

Matthew 24 and the Great Tribulation

Chapter 4: Are the Jews a Distinct Race?

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There is another serious problem with the idea that *genea* (“generation”) means “race” in Matthew 24:34 which needs to be examined. If one defines “race” as a people that belong to a certain ethnic stock, or descendants of a common ancestry, can one make the claim that modern Jews *as a class of people* are truly ethnic Jews in the strict sense of the term? In our discussion above we used the term race in a rather loose sense acknowledging the obvious fact that there are descendants of ancient Jews alive today. However when dispensationalists and others discuss Matthew 24:34, they speak as though the Jewish people are a distinct racial grouping. The fact of the matter is that most people who are referred to as modern Jews today are not ethnically Jewish (i.e. descended from Abraham) at all. Scientists and anthropologists have known this fact for years. Note the following quotes:

The *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1937) says, “The Jews as a Race: The findings of physical anthropology show that, contrary to the popular view, there is no Jewish race. Anthropometric measurements of Jewish groups in many parts of the world indicate that they differ greatly from one another with respect to all the important physical characteristics.”¹

The *Encyclopedia American* says, “Racial and Ethnic Considerations. Some theorists have considered the Jews a distinct race, although this has no factual basis. In every country in which the Jews lived for a considerable time, their physical traits came to approximate those of the indigenous people. Hence the Jews belong to several distinct racial types, ranging, for example, from fair to dark. Among the reasons of this phenomenon are voluntary or involuntary miscegenation and the conversion of Gentiles to Judaism.”²

Collier's Encyclopedia says, “A common error and persistent modern myth is the designation of the Jews as a ‘race.’ This is scientifically fallacious, from the standpoint of both physical and historical tradition. Investigations by anthropologists have shown that Jews are by no means uniform in physical character and that they nearly always reflect the physical and mental characteristics of the people among whom they live.”³

Even the *Encyclopedia Judaica Jerusalem* acknowledges that today the Jewish people do not constitute a distinct race. It reads, “It is a common assumption, and one that sometimes seems ineradicable even in the face of evidence to the contrary, that the Jews of today constitute a race, homogeneous entity easily recognizable. From the preceding discussion of the origin and early history of the Jews, it should be clear that in the course of their formation as a people and a nation they had already assimilated a variety of racial strains from people moving into the

¹ *The Encyclopedia Britannica* (New York, 1973), 12:1-54; as quoted in John L. Bray, 206.

² *The Encyclopedia Americana* (New York, 1986), 16:71; as quoted in John L. Bray, 207.

³ *Collier's Encyclopedia* (1977), 13:573; as quoted in John L. Bray, 207.

general area they occupied. This had taken place by interbreeding and then by conversion to Judaism of a considerable number of communities....Thus, the diversity of the racial and genetic attributes of various Jewish colonies of today renders any unified racial classification of them a contradiction in terms. Despite this, many people readily accept the notion that they are a distinct race. This is probably reinforced by the fact that some Jews are recognizably different in appearance from the surrounding population. That many cannot be easily identified is overlooked and the stereotype for some is extended to all—a not uncommon phenomenon.”⁴

In modern times the designation Jew is in reality more a religious designation rather than an ethnic or racial identification. This point is evident not only from the fact that many Jews are either Gentile converts or descendants of Gentile converts (e.g., there are black Jews in Ethiopia and South Africa, Japanese Jews, British Jews, etc.), but also from the history of the Ashkenazim Jews of and from Europe. Historically there have been two main classifications of Jewish people in the world. There are the Ashkenazim Jews who in the twentieth century were found mainly in Germany, Eastern Europe (e.g., Poland) and the former Soviet Union (Russia, Ukraine, Belarus). Ashkenazim Jews usually look very European. Their communities in Europe often spoke Yiddish. Yiddish “is a dialect of High German written in characters of the Hebrew alphabet and containing elements of Hebrew, Russian, Polish, etc.”⁵ The other main grouping is the Sephardim that make up the Jews from Spain and the Middle East, who look very Semitic and often speak Hebrew. In the modern state of Israel the Ashkenazim make up the great majority of the population and (with the exception of the recent Russian immigrants who are lower class) are dominant politically, culturally, intellectually and economically over the Sephardim.

What is particularly interesting regarding the Ashkenazim Jews, who make up the vast majority of Jews in the world and Palestine today, is that virtually all of the Ashkenazim have absolutely no ethnic lineage to Abraham or Jacob. They are descendants of an ancient nation called Khazaria, which was a very large kingdom that dwelt between the Black and Caspian Seas (the southern most part of modern Russian and the southeast section of modern Ukraine). “The origin of the Khazars has been much disputed and they have been variously regarded as akin to Georgians, Finno-Ugrians and Turks.”⁶ Others note connections to the Bulgarians and Huns. During the early Middle Ages a number of Jews moved to Khazaria from Persian and the Byzantine Empire because of their tolerant attitude Jews, Christians and Moslems.⁷ Evangelist John L. Bray who has done an extensive study of Israel in Bible prophecy writes,

In A.D. 740 king Bulan of Khazaria decided to adopt the Judaistic religion for his country. A number of Jews were already living there. So he converted to Judaism, along with all his officials, and his whole nation ended up being known as a nation of Jews. In 970 Russia came in and dominated the situation, and the Khazars were scattered, many of them going down into Poland and Lithuania, where at the dawn of our modern civilization the largest concentration of Jews were found....Naturally, these people are not a “race” of Jews, and yet it is thought by some that they constitute the major portion of the 14,000,000 so-called Jews in the world today. Their features are different than the Sephardim Jews; their language backgrounds are different

⁴ *Encyclopedia Judaica Jerusalem* (1971), 3:50; as quoted in John L. Bray, 206.

⁵ *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary*, Unabridged (Collins World, 1978), 2120.

⁶ *The Encyclopedia Britannica: A Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, Literature & General Information* (New York: The Encyclopedia Britannica, 1926 [1911]), 15:774.

⁷ See *The Encyclopedia Americana* (New York: Americana Corporation, 1953 [1829]), 16:390. The *Encyclopedia Americana* says, “It is not improbable that the modern Jews of Russian have at least an admixture of Khazars blood” (*Ibid.*). This assertion is a cautious understatement.

(the Ashkenazim speaking Yiddish, and the Sephardim with their Hebrew and many of them who speak Spanish on account of their own mixed-up background in Spain). In Israel they have their separate organizations, and the nation there is divided between these two mixed-up bloodlines of people. In the 12th century the Ashkenazim Jews made up only 6.7% of the Jews, but around 1965 they numbered 11,000,000 or about 86% of all the Jews in the world. Think about the implication of this!⁸

Thus, the reason that most Jews in the world today do not look Semitic is simple. They are not Semitic. They are the descendants of the Khazars who have been interbreeding with Europeans and Russians for more than a millennium.

The vast majority of Jews in the world today are not ethnically Jewish (i.e. descended directly from Abraham) but adhere (in some manner) to a religion called Judaism. They (for the most part) insist that they are the true sons of Abraham, and that the promised land belongs to them. Most evangelical Christians today believe that the Jews are descendants of Abraham and are still in some sense a special people of God. They are big supporters of the state of Israel and believe that modern Israel has a crucial role to play in biblical prophecy. The truth of the matter is that most Jews are not ethnically Jewish; the modern Jewish religion (even by Old Testament standards) is a damnable heresy,⁹ and, the modern state of Israel holds no special prophetic significance whatsoever. Modern Judaism is not a religion of the Old Testament but is a religion of the Talmud, which is a collection of the speculations and heresies of the Pharisees. “Modern Jews do not worship the God of the Old Testament. They are either secular humanists, or else Talmudists, and the Talmud has no more relation to the Old Testament than does the Quran or the Book of Mormon. Like the Quran and the Book of Mormon, the Talmud and Mishnah are designed to add and reinterpret the Old Testament in such a way as to obliterate completely the revelation of God through Jesus Christ (compare Luke 24:27). The ‘God’ of Judaism is as much a fiction as the ‘God’ of Islam and the ‘God’ of Mormonism.”¹⁰

It is important for Christians to understand that race or ethnicity is not the important issue but rather faith in Jehovah and His word. This was true even of the Old Testament people of God. While it is certainly true that the Messiah had to be a direct descendent of Abraham (Abraham’s seed) and the priests and Levite’s descendants of Aaron and Levi, many of the Jews even in Jesus’ day were not directly related to Abraham. Jordan writes,

⁸ John L. Bray, *Matthew 24 Fulfilled*, 209.

⁹ Even if one ignores the New Testament teaching that only those who believe in Jesus Christ are really Jews, the Old Testament excommunicates (i.e. cuts off) the whole multitude of what are called Jews today from the covenant people. According to the Old Testament Scriptures anyone who violates the following laws are to be cut off from “the congregation of Israel.” (1) Anyone who does not properly observe the Passover (e.g., “for seven days no leaven shall be found in your houses”) is to be “cut off from the congregation of Israel” (Ex. 12:15, 19). (2) Anyone who eats meat with its blood is to be cut off (Lev. 17:10, 14). (3) Anyone who commits adultery is to be cut off (Lev. 20:3). (4) Anyone who lies with a woman during her menstrual flow is to be cut off (Lev. 20:18). (5) Anyone who is not afflicted in soul on the day of atonement is to be cut off (Lev. 23:29). This passage pre-supposes a faith in Jehovah and a sorrow for sin that leads to repentance. The fact that the Old Testament required the obedience of faith and sincere repentance alone removes modern Israel as a special nation. God says they are to be cut off (i.e. excommunicated from the household of God). (6) Anyone who ceases to keep the Passover and bring an offering is to be cut off from God's people (Nu. 9:13). (7) Whoever presumptuously breaks God's law is to be cut off from God's people (Nu. 15:30-31). Modern Jews who are not agnostics or atheists follow the Talmud not the Old Testament Scriptures. God's law says they are to be cut off because they are not living in obedience to God's word. They have cast off God's word for their human traditions (cf. Mt. 15:1-9).

¹⁰ James Jordan, *The Future of Israel Reexamined (Part I)* (Niceville, FL: Biblical Horizons, 1991), Internet Article.

When God called Abraham and made him a priest to the gentile nations, He commanded him to use the sign of circumcision to mark out the Hebrews from the other nations. Abraham's household at this time included at least 318 fighting men (Gen. 14:4), as well as their wives and children, and possibly many more servants. All of these men were circumcised. We see these servants mentioned in the book of Genesis several times (Gen. 26:19ff.; 32:16), and when Jacob went down to sojourn in Egypt, so many people went with him that he had to be given the whole land of Goshen to dwell in. Genesis 46 provides a list of only about 70 actual blood descendants of Abraham who went into Egypt. *Thus, from the very beginning, the Israelites were defined by covenant, not by blood and race.*

These several thousand people became over two million by the time of the Exodus 215 years later. Only a small percentage of the people who came out of Egypt had any racial connection with Abraham. Moreover, added to the company of Israel at this time was a vast mixed multitude, many of whom became circumcised members of the nation and therefore members of individual tribes as well.

There was another admixture of converts in the time of David and Solomon. Think of Uriah the Hittite, for example. Then again, the book of Esther tells us that during and after the Exile many more gentiles became Jews (Esth. 8:17). What this means is that very few of the Jews at the time of Christ had any of Abraham's blood in them. They were a nation formed by covenant, not a race formed by blood. True, Jesus Himself was a true blood descendant of Abraham, and His genealogy is important for theological reasons, but few other Jews could trace their genealogy to Abraham.

What I seek to establish by this survey is this: With the passing away of the Old Covenant, there is no longer any such thing as a Jew in the Biblical sense, unless by "True Jews" we mean Christians. There is no covenant, and therefore there is no nation, no "race."¹¹

While this statement may seem radical to modern evangelicals who have been saturated with the false teaching of dispensationalism, it is supported throughout the New Testament. John the Baptist explicitly told the Pharisees and Sadducees that descent from Abraham was worthless if it is not accompanied by obedience to the covenant law that flows from genuine conversion (i.e. regeneration and saving faith). "Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our Father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children of Abraham from these stones" (Mt. 3:8-9). John (the last Old Testament prophet) tells the Jewish leaders that descent from Abraham does not make a person a true son of Abraham. When the Baptist says that God can make stones (Aramaic, *abanim*) into Abraham's children (Ar. *banim*) he is asserting the fundamental truth that everyone who trusts in Christ and repents is a child of Abraham. As Peter says, "In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him" (Ac. 10:34-35).

Note that, even in the Old Testament, Gentiles could believe, enter into covenant, and then be circumcised and join the covenant people. Even in our Lord's lineage there was Rahab the harlot (Josh. 3:1, 21; Mt. 1:5) and Ruth the Moabitess (Ru. 1:14-17; Mt. 1:5). Moses' wife was a black African, an Ethiopian (Nu. 12:1). When Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of his choice of an African wife, God struck Miriam with leprosy (Nu. 12:10). Caleb (who was a favorite of Moses and one of the leaders of Israel because of his great faith) was a

¹¹ *Ibid.*

converted Gentile, a Kenizzite (Gen. 15:19; Josh. 14:6). Caleb's family was incorporated into the tribe of Judah (cf. Num. 13:6). The nation of Israel was not founded upon race but upon God's covenant. Thus Paul could write, "For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: but he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God" (Rom. 2:28-29). God did not allow a whole generation of Jews (except Joshua and Caleb) to enter the promised land because of their *unbelief* (cf. Heb. 3:19). Jesus rebuked the Jews for their unbelief saying, "If you were Abraham's children, you would do the works of Abraham....You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do....He who is of God hears God's words; therefore you do not hear, because you are not of God" (Jn. 8:39, 44, 47). Modern "Jews" say that the New Testament (especially John's gospel) is anti-Semitic. The truth of the matter is that the Bible from cover to cover is *anti-unbelief*. John L. Bray writes,

Gentiles who by faith came into this believing body of people became part of the same body. They were like branches grafted into the main tree. (See Romans 11:17, 19.) Unbelieving Jews who were not spiritual Israel could also be grafted into the same spiritual tree (Romans 11:23). In this one body there is "neither Jew nor Greek" (Galatians 3:28), but all of them, both Jew and Gentile, are "Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:29). And in all of this there is not, and never was, any acceptance by God on the basis of race of any of these people—either under the old covenant or the new, either before Christ or afterwards. All were saved by faith, all were God's people (true Israel) by faith in God. The NATION was only a nation because to that group of people was given the covenant, though only those in that nation who were obedient to the covenant were God's true people (spiritual Israel).¹²

This teaching is found throughout the New Testament. Note the following passages:

Romans 4:11-13: "And he [Abraham] received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while still uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all those who believe, though they are uncircumcised, that righteousness might be imputed to them also, and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also walk in the steps of the faith which our father Abraham had while still uncircumcised. For the promise that he would be the heir of the world was not to Abraham or to his seed through the law, but through the righteousness of faith." Note how Paul's refutation of the Jewish (pharisaical) distortion of the Bible also refutes dispensationalism. Abraham is the father of all Gentiles and Jews *who have the faith of Abraham*. He is the heir of the world (v. 13), "a father of many nations" (v. 16).

Romans 9:6-8, 23-25: "For they are not all Israel who are of Israel, nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham; but, 'In Isaac your seed shall be called.' That is, those who are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God; but the children of the promise are counted as the seed....that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory, even us whom He called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles? As He says also in Hosea: 'I will call them My people,

¹² John L. Bray, *Matthew 24 Fulfilled*, 219.

who were not My people, and her beloved, who was not beloved” (cf. Rom. 9:26-33). John Murray writes,

The Israel distinguished from the Israel of natural descent is the *true Israel*. They are indeed “of Israel” but not coextensive with the latter. It is in accord with our Lord’s usage to make this kind of distinction within a designated class. He distinguished between those who were disciples and those *truly* disciples (cf. John 8:30-32). He spoke of Nathanael as “truly an Israelite” (John 1:47). If we use Paul’s own language, this Israel is Israel “according to the Spirit” (Gal. 4:29) and “the Israel of God” (Gal. 6:26), although in the latter passage he is no doubt including the people of God of all nations. The purpose of this distinction is to show that the covenantal promise of God did not have respect to Israel after the flesh but to this true Israel and that, therefore, the unbelief and rejection of ethnic Israel as a whole in no way interfered with the fulfillment of God’s covenant purpose and promise.¹³

Galatians 3:6-9, 28-29: “Abraham ‘believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.’ Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, ‘In you all the nations shall be blessed.’ So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham...There is neither Jew nor Greek...for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.” “Clearly, the apostle once again stresses the fact that ‘belonging to the seed of Abraham’ is not determined by physical descent but by faith (Ridderbos, *op. cit.*, p. 150). ‘In Christ’ the wall of separation between Jew and Gentile no longer exists....Throughout the whole vast earth the Lord recognizes *one*, and *only one*, nation as his own, namely, the nation of believers (1 Peter 2:9). These are Abraham’s seed.”¹⁴ Further, Paul connects the covenant promise not to Israel indiscriminately but to Christ directly. “Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He does not say, ‘And to seeds,’ as of many, but as of one, ‘And to your Seed,’ who is Christ” (Gal. 3:16).

Galatians 5:6, 6:15: “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love...For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but a new creation.” In the Old Covenant order the distinction between circumcision and uncircumcision was of great importance; circumcision being the sign and seal of regeneration, the sign that a person is now part of the body, the covenant community. In the new order circumcision holds no relevance to the true religion at all. Paul not only refutes the idea that circumcision was necessary for salvation (which was the deadly doctrine of the Judaizers), but also clearly implies that the sign which separates Jew from Gentile has been abolished as a religious rite. That Israel as a nation or race holds no significance and is no longer God’s special people is proved by these passages. This explains why Jesus Himself called the unbelieving Jews who were persecuting the church “the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews and are not, but lie” (Rev. 3:9). (For more on this subject, see the second point under number 4 in the discussion of the abomination of desolation above; note also the following passages: Gal. 4:26; 5:2; 6:16; Jn. 5:21; Eph. 2:14-23; 3:6ff.; Heb. 13:13-14; Ac. 15:15; etc.).

What is the whole point of this digression on the New Testament teaching regarding the nature of the covenant people? The reason for this digression is to establish the theological fact

¹³ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959, 1965), 2:9-10.

¹⁴ William Hendriksen, *Galatians and Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967-68), 1:151.

that ethnic Israel holds no special significance in the new covenant era after A.D. 70. Therefore, the idea that Jesus is teaching that the race or nation of unbelieving Jews holds some special prophetic significance two thousand years in the future contradicts the explicit teaching of the whole New Testament. The interpretation which says that our Lord is referring to "race" in Matthew 24:34 really only fits into the dispensational system of theology, which erroneously asserts that God has two separate peoples, the church and the Jews. Jehovah has only one covenant people--Christians; that is, everyone who is in Christ; and all Christians have the exact same status and rights. To claim that God has two separate peoples with two separate agendas (especially after the destruction of Israel in A.D. 70) is an insult to Jesus' body (the church) and thus to Christ Himself.¹⁵ Pastors, scholars and writers who interpret the word generation in

¹⁵ The one passage which could be used to attempt to prove that God has a *continuous* special plan for ethnic Israel in the future is Romans 11:25-26, "blindness in part has happened to Israel until fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved." The standard dispensational view of this passage is that the times of the Gentiles ends with the rapture of the church at the beginning of the seven year tribulation. Then God will save the Jews *en mass* and they will be the great evangelists during the tribulation period. Such a view is based on Darbyite presuppositions and not a responsible exegesis of the passage. Other common views in church history are as follows: (1) All Israel refers to all the elect, both Jews and Gentiles. This view was popular during the early Reformation period. It, however, has fallen out of favor over time because the context makes it very clear that Paul is discussing Jews "according to the flesh" not spiritual Israel. (2) Another view is that the passage teaches that all the elect of Israel (i.e. the remnant or true Israel) will be saved progressively throughout history. In other words over time Jews here and there will be saved and join Christ's church. This view is popular with Dutch theologians and commentators (e.g., Bavinck, Ridderbos, Hendricksen, A. Hoekema, Berkhoff, etc). (3) The view most popular among the Puritans, that could even be labeled the standard historic postmillennial view, says that Paul is teaching that God has hardened Israel and though He is saving a few Jews here and there, His primary focus has been and still presently is upon the Gentiles. A time is coming, however, when God will shift His attention back upon the Jews and "all Israel will be saved." That is, the vast majority of Jews "according to the flesh" will come to Christ and be saved. Some Puritans have even argued that this passage implies that Israel would become a nation again and would convert en mass as a nation. Do any of these interpretations imply a continuous separate plan for Israel? Do they support the idea that *genea* means race in Matthew 24:34? If we set aside the somewhat common Puritan idea that Israel would become a nation again (which is not stated anywhere in the Bible and is pure speculation), none of these interpretations support the common dispensational idea that God has two separate peoples. Even if we accept interpretation number 3 which has a large conversion of Jews at a point in history, we are simply saying that at a particular time people identified as Jews will convert to Christ and be grafted back into the *one tree--the church*. Why are they grafted back into the covenant people? Because of their faith in Christ! They become part of the *one people of God* when they have the faith of Abraham. It would be a great interpretative error to ignore the many clear passages which teach that ethnicity or circumcision is irrelevant in the new covenant era.

An interpretation that does not conflict with the NT teaching that Israel ceased to exist covenantally in A. D. 70 is one that views Romans 11:26 as being fulfilled by A.D. 70. The reasons for accepting this view are as follows: (1) The statement that all Israel will be saved was future for Paul but not necessarily future for us. The statement "all Israel will be saved" may refer to the gathering of the remnant before the nation was cut off and permanently lost their status as a special covenant nation. (2) Modern "Jews," unlike their first century counterparts, are not made jealous by the conversion of the Gentiles because modern Judaism has almost nothing to do with the Old Testament. Paul's central argument applied to his generation but not to our situation. (3) The "fullness of the Gentiles" does not necessarily mean "the full gathering of every elect Gentile." It may refer to the transfer of covenant riches to the Gentiles in that generation when they received "the oracles of God," the full NT canon; the sacraments and the keys to the kingdom (e.g., government and discipline). Remember that that first generation of the church (when there was an overlap of two covenantal administrations, when there was a great emphasis and priority on preaching to the Jews) was unique. After the destruction of Jerusalem it is no longer "to the Jews first and then the Gentile." (4) The fullness of the Gentiles and then the Jews refers to the completion of the formation of the new covenant church in that unique period. First, the Jews minister to the Gentiles; then, many Gentiles are saved provoking jealousy among the Jews. Then the Gentiles minister to the Jews. Branches are broken off the olive tree because of unbelief, in order that the Gentiles may be grafted in (Rom. 11:19). However, the Jews who do not

Matthew 24:34 as race or nation are in error not only contextually and morphologically but also theologically.

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continue in unbelief are grafted back into the one tree. Because after A.D. 70 the Jewish nationality becomes covenantally irrelevant, the statement “all Israel will be saved” refers to the great influx of Jews into Christ’s church before the dissolution of Israel (for a fuller explanation of this view see James Jordan, *The Future of Israel Reexamined*, (Parts 1 to 3).