for fleeing on the Sabbath under a wartime threat. First, the rabbis taught that such flight was permissible and, second, available evidence of the way in which the Jews kept the Sabbath during the Roman war confirms this.

First, Yang has reviewed the evidence from Jewish sources of the intertestamental period that provides an understanding of Sabbath observance in the first century.<sup>30</sup> In this survey, he has canvassed the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha (*Jubilees*, I and II Maccabees and Aristobulus), the Dead Sea Scrolls, Josephus, Philo, Græco-Roman references to the Sabbath and rabbinic literature, the latter category being subdivided between earlier (pre-70) materials and later (70-100) materials. When Yang applied this information to the question of Sabbath flight for the purpose of preserving life, he concluded that "most rabbis . . . allowed someone to save his or her life on the sabbath from immediate life-threatening danger, and, therefore, would have been ready to allow one to flee even on the sabbath. . . . If, as I have suggested, the persecution (in Matt 24:15-20) came from Gentiles, most Jews as well as Christians would have fled even on the sabbath, and there is no possibility that the fleeing Christians could be 'as recognizable as a spotted dog.'"<sup>31</sup>

The second point to be made about fleeing on the Sabbath during the Roman war comes from Josephus, where he illustrates how the Jews used the Sabbath to their advantage in fighting the Romans.

*The Sabbath attack by the Jews during the first Roman assault upon Jerusalem.* In the early fall of A.D. 66, Cestius Gallus led his troops up into the central hill country of Judea by way of the Beth Horon pass. Arriving at Gibeon, he established his camp there, approximately five or six miles from Jerusalem.

The Roman troops arrived at Gibeon while the Jews were celebrating the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths (Heb. *sukkot*). Alarmed by the arrival

<sup>30</sup>Yang, 53-99.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 239. For illustrations of this principle, see Yang's summary on p. 98, esp. n. 178. The reference to "a spotted dog" comes from Hirsch's study, cited above in n. 3. For further discussion on permission to travel in view of a Sabbath threat, see E. Lohse's article *Sabbaton* in *TDNT*, VII, 14, where he cites the homilies of R. Tanchuma with attendant modern literature on this source and subject.

of Roman troops so close to Jerusalem, the celebrants broke off their services and attacked the Romans. Not only did they do so during the festival, but their attack came on the seventh-day Sabbath that fell in the middle of the festival. In order to attack the Romans, the Jews had to travel more than a Sabbath day's journey. Josephus writes of this attack upon the Romans:

The Jews, seeing the war now approaching the capital, abandoned the feast, and rushed to arms; and with great confidence in their numbers, sprang in disorder and with loud cries into the fray, with no thought for the seventh day of rest, for it was the very sabbath which they regarded with such special reverence. But the same passion which shook them out of their piety brought them victory in battle.<sup>32</sup>

The only thing that saved the day for the Romans was the counterattack of their cavalry.

There is a long history about the problem of military activity by and against the Jews on Sabbath. For instance, using the Julian day-number tables, A. H. Johns calculated that 2 Adar, the day Nebuchadnezzar's Chronicle records that Jerusalem fell to Nebuchadnezzar, was a Sabbath.<sup>33</sup> A new development, however, took place in this matter during Maccabean times. E. Lohse states that

in the older Halachah fighting was brought under the prohibition of work, *Jub* 50:12. In obedience to this, some pious Jews at the beginning of the Maccabean revolt were killed without offering any resistance on the Sabbath, 1 Macc. 2:32-38. Due to this terrible event, however, it was decided that in the future weapons might be lifted in self-defense even on the Sabbath, 1 Macc 2:39-41. Attack, however, was still forbidden.<sup>34</sup>

Using the Sabbath for offensive military attack was a new stratagem for the Jews. The Romans would not have expected this attack for two reasons: the Jews were celebrating their Feast of Booths, and it was a Sabbath on which they were not supposed to do any work, certainly not offensive military activity. Apparently expecting that the Jews were keeping their Sabbath, the Romans were thrown off-guard. The Jews' decision to use the Sabbath for an offensive attack was largely successful. They won a major, but not quite complete, victory.

*Sabbath flight by the Jews during the Galilee campaign.* Once again the Sabbath played a part in the second Roman assault upon Judea that began in A.D. 67. As the campaign in Galilee was drawing to a close, word came

<sup>32</sup>Josephus, *Jewish War*, Bk. II, par. 517.

<sup>33</sup>A. H. Johns, "The Military Strategy of Sabbath Attacks on the Jews," *VT* 13 (1963): 482-486.

<sup>34</sup>E. Lohse, 8; cf. Yang, 57-59.

to Vespasian that the Jewish town of Gischala was still holding out. Vespasian dispatched Titus to Gischala with a thousand cavalry. The leader of the rebels there was a man named John. After his escape, he became one of the leaders of the rebellion in Jerusalem. When Titus arrived at Gischala, John negotiated with him. Titus appealed to the garrison of Gischala to surrender in order to avoid a massacre. John agreed, but proposed that the surrender be delayed until after the Sabbath that was drawing on. Josephus reported John's appeal to Titus:

It was John who replied, saying that for his part he acquiesced in the proposals and would either persuade or coerce refractory opponents. Titus must, however, (he said) in deference to Jewish law, allow them that day, being the seventh, one which they were forbidden alike to have resort to arms and to conclude a treaty of peace. Even the Romans must be aware that the recurrence of the seventh day brought them repose from all labour; and the one who compelled them to transgress that law was no less impious than those who so acted under compulsion.<sup>35</sup>

Titus agreed to John's proposal and actually withdrew his camp some distance away, leaving the city unguarded. The whole purpose of what John proposed, however, had nothing to do with observing the Sabbath; it was a ruse which he used to escape: "At nightfall John, seeing no Roman guard about the town, seized his opportunity and, accompanied not only by his armed followers but by a multitude of non-combatants with their families fled for Jerusalem."<sup>36</sup>

Josephus then describes how, during the flight of the Jews, the women and children fell farther and farther behind. They shouted and screamed for help. However, John refused to accommodate them and marched on ahead: "Save yourselves," he cried, "and flee where you can have your revenge on the Romans for any left behind, if they are caught."<sup>37</sup> Indeed they were caught. When Titus realized that he had been tricked, he set out in hot pursuit. He was unable to overtake John and his soldier group, but he caught most of the rest. According to Josephus, Titus's troops killed 6,000 on the road and captured another 3,000 women and children and sent them back as prisoners.<sup>38</sup>

John and his followers had no qualms about traveling on the Sabbath during wartime. No Jews came out to remonstrate with them for breaking the Sabbath. Their appeal to Sabbath-keeping served as a subterfuge by which to escape imprisonment. The group had no trouble

<sup>35</sup>Josephus, *The Jewish War*, Bk. IV, pars. 99-100.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., par. 106.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., par. 111.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., par. 115.

traveling through Jewish territory on the Sabbath; their only threat came from the pursuing Romans.

### *Summary on Option I*

It does not seem likely that Jesus instructed his disciples to pray that their flight (during the future Roman war) should not take place on the Sabbath because of fear of the Jews. The religious leaders of the Jews permitted that kind of flight on the Sabbath and this was demonstrated historically at least twice during the Roman war, once at the beginning of the war when the Jews attacked the Romans on the Sabbath and had to travel more than a Sabbath day's journey to do so. Later during that war the forces of John of Gischala made a forced march to Jerusalem to escape from the Roman besiegers of their town. The whole Sabbath, night and day, must have been given over to that flight, along with a considerable amount of time beyond it to reach Jerusalem.

In view of these instructions and historical examples, a Christian flight on the Sabbath, if necessary in view of a military invasion, should not have been threatening to the Jews. Probably they would have joined in that flight had they seen the threat in the same way.

## Option II

### *Geographical Considerations*

A Sabbath day's journey was considered to be 2,000 cubits.<sup>39</sup> This would be approximately three-fifths of a mile. Starting from the eastern gate of the temple mount on Sabbath, one could easily reach Bethany, located on the backside of the Mount of Olives, within a journey of that length. The modern road from the Kidron Valley angles up to the southeast from the northwest, but in biblical times the track was much more direct, following the direction of the path that runs up behind the Church of All Nations. Having reached Bethany, there would not have been any obstructions in the way of individuals as they traveled down the old Roman road toward Jericho. This would have taken them through the largely uninhabited wilderness of Judea. Traffic on the Jericho road would have been minimal on Sabbath.

An extra 2,000 cubits could have been added to a normal Sabbath day's journey by placing, on the preparation day, a deposit of food sufficient for two meals at a location at the end of the first Sabbath day's journey.<sup>40</sup> This would have taken a traveler to the eastern edge of Bethany with only the wilderness of Judea lying farther to the east, thus taking a traveler out of the range of any possible Sabbath harassment.

<sup>39</sup>Josephus, *Antiquities*, Bk. XIII, Sota 5, 3; Erubin 4,3.

<sup>40</sup>Erubin 4, 7-9, 8, 2.



Jesus' instructions in Matt 24:20 were not just for those in Jerusalem, but also for those living elsewhere in Judea. Sabbath travel for those living outside of Jerusalem would probably have been easier than for those living in Jerusalem, since the towns and villages they might have bypassed would have been smaller and less obtrusive.

In terms of forced travel on the Sabbath, Christians of the time who were in fairly good physical condition or had donkeys to ride could have made it to Jericho by sundown by leaving Jerusalem early in the morning. The normal route of travel would have been down the old Roman road through the Wadi Qelt. The downward pitch of the road, which declined approximately 4,000 feet in twenty miles, would have aided the travelers.

Since this route passed through the wilderness of Judea, it was a sparsely inhabited area and one would not have expected to obtain provisions along the way. Provisions would have been prepared on the preparation day if travel had to begin early Sabbath morning. These preparations would have been normal for anyone traveling that route at any time in the week because of the general unavailability of supplies to be had along that route. The "Good Samaritan Inn" on the south side of the modern road to Jericho is, of course, a modern construction. The monastery in the Wadi Qelt also comes from post-first-century times. The "Good Samaritan Inn" of Luke 10:30-37 was the exception rather than the rule in this barren region, and one would not have depended upon it except in cases of special necessity, as in the case of the man who was wounded by thieves while traveling through that region.

### *Religio-Political Considerations*

The problem here has to do with the question of whether the gates of Jerusalem were open on Sabbath or not. In peacetime they had to be open on Sabbath to enable worshipers to enter the temple precincts. In at least two instances the eastern gates of the temple also served as the eastern gates to the city. This was the case for the Golden Gate, blocked up from the time of Suleiman the Magnificent in the sixteenth century, and for the Sheep Gate through which the sacrifices for the temple were brought. Those coming from the eastern side of the city to worship in the temple precincts on Sabbath would have entered the city through these gates that were kept open in peacetime. Probably people coming from outside of the city from the north, west, and south would have entered the city first in order to go most directly to the temple area. In times of war, all of the gates were closed all of the time, including the Sabbath.

### *Summary on Option II*

The physical obstacles to a mandatory flight on the Sabbath day would have been minimal. People from inside of Jerusalem could have exited through the eastern gates of the temple, which also served as gates of the city. Other gates probably were open in peace time to permit worshipers to take the most direct route to the temple area. Having cleared the Mount of Olives, travelers would have encountered no obstructions in their path down to Jericho other than the problem of having to traverse a barren area. Preparations for travel through this barren terrain would naturally have been made previously and provisions taken along on the journey, since the people knew that supplies were not readily available along that route. When the actual "physical obstacles" are studied in detail and not left in generalities, it can be seen that these were not major considerations in determining whether to flee on Sabbath or not.

### *Fulfillment of Jesus' Prophecy*

#### Interpretations

In spite of his excellent review of the literature on this subject and his useful review of rabbinic teaching about acceptable Sabbath activities, Yang falls short on his application of the prophecy. He does not believe that Eusebius's statement about the escape of Christians to Pella before the war in response to a "divine oracle" fits the fulfillment of this prophecy because Pella was not in the mountains to which Jesus urged his followers to flee.<sup>41</sup> This is a very literalistic reading of the text. Jerusalem lies at an elevation of 2,900 feet. Significantly higher mountains than this are encountered only when one reaches Upper Galilee. As a geographical point, one flees through the mountains of the wilderness of Judea to get down to Jericho.

Yang then considers the suggestion of B. Reicke and others that there was not a single emigration, but a rather spontaneous, gradual flight in the years 64-66 that occurred just before the war broke out.<sup>42</sup> Yang rightly rejects this proposal because it had nothing to do with the Abomination of Desolation that is mentioned immediately preceding the instruction about praying not to flee on the Sabbath (Matt 24:15). Others, Yang notes, applied the Abomination of Desolation to the desecrations carried out in the temple by the Zealots in the winter of 67/68.<sup>43</sup> Since this did not involve any strictly idolatrous symbol, Yang moves on to the Roman standard brought into the

<sup>41</sup>Yang, 236, with the sources mentioned in n. 39.

<sup>42</sup>B. Reicke, *New Testament Era: The World of the Bible from 500 B.C. to A.D. 100*, trans. D. E. Green (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968), 216.

<sup>43</sup>Yang, 236.

temple area at the time the temple was destroyed in 70. This does not fit either because that would have been too late for Christians to flee.<sup>44</sup> Thus in spite of having worked upon this text in so much detail, Yang is unable to apply it to any historical circumstance.

### Application

Closer attention to the course of the Roman war would have provided a better locus for the application of this exhortation. What Yang did not take into account was that the first phase of this war ended with a Jewish victory, which occurred in the fall of 66. The Romans, however, came back with a vengeance in 67. This interlude provided Christians (and Jews) time to flee as Jesus had instructed them. Moreover, the Roman legions and banners were brought up to the wall of the temple enclosure in this initial phase of the war. The signal was given that it was time to flee, and the Roman retreat provided the opportunity to do so. The historical situation can be described in the following terms.

#### *Abomination of Desolation*

After finally turning back the attack of the Jews upon his troops at Gibeon at the beginning of the Festival of Tabernacles, Cestius Gallus moved his troops on to attack the city of Jerusalem at its northeastern corner. He broke through the outer wall at that point and fought all the way up to the retaining wall of the temple area. His troops were making efforts to break through that wall, and they prepared to burn the gate on that side of the temple area. The defenders of the city were very discouraged as they retreated into the temple and palace area, thinking that this would be the site of their last stand. Then with victory in his grasp, Cestius suddenly decided to call off the attack, much to the surprise of the defenders. Of this moment Josephus observed that "had he, at that particular moment, decided to force his way through the walls he would have captured the city forthwith, and the war would have been over."<sup>45</sup> By turning back, the opportunity for victory passed from the Romans. They had to fight their way in retreat down to Caesarea at the coast, with the final defeat of the rearguard force occurring in the Beth Horon pass.

#### *Christians Pray for Their Safe Flight*

Picture the situation of Christians inside the city while it was under siege for slightly less than a month. What would they have been doing?

<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

<sup>45</sup>Josephus, *The Jewish War*, Bk. II, par. 531.

According to Jesus' instructions, this was the special time that they were to pray. The Roman army came right up to the retaining wall of the temple area: the Abomination of Desolation had come to stand in the holy place. When the siege was suddenly and inexplicably lifted, the Christians undoubtedly saw this as an answer to their prayers. While their time to flee had come, they did not have to depart in winter, for it had not yet come. They did not have to leave on the Sabbath, because the army of Vespasian did not attack until the next year, A.D. 67. Their prayers were answered.

### *Not in Winter*

The word used for winter in Matt 24:20 is *cheimnos*, which can mean full winter or simply bad weather or heavy rainstorms. In modern Israel, these winter rains begin in late November or early December. Josephus dates the final battle at the Beth Horon pass during the initial Roman retreat on the eighth day of the Macedonian month of Dios.<sup>46</sup> According to tables available for the Macedonian calendar, the first day of Dios in A.D. 66 fell on October 9.<sup>47</sup> Adding seven days to Josephus's date yields October 16 as the date of the final battle at the Beth Horon pass. This means that the residents of Judea and Jerusalem had a month or six weeks before the winter rains began, ample time for them to leave the city and country.

### *Evidence for the Flight*

Yang holds that there is no evidence for a flight of either Christians or Jews from Jerusalem or Judea before, during, or after the Roman war.<sup>48</sup> Josephus, on the other hand, notes that there was a major flight from Jerusalem right after the defeat of Cestius's troops: "After the catastrophe of Cestius many distinguished Jews abandoned the city as swimmers desert a sinking ship."<sup>49</sup> Josephus named a number of those who fled at this time. It appears that most of them were Roman sympathizers, for they went over to Cestius. He, in turn, sent some of them on to Rome to report to Nero what had happened. Josephus names one pro-Roman elder who did not desert and was killed by the rebels. Thus, the danger was not that of fleeing the city, but of staying in it. While Josephus does not specifically mention them, Christians were undoubtedly among those who fled the city at this time. They, however, fled

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., par. 555.

<sup>47</sup>F. Parise, *The Book of Calendars* (New York: Facts on File, 1982), 12.

<sup>48</sup>Yang, 236-237.

<sup>49</sup>Josephus, *The Jewish War*, Bk. II, pars. 556-558.

in the opposite direction, down to and across the Jordan River and up the Jordan Valley to Pella, according to Eusebius.

### *Summary*

A number of scholarly theories have been advanced to explain why Matthew included the Sabbath as a part of Jesus' exhortation to pray for deliverance at the time of the coming war. Most of these theories can be discarded reasonably, leaving only three main interpretations to deal with. The first of these is that Christians would not want to flee for fear of the Jews. Jewish theory and practice at the time, however, indicate that the Jews could have fled alongside of the Christians. A second theory, probably currently the most popular among commentators, is that Christians would not have wanted to flee on the Sabbath because of physical obstacles in their way at that time. A close examination of the obstacles proposed indicates that they would not have presented any major problems on the Sabbath more than any other day.

The final option is that Christians were exhorted to pray that their flight, at the beginning of the Roman war, would not have to occur on the Sabbath out of respect for their observance of that day. They could flee on that day if they had to, but they were to pray that they would not in order to keep that day as one of rest and worship, rather than a day of travel. This opportunity came immediately after the initial attack upon the city by Cestius's troops in the fall of A.D. 66. When the Romans retreated, the prayers of the Christians were answered. They did not have to flee upon the Sabbath or in winter, but were able to keep it even under those wartime conditions, due to the hiatus in the Roman attack upon Judea and Jerusalem.