**Did the Twelve Fail in “the Great Commission”?**

By “the great commission” I mean the command given the Twelve at the end of Matthew’s Gospel –

“And having approached, Jesus spoke to them, saying, ‘Every authority in heaven and upon the earth was given to Me. Therefore, having gone, **disciple all the nations**, baptizing them to the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to keep all whatsoever I commanded you. And, **behold**, I am with you all the days until the end-time of the age.’” Mat.28:18-20

This is, in fact, the very end of Matthew’s account of the life of Jesus. Let us analyze this in some detail. Because “every authority” (heavenly and earthly) was given to Jesus, *therefore* He was giving them this new commission. If we allow that His pre-glorification authority was more limited, then we must also allow that Jesus’ commissions to His disciples were more limited before this. In other words, this final word from the Master was a change from what went before.

He had previously commanded them –

“These twelve Jesus sent out, having commanded them, saying, ‘**You may not go away into the way of nations**, nor enter into a city of Samaritans, but go rather to the Lost Sheep of *the* house of Israel. And going, proclaim, saying, “The kingdom of the heavens has come near.”’’” Mat.10:5-7

There was nothing in the final commandment of Matthew 28 about “the Lost Sheep of the house of Israel”. This was strictly an evangelizing campaign for the nations. And note that the Lord’s presence would enable them right up to the end-times (*sunteleia*) of the age. Presumably this commandment would be exercised at some time during the very end – either during Daniel’s last “seven” or the last half-seven. In one sense, the Twelve did fail in this commission, because the Acts-period did not advance as far as Daniel’s final “seven”.

There are some who try to explain that this command was fulfilled by the Twelve ministering to Jews “out of all nations” (a similar expression is used of Jews in Rev.5:9; 7:9; 11:9). These would include such diaspora Jews as those listed at Acts 2:9-11. But this argument is special pleading, because the Twelve did not “go” to them, but they went to the Twelve. Further, the command is very specific as to “the Name” (note, singular) to which they were to baptize – one name in three parts, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. There is no record of such a baptism being done by anyone at any time during Acts.

Seeing that the Lord would be with them “until the end-time of the age”, what else had He spoken about this *Sunteleia*? Well the extensive prophecy of Matthew 24 was in answer to their question about the timing His *Parousia* and the *Sunteleia* of the age (v.3). Here is part of what He said about it –

“And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed in the whole habitable world (in that day understood as the Roman Empire) as a witness to **all the nations**, and then will come the end.” Mat.24:14

This appears to be the same ministry as the discipling command of Matthew 28. Although Peter did write from Babylon (1 Pet.5:13), there was still a sizable Jewish diaspora there in his day, and diaspora Jews are the ones to whom he addressed his letter (1 Pet.1:1). The Twelve seemed very comfortable ministering to Jews from Jerusalem throughout much of Acts (see Acts 15:6-7).

Elsewhere, the Matthew 24 *Sunteleia* prophecy details “wars and news of wars”, and “famines and earthquakes in various places” (Mat.24:6-7), but no Acts-period Scripture says anything about them having coming to pass. So apparently the Twelve and the Acts-period did not advance that far into the prophetic future.

Matthew 24 continues –

“But all these *are* a beginning of birth-pains.” Mat.24:8

So, if the beginning of the *Sunteleia* did not arrive by Acts 28, we can hardly expect the following aftermath to have been fulfilled –

“Then they will deliver you to affliction and they will kill you, and you will be hated by **all the nations** on account of My name. And then many will be made to stumble, and they will deliver up one another, and they will hate one another.” Mat.24:9-10

Yes, there were Acts-period persecutions against the Twelve by Herod, but he hardly represented “all the nations”. This was only a preview of a much greater tribulation to come.

We also have –

“And many false-prophets will arise, and they will deceive many. … Then, if any should say to you, ‘Behold, here is the Christ’, or ‘there.’ you should not believe *it*. For false-christs and false-prophets will be arisen, and they will provide great signs and wonders, so as to deceive, if possible, even the chosen ones. **Behold**, I have foretold *it* to you.” Mat.24:11, 23-25

John warned about “many antichrists” having come (1 Joh.2:18), but there is no account in Scripture of anyone claiming to be *the* Christ. Paul mentioned “the apostasy” and “the Man of Lawlessness”, “proclaiming himself that he is God” (2 Thes.2:3-4), but Scripture does not confirm these as having come to pass.

There is also this benchmark prophecy –

“Therefore, whenever you may see **the Abomination of Desolation**, which, having been spoken by Daniel the prophet, having stood in *the* holy place (let the one reading understand), then let those in Judea flee into the mountains. Let the one on the roof not descend to take away the things from his house. And the one in the field let not turn back to take his clothes.” Mat.24:15-18

Not one of the Acts-period writers gave witness that Daniel’s Abomination of Desolation was seen during their lifetimes.

Although Jesus was discoursing privately to “His disciples” in Matthew 24, and He constantly referred to them as witnesses of these things, it was a potential only. Another set of “you” “disciples” will be the first-hand witnesses of these things at some future date.

I have seen Matthew’s Gospel described by some as the most Jewish of the Four. If so, then note this paradox – Matthew has more to say about blessings for the nations than Mark, Luke and John combined. The “great commission” text (Mat.28:18-20) and its affiliated commission (Mat.24:14) are among these. But we also have –

“But when the Son of Man should come in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit upon the throne of His glory. And will be gathered together before Him **all the nations**, and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.” Mat.25:31-32

This special tribunal will lead to the right-hand nations inheriting the kingdom alongside faithful Israel (v.34). These will be the many coming from east and west to share the kingdom of the heavens with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Mat.8:11).

I have had difficulty finding parallels to this *Sunteleia* mission toward the nations. But what of “the kingdom of priests”, as first promised in Exodus?

“’And now, if you will surely listen to My voice and keep My covenant, then you will become to Me **a possession** from **all the peoples**, for the whole earth *is* Mine. And you will become to Me **a kingdom of priests and a holy nation**.’ These are the words which you will speak to the sons of Israel.” Exo.19:5-6

We might have wished for more specificity here. There is an implied relation to “all the peoples”, but what is the exact nature of the priesthood? As the priests were mediators between Israel and Yahweh, then might all Israel become the mediators between “the nations” and Yahweh?

Although “kingdom of priests” and “holy nation” appear only in the Heb. of Exodus 19, they do appear via the *LXX* in the NT –

“But you are a chosen generation, **a royal priesthood, a holy nation**, a people for **a possession**, so that you might declare the excellence of the One having called us from darkness into His wonderful light.”

1 Pet.2:9

The context also speaks of “a spiritual house for holy priesthood offering up spiritual sacrifices” (1 Pet.2:5), so this was not an extension of the Levitical priesthood. The context also mentions the stumbling of the disbelieving and disobedient, who were also “appointed” for the word. I conclude that during Acts the priestly kingdom ministered to unbelieving Israel. But Peter’s teaching continued –

“Keeping your conduct upright **among the nations**, so that in what they speak against you as evildoers, observing from the good works, **they may glorify God in a day of oversight** (*KJV*, ‘visitation’).”

1 Pet.2:12

So here was an ultimate ministry to the nations, its fruit for a future day of oversight (‘visitation’ or ‘punishment’). Isaiah 10:3 asks the oppressors in Israel, “What will you do **in the Day of Oversight**?” (emphatic, both definite articles). Great calamity will be visited upon rebellious Israel and the nations, but some among the nations will respond to the witness of believing Israel as a royal priesthood.

It is interesting that the fulfillment of Israel’s royal priesthood is mentioned only in 1 Peter and indirectly in Revelation. This message belonged to the Twelve. Paul had an apostleship mostly devoted to the nations, but it is nowhere called a priesthood. If we allow that Paul had a hand in authoring Hebrews, even there the royal priesthood is lacking. Hebrews deals with the priesthoods of Levi and Melchisedek, and the high priesthood of Christ, but not the fulfillment of Exo.19:6.

In the larger scheme of things, the command of Matthew 28 was less a failure of the Twelve than a failure of end-time prophecy to ripen, as it were, within the lifetimes of “that generation”. It was not a failure of prophecy in any absolute sense – just a failure to meet all the conditions required for its fulfillment. That means a future fulfillment will find all conditions met.