

# Matthew 24 and the Great Tribulation

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## Introduction

A section of Scripture that has perplexed many interpreters and caused a multitude of speculations and differing opinions is Matthew 24. In this brief study we will examine this prophecy (and the parallel chapters-Mark 13 and Luke 21) in order to dispel the many common misconceptions regarding its teaching. If one is careful not to impose one's eschatological presuppositions upon the text and follows standard historical-grammatical procedures of interpretation, the confusion surrounding this great prophecy will dissipate.

## Common Interpretations of Matthew 24

Before we examine Matthew 24, we will briefly consider the variety of opinions related to Jesus' discourse. (1) One opinion that is very common today is that Matthew 24 (and Mark 13) has nothing to say about the destruction of the Jewish Temple in A.D. 70, but rather speaks solely of signs that portend the Second Advent. This view is popular among old-style dispensationalists who argue that the Olivet Discourse is directed to Jewish disciples who are representatives of the converted Israel of the last days. In other words, the passage is directed to Jewish converts who will live in the far distant future (e.g., 2,000 years). Such interpreters argue that only the Luke 21 discourse (written to a Gentile audience) applies to the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem in A.D. 70. As we consider this passage, we will see that such an interpretation is arbitrary, imposed on the text, and violates the perspicuity of Scripture as well as standard Protestant methods of interpretation.

(2) Another very common interpretation is that Jesus in the Olivet Discourse *intertwines* predictions regarding two entirely different events: the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 and the second bodily coming of Christ at the end of human history. Godet writes, "Matthew combines in the answer of Jesus the two subjects indicated in the question as Matthew has expressed it, and he unites them in so intimate a way that all attempts to separate them in the text from Chrysostom to Ebrard and Meyer have broken down."<sup>1</sup> Hendriksen writes, "The prophetic material found in this sixth discourse has reference not only to events near at hand (see, for example, verse 16) but also to those stretching far into the future, as is clear from 24:14, 29-31....By the process of prophetic foreshortening, by means of which before one's eyes the widely separated mountain peaks of historic events merge and are seen as one...two momentous events are here intertwined, namely, a. the judgment upon Jerusalem (its fall in the year A.D. 70), and b. the final judgment at the close of world's history."<sup>2</sup> This view is held by the vast majority of commentators (e.g., John Calvin, David Dickson, Matthew Henry, James Moffat, William Manson, R. C. H. Lenski, William Hendriksen, R. V. G. Tasker, David Hill, etc.). Indeed, it is so

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<sup>1</sup> Frederic Louis Godet as quoted in William E. Biederwolf, *The Second Coming Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985 [1924]), 326.

<sup>2</sup> William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), 846.

common one could call it the standard evangelical interpretation. Therefore, when one disagrees with this interpretation eyebrows are raised. Given the widespread acceptance of this view in the church we must only depart from it on the basis of solid exegetical evidence. (This evidence will be presented shortly.)

(3) Some interpreters view the Olivet Discourse as a type of the tribulation that will occur immediately prior to the end of history. In other words the signs that precede the destruction of Jerusalem will also precede the second coming. Similarly, some interpreters think of the discourse as having a double fulfillment. Our Lord's words (we are told) apply simultaneously to the generation that witnessed the destruction of the temple (A.D. 70) and a future generation that witness the second coming of Christ. (This view is sometimes combined with view number 2.)

(4) It is not uncommon to find modernist interpreters who argue that in Matthew 24 Christ predicted the destruction of Jerusalem, the second coming and the end of the world. These interpreters teach that Jesus believed that all these things would occur within one generation (Mt. 24:34) and thus conclude that Christ was wrong when He predicted the second coming and the end of the world. This view, which is based on an anti-supernaturalistic bias and a misunderstanding of key sections of the text, must be rejected.

(5) There are interpreters who teach that Jesus did indeed predict that the second coming and end of the world would occur within the generation then living (i.e. by A.D. 70); and, that therefore the rapture, second coming, bodily resurrection and final judgment have already taken place. Those who adhere to such a view often label themselves full or consistent preterists. However, since this view involves an unbiblical view of the timing and nature of such crucial doctrines as the second coming, the general resurrection, the last judgment, the glorified bodies of believers and the final state, it properly has been designated as heretical and dangerous. Orthodox theologians and exegetes describe this heresy as "hyper-preterism" (Kenneth L. Gentry), "Hymenaenism" (Andrew Sandlin) or "pantelism" (Jonathan Seraiah). Hyper-preterists must redefine a number of very clear, confessional, established doctrines in orders for them to fit into their unbiblical paradigm.

(6) Another view which has gained popularity in Reformed circles within the last thirty years is that everything in the Olivet discourse at least up to verse 34 refers to the destruction of Jerusalem and the close of the Jewish age. This view had been labeled "partial preterism" in order to distinguish it from "hyper-preterism." This interpretation respects the clear teaching of Scripture regarding the rapture, second coming, general resurrection, final judgment and nature of glorified bodies, yet takes literally the various time indicators within the discourse (e.g., verse 34). It is this view that will be set forth in this study of Matthew 24.

## Important Interpretive Procedures

If one is to arrive at a correct understanding of the Olivet discourse, he must follow biblical principles of interpretation (i.e. one must adopt a genuine grammatical-historical-theological hermeneutic). Some basic principles of biblical interpretation are as follows. (1) The section of Scripture in question must be interpreted in light of the original audience. For example, would a first century Jewish audience regard a phrase such as "blood, fire, vapor and smoke" (Ac. 2:19ff.; Rev. 6:12; cf. Joel 2:28-32) as referring to nuclear war or as old covenant prophetic imagery for God's impending judgment on Israel? (2) Scripture must be used to interpret Scripture. In Matthew 24 Jesus uses terminology that comes directly from the Old Testament prophetic books. What makes more sense: using the Bible to give us the meaning of

such apocalyptic images or using speculations founded upon the New York Times or Newsweek? (3) One must interpret biblical passages according to their literary type. Many prophetic passages use poetic metaphor and apocalyptic imagery. Apocalyptic or poetic imagery must be treated in a different manner than a straight-forward historical account. Once again the key to understanding prophetic imagery (e.g., stars falling from heaven, the sun becoming dark, the sky rolled up like a scroll, etc.) is to see how such imagery is used in the Bible, rather than use current events and modern scientific discoveries to speculate (e.g., nuclear war, bar codes, computer chips in the hand and forehead, attack helicopters, tanks, etc.). Most books written on prophecy today are disconnected exegetically from the biblical text and thus are nothing more than the clever fantasies of the different authors. (4) The time indicators within the discourse and the immediate context that relates to the discourse (e.g., Mt. 23:36) must be taken into account when determining the meaning of this section of Scripture. The time indicators (if taken at face value, i.e. according to the normal etymological meaning) prove that Jesus' discourse at least up to verse 34 must be applied directly and solely to Christ's judgment upon Jerusalem and the complete end of the Jewish age. (This point will be discussed in more detail below.) (5) Whenever one is interpreting a section of Scripture in the synoptic gospels (i.e. Matthew, Mark and Luke), parallel accounts should be carefully compared and analyzed. Matthew wrote to a predominately Jewish audience while Mark and Luke wrote to a predominately Gentile audience. Therefore, if Matthew uses a phrase from Old Testament history or poetical prophetic imagery that would be obscure or difficult for a Gentile audience, the other gospels should be checked for clarification (e.g., the disciple's question, Mt. 24:3; Mk. 13:4; Lk. 21:7; the abomination desolation, Mt. 24:15, Lk. 21:20).

## Chapter 1: The Context and Theological Setting of Matthew 24

The Olivet discourse (Mt. 24, 25) comes almost at the very end of Jesus' ministry, only a few days before the institution of the Lord's supper and His betrayal (Mt. 26:2). In this lengthy discourse our Lord discusses the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of the age (Greek, *aion*). That is the end of the old covenant order, the time when the kingdom of God was to be taken from Israel and given to the multi-national church (Mt. 21:43). Christ also spoke about the second coming and final judgment (Mt. 24:36-51; 25:31-46). The central propositions of our Lord throughout His discussion of coming in judgment upon Israel and His bodily coming to judge the whole world are perseverance, faithfulness, readiness and watchfulness. He warns the disciples that only those who endure to the end will be saved (24:13). He commands them to "be ready" (24:44), to "watch" (25:13). In the parable of the ten virgins only those virgins who had made proper preparations and are ready at the bridegroom's appearing are permitted to go into the wedding. The rest are excluded (Mt. 25:1-13). In the parable of the talents (Mt. 25:14-30) only those who were faithful in investing the master's money and making a profit were given a reward. The rest were cast into "outer darkness" (Mt. 25:30). In Jesus' teaching on the final judgment only those who did good works toward Christ by serving and loving His people are given eternal life. The rest "will go away into everlasting punishment" (Mt. 25:46).

As one studies the gospels, it is clear that the four evangelists in their presentation of the life and ministry of Jesus were careful to note the lack of faithfulness, perseverance, watchfulness and readiness on the part of the covenant nation. The prophesying of our Lord in Matthew 24 against Israel is God's response to the nation's rejection, hatred, blasphemy and murder of the Messiah and their similar treatment of Christ's disciples after the ascension.

Because the Jewish people had the oracles of God (Rom. 3:2) and were in covenant with Jehovah (Ex. 19:8), they had a much greater responsibility to believe in, love and serve the Son of God. To reject Jesus would be the final straw in their rebellion. Luke writes, "Now as He drew near, He saw the city and wept over it, saying, 'If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things that make for your peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment around you, surround you and close you in on every side, and level you, and your children within you, to the ground; and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, *because you did not know the time of your visitation*'" (Lk. 19:41-44). The Jews could commit no greater crime than murdering the Prince of life (Ac. 3:15). Although the Jewish leaders held the chief responsibility in delivering up the Messiah unto death (cf. Jn. 19:11), the people were also guilty. At our Lord's trial "all the people answered and said, 'His blood be on us and on our children'" (Mt. 27:25). Thus on the way to the cross Jesus said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for Me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For indeed the days are coming in which they will say, 'Blessed are the barren, wombs that never bore, and breasts which never nursed!' Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us!' and to the hills, 'Cover us!'" (Lk 23:28-30).

The gospels carefully documented the covenant nation's rejection, hatred and persecution of Christ. When the political and religious leaders were informed by the wise men from the East that the Messiah had been born, the only person who showed any interest was King Herod. He, however, was not interested in worshiping the Messiah but only in killing Him. When John the Baptist (the greatest of all the Old Testament prophets, Mt. 11:11) appeared on the scene both he and his message were totally rejected by the scribes and Pharisees (Mt. 3:7-8; 11:18; 21:25). Under inspiration John called them a "brood of vipers" (Mt. 3:7). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus refuted the false teaching of the Pharisees regarding God's law (Mt. 5:17 ff.) and then warned the people that those who do not obey His teachings are like a house built on sand that will be destroyed by a coming storm (Mt. 7:26-27). After remarking about the great faith of a Gentile centurion, Christ said "the sons of the kingdom will be cast into outer darkness" (Mt. 8:12). After our Lord sent out the twelve on a preaching mission, He discussed the great judgment that would come upon those cities that rejected His word. "Assuredly, I say to you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city" (Mt. 10:16)! He also warned the disciples of the coming persecution. "Now brother will deliver up brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and cause them to be put to death" (Mt. 10:21; cf. 22-23; 10:34-42). (This severe persecution is documented in Acts 4:1 ff.; 6:11 ff; and especially 8:1 ff.). Our Lord speaks of the nation's rejection of John the Baptist and Himself in Matthew 11, "But to what shall I liken this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their companions, and saying: 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we mourned to you, and you did not lament.' For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' But wisdom is justified by her children" (16-19). Christ then proceeds with severe rebukes for the cities in which He had preached (Chorazin, Bethsaida, Tyre, Sidon and Capernaum). He emphasizes the fact that a rejection of the preaching of the Son of God Himself accompanied by amazing, authenticating miracles merits a much greater punishment. "But I say to you that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for you" (Mt. 11:24). The theme of greater judgment because of a rejection of the Messiah, the prophet greater than Moses (Heb. 3:3 ff.), continues in the next chapter. "The men of

Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here. The queen of the South will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and indeed a greater than Solomon is here” (Mt. 12:41-42).

The hatred and rejection of Jesus is also very pronounced in the gospel of John. The apostle says, “He came to His own and they did not receive Him” (Jn. 1:11). The Jews accused Christ of being demon-possessed and sought to kill Him (Jn. 7:1, 19, 20, 25; 8:37; 10:20). They accused our Lord of being a hated half-breed, a Samaritan (Jn. 8:48), born of fornication (Jn. 8:41), a mad man (Jn. 10:20), a blasphemer (Jn. 5:18; Mt. 26:65; Lk. 22:71), a glutton and drunkard (Mt. 11:19). The Jews were so angry about our Lord's teaching that on more than one occasion they wanted to kill Him (Jn. 5:18; 7:20; 8:59). They even rejected Him after observing proof of incredible miracles (e.g., Jn. 9:30 ff.; 11:47; Ac. 4:14-18). The Pharisees accused Jesus of casting out demons by the power of Satan (Mt. 12:24). This, Jesus said, was blasphemy against the Holy Spirit which could never be forgiven by God (Mt. 12:31-32). The religious leaders were guilty of blasphemy, a death penalty offense (Lev. 24:16), and had committed a sin so heinous that restoration was impossible. As we will see in a moment the nation of Israel as a covenant nation (i.e. a nation with a special redemptive role and purpose) would forever lose their kingdom status. The official policy of the religious leaders was to excommunicate anyone who confessed Jesus as the Messiah (Jn. 9:22; 12:42; 16:2). After Lazarus was raised from the dead, the response of the Jewish leaders was a conspiracy to murder Christ (Jn. 11:3) and even eliminate proof of the miracle by killing Lazarus (Jn. 12:10-11). When the Jewish people were given a choice between setting free the sinless Son of God and a thieving murderer (Barabbas) they choose Barabbas (Jn. 18:39-40; Mt. 27:15-17). When our Lord hung on the cross in intense pain and agony, He was mocked, reviled and blasphemed against by the people and religious leaders (Mt. 27:39-44). Jesus was justified in referring to the generation of Jews living at the time of His visitation as an “evil and adulterous generation” (Mt. 12:39; 16:4), a “faithless and perverse generation” (Mt. 17:17), a wicked generation full of unclean spirits (Mt. 12:45), a “generation of vipers” (Mt. 12:34; 23:33).

As the ministry of our Lord on earth nears its end, Jesus increasingly reveals the coming covenantal curse upon the Jewish nation.<sup>3</sup> “And seeing a fig tree by the road, He came to it and

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<sup>3</sup> As we study this section of Scripture it is important that we understand that God's covenant with Israel was a *conditional* covenant. Jehovah always expects and demands genuine faith and good works that are the fruit of true saving faith. God repeatedly promised Israel that if they turned from Him and rejected His law for a life of idolatry and wickedness that a time of destruction would come. Note the following passages. “Take heed to yourselves, lest you forget the covenant of the Lord your God which He made with you, and make for yourselves a carved image in the form of anything which the Lord your God has forbidden you....I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that you will soon utterly perish from the land which you cross over the Jordan to possess; you will not prolong your days in it, but will be utterly destroyed. And the Lord will scatter you among the peoples, and you will be left few in number among the nations where the Lord will drive you” (Dt. 4:23, 26-27). “But it shall come to pass, if you do not obey the voice of the Lord your God, to observe carefully all His commandments and His statutes which I command you today, that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you:...The Lord will bring a nation against you from afar, from the end of the earth, as swift as the eagle flies, a nation whose language you will not understand, a nation of fierce countenance, which does not respect the elderly nor show favor to the young” (Dt. 28:15, 49-53). “If those ordinances depart from before Me, says the Lord, then the seed of Israel shall also cease from being a nation before Me forever” (Jer. 31:36). “Now hear this, you heads of the house of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel, who abhor justice and pervert all equity, who build up Zion with bloodshed and Jerusalem with iniquity: her heads judge for a bribe, her priests teach for pay, and her prophets divine for money. Yet they lean on

found nothing on it but leaves, and said to it, Let no fruit grow on you ever again.’ Immediately the fig tree withered away” (Mt. 21:19; Mk. 11-13, 20; cf. Lk. 13:6-9). After cleansing the temple (Mt. 21:12-13), which was a symbolic denunciation of Israel's perversion of the worship and service of God, Christ curses the covenant nation. The great majority of Jews had rejected the truth, replaced it with their own human traditions (Mt. 12) and were living in gross immorality (Mt. 12:39, 45; 16:4; 17:17; 23:33). While they had leaves (that is the outward appearance of religion), they had no fruit. They did not believe in Christ, nor did they love their neighbor. If a tree does not bear fruit, especially after being nurtured and fertilized, then it needs to be cut down (Lk. 13:8-9). The cursing and withering of the fig tree was a prophetic act predicting the coming destruction of the nation.

After the encounter with the barren fig tree, Jesus entered the temple and spoke three parables against the Jews, especially the leadership. In the first parable the Jews are compared to a son who promised to obey his father yet did not. In their covenant with Jehovah, Israel had promised to obey God's voice (Ex. 19:6) yet they refused. Their rejection of the law and the prophets is reflected in their unbelief toward John the Baptist (Mt. 21:32). The Jews had rejected God's covenant. They did not believe. Therefore, “Jesus said to them ‘Assuredly, I say to you that tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you’” (Mt. 21:31).

In the second parable (concerning the wicked tenants) our Lord uses a story about an absent landowner who sends servants and then finally his own son to check on certain vinedressers in charge of his vineyard (cf. Isa. 5:1-7). In this parable Christ indicts the Jews for their persecution and murder of the prophets (Mt. 21:35-36) and (the climax of their rebellion) their murder of the Messiah (Mt. 21:39). To press home the central message of the parable Jesus asks a rhetorical question. “Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vinedressers” (Mt. 21:40)? The Jews give the correct and obvious answer, “They said to Him, ‘He will destroy those wicked men miserably, and lease his vineyard to other vinedressers who will render to him the fruits in their seasons’” (Mt. 21:41)? Christ then interprets the parable to make sure He is not misunderstood. “Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it” (Mt. 21:43). There is to be a coming in judgment on the generation of Jews that our Lord was speaking to (Mt. 21:40). The nation will be destroyed, its leaders killed and their covenant privileges removed. Matthew, writing under inspiration, makes it very clear that our Lord was speaking of the *present generation*. He wrote, “Now when the chief priests and Pharisees heard His parables, they perceived that He was speaking of them” (Mt. 21:45).

In the third parable (about the wedding feast) the Jews are compared to people who reject a king's invitation to his son's wedding announced by the king's servants. The king is God and acceptance to the wedding feast is belief in the gospel. The wedding feast is the marriage supper of the Lamb. The Jews show that they are unworthy not only by their indifference (Mt. 12:4-5), but especially by their treatment of God's servants who are “seized,” “spitefully treated” and “killed” (Mt. 22:6). Noting God's response to such behavior Jesus said, “But when the king heard about it, he was furious. And he sent out his armies, destroyed those murderers, and burned up their city” (Mt. 22:7). In these terrifying words, our Lord makes a very clear reference to the

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the Lord, and say, ‘Is not the Lord among us? No harm can come upon us.’ Therefore because of you Zion shall be plowed like a field, Jerusalem shall become heaps of ruins, and the mountain of the temple like the bare hills of the forest” (Mic. 3:9-12). The Jeremiah passage taken in context apparently applies directly to the destruction of Israel in A.D. 70. While it is true that Israel exists as a nation today, they are not a covenant nation, but a nation of unbelieving heathen.

siege of Jerusalem by the armies of Titus, to the slaughter of the people and even the burning of the city. This all occurred within one generation (by 70 A.D.).

The parables in Matthew 21 and 22 are a prelude to the scathing condemnation of the Jewish leaders (the scribes and Pharisees) in Matthew 23. This chapter is important because it sets forth the immediate context of the Olivet Discourse. It also foretells in detail the destruction of Jerusalem (Mt. 23:35, 38) and the time of the coming judgment (i.e. “this generation,” 23:36). The question that the disciples ask in Matthew 24:3 comes as a direct result of Jesus' statements in Matthew 23:32-24:2.

There are a number of things that we should consider regarding this chapter. First, the teachings of the parables given in chapters 21 and 22 are made explicit and elucidated. Like the unfaithful son, the scribes and Pharisees “say, and do not do” (Mt. 23:3; cf. 21:30). Like the wicked vinedressers and the people who killed the servants who announced the wedding feast, the scribes and Pharisees persecuted and murdered the prophets (Mt. 23:29-35; cf. 21:36-39; 22:6). Like those in the parables who were judged and excluded from the kingdom, the scribes and Pharisees will be destroyed (Mt. 23:35, 38; cf. 21:31, 41, 43-44; 22:7).

Second, our Lord sets forth the extent of the Jewish leadership's covenant-breaking and lawlessness in the fashion of a prophetic covenant lawsuit. Christ documents their sins in the form of eight woes (eight indicating that their wickedness would lead to a new beginning, a new age, a new kingdom universal in scope). The scribes and Pharisees were hypocrites (Mt. 23:13, 14, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29; 15:7) who through their false teaching “shut up heaven” (Mt. 23:13) and made their converts “sons of hell” (Mt. 23:15). They had perverted the doctrine of salvation to the extent that they were teaching damnable heresy and thus had completely lost the preeminent mark of the true church. No wonder Jesus said that their father was the devil (Jn. 6:44) and their synagogues were of Satan (Rev. 3:9). The scribes and Pharisees were also exceedingly wicked in their behavior. They were stealing from widows (Mt. 23:14) and putting on an insincere religious show (Mt. 23:14). They made up human traditions in order to circumvent the law of Moses (Mt. 23:16 ff.; Mt. 15:6). They neglected the weightier matters of the law to focus on trifles (Mt. 23:23-24). Thus they were “fools and blind” (23:17, 19), “blind guides” (Mt. 23:16, 24; cf. 15:7), “white-washed tombs” (23:27), “full of hypocrisy and lawlessness” (Mt. 23:28), “serpents” and a “brood of vipers” (23:33). They were the “sons [i.e. of like mind and behavior] of those who murdered the prophets” who will “persecute,” “scourge,” “crucify” and “kill” the “prophets, wise men and scribes” that Christ will send (Mt. 23:34).

Third, Jesus explains the reasons for the severity of the coming judgment. “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, and say, ‘If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets.’ Therefore you are witnesses against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers’ guilt. Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell? Therefore, indeed, I send you prophets, wise men, and scribes: some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from city to city, that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. Assuredly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation” (Mt. 23:29-36). Our Lord's condemnation of the Jewish leaders sets forth a number of reasons for the just sentence of destruction against them. Jesus, in the role of a prosecutor and judge, first points out that these men are condemned by their own statements. They acknowledged that their fathers had

persecuted the prophets and even implicitly condemned their behavior (Mt. 23:30). But they themselves were guilty of the same behavior and even worse for they murdered the Son of God (Mt. 21:39). By condemning the sin of their forefathers while engaging in the identical behavior, these men were inexcusable (Rom. 1:32-2:1). Their testimony sealed their own prosecution. Their intimate knowledge of the Scriptures and their own history also indicates that they have committed high-handed sin, a sin against knowledge. “Our Lord does not mean that the Scribes and Pharisees of His own day were responsible for murders committed by their forefathers centuries before that time. But the guilt of wickedness is increased by the accumulation of previous instances and warnings. Each generation that condemns the wickedness of its predecessors, and yet repeats the wickedness, is more guilty than its predecessors, and has more to answer for.”<sup>4</sup> Further, Jesus takes the Jewish leaders’ statement regarding their persecuting fathers and turns it against them as an admission that they ethically are of the same cloth: like father, like son. “Indeed, you are the sons of these men for you too are full of envy, malice, hatred and cruelty; you too are unbelievers, full of rebellion, who persecute and murder the saints of God (cf. Ac. 7:51).”

Christ then tells the leaders that they are the ones who will fill up the measure of their father's guilt (Mt. 23:32). The cup of God's wrath has been filling over time because of the sins of the nation. These religious and political leaders and the deluded populace who follow their example will overflow the cup by the murder of Christ and the severe persecution of the Christian church. The Bible views nations as covenantal persons that can accumulate injustice and sin until God can no longer forbear. After carefully documenting the rank idolatry of the Jewish people Jeremiah wrote, “So the Lord could no longer bear it, because of the evil of your doings and because of the abominations which you committed. Therefore your land is a desolation, an astonishment, a curse, and without an inhabitant, as it is this day” (Jer. 44:22). The Bible speaks of nations that forget God being turned into hell (Ps. 9:17), of four generations of time being necessary before the destruction of the Amorites “for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete” (Gen. 15:16), of the land vomiting out its inhabitants because it is defiled by so much iniquity (Lev. 18:25), of the land (Gk. *ges*) being ripe for the harvest of the sickle (Rev. 14:15). The nation of Israel had been storing up guilt for generations. However, it was the murder of Christ and the persecution of His people that put the final nail in the coffin. The leaders had blasphemed the Holy Spirit and killed the Son of God. Therefore the coming destruction deserved to be and was more terrible than anything that the world had ever witnessed, either before or since. God had promised, “He repays those who hate Him to their face, to destroy them. He will not be slack with him who hates Him; He will repay him to his face” (Dt. 7:10). Paul said, “For you also suffered the same things from your own countrymen, just as they did from the Judeans, who killed both the Lord Jesus and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they do not please God and are contrary to all men, forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they may be saved, so as always to fill up the measure of their sins; but wrath has come upon them to the uttermost” (1 Th. 2:14-16). “V. 16b suggests the image of a scale weighing up the sins of the Jewish people until the fixed amount is achieved that will lead to their judgment.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, all the righteous blood shed upon the earth from Abel to Zechariah will come upon the Jewish nation. The scribes and Pharisees, by murdering the Son of God—the Prophet of prophets and the head of the body (the church)—commit the ultimate crime of

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<sup>4</sup> Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982 [1915]), 323.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Wanamaker, *Commentary of I and II Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 116.



persecution of which all others were types. “Though God bear long with a persecuting generation, he will not always; and patience abused, turns into the greatest wrath. The longer sinners have been heaping up treasures of wickedness, the deeper and fuller the treasures of wrath be; and the breaking of them will be like breaking up the fountains of the great deep.”<sup>6</sup>

God's wrath will result in the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple (23:37-38; 24:2) and the condemnation of hell (23:33). With the destruction of the city by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. there was a temporary separation. “‘But if you will not hear these words, I swear by Myself,’ says the Lord, ‘that this house shall become a desolation’” (Jer. 22:5). However, after 70 years a remnant returned, the temple was rebuilt and the *shekinah* presence restored. But with the rejection of the Messiah, the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit and the persecution of the church, God will permanently divorce Israel. Jehovah's special presence will leave the temple forever. “See! Your house is left to you desolate” (Mt. 23:38). Morison writes, “[T]he Savior's reference is to His own leaving or departure, a leaving that involved the penal departure of His Father as the Head of the theocracy. The Jewish theocracy was to be a theocracy no longer. ‘*Ichabod*’ was to be its name. Judaism henceforth would be mere Judaism, not Jehovahism or Jahveism. The Jews henceforth, instead of being the people and kingdom of God, would be a mere Semitic nationality under the dynasty of the Herods or under no dynasty at all. Their temple would just be like any other temple of any other contemporaneous people, an empty edifice dedicated to the empty celebration of an empty ritual.”<sup>7</sup> In order to make sure His pronouncement of doom could not be misunderstood, Christ explicitly tells His disciples what will happen to the temple. “Then Jesus went out and departed from the temple, and His disciples came up to show Him the buildings of the temple. And Jesus said to them, ‘Do you not see all these things? Assuredly, I say to you, not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down’” (Mt. 24:1-2).

## The Time Indicators

One of the main reasons we have taken the time to examine the context of Matthew 24 is to establish the proper timing of our Lord's prophecy. We have seen that the gospels take great care in documenting the unfaithfulness and wickedness of the Jewish leadership and nation. We have also observed that much of Matthew chapter 21 and 22 and almost all of chapter 23 is concerned with the wickedness of the Jews in rejecting Christ and persecuting His prophets (both past and future). Jesus also carefully explains that the behavior of the Jews has filled the cup of God's wrath, that total destruction and the permanent removal of covenant privileges is coming. The all-important question is when? The answer to this question is the generation living when Jesus spoke His words of judgment. He said, “On you [the scribes and Pharisees] may come all the righteous blood shed on earth” (Mt. 23:35). “Assuredly I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation” (Mt. 23:36). “See! Your house is left to you desolate” (Mt. 23:38). Then in chapter 24 after listing a number of signs that precede the end (i.e. the coming of the Son of God in judgment and the destruction of Jerusalem) our Lord once again asserts, “Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place” (Mt. 24:34).

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<sup>6</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (McLean, VA: McDonald Publishing, n. d.), 5:342.

<sup>7</sup> James Morison, *A Practical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Minneapolis: Klock and Klock, 1981 [1884]), 451.

Christ's words are very clear and easy to understand. They leave no room for controversy. Jesus taught that His prophecy of doom (at least up to verse 34) must take place within the lifetime of the existing generation. But what about the futurist contention that the word generation (*genea*) in Matthew 24:43 really means nation or race; that many or even most of the events prior to verse 34 refer to the distant future (i.e. the second bodily coming of Christ)? There are a number of solid exegetical reasons for rejecting the common futurist understanding of generation (*genea*). First, there is the immediate context. In Matthew 23:36 the words, "this generation" cannot refer to a race or nation thousands of years in the future.<sup>8</sup> They can only refer to the leaders and people living at that time. Jesus addresses the scribes and Pharisees personally. He uses the pronoun "you" twenty-six times. Then He laments over Jerusalem. All commentators agree that the word generation in Matthew 23:36 refers to the group of people living at the time our Lord uttered those words. Even the *New Scofield Study Bible* says, "The prediction of v. 36 was fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70."<sup>9</sup> Given the fact the Jews used the word generation with this specific meaning in 23:36, is it exegetically responsible to assert that only moments later when discussing the same topic (cf. Mt. 24:2) our Lord would without warning or explanation give the identical word, in an almost identical statement, a completely new and different meaning? Further, the common practice of Jesus in the gospels was to teach the multitudes and then privately to give further instruction regarding His public teaching to His close disciples. In these teaching sessions Christ would answer questions and clarify His doctrines. He wanted to make sure the apostles understood what He had to say. Given this pattern does it make sense to assert that our Lord would give a statement to the apostles in 24:34 that they would most certainly misunderstand?

Second, the broader context proves that Jesus was referring to the contemporary generation. If one carefully examines every occurrence of the word generation (*genea*) in the gospels (Mt.1:17; 11:16; 12:39, 41, 42, 45; 16:4; 17:17; 23:36; 24:34; Mk. 8:12, 38; 9:19; 13:30;

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<sup>8</sup> By far the most popular futurist interpretation of "generation" (*genea*) in Matthew 24:34 is that the word means race. The passage says (according) to this view that the Jewish race will still be in existence when all these things take place. This interpretation is then often accompanied by comments regarding God's amazing preservation of the Jewish people. Although this view is immensely popular and even has an emotional appeal, it is not supported by any sound scriptural argumentation whatsoever. To prove this assertion let us examine the typical argumentation for choosing the meaning of race. The excellent Bible commentator and Greek scholar William Hendriksen offers the following passages as evidence for the meaning of race in Matthew 24:34 in the Septuagint (LXX) version of the Old Testament. He points to Deuteronomy 32:5, 20; Psalm 12:7; 78:8; in the New Testament-Acts 2:40; Philippians 2:15; Hebrews 3:10. Apparently whenever Hendriksen finds the expression "a wicked and perverse generation," he believes generation can or should be interpreted as meaning the Jewish race. There are a number of reasons why we must regard Hendriksen's proof texts as insufficient proof for his assertion. First, substituting the meaning of race for generation doesn't work in these passages any more than does it work in Matthew 24:34. For example when Peter said in Acts 2:4, "Be saved from this wicked and perverse generation," he was preaching to men "from every nation under heaven" (Ac. 2:5). The Gentile God-fearers didn't need to be saved from the Jews but from the ethical degeneracy of that evil generation. Second, if the meaning of generation is not retained, Hendriksen's proof texts give a false understanding of Jewish history. The Jewish race in the Old Testament dispensation did have great periods of revival and obedience (e.g., under Joshua, Hezekiah, Josiah). The Jewish nation could not *always* at *every time* be classified as an evil race. The word generation retains the biblical fact that some generations were exceedingly evil while other generations were not. Third, if the word "generation" is given the meaning "race" then the urgency of prophetic preaching loses its force. The whole point of using the phrase "this generation" is to instruct a particular audience that covenant sanctions are about to come to pass. Fourth, the context of Matthew 24 (both broad and narrow) renders such an interpretation (i.e. race) impossible. This will be dealt with in detail below.

<sup>9</sup> Editor C. I. Scofield, *The New Scofield Study Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989), 1167, footnote 3.

Lk. 1:48, 50; 7:31; 9:41; 11:29, 30, 32, 50, 51; 16:8; 17:25; 21:32), one will note that the word always refers to a specific generation living at the same period of time.<sup>10</sup> We will examine three different manners in which the word is used. First, there are passages that speak of generations in history. That is, the totality of the covenant people living during a specific period of time. “So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations, from David until the captivity in Babylon are fourteen generations...” (Mt. 1:17). “His mercy is on those who fear Him from generation to generation” (Lk. 1:50). If one attempted to translate generation as race in these passages he would end up with a very absurd meaning. For example, there would be 42 different races of Jews between Abraham and Christ (cf. Mt. 1:17). Second, the word generation is frequently coupled with a scathing criticism of our Lord's contemporaries: “an evil and adulterous generation” (Mt. 12:39); “a wicked and adulterous generation” (Mt. 16:4); “faithless and perverse generation” (Mt. 17:17; Lk. 9:41); “this adulterous and sinful generation” (Mk. 8:38); “faithless generation” (Lk. 9:41); “this perverse generation” (Ac. 2:40). In these passages, generation clearly refers to the people of Israel alive during Christ's ministry. Not only are these criticisms directed to his contemporaries (e.g., the scribes and Pharisees Mt. 12:39; 16:4), they are often coupled with the lament: “how long shall I be with you” (e.g., Mk. 9:19; Lk. 9:41).

By far the most common usage of the term comes in the formula “this generation” (*he genea haute*). It occurs 18 times in the gospels (Mt. 11:16; 12:41, 45; 23:36; 24:34; Mk. 8:12 [twice], 8:38; 13:30 Lk. 7:31; 11:29 [in sentence form]; 11:30, 31, 32, 50, 51, 17:25; 21:32). The reason that this formula is found so frequently on the lips of Jesus is that He repeatedly condemned the Jews for their unbelief and wicked behavior. The men of Nineveh and the queen of the South will condemn “*this generation*” on the day of judgment because they did not repent at the preaching of the Messiah (Mt. 12:41, 42; Lk. 11:31, 32). The Jews repeatedly asked Jesus to show *them* a sign (e.g., Mk. 8:11; Lk. 11:29). Our Lord responded by saying, “no sign shall be given to *this generation*” (Mk. 8:12), “except the sign of Jonah the prophet” (Lk. 11:29). As the day of Christ's betrayal drew near Jesus said, “But first He must suffer many things and be rejected by *this generation*” (Lk. 17:25). When our Lord prophesied to the Jews regarding their coming destruction He said, “Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place” (Mt. 24:34; Mk. 13:30; Lk. 21:32; cf. Mt. 23:36; Lk. 11:49-51). The words “this generation” obviously apply to the *existing generation* of the Jewish nation to whom Jesus spoke. Indeed, in all of the passages above they are incapable of any other interpretation. Those who argue that Christ was referring to a race or nation more than 2,000 years in the future can only do so by intruding their eschatological presuppositions upon the text. No one in the original audience would have understood our Lord's words in this manner. In fact, the only reason that Christians today suddenly change the meaning of “generation” when they come to Matthew 24 is that they have been trained to do so.

Third, the idea that “*this generation*” refers to a group of people in the distant future cannot be reconciled with the normal meaning and usage of the word “this.” The adjective “this” has a specific meaning. It designates “the person or thing mentioned or understood.”<sup>11</sup> Webster's Unabridged Dictionary says, “designating the thing that is nearer: distinguished from *that*.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The one possible exception is Luke 16:8: “For the sons of this world are more shrewd in their generation than the sons of light.” The phrase “their generation” apparently means “with worldly people like themselves.” This passage is the only place in the New Testament with this meaning. Note, that the word *this* is not used and this passage still cannot be interpreted to mean race or nation.

<sup>11</sup> *Webster's New Century Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged* (Collinsworld & World Publishing, Inc., 1978), 1899.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

When somebody says “this house” or “this car” or “this person” they obviously are not referring to a different house, car or person in the future. To use the adjective *this* in such a manner would render meaningful discourse impossible. When Matthew wrote his gospel he used normal, existing rules of grammar (e.g., “this day” [6:11]; “this man” [8:9]; “this city” [10:23]; “this place” [12:6]; “this people” [15:8]; “this rock” [15:18]; “this little child” [18:4]; “this mountain” [21:21]; “this stone” [21:44]; “this image” [22:20]; “this gospel” [24:14]; “this woman” [26:13]; “this night” [26:31], etc.). “If some future generation had been in view, Jesus could have chosen the adjective *that* (cf. 7:22; 10:19; 24:10, 36; 26:29). The passage would then read this way: ‘*That* generation will not pass away until all these things take place.’”<sup>13</sup> Given the meaning of “this,” we are compelled to conclude that all of the events prior to Matthew 23:34 occurred before the contemporary generation of Jesus’ day passed away.

Fourth, Christ’s audience could only have understood the phrase “this generation” as applying to their own generation. All books on biblical interpretation emphasize the importance of taking into consideration the way in which words, phrases and expressions would have been understood by a contemporary audience. The phrase “this generation” did not occur in a vacuum. We have noted how our Lord used the word “generation” (with qualifying criticisms, e.g., “an evil and adulterous generation” Mt. 12:39) throughout His ministry to condemn His apathetic, unbelieving, wicked contemporaries. We also have noted that “this generation” is used in Matthew 23:36 after Jesus used the pronoun “you” 26 times. The disciples had heard Christ use the word “generation” and the phrase “this generation” to designate the contemporary generation of Jesus for over three years. In Matthew 24 our Lord continues to use the phrase “this generation” in the same manner. Speaking directly to the disciples, looking into their eyes, Jesus said to them: “Take heed that no one deceives *you*” (v. 4); “*you* will hear of wars” (v. 6); “see that *you* are not troubled” (v. 6); “they will deliver *you* up to tribulation and kill *you*, and *you* will be hated by all nations” (v. 9); “when *you* see the abomination of desolation” (v. 15); “So *you* also, when *you* see all these things, know that it is near-at-the doors!” (v. 34), “Assuredly I say to *you* this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place” (v. 34). Given all these things we can say with assurance that the disciples most likely took Christ’s words at face value. If one accepts the futurist interpretation of Matthew 24:5-34, then one has accepted an interpretation of which the apostles were almost certainly ignorant. The futurist view (which takes “generation” in the sense of race or nation in the distant future) would have completely baffled the apostles. Would our Lord switch the meaning of metaphors and repeatedly use the plural form of “you” in Matthew 24 if He wanted the apostles to understand Him? Obviously not! Yet note how Jesus opens the discourse: “Take heed that no one deceives *you*” (v. 4). In other words, make sure that you understand what I am saying so that you will not be fooled by false teachers (v. 5). The evidence for the fulfillment of the prophecy (of events discussed prior to verse 34) taking place in their generation (i.e. by A.D. 70) is overwhelming.

This analysis raises an important question. If standard hermeneutical procedures lead to only one viable conclusion (i.e. “this generation” must be applied to the generation of Jews living when our Lord uttered those words [c. A.D. 30]), then why do the vast majority of commentators (at least after 1850) insist that the word “generation” (*genea*) must refer to the Jewish race or the generation living thousands of years in the future when Jesus returns? The simple reason is that these expositions interpret many sections of the discourse prior to verse 34 as clearly referring to the second *bodily* coming of Christ. Some of the phrases that are taken as indisputable proof of the futurist view are: “the gospel...will be preached in all the world...then

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<sup>13</sup> Gary Demar, *Last Days Madness: Obsession of the Modern Church* (Atlanta: American Vision, 1999), 58.

the end will come” (v. 14); “there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be” (v. 21); “For as lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west; so also will the coming of the Son of Man be” (v. 27); “the stars will fall from heaven” (v. 29); “they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” (v. 30); “they [His angels] will gather together His elect from the four winds” (v. 31). Obviously, if any verses prior to verse 34 speak of the second *bodily* coming of Christ to judge the quick and the dead (which every one [except spiritually blind hyper-preterists] knows has not yet occurred), then verse 34 must somehow be harmonized with this fact. Evangelical scholars (who rightly accept biblical inerrancy) cannot say (as modernists often do) that Jesus made a blatant error when He gave the time indicator as “this generation.” This point explains the contrived, eisegetical and absurd attempts at redefining “this generation” in Matthew 24:34. If, however, our Lord’s apocalyptic language is interpreted in light of the identical imagery found in the Old Testament prophets, the prophecy comes into focus. Indeed, without a careful examination of relevant Old Testament texts, one will invariably think in terms of the second coming. But, we must let Scripture interpret Scripture.

Second, the interpretation which holds that Matthew 24 (up to verse 34) refers to a coming in judgment upon Israel in Jesus’ own generation is supported by other passages. We will briefly consider these passages in order to dispel the erroneous notion that every mention of Christ’s coming must refer to our Lord’s second bodily coming at the end of history. “And you [the apostles] will be hated by all for My name’s sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in this city, flee to another. For assuredly, I say to you, you [the apostles] will not have gone through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes” (Mt. 10:22-23). “[T]he reference is to the time of judgment which came upon the Jewish people at the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans. It was a time of Divine judgment. It was Christ, too, who was judging. He came to judge. He sat upon His judgment throne, and pronounced a sentence of condemnation, and delivered up the guilty nation to the hand of the executioner.”<sup>14</sup> “The coming here referred to is the terrible judgment which came upon the Jews in the war of the year 66, ending with the total destruction of Jerusalem.”<sup>15</sup> Brown writes, “‘The coming of the Son of man’ has a fixed doctrinal sense, here referring immediately to the crisis of Israel’s history as the visible kingdom of God, when Christ was to come and judge it; when ‘the wrath would come upon it to the uttermost’ [1 Th. 2:16]; and when, on the ruins of Jerusalem and the old economy, He would establish His own kingdom.”<sup>16</sup>

Another important passage is Matthew 16:27-28: “For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works. Assuredly, I say to you, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom.” The parallel passage in Mark reads, “Assuredly, I say to you that there are some standing here who will not taste death till they see the kingdom of God present with power” (9:1). The phrase “there are some standing here” can only refer to persons actually present to hear Christ’s words. “This restricts the meaning of what follows to a single generation or a single life time.”<sup>17</sup> Jesus taught that His *coming* would take place during the

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<sup>14</sup> James Morison, 166.

<sup>15</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961 [1943]), 405-406.

<sup>16</sup> John Brown, *The Four Gospels: A Commentary, Critical, Experimental and Practical* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1969 [1864]), 63.

<sup>17</sup> J. A. Alexander, *Mark* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1960 [1858]), 230.

lifetime of some of His contemporaries. What then does the coming refer to? Many commentators see this passage as problematic and offer various opinions as to its meaning. Many believe it refers to the transfiguration (e.g., Richard Baxter, J. C. Ryle, William L. Lane), others to the resurrection of Christ (Luther, Melanthon, Calvin, Lange), still others to the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost (e.g., Henry Barclay Swete, Gleason Archer). The problem with all these interpretations is that they all point to events that are only days or weeks in the future. The whole point of our Lord's statements "some standing here will not taste death" is irrelevant if His coming is only a few days or weeks away. Jesus' "language implies that most of them would be dead, while a few would live to see the great event."<sup>18</sup> The coming that Christ refers to is a coming in judgment upon Jerusalem and the apostate nation of Israel. "The Parousia of Christ may be viewed in a narrow sense, as referring to his coming at the end of the world, but also in a wider sense, as including the preliminary judgments, in particular that visited upon the Jews."<sup>19</sup> This interpretation is superior for a number of reasons. This view comports with our Lord's time indicator. Christ's visitation of wrath upon the Jews occurred about 40 years after He spoke these words. Thus, while many of the saints had perished through persecution and old age, some still remained. Also, the context of both passages is a discussion of the cost of discipleship. Following Jesus in that wicked generation will mean denial, pain and persecution. The purpose of these passages is to show the disciples that the cost of discipleship is well worth it. The suffering and humiliation of the saints will be vindicated by an awesome manifestation of the glorified Savior's power as the eschatological judge. "The kingdom with power" means that in the destruction of the Jewish nation the Lord Jesus will *openly* manifest His power and glory as the King of the nations who sits at the right hand of God. "The ordinary workings of the kingdom are invisible, but in this judgment upon the Jews the royal rule of Jesus 'in power' would actually be seen as fulfilling what he now tells his hearers."<sup>20</sup> Matthew Henry concurs,

Here is, I. A prediction of Christ's kingdom now near approaching, Mk. 9:1. That which is foretold, is, 1. That the kingdom of God would come, and would come so as to be seen: the kingdom of the Messiah shall be set up in the world by the utter destruction of the Jewish polity, which stood in the way of it; this was the restoring of the kingdom of God among men, which had been in a manner lost by the woeful degeneracy both of Jews and Gentiles. 2. That it would come with power, so as to make its own way, and bear down the opposition that was given to it. It came with power, when vengeance was taken on the Jews for crucifying Christ, and when it conquered the idolatry of the Gentile world. 3. That it would come while some now present were alive; There are some standing here, that shall not taste of death, till they see it; this speaks the same with Mt 24:34, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled. Those that were standing here with Christ, should see it, when the others could not discern it to be the kingdom of God, for it came not with observation.<sup>21</sup>

In addition, this interpretation is supported by Matthew 26:63-64. "And the high priest answered and said to Him, 'I put you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God!' Jesus said to him, 'It is as you said. Nevertheless, I say to you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of

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<sup>18</sup> Ezra Gould, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1975 [1896]), 159.

<sup>19</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Mark's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961, [1946]), 357.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (McLean, VA: McDonald Publishing Co., no date), 5:506.

heaven.” After identifying Himself as the Christ, the Son of God our Lord applies Psalm 110:1 and Daniel 7:13-14 directly to Himself. The phrase “you will see” is not a reference to the second coming and final judgment, but a reference to Jesus' manifestation of power in the destruction Jerusalem and the Jewish nation. This point is evident from the phrase “coming on the clouds” which in Scripture symbolizes divine judgment (cf. Ps. 104:3; Isa. 19:1; Nah. 1:3; Mt. 24:30; Rev. 1:7) and the word “hereafter” which is equivalent to “soon.” Jesus in essence is telling the high priest and his accomplices that “Yes, I am the Messiah, however, you will not see the power you expect in this office until I am glorified and exhibit My power by destroying you and your unbelieving comrades.”

Another passage that speaks of Christ coming in the first century is John 21:21-22. “Peter, seeing him [the apostle John] said to Jesus, ‘But Lord, what about this man?’ Jesus said to him, ‘If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you?’” The “coming” in this passage cannot refer to Pentecost for both Peter and John were still alive. Nor can it refer to the second bodily coming of Christ for both apostles have already died. The only logical alternative is that Jesus promised “the preservation of John’s life until the great judgment in the fall of Jerusalem.”<sup>22</sup> It is a fact of history that all the apostles died before the destruction of Jerusalem (A.D. 70) *except* the apostle John. Hengstenberg writes,

The *coming* of Jesus could not have had an individual meaning in relation to John; not the coming to take him in the hour of death, ch. xiv. 3, for in this sense the Lord came even to Peter. But we must find a sense in which John remained, and Peter did not, until Christ came. If the coming was one of universal import, we must needs think at once of the Lord’s coming in judgment upon Jerusalem, concerning which He had said, Matt. xvi. 28, ‘Verily I say unto you, there be some standing here who shall not taste of death until they see the Son of man coming in His kingdom.’ comp. Mark ix. 1; Matt. xiv. 34, which teaches that that generation was not to pass before the sign of the Son of man would be seen in heaven. Peter fulfilled his course in martyrdom some few years before that catastrophe: John, on the other hand, survived that great and solemn coming of Jesus.”<sup>23</sup>

There are accordingly, very good biblical grounds for interpreting Matthew 24:4-34 as a coming in judgment, a “day” of the Lord on the temple, city and people.

## The Prediction

Before we turn to an examination of the Olivet Discourse, we must first consider the immediate context (i.e. our Lord’s prediction that the Jewish temple and city would be destroyed). After the cursing of the barren fig tree (Mt. 21:12-13; Mk. 11:15-17; Lk. 19:45-46);<sup>24</sup> the parables of condemnation (Mt. 21:28 to 22:14; Mk. 11:1-12; Lk. 20:9-19); the scathing indictment of the Jewish leaders (Mt. 23:1-36; Mk. 12:38-40; Lk. 20:45-47); the lament over Jerusalem (Mt. 23:37) and the declaration “your house is left to you desolate” (Mt. 23:38); our Lord finally states plainly what He had been leading up to in all these prior acts and teachings.

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<sup>22</sup> Frederic Louis Godet, *Commentary on John's Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1978 [1886]), 1011.

<sup>23</sup> E. W. Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John* (Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, 1980 [1865]), 2:493.

<sup>24</sup> When Christ cleansed the temple He used words taken from Jeremiah 7:11. Jeremiah 7 contains the declaration of destruction upon the first Jewish temple. “Therefore I will do to the house which is called by My name, in which you trust, and to this place which I gave to you and your fathers, as I have done to Shiloh” (v. 14). The Jewish leaders would have taken our Lord's statement as a condemnation and threat of coming judgment.

“Then Jesus went out and departed from the temple, and His disciples came up to show Him the buildings of the temple. And Jesus said to them, ‘Do you not see all these things? Assuredly, I say to you, not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down’” (Mt. 24:1-2). Note that Matthew, writing to a predominantly Jewish audience, places this prediction immediately after Jesus’ declaration of judgment on the contemporary generation (Mt. 23:34-36) and the terrifying pronouncement, “Your house is left to you desolate” (Mt. 23:38); leaving out the story of the poor widow’s gift (Mk. 12:41-44; Lk. 21:1-4). Matthew also focuses his audience’s attention on the destruction of the temple complex. Jewish leaders would have regarded the temple as the center of their religion and as a symbol of their covenant relationship to Jehovah. Luke, however, writing to a predominately Gentile audience applies the prophecy to the whole city. “For days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment around you and close you in on every side, and level you, to the ground; and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not know the time of your visitation” (Lk. 19:43-44). This different emphasis between these authors is due to the fact that a Jewish audience would easily understand that the abandonment of the temple by Jehovah and its destruction entails the destruction of the people and city. It is of particular interest that in Ezekiel’s prophecy regarding Solomon’s temple, God first abandons the temple (9:3) before the temple is defiled (9:7) and the people of the city are slaughtered (9:7 ff.). Similarly, the prophet Jeremiah refers to the destruction of God’s house (7:14) and then the total destruction of Jerusalem and the cities of Judah (7:17, 20).

The extent of the devastation is given in the phrase “not one stone shall be left upon another.” As Jews, the disciples had great pride in their magnificent temple. The temple of Herod was indeed a grand spectacle. It was one of the wonders of the ancient world. Jesus shocked the disciples by predicting that the pride of the nation was doomed to complete humiliation. Our Lord’s phrase (literally in Greek, “stone upon stone”) is almost identical to the phrase used by the prophet Haggai in his preaching to encourage the Jews to rebuild the temple. “Now Jesus announces the approach of a day when utter devastation will overtake the city and the temple will be systematically dismantled”<sup>25</sup> Although the phrase “not one stone shall be left upon another” is hyperbolic or rhetorical and need not be taken literally, it was fulfilled literally regarding the temple complex of buildings. “But while a part of the substructure remains [e.g., the western wailing wall], the buildings on the platform of the *ieron* [temple, or temple area], to which the Lord referred, are wholly gone; not a stone there is left in its place.”<sup>26</sup> The extent of the destruction of the city was documented by the contemporary historian Josephus (A.D. 37-101). He writes, “Caesar gave orders that they should now demolish the entire city and temple, but should leave as many of the towers standing as were of the greatest immanency; that is, Phasaelus, and Hippicus, and Marianne, and so much of the wall as enclosed the city on the west side...but for all of the rest of the wall, it was so thoroughly laid even with the ground by those that dug it up to the foundation, that there was left nothing to make those that came thither believe it had ever been inhabited” (VII. I).<sup>27</sup>

Because of the current popularity of futurist interpretations, it is important to note that Jesus could not be speaking about another Jewish temple to be built almost 2,000 years in the future. Our Lord said “Do you not see all these things” to His disciples. The buildings to be

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<sup>25</sup> William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 452.

<sup>26</sup> Henry Barclay, *Commentary on Mark* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1977 [1913]), 296.

<sup>27</sup> Flavius Josephus, translated by William Whiston, *Josephus: Complete Works* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1960), 589.



destroyed were right in front of their eyes. Note also the phrase, “not one stone shall be left here upon another” (Mt. 24:2). The dispensational idea of a future temple has absolutely no basis in Scripture. Although it cannot be found in the prophets, such eschatological fantasies make for great profits.

## The Disciples’ Question

The disciples were understandably shocked by Christ's prediction. After leaving the temple area, Jesus and the apostles stopped to rest on the Mount of Olives. Mark's account tells us that they were facing the temple. “The position here of Christ and his disciples is not only striking in itself, but suited to enhance the grandeur of the prophetic discourse that follows.”<sup>28</sup> As soon as an opportunity arose, some of the disciples (the inner circle—Peter, James and John—plus Andrew, Peter's brother, Mk. 13:3) asked Jesus a multi-faceted question relating to the prophecy. It is likely that all the disciples had discussed Christ's prediction and that the four agreed to ask the Lord privately about the prediction while the others waited apart for the relayed response. Mark and Luke record the question as having two parts: *when* will these things occur and *what* are the signs that tell us these things are about to happen. Matthew writing to a Jewish audience adds a third clause regarding the end of the age. “[T]he disciples came to Him saying, ‘Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your coming, and the end of the age?’” (Mt. 24:3)?

The disciples' inquiry is crucial to an understanding of the Olivet Discourse, for if it is misunderstood, the discourse itself will be wrongly interpreted. Unfortunately, most students of prophecy today regard the inquiry as relating to two completely different events that are separated from each other by over 19 centuries. The first question (“when will these things be?”) is usually applied to the destruction of the temple by the Romans in A.D. 70. The second and third questions (“what will be the sign of Your coming and the end of the age?”) are applied to the second coming of Christ and the end of the world. This approach to the inquiry, while common, must be rejected for a number of reasons. (1) The disciples' inquiry comes directly as a result of Jesus' prediction that the temple then in existence was about to be completely destroyed. Therefore, we can safely assume that the disciples were not meditating on events in the distant future. Even if in their minds the coming in judgment and end of the age were to be coterminous with the second bodily coming of Christ, there can be no question but that they believed everything relating to their inquiry was simply a different aspect of the same great event. (2) The question “what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age” in Matthew's gospel, is paralleled in Mark's and Luke's account by, “what will be the sign when all these things will be fulfilled” (Mk. 13:4; Lk. 21:7). Matthew, writing to Jews, uses language significant to the old covenant people of God. The destruction is a coming in judgment that will dissolve the old covenant order. The Jewish age, that is, Israel's special status as a covenant nation was coming to a complete end. Mark and Luke, writing to a predominately Gentile audience, simply speak of a sign of impending doom on the temple and city. (3) That the inquiry refers to a single complex of events is evident in the repeated use of the phrase “*all these things* will come upon this generation” (23:36); “Do you not see *all these things*” (24:2). Then as His discussion of the destruction of Jerusalem comes to a close He again says “this generation will by no means pass away till *all these things* take place” (24:34). The phrase “these things” in

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<sup>28</sup> J. A. Alexander, *Mark* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1960 [1858]), 346.

Matthew 24:3 is parallel in its intention and reference to the “these things” in 23:36. The disciples regarded the judgment of the *contemporaneous* generation of Jews, the destruction of the *existing* temple and *the end of the Jewish age* as all part of the same complex of events. They held to the unity of the eschatological complex regarding the prediction of 24:2 as regards to the timing sequence of fulfillment.

(4) A proper understanding of the phrase “end of the age” in Matthew 24:3 supports the interpretation that the prophecy to 24:34 refers solely to events that occurred prior to A.D. 70. That many people regard Christ as speaking about events in the distant future is understandable given the misleading translation of the King James Version of the Bible (also the ASV). The KJV has the disciples asking our Lord for a sign of the “end of the world.” The Greek, however, does not say “the end of the world” (*kosmos*), but “the end of the age” (*aion*). In the New Testament, passages which speak of “the end of the age” or “the ends of the ages” usually refer to the end of the Jewish age or the permanent termination of the Jewish nation as the visible church, as a special covenant nation. Thus, the apostle Paul could write, “they were written for our admonition, upon whom the end of the ages have come” (1 Cor. 10:11). “It means that the Corinthian Christians had lived in and had witnessed the completion of the Mosaic and earlier epochs.”<sup>29</sup> Christ Himself appeared to put away sin “once at the end of the ages” (Heb. 9:26).

The first century apostolic understanding of the “end of the age” is reflected in the biblical phrase “the last days.” Many modern Christians have been conditioned by Bible prophecy books to think that we alone of all generations are living in the last days or at the end of the age. A study of the New Testament, however, reveals that the apostles themselves were living in the last days. Peter said, “He indeed was foreordained...but was manifest in *these last times* for you” (1 Pet. 1:20). The author of Hebrews said that God “has in *these last days* spoken to us by His Son” (Heb. 1:2). James, writing to Christians in his day, said “You have heaped up treasure in *the last days*” (Jas. 5:3). On the day of Pentecost, Peter applied the prophecy of Joel 2:28-32 to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that had just occurred saying “It shall come to pass in *the last days*, says God” (Ac. 2:17).<sup>30</sup> Since the divinely inspired apostles said that they were living in “the last days” at “the end of the age,” their question regarding the end of the age in Matthew 24:3 must apply to something that occurred in their own generation. The context and the manner in which the New Testament uses this terminology prove that they wanted to know when the temple would be destroyed and the Mosaic economy would end.

Such matters seem inconsequential to modern Christians, but to the disciples the destruction of the temple, the end of the sacrificial system and the end of Israel as a special covenant nation was exceedingly radical. From the time of Moses the true covenant religion was organized around one central sanctuary (Dt. 12:5 ff.). If a person wanted to join himself to the

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<sup>29</sup>Gordon H. Clark, *First Corinthians: A Contemporary Commentary* (Jefferson, MD: The Trinity Foundation, 1991 [1975]), 156.

<sup>30</sup>In 1 Corinthians 14:21 Paul quoted Isaiah 28:11-12, which connects foreign tongues to the impending destruction of Israel by a foreign nation. When Peter quoted Joel 2:28-32 on the day of Pentecost, he spoke of “the coming of the great and awesome day of the Lord.” The tongues on the day of Pentecost were a sign of impending doom on Israel. David Brown writes, “This well-known prophetic language was employed by our Lord in his prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem (see on Mark xiii. 24, 25); and to this the prediction quoted by Peter beyond doubt refers, when he seeks to fix the attention of his audience upon ‘the great and notable day of the Lord’-the day that closed their day of grace as a nation; the day when, ‘the judgment being set, and the books opened,’ they were adjudged to lose their standing as God’s visible witness upon the earth, and to have their whole civil and ecclesiastical polity swept away” (Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset and David Brown, *A Commentary: Critical, Experimental, and Practical on the Old and New Testaments* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973, Vol. 3, Part 2], 10).

true religion he or she would have to essentially become a part of the covenant nation (e.g., Ruth 1:16). With the coming of Christ, however, true worship will exist anywhere in the world where believers gather, hear the preaching of the word, sing psalms and partake of the sacraments. As Jesus had promised, “the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father....But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth” (Jn. 4:21, 23; cf. Mal. 1:11). Also, no longer did people have to become Jews in order to follow God for the apostles were to disciple all nations (Mt. 28:19) and preach the gospel to every creature (Mk. 16:15). The new covenant temple is the multi-national, pan-ethnic body of Christ-the church (Ac. 15:16 ff.; Eph. 2:21). (There is absolutely nothing in Scripture that predicts a future third temple. When the Bible is not speaking of rebuilding Zerubbabel’s temple, it speaks of the building of Christ’s church [Eph. 2:21; 4:12, 16; 1 Pet. 2:5, 9]).

When Jesus died on the cross “the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom” (Mt. 27:51). The whole sacrificial system (which included the types and ceremonies) was rendered obsolete by Christ’s perfect sacrifice. The inferior (Heb. 9:11-15), the shadow (Heb. 10:1; 8:4-5), the obsolete (Heb. 8:13), the symbolic (Heb. 9:9), and the ineffectual (Heb. 10:4) have been replaced by Jesus Christ and His perfect work. Once our Lord said “it is finished” (Jn. 19:30), the temple had no reason to exist. The temple system, which had created a wall of separation between Jews and Gentiles, has been removed by Christ (Eph. 2:11-22). The temple and the continued use of the animal sacrifices became visible symbols of the Jewish nation’s unbelief and rejection of their Messiah. Their continued use was an insult to Christ and His redemptive work. God, however, in His forbearance gave the nation one generation to repent and turn to Jesus before publicly meting out the covenant death penalty on the apostate Christ-persecuting nation. The new covenant kingdom, which was established definitively at our Lord’s resurrection, was exhibited in power at the divorce and dissolution of Israel in A.D. 70. The new covenant age was permanently established upon the smoking ruins of the old.

Note once again that the terminology of the disciples’ question, when compared with the rest of the New Testament, applies very specifically to their own generation. There is no sound exegetical reason for us to apply these questions to the future second bodily coming of Christ. As we study Jesus’ answer to the disciples’ inquiry, it will become even more clear that all the things discussed in verses 2 through 34 of Matthew 24 have all already taken place.

## Signs Preceding the End

The disciples asked Jesus when the destruction of the temple would take place and they wanted a sign to identify the coming of Christ in judgment. Our Lord answers the “when” in Matthew 24:34 with “this generation.” Regarding the request for a sign, Jesus discusses the history prior to the end giving the disciples seven distinct signs. Christ goes into considerable detail for a number of reasons. First and foremost, there is a deep concern for the welfare of His church. Our Lord wants to prepare the disciples for the false Messiahs and persecutions to come. Second, He does not want the disciples to panic and flee prematurely. The gospel is to be preached and the elect gathered from the land to the last possible moment. Thus, there is a progression in the signs from the general to the more specific. “[T]he signs seem to become more specific and pronounced until we reach the final, immediate precursor of the end.”<sup>31</sup> Third, Jesus

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<sup>31</sup> David Chilton, *The Great Tribulation* (Fort Worth, TX: Dominion Press, 1987), see also <http://www.freebooks.com/docs/html/dcgt/Chapter01.htm>), 3.

wants to make sure that the Jerusalem church is not destroyed by the coming devastation. When they see “the abomination of desolation” they are to immediately flee to the mountains.

### *1. False Messiahs (Mt. 24:5; Mk. 13:5, 6; Lk. 21:8)*

Our Lord begins the discourse with a word of caution. “For many will come in My name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and will deceive many” (Mt. 24:5). The disciples are to be on guard for the many false christs and false prophets (Mt. 24:24) who will make their appearance before the destruction of Jerusalem. Tragically, these imposters will be very effective in gaining a following. Did this prophecy come to pass before Jerusalem was destroyed? Yes, it did. Both the Bible and secular historians confirm our Lord's prediction. When the Jewish leader Gamaliel discussed the claims of the apostles regarding Jesus Christ with the council, he said, “For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody. A number of men, about four hundred, joined him....After this man, Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census, and drew away many people after him” (Ac. 5:36-37). Luke also mentions Simon whom the church fathers tell us was a significant false messiah in his day. “But there was a certain man called Simon, who previously practiced sorcery in the city and astonished the people of Samaria, claiming that he was someone great, to whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, ‘This man is the great power of God’” (Ac. 8:9-10). “Justin, himself a Samaritan, reports in *I Apol.* 26.3, *Dial.* 120.6 that really all his countrymen revered Simon as the highest god. It is clear from the history of his movement that ‘the great power’ was a Samaritan designation for the supreme deity. Simon declared that this deity had come to earth in his person for the redemption of men.”<sup>32</sup> “According to different early writers, he professed to be the Logos, the Messiah, the Samaritan Archangel, and the Power of God personified.”<sup>33</sup>

There were so many false teachers in the first century that John could write: “Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour” (1 Jn. 2:18). The noteworthy phrase, “it is [present tense] the last hour” reveals that the prevalence of false teachers indicated to John that a major eschatological event was about to occur. The only major event that we know occurred shortly after this epistle was composed was the destruction of Jerusalem. (This author rejects the late date (A.D. 92) for the authorship of 1 John).

Although false messiahs and teachers can be found throughout church history, it is the prevalence of such imposters in the first century Palestine that Jesus said is significant as a sign. This prediction was literally fulfilled.

### *2. Wars and Rumors of Wars*

In the second preliminary sign our Lord spoke of a plurality of conflicts. “And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not troubled; for all these things must come to

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<sup>32</sup> Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1971), 303.

<sup>33</sup> J. A. Alexander, *Acts* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1963 [1857]), 327. The early church father, Irenaeus wrote, “Simon Magus set himself to contend against the Apostles, that he might also appear glorious. He was for his Magic honored with a statue by Claudius Caesar. He was glorified by man as a god, and taught that himself was he that appeared as the Son among the Jews, that in Samaria he descended as the Father, and in other nations came as the Holy Ghost. That he was the most sublime virtue, that is, he which was the Father over all, and that he was content to be called by the highest titles than many men did call him” (Henry Hammond translator [1681], as quoted in John L. Bray, *Matthew 24 Fulfilled* [Lakeland, FL: John L. Bray Ministry, 1996] 25).

pass, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of sorrows” (Mt. 24:6-8). The disciples will hear of wars (that is, actual conflicts which are taking place) and they will hear rumors of wars (that is, they will hear talk of conflicts that the people think are about to break forth). The outbreaks that occur in various provinces of the Roman Empire will cause uneasy whispers and trembling among the people.

Sensationalist prophecy peddlers often quote this passage and then list the many wars of the twentieth century or the dozens of conflicts that have occurred since Israel became a nation in 1948. The problem with this interpretation is that if this is a sign meant for the whole inhabited earth before the second coming, then it is essentially useless as a sign. The reason we are making this point is that for “wars and rumors of wars” to be significant as a sign, there must first be a period of relative peace. But, if we include the whole planet there are always “wars and rumors of wars.” If, however, our Lord was speaking of the Roman Empire proper and the region of the Middle East, Christ’s words were very significant because there had been peace for a whole generation. The *Pax Romana* (Roman Peace) was established under Augustus in 17 B.C.. Christ and the apostles lived during the most peaceful period of the Roman Empire. The last major insurrection in Palestine occurred before Jesus was born in 7 B.C.

Jesus’ reference must then have applied to the conflicts which arose in the Roman Empire and Palestine after the ascension and before the fall of Jerusalem. In Palestine there was “the expedition of Cuspius Fadius against Theudas and of Felix against the Egyptian Jew; the riots at Jerusalem under Agrippa II; the early movements of the last struggle which began in A.D. 66.”<sup>34</sup> The Roman Empire became filled with strife, and wars and various insurrections. “In Rome itself, four emperors came to a violent death in the short space of eighteen months. Were one to give account of all the disturbances that actually occurred within the Empire after Jesus’ death, he would be constrained to write a separate book.”<sup>35</sup> Because the Roman Empire consisted of several separate nations held together by the conquests and tyranny of Rome, the prophecy of Jesus that “nation will rise against nation” was literally fulfilled.

Christ’s added injunction “not to be troubled for the end is not yet” (Mt. 24:65) serves the purpose of informing the disciples that such turmoil does not mean the end is immediate. This sign means there are distant clouds on the horizon. Indeed, so distant that the disciples must remain diligent in their task of making disciples. “[T]hey are not to be disconcerted or diverted from their task.”<sup>36</sup> The time to make haste and flee the area has not yet arrived.

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<sup>34</sup> Henry Barclay Swete, *Commentary on Mark*, 298. “They heard of war! In A.D. 40 there was a disturbance at Mesopotamia which (**Josephus** says) caused the deaths of more than 50,000 people. In A.D. 49 a tumult at Jerusalem at the time of the Passover resulted in 10,000 to 20,000 deaths. At Caesarea contentions between Jewish people and other inhabitants resulted in over 20,000 Jews being killed. As Jews moved elsewhere, over 20,000 were destroyed by Syrians. At Scythopolis, over 13,000 Jews were killed. Thousands were killed in other places, and at Alexandria 50,000 were killed. At Damascus, 10,000 were killed in an hour’s time. These were not wars of a world-wide scope as we know the world today. They were in Galilee, and in Syria, and in the areas east and south of Judaea. And Judaea was in revolt against Rome, ‘while the armies of Spain, Gaul and Germany, Illyricum and Syria, converged upon Italy, to decide who should succeed to Nero’s purple’” (John L. Bray, 28).

<sup>35</sup> J. Marcellus Kirk, *An Eschatology of Victory* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971), 92.

<sup>36</sup> William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, 458.

### 3. Natural Disasters

Jesus extends the description of wars and strife in the empire with earthquakes, famines and pestilences. “There will be famines, pestilences and earthquakes in various places” (Mt. 24:7). The linking of wars, famines and pestilence is common in prophetic pronouncements of divine judgments (cf. Jer. 14:12; 21:7; Ezek. 5:12; 14:12-23; Rev. 6:3-8). Earthquakes also are often associated in Scripture with God’s judgment against sin (Isa. 29:6; Rev. 6:12; 8:5; 11:13, 19; 16:18), and the deliverance of Christ's people from death (Mt. 27:51-52) and persecution (Ac. 16:26).

Did these predictions come to pass in the generation prior to the destruction of Jerusalem? Yes. They all were fulfilled. In the book of Acts we read, “Then one of them, named Agabus, stood up and showed by the Spirit that there was going to be a great famine throughout all the world, which also happened in the days of Claudius Caesar. Then the disciples, each according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea” (11:28-29). The famine prophesied in Acts occurred in the ninth year of Claudius (A.D. 49). “It was great at Rome, -and therefore probably Egypt and Africa, on which the Romans depended so much for supplies, were themselves much affected by it. Suetonius speaks of *continual droughts*; and Tacitus of *death of crops, and thence famine*, about the same time. There was famine in Judea in the reign of Claudius...”<sup>37</sup> This great famine did indeed affect the whole world (*oikoumene*, the inhabited world; an expression often used in Jesus’ day to describe the Roman Empire). There were also a series of localized famines in A.D. 41-54 as well as a particularly severe famine in Palestine between 46 and 48.<sup>38</sup> Remember Paul’s appeal for funds to relieve the Jerusalem church in 1 Corinthians 16:1-5 and Romans 15:25-28.

There was pestilence just as our Lord predicted. When warfare and famine occur to large bodies of people it invariably leads to outbreaks of disease. “And as to pestilences, though their occurrence might, as above, be inferred from the other, we have distinct accounts of pestilence at Rome (A.D. 65) in Suetonius and Tacitus, which in a single autumn carried off 30,000 persons at Rome. But such matters as these are not often related by historians, unless of more than usual severity.”<sup>39</sup>

Our Lord predicted earthquakes in various places. This too came to pass. The major earthquakes that occurred after the Olivet Discourse but before the destruction of Jerusalem noted by historians are: Crete (A.D. 46 or 47), Rome (A.D. 51), Phrygia (A.D. 53), Laodicea (A.D. 60), Campania (A.D. 62 or 63), Pompeii (A.D. 63), and Judea (according to Josephus).<sup>40</sup> There is abundant historical evidence that the generation leading up to the destruction of the temple was one of unusual seismic activity. Seneca wrote (A.D. 58): “How often have cities of Africa and Achaea fallen with one fatal shock! How many cities have been swallowed up in

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<sup>37</sup> Henry Alford, *The New Testament For English Readers: Containing the Authorized Version...and a Critical and Explanatory Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 1:163.

<sup>38</sup> See Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 374.

<sup>39</sup> Henry Alford, 1:163.

<sup>40</sup> See Henry Alford, 1:163. There are also the three supernatural earthquakes mentioned in Scripture. One occurred at the crucifixion (Mt. 27:54), another at the resurrection (28:2) and still another when God set Peter free from prison (Ac. 16:26). Wilhelmus á Brakel writes, “The earth shook again at His resurrection, which was not only a proof of His divinity, but also of the wrath of God against the Jews and their land which would be destroyed and left destitute. The inhabitants would perish miserably and their religion would be taken from them and be transferred to the Gentiles. It also indicated that all temporal ceremonies were now terminated and that an unchangeable religion had taken place” (*The Christian's Reasonable Service* [Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1992], 1:627).

Syria, how many in Macedonia! How often have Pathos become a ruin! News has often been brought us of the demolition of whole cities at once.”<sup>41</sup> Note, once again that if one applies these signs (earthquakes in various places, famines and pestilences) to the whole planet earth, they essentially are meaningless, for over the entire planet these calamities are always in existence. If, however, they are to be applied to the Roman Empire (southern Europe, the Middle East, North Africa), they are noteworthy as signs.

After noting these signs, Jesus told the disciples that they are to be regarded as signaling the beginning of the end. “All these are the beginning of sorrows” (Mt. 24:8). The word translated “sorrows” (*odionon*) is used in Scripture for both the sharp pains of childbirth (Ps. 48:7; 1 Th. 5:3) and the pain of death (Ps. 18:5; Ac. 2:24). In rabbinic literature the phrase “the beginning of sorrows” referred to a period of intense sufferings which were to take place before the coming of deliverance of the Messiah (Book of Jubilees, 23:18; Apoc. of Baruch 27-29). “In the OT the pangs of birth are a recurring image of divine judgment, often in the context of God’s eschatological action (cf. Isa. 13:8; 26:17; Mic. 4:9 ff.; Hos. 13:13; Jer. 4:31; 6:24; 13:21; 22:23; 49:22; 50:43).”<sup>42</sup> Our Lord’s statement suggests that even when these signs take place the disciples will still have an extended period of time in which to minister to Israel and Jerusalem.

#### 4. *Persecution*

After concentrating on convulsions and calamities in the Roman Empire, Jesus turns His attention on the rise of persecution against the church, and betrayal and apostasy within the church. These events will occur at the time the first birth pangs appear. “Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for My name’s sake” (Mt. 24:9; cf. vs. 10-13). The events described here are very specific and are addressed directly to the disciples. Although they apply to the whole church of that period, we must not neglect the fact that Christ says the apostles themselves shall see and suffer these things.

The tribulation predicted by our Lord is well documented in the New Testament. The first persecution is recorded in Acts chapter 4 where Peter and John are arrested, placed in custody (4:3), commanded not to preach (4:18) and threatened by the Sanhedrin (4:21). In Acts chapter 5 the apostles are arrested, placed in prison (5:18) and commanded once again to stop teaching in Jesus’ name (5:28). The persecution escalates in Acts chapter 6 when Stephen is arrested and falsely accused of blasphemy (6:12-13). This results in Stephen’s murder (7:58-60). A “great persecution” is discussed in Acts chapter 8. It is so severe that the Jerusalem church is scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. In this persecution both men and women are dragged from their homes, placed in prison (Ac. 8:1, 3; 9:1-2, 26:9-10) and put to death (Ac. 26:10). Saul even

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<sup>41</sup> Seneca as quoted in Henry Alford, 1:163.

<sup>42</sup> William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, 458-459. In the gospel of Luke, the parallel to Matthew 24:7 and Mark 13:8 adds “great signs from heaven.” Modern prophecy speculators have on occasion pointed to the great increase of UFO sightings since 1952 as a fulfillment of Luke 21:11. Since we have established that at this point in the discourse Jesus is still discussing signs prior to the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70, there is not need for us to fantasize even though it may be great fun and certainly sells a lot of books. The truly important question is this. Were there notable signs in the heavens prior to the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus? Indeed, there were such signs. A comet appeared in A.D. 60 in the 9<sup>th</sup> year of Nero’s reign that caused distress among the people. (In the ancient world comets were viewed as signs of impending doom.) In A.D. 66 Halley’s Comet appeared. “Historians have linked the appearance of Halley’s comet not only with the death of Nero, but with the destruction of Jerusalem four years later” (Demar, 82; for historical documentation see Demar, 82 and 90). Once again, the signs set before the disciples by Jesus find a perfect fulfillment in their own generation (A.D. 30 - A.D. 70).

attempted to force believers to blaspheme the Lord (Ac. 26:11). In Acts chapter 12 Herod also begins to persecute the church “because he saw that it pleased the Jews” (vs. 3). Herod’s policy led to the murder of James (12:2) and the arrest of Peter (12:4-5). Fortunately, God delivered the apostle by supernatural means (12:7ff.).

The disciples were also persecuted by the Greeks and Romans. At the instigation of unbelieving Jews, the mob at Lystra “stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead” (Ac. 14:19). Paul gives us a glimpse of his experience as an apostle to the Gentiles in 2 Corinthians 11: “From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren” (vs. 24-26). In 1 Corinthians Paul speaks of the “present distress” (7:26). In 2 Thessalonians the apostle writes about the suffering of believers “in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure” (1:4) and promises that God will “repay with tribulation those who trouble you” (1:6). Peter warns the church “concerning the fiery trial which is about to try you” (1 Pet. 4:12). The Roman persecution, which was often sporadic and unorganized, became an official policy under Nero. Bromily writes, “A drastic change came in July of A.D., 64, when Nero accused of setting a disastrous fire in Rome and unable to clear himself by gifts or sacrifices, decided to make the Christians scapegoats, and started a persecution which for its cruelty would evoke censure even from those who regarded Christianity as a debased superstition (Tacitus Ann. xv. 44). References to this persecution may perhaps be found in 1 Peter, and also in 2 Timothy, in which Paul mentions his trial and impending death. 1 Clem. 1:1 also refers to the martyrdom of Peter and Paul at this time, and Eusebius (HE ii.25.5ff.) adds that Peter suffered death by crucifixion and Paul by beheading. If Revelation belongs to the age of Nero, the persecution extended to Asia Minor, for the opening letters mention pressures and martyrdoms (2:2, 10, 13, 19; 3:8), and the author himself suffered exile for the word of God and the witness of Christ (1:9).”<sup>43</sup>

Although persecution in one form or another has always plagued the church of Christ throughout its history, only the persecutions between the ascension and destruction of the temple area are the direct fulfillment of Jesus’ words in Matthew 24:9. One must not forget the context of our Lord’s statement (Mt. 23:34) where he chides the Jewish leaders because they will persecute the new covenant “prophets, wise men and scribes.” They will fill up the measure of their fathers’ guilt (Mt. 23:32) and thus all these things will come upon their generation (Mt. 23:36).

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<sup>43</sup> G. W. Bromily, “Persecute; Persecution” in G. W. Bromily General Editor, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 3:772. Philip Schaff gives us a glimpse of the barbarities of Nero. He writes, “A ‘vast multitude’ of Christians was put to death in the most shocking manner. Some were crucified, probably in mockery of the punishment of Christ, some sewed up in the skin of wild beasts and exposed to the voracity of mad dogs in the arena. The satanic tragedy reached its climax at night in the imperial gardens on the slope of the Vatican (which embraced, it is supposed, the present site of the place and church of St. Peter): Christian men and women, covered with pitch or oil or resin, and nailed to posts of pine, were lighted and burned as torches for the amusement of the mob; while Nero, in fanatical dress, figured in a horse race, and displayed his art as a charioteer. Burning alive was the ordinary punishment of incendiaries; but only the cruel ingenuity of this imperial monster, under the inspiration of the devil, could invent such a horrible system of illumination” (*History of the Christian Church* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991 (1910)], 1:381-382).



## 5. *Betrayal, Apostasy and Lawlessness*

Jesus said that the generation preceding the destruction of the temple will be one of betrayal, apostasy and lawlessness. “And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another. Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold” (Mt. 24:10-13). There was an incredible hatred of Christ and the gospel among the Jews in that first generation of the church. Christianity was seen as a betrayal of the Jewish religion, the temple and the nation. Jews who betrayed their own family members over to prison and execution believed they were doing so out of service to God. Jesus had earlier elucidated the degree of hatred and betrayal saying, “Now brother will deliver up brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and cause them to be put to death. And you will be hated by all for My name’s sake...and a man’s enemies will be those of his own household” (Mt. 10:21, 22, 36). Our Lord’s statement also likely refers to Jewish believers who rejected the faith and who “like Judas, use[d] their knowledge and their former connection to help to destroy the faithful by denouncing and by delivering them up.”<sup>44</sup>

The apostolic church also had a great problem with false teachers and apostasy. There were the Judaizers who struck at the very heart of the gospel by insisting upon human merit and Jewish ceremonies as necessary to salvation (cf. Ac. 15:1; Gal. 1:6-7; 3:1). There were the antinomian Gnostics who taught that obedience to God's word as a fruit of saving faith was unnecessary (1 Jn. 2:3-4). John had to deal with the Nicolaitan antinomians who taught that committing acts of sexual immorality were lawful for believers (Rev. 2:6; 3:15). There were even Gnostic teachers who taught that Jesus did not have a true human body. “For many deceivers have gone out into the world who do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh” (2 Jn. 7). Paul had to warn the Ephesian church of “savage wolves [who] will come in among you, not sparing the flock...speaking perverse things to draw away disciples after themselves” (Ac. 20:29-30). He warned the Corinthian church of “false apostles, deceitful workers” who transform “themselves into apostles of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:13). Paul instructed Timothy to stop false teachers (1 Tim. 1:3-4, 7, 19-20; 6:3-5, 20-21, 2 Tim. 2:16-18), some of whom even taught that “the resurrection is already past” (2 Tim. 2:18). The problem of false teachers was so prevalent that Peter wrote, “But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed” (2 Pet. 2:1-2; cf. 2:1-22; 3:1-9). Paul, writing about his own generation, said, “Now the Spirit expressly says that in the latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons” (1 Tim. 4:1). Although this passage is usually directly applied to the rise of Romanism or the heresies of our own day, we need to keep in mind that the apostolic church was living in the last days—at the end of the Jewish age.

There also was a general increase of lawlessness just as our Lord predicted. When Paul described the end result of suppressing the truth of God in unrighteousness in his epistle to Romans, he was describing the Greco-Roman culture of his own day. He writes, “For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature. Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful, and receiving in themselves the

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<sup>44</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 933.

penalty of their error which was due. And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting; being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; they are whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful” (Rom. 1:26-31). Throughout the Roman Empire there was gross sexual immorality: homosexuality, pederasty, prostitution and fornication. A reading of the epistles reveals that heathen sexual practices were affecting the various churches. There were problems with incest (1 Cor. 5:1), prostitution (1 Cor.6:15-16) and fornication (1 Cor. 5:1, 11; Rev. 2:20). The Roman Empire was also notorious for violence and cruelty. People would actually watch gladiators cut each other to pieces for entertainment. Gladiators, political enemies and even innocent Christians were torn apart by wild beasts. The emperors Caligula and Nero were notorious for their disgusting perversions (e.g., bestiality, incest, homosexuality) and murderous rage (e.g., assassination, murder, torture, etc.). The great increase in lawlessness extended to Judea (murder, adultery, terrorism and persecution) and is well documented by Josephus. While there is no question but that our own culture is growing more evil at the present time, we must not make the mistake so common today of applying this prediction to our generation, for it was fulfilled over 19 centuries ago.

After discussing persecution, betrayal, apostasy and lawlessness, Jesus encourages His disciples to persevere through the coming trials. “But he who endures to the end will be saved” (Mt. 24:13). Although it is true that all those who profess faith in Christ must persevere in that faith and the good works that are the fruit of saving faith if they are to be saved and go to heaven (Mt. 7:21; 13:3-23; 1 Cor. 6:9; Heb. 3:12-19; 4:2, 6; Jas. 2:14-26; 1 Jn. 2:3-4; 3:6, 8-10; Rev. 22:14, etc.), the passage before us (taken in its context) refers not to being saved from hell but to being saved from the coming wrath upon the city. Christ says that great trials are coming, that believers will be hated, persecuted and betrayed. In such a situation there will be a great temptation for believers (especially Jewish Christians) to return to their former religion. Our Lord says that only those who endure these trials will be saved from the slaughter. “It is most interesting to know that none of the Christians perished during the final siege and destruction of Jerusalem. When Titus the Roman general finally came into the city, he did not find a single Christian there. Of course, they had all fled the city upon the instruction of Jesus when they saw the armies surrounding the city (see vs. 16-20 [note the parallel in Lk. 21:20-21]).”<sup>45</sup> Gill concurs, “The same shall be saved; with a temporal salvation, when Jerusalem, and the unbelieving inhabitants of it shall be destroyed: for those that believed in Christ, many of them, through persecution, were obliged to remove from thence; and others, by a voice from heaven, were bid to go out of it, as they did; and removed to Pella, a village a little beyond the Jordan, and so were preserved from the general calamity; and also with an everlasting salvation, which is the case of all that persevere to the end, as all true believers in Christ will.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> John L. Bray, *Matthew 24 Fulfilled*, 32.

<sup>46</sup> John Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament* (Streamwood, IL: Primitive Baptist Library, 1979 [1809]), 1:288. It is interesting that after using the pronoun “you” in verses 4 through 9, Jesus changes to the pronoun “he” (“he who endures”) in verse 13. It is likely that this change was made for two reasons. First, Christ wants to make it perfectly clear that this injunction applies to the whole church and not just the apostles. Second, our Lord knew that when the final siege of Jerusalem began only the apostle John would still be alive.

## 6. Worldwide Evangelization

We now come to the point in the discourse where futurists say that any idea of a past fulfillment is totally absurd. Jesus says that the gospel must be preached throughout the whole world before the end will come. “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come” (Mt. 24:14). Had the gospel been preached in all the world when Israel was destroyed by the Romans in A.D. 70? The answer to this question is both yes and no depending how one interprets the word *world* (*oikoumen*). If by “world” Jesus meant the world *as we understand it*, then obviously it could not have been fulfilled. There were no preachers in North or South America, China, Japan, Greenland or even Russia at that early date. However, if we interpret the word *world* according to its common New Testament usage, then Jesus' words did come to pass before A.D. 70. To the inspired authors of the gospels and epistles the term “world” (*oikoumen*) meant the inhabited “civilized” world of their day—the Roman Empire. Luke writes, “And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world [*oikoumene*] should be registered” (Lk. 2:1). The word *world* in this context obviously refers to Roman citizens and subjects, not Aztecs and Eskimos. Likewise Acts 11:28 reads, “Agabus...showed by the Spirit that there was going to be a great famine throughout all the world, which also happened in the days of Claudius Caesar.” Hackett writes, “*Over all the inhabited land-i.e. Judea and the adjacent countries, or, according to some, the Roman Empire. The Greek and Roman writers employed the inhabited (land) (oikoumene) to denote the Greek and Roman world, and a Jewish writer would naturally employ such a term to denote the Jewish world. Josephus appears to restrict the word to Palestine in Ant., 8.13.4.*”<sup>47</sup>

Thus, not only is it biblically permissible to regard the phrase “all the world” as the whole Roman Empire, the Bible also explicitly teaches that the gospel was indeed preached throughout the whole world before the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Writing around A.D. 64 to the Colossian Church Paul said, “...the word of the truth of the gospel...has come to you, as it has also in all the world” (Col. 1:5-6). He also exhorted the Colossians to have “the hope of the gospel which you heard, which was preached to every creature under heaven” (Col. 1:23). To the church at Rome Paul wrote, “I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world” (Rom. 1:8). Plummer writes, “Her faith was spoken of over the Roman empire, which now embraced Western Asia and Northern Africa, as well as nearly all Europe. In Luke 2:1 the phrase *all the world* is so used, though the Greek terms are not the same in the two places [one uses *oikoumene*, the other *kosmos*]; but they mean the same thing.”<sup>48</sup> In Romans 10:18 Paul says that the voice of gospel preachers, “has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world.” “According to the infallible Word of God, the Gospel was indeed preached to the whole world, well before Jerusalem was destroyed in A.D. 70.”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Horatio B. Hackett, *Commentary on Acts* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1992 [1882]), 141. J. A. Alexander writes, “*Throughout all the world, literally on (or over) the whole inhabited (earth).* This phrase, though strictly universal in its import, is often used in a restricted sense. The Greeks, in their particular pride of race, applied it to their own country; the Romans, in like manner, to the empire. A similar restriction of the term by Jesus to Palestine would be perfectly analogous, though it may not be demonstrable in usage” (Acts, 438). Alexander then goes on to say that in this passage it refers to the Roman Empire (pp. 438-439).

<sup>48</sup> Wm. S. Plumer, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1971 [1870]), 46.

<sup>49</sup> David Chilton, 4.

But, some may object, what about the phrase “as a witness to all nations” in Matthew 24:14. Doesn’t the designation “all nations” rule out the interpretation that applies this passage to the Roman Empire. No, not at all! Luke in the Acts of the Apostles wrote, “And there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven” (2:5). Does this passage teach that there were Jews from Mongolia, China, New Zealand, South Africa, Peru and Canada at the feast of Pentecost? No, obviously not. Luke even lists the nations represented: “Parthians and Medes and Elamites, those dwelling in Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya adjoining Cyrene, visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs -- we hear them speaking in our own tongues the wonderful works of God”(Acts 2:9-11). Luke essentially lists a series of Roman provinces “passing from the extreme west (Italy) to the extreme south (Arabia);”<sup>50</sup> also covering the island of Crete as well as North Africa. Paul also says that the gospel “has been made known to all nations” (Rom. 16:26). Given the inspired teaching of both Luke and Paul there is sound biblical warrant for applying the direct fulfillment of Matthew 24:14 to the generation living when Jerusalem was destroyed.

### *7. The Abomination of Desolation*

The last sign that the disciples are to look for before “the great tribulation” (Mt. 24:21), the coming in judgment (Mt. 24:27) and the destruction of the temple is “the abomination of desolation.” “Therefore when you see the ‘abomination of desolation,’ spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place” (whoever reads, let him understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let him who is on the housetop not go down to take anything out of his house. And let him who is in the field not go back to get his clothes. But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! And pray that your flight may not be in winter or on the Sabbath” (Mt. 24:15-20).

Thus far Jesus had instructed the disciple regarding general signs (false christs, wars, famines, pestilences, earthquakes, persecutions, false prophets), the beginning of sorrows. Our Lord now turns His attention to a very specific sign, the “abomination of desolation.” When this sign appears, believers in Judea are to immediately flee to the mountains. In order to understand the phrase “abomination of desolation” we must consider the background, the immediate context and the parallel passage in Luke.

## The Background

In order to examine the background of this phrase we will need to consider the law, the prophets, the specific reference in Daniel and Jewish inter-testamental history.

(1) In the law of God, and “abomination” applies to idolatry (Dt. 7:25-26; 12:31; 17:3-4; 27:15); the corruption of worship (Lev. 7:18) and the offering of a defective sacrifice (Dt. 17:1); practicing a false religion, spiritualism and divination (Dt. 18:9 ff.); homosexuality and cross-dressing (Lev. 18:22; 20:13; Dt. 22:5); unclean animals (Lev. 11:10-13, 18, 20, 23, 41-42); the tithe of a harlot (Dt. 23:18) and unjust or dishonest business practices (Dt. 25:16). Interestingly, Israel in the days of our Lord was guilty of corrupting the worship of God (Mt. 15:3 ff.). They rejected Christ’s perfect sacrifice and continued to offer the blood of bulls and goats. Thus, they

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<sup>50</sup> J. A. Alexander, Acts, 54.

were guilty of offering a defective sacrifice (cf. Heb. 9:11 ff.). Further, the Jews had turned the temple into a “house of merchandise” and “a den of thieves” (Mt. 21:13). The Jews had made the true religion of Jehovah into a false religion, and unclean thing, and abomination. Thus, Jesus proclaimed the temple “desolate.”

(2) When the prophets set forth God's reason for the destruction of the cities of Israel it was because the people had committed abominations. They even set up abominations in God's temple. ““For the children of Judah have done evil in My sight,’ says the Lord. ‘They have set their abominations in the house which is called by My name, to pollute it...the land shall be desolate’” (Jer. 7:30, 34). Ezekiel's prophecy is virtually identical to Jeremiah's in its reason for desolation. ““Therefore, as I live,’ says the Lord GOD, ‘surely, because you have defiled My sanctuary with all your detestable things and with all your abominations, therefore I will also diminish you; My eye will not spare, nor will I have any pity...Moreover I will make you a waste [lit. a desolation] and a reproach among the nations...a reproach, a taunt, a lesson, and an astonishment to the nations that are all around you, when I execute judgments among you in anger and in fury and in furious rebukes. I, the Lord, have spoken’” (Ezek. 5:11, 14-15). The emphasis in the prophets is that the Jews had committed abominations (e.g., idolatry, corrupt worship) that resulted in desolation. If the Jews who lived in the period of the major prophets received destruction and horror for defiling God's house (which typified Christ), then we should not be surprised when God brings desolation on the people and city who crucified the Son of God.

(3) The phrase “the abomination of desolation” is used in Daniel 11:31 and 12:31 to describe Antiochus Epiphanes and his abomination that occurred in the inter-testamental period. Antiochus surnamed Epiphanes was the Greek ruler of Syria from 174 to 164 B.C. His efforts at the Hellenization of the Jews and at the stamping out of Jewish resistance are discussed in the uninspired apocryphal book 1 Maccabees. Beasley-Murray writes, “Antiochus Epiphanes, on returning from his conquest of Egypt, entered Jerusalem and plundered the temple. He later sent an official, who by guile attacked the Jews, plundered Jerusalem, and set it ablaze. Orders were given that sacrifices in the temple should cease and the ancestral law no longer be observed. Altars, idols, and sacred precincts were to be established, and ‘swine and other unclean beasts’ were to be offered in sacrifice. This reached its climax on the fifteenth day of Kislev, 167 B.C.; ‘the abomination of desolation was set up on the altar....On the twenty-fifth day of the month they offered sacrifice on the pagan altar which was on top of the altar of the Lord’ (1 Macc. 1:54, 59)...there is evidence that Antiochus ordered not only a pagan altar to be placed on the altar of the Jerusalem temple but also an image of Zeus made in his own likeness.”<sup>51</sup> Although there is no question that Antiochus and his activities would come to the disciples' mind when our Lord referred to the abomination of desolation in Daniel's prophecy, these prophecies were already fulfilled and could not be directly applied to events in the disciples' own generation. Antiochus could at the most only serve as a type of a future leader who committed abominations and brought destruction to Jerusalem. There is, however, a reference in Daniel to “the abomination of desolation” that cannot be applied to Antiochus. This reference applies to a period of time after the crucifixion of Christ. We will now turn our attention to this passage found in Daniel chapter 9.

(4) In Matthew 24:15 Jesus makes a specific reference to the ““abomination of desolation,’ spoken of by Daniel the prophet.” Our Lord refers to Daniel 9:27, “Then he shall

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<sup>51</sup> George R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Last Days: The Interpretation of the Olivet Discourse* (Peabody, MA: Hendriksen, 1993), 409.

confirm a covenant with many for one week; but in the middle of the week He shall bring an end to sacrifice and offering. And on the wing of abominations shall be one who makes desolate.” Contrary to dispensational futurist interpretations of this passage, Jesus sets before His disciples a prediction of the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 by the armies of Rome. Dispensationalists argue that verse 27 refers to a future (i.e. future even for us) antichrist who will make a covenant with Israel but who will break this agreement and force them to stop their sacrifices in their rebuilt temple. The antichrist will then set up a statue of himself in the temple, proclaim himself to be God and demand that people worship him. There are a number of reasons why such a theory must be rejected as unscriptural. First, the passage does not say that he will *make* a covenant but that he will *confirm* a covenant. A covenant is confirmed that is already in existence. Who confirmed the covenant? None other than Jesus Christ. Most scholars rightly argue that the final week of Daniel 9 begins with the baptism of Jesus, the anointing of the most Holy One (Dan. 9:24). Christ ministered to the Jews for 3½ years, then in the middle of the week “He shall bring an end to sacrifice and offerings” (Dan. 9:27). This statement has nothing to do with a supposed (still future) antichrist that will break a covenant with the Jews. It refers to the fact that Christ’s perfect sacrifice of Himself brought a complete end to the sacrificial system. Our Lord confirmed the divine covenant of God’s redemptive grace by His substitutionary death. Zacharias said by the Holy Spirit that Jesus came “to perform the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember His holy covenant” (9:22). This interpretation fits in perfectly with the immediate context (vs. 26) which says that after the sixty-two weeks (i.e. sometime in the last week) “Messiah shall be cut off but not for Himself.” This is a clear reference to Jesus’ vicarious atonement.

Second, there is absolutely no biblical evidence for a future rebuilt *physical* temple. All of the biblical references to a rebuilt temple refer either to the temple rebuilt after the Jews returned from the Babylonian exile or refer in a spiritual manner to the New Covenant church (cf. Ezek. 47:1-12). Note the following New Testament reference. “After this I will return and will rebuild the tabernacle of David which has fallen down; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will set it up” (Ac. 15:16). (In context this passage is an explicit reference to God building up His church by calling out the Gentiles.) “Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit” Eph. 2:19-22). In Matthew 23 Jesus abandoned the earthly temple in Jerusalem (vs. 38). Further, Paul says that the earthly Jerusalem corresponds to Hagar and is in bondage (Gal. 4:26). The author of Hebrews exhorts Christians to go outside the earthly Jerusalem, “For here [on earth] we have no continuing city, but we seek the one to come” (Heb. 13:13-14). Jesus told the Samaritan woman “the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father” (Jn. 5:21). In other words in the new covenant era, Jerusalem and the temple mount hold no special religious significance whatsoever. The church is God’s temple. “You also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 2:5). Indeed, even if the Jews did somehow rebuild a temple and offer sacrifices in Jerusalem it would be a blasphemous rejection of the atoning blood of Christ. The New Testament is crystal clear when it speaks of Christ rendering the Old Testament sacrificial system obsolete. Hodge writes,

That the ceremonial law introduced by Moses was typical of Christ and his work is taught throughout the New Testament, and especially in the Epistle to the Hebrews. It was declared to be “a shadow of things to come, but the body is of Christ.” The tabernacle and its service were “patterns of things in the heavens,” and figures, antitypes, of the true tabernacle, into which Christ has now entered for us. Col. ii. 17; Heb. ix. 23, 24. Christ is said to have effected our salvation by offering himself as a sacrifice and by acting as our high priest. Eph. v. 2; Heb. ix. 11, 12, 26, 28; xii. 11, 12. That the coming of Christ has superseded and for ever done away with the ceremonial law is also evident from the very fact just stated—that its ceremonies were types of him, that they were the shadows of which he was the substance. Their whole purpose and design were evidently discharged as soon as his real work of satisfaction was accomplished; and therefore it is not only a truth taught in Scripture (Heb. x. 1-14; Col. ii. 14-17; Eph. ii. 15, 16), but an undeniable historical fact, that the priestly work of Christ immediately and definitely superseded the work of the Levitical priest. The instant of Christ’s death, the veil separating the throne of God from the approach of men “was rent in twain from the top to the bottom” (Matt. xvii. 50-51), thus throwing the way open to all, and dispensing with the priests and their ceremonial for ever.<sup>52</sup>

Tragically, dispensational interpreters are so concerned with a future program for ethnic Israel and are so obsessed with a carnal concept of the kingdom that they minimize the cross.

Third, the dispensational interpretation of Daniel 9:27 is based on the novel arbitrary idea that a gap exists between the sixty-ninth and seventieth week of Daniel. We are told that the sixty-ninth week ended with Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem (some dispensational scholars say it ended with the crucifixion) and that it will not begin again until the rapture of the church at the beginning of the seven-year tribulation. There are a number of reasons why the gap theory must be rejected. For one thing, it has absolutely no scriptural support. It is simply assumed and then imposed on the biblical text in order to fit certain passages into the dispensational paradigm. Also the concept of a gap that has now lasted almost two thousand years destroys the very purpose of Daniel’s prophecy, which is to set time limits to the scope of his prophecy. Daniel’s prophecy speaks of 70 weeks then subdivides these weeks into 7, 62 and 1. The seventy weeks represent 490 years. The first 7 weeks gives us the 49 years in which the temple was rebuilt in Jerusalem. Virtually everyone agrees that the sixty-two weeks immediately follow the seven weeks giving us 483 years ending at the baptism of Jesus. Given the precise and consecutive nature of this prophecy why would anyone regard the last week as disconnected from the other weeks by thousands of years? There is certainly nothing in the text about a gap that is already over four times longer than the period covered by the prophecy. Allis writes, “It would seem to be obvious that the more definite and precise the chronology of the weeks is held to be, the more difficult must it become to regard the insertion of a quite indefinite and timeless interval into it as permissible or possible.  $483+7$  is 490, no more and no less.  $483+x+7$  is a very different total, especially if  $x$  is an ‘unknown,’ already proved to represent more than 1900.”<sup>53</sup> After a careful consideration of how prophetic measures of time were fulfilled in the Old and New Testaments (e.g., Gen. 15:13; Ex. 12:40; Gal. 3:17; Gen. 45:6; Num. 14:34 and Jesus’ prediction of three days until His resurrection), Mauro concludes, “We are bold, therefore, to lay it down as an absolute rule, admitting of no exceptions, that when a definite measure of time or space specified by the number of units composing it, within which a certain event is to happen or a certain thing

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<sup>52</sup> A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1958 [1869]), 255-256.

<sup>53</sup> Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974 [1945, 47]), 118.

is to be found, the units of time or space which make up that measure are to be understood as running continuously and successively.”<sup>54</sup>

Lastly, the dispensational understanding of a lengthy gap or “mystery parenthesis” is based in a large part on two totally unscriptural presuppositions. The first is that in the new covenant era God has two separate and distinct peoples--Israel and the church. The gap we are told refers to the church age. In other words the time-clock of prophecy stopped when Israel rejected Jesus’ offer of a literal earthly kingdom. The time-clock will resume ticking as soon as the church is raptured and Israel is once again the center of attention (e.g., the converted Jewish remnant of the tribulation, the 144,000). Does the Bible teach that God has two separate peoples? No, absolutely not! God has one church one bride, one people composed of both Jews and Gentiles. The New Testament teaches that with the coming of Christ the distinction between Jew and Gentile has been removed. Christ has *one* body not two (1 Cor. 10:17, 12:12). The middle wall of partition between Jew and Gentile has been removed (Eph. 2:14). God has made two peoples into *one* (Eph. 2:15). Gentiles are fellow citizens and full members with the Jews in God’s household; God is building both Jewish and Gentile believers into *one* temple (Eph. 2:11-22).

After the resurrection, ascension and Pentecost there is neither Jew nor Greek, for Christians are all *one* in Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:28). Gentiles who believe in Christ are called the true sons of Abraham (Gal. 3:29). The Apostle Peter takes Old Testament titles for Israel and applies them directly to the church: “You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people...who once were not a people but are now the people of God” (1 Pet. 2:9-10; cf. Ex. 19:5-6). “The word *genos* [nation] denoting blood-relation is applied to the Christians as members of one family through the new birth.”<sup>55</sup> Paul calls the church “the Israel of God” (Gal. 6:16). He says of believers, “We are the circumcision” (Phil. 3:3). Paul says that in Christ neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but what is important is the new birth (Gal. 6:15). “It is not natural descent that makes man a child of Abraham.”<sup>56</sup> “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” (Rom. 9:8). The promises to Israel were made not according to “the flesh” but according to “the spirit.” In the Old Testament, Israel is the bride of Jehovah. Yet in the New Testament, the church is repeatedly called the bride of Christ (Rev. 18:23; 21:2, 9; 22:17). Christ only has one bride--the church. To say that God has two separate peoples is to implicitly assert that God is a polygamist. God only has one people: the church, “the Israel of God.” When the Apostle Paul discusses ethnic Israel he has nothing to say about earthly blessings but aims to show that the spiritual blessings promised to Israel are to be secured only by faith, and are the common possession of all believers, both Jew and Gentile. Paul’s concern for Israel was not that they might inherit the land of Canaan, but “that they might be saved” (Rom. 10:1; cf. v. 9). Further, Jesus refers to unbelieving Jews not as His people but as “the synagogue of Satan” (Rev. 3:9). They claim to be Jews but because they do not believe in Christ they are not true Jews (Rev. 3:9). Such a designation belongs to the church (Rom. 9:8; Gal. 6:16; Phil. 3:3; etc.).

The second unbiblical presupposition is that Old Testament prophecy only applies to ethnic Israel and has nothing to say regarding the New Testament church. This presupposition is explicitly contradicted by passages such as Acts 15:14-17. In Acts 15 the apostles and elders are

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<sup>54</sup> Philip Mauro, as quoted in Edward J. Young, *Daniel* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1972 [1949]), 216.

<sup>55</sup> Charles Bigg, *The Epistles of St. Peter and St. Jude* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1978), 134.

<sup>56</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 3:810.



gathered together in Jerusalem to discuss the conversion of the Gentiles and what to do regarding their keeping certain aspects of the Mosaic law. Peter discussed the conversion of the Gentiles and their receiving the Holy Spirit (vs. 7-8). He said that God “made no distinction between us and them” (v. 9). Paul and Barnabas relate also what God did among the Gentiles (v. 12). James spoke and quoted an Old Testament prophecy regarding the tabernacle of David and applied it to the ingathering of Gentiles into the church: “Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name. And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written: ‘After this I will return and will rebuild the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will set it up; so that the rest of mankind may seek the LORD, even all the Gentiles who are called by My name, says the LORD who does all these things’” (vs. 14-17). Note that James used the plural “prophets.” All the prophets agree that the tabernacle of David is being rebuilt by Jesus Christ the Lord and all the Gentile nations are flowing into it. James applies Amos 9:11-12 to the present church age not to a future tribulation in the distant future or to a future millennium.

If the common modern evangelical understanding of the “abomination of desolation” is pure fiction, then to what does Daniel 9:27 refer? It refers to the presence of the Roman legions encompassing Jerusalem with their idolatrous emblems. There are a number of reasons why this interpretation must be accepted: (1) The parallel passage in Luke says in unequivocal language that Jesus’ statement refers to Jerusalem being surrounded by armies. “But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation is near” (21:20). Matthew, writing to Jews, points them to a passage in Daniel and says, “...whoever reads, let him understand” (Mt. 24:15). Luke, writing to a predominantly Gentile audience, interprets the passage in Daniel for them. “To a large extent the problems that confront anyone who tries to explain Matthew’s or Mark’s parallel accounts, with their highly symbolic language...are absent from Luke’s account. The latter could almost be called a commentary on that of Matthew and Mark.”<sup>57</sup> The fact that Luke’s comments are exactly parallel to Matthew and Mark’s statements regarding the abomination of desolation cannot be denied, for all three accounts are immediately followed by warnings to flee using identical statements. The dispensational view that Matthew 24:15 points to an event in the distant future (i.e. the antichrist of a revived Roman Empire) while Luke 21:20 applies to Roman armies immediately prior to and during A.D. 70 is exegetically untenable. It is an arbitrary distinction imposed on the text.

(2) The immediate context supports the interpretation that regards the “abomination of desolation” as the Roman armies. When the abomination appears, “then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.” Jesus switches from the second person “when you see” to a third person imperative “then let those...flee.” When Christians are aware of this event they are commanded to flee to the mountains. Why did our Lord issue an imperative to flee? The reason for such a command is that the Jews under such circumstances would normally flee into a walled, well-armed city such as Jerusalem for protection. Jews throughout Judea would especially seek refuge in Jerusalem where the temple dwelt, where God had “set His name.” Christians are to act differently because Christ had prophesied “not one stone will be left upon another” (Mt. 24:2). The fourth century historian Eusebius tells us that this is exactly what happened. He writes, “But before the war, the people of the Church of Jerusalem were bidden in an oracle given by revelation to men worthy of it to depart from the city and to dwell in a city of Perea called Pella. To it those who believed in Christ migrated from Jerusalem. Once the holy men had completely left the Jews and all Judea, the justice of God at last overtook them, since

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<sup>57</sup> William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 937.

they had committed such transgressions against Christ and his apostles. Divine justice completely blotted out that impious generation from among men” (*Ecclesiastical History III. v. 3*). The oracle to which Eusebius refers is none other than Christ’s prophecy recorded in the synoptic gospels.

There are a number of things regarding Jesus’ warning that indicate an A.D. 70 fulfillment and preclude a twenty-first century fulfillment. a) The houses have flat roofs (Mt. 24:17; Mk. 13:15). While the flat roofed houses were common in first century Palestine (cf. Mk. 2:4; Ac. 10:9), they are virtually non-existent in modern Israel. b) The people are told to pray that their escape does not occur on the Sabbath or in the winter (Mt. 24:20). In ancient Israel there were strict Sabbath laws. These laws restricted a Jew’s travel to a “Sabbath day’s journey” (around three quarters of a mile). This concern obviously does not apply to modern Israel, which is a secular state. The concern about flight in winter applies to people on foot or donkey. It, however, is not a major concern to people driving cars or wearing down jackets. c) Jesus’ warning presupposes a slow moving ancient army. Such a warning would not be applicable to a modern war with jeeps, helicopters, airplanes, tanks, jets, missiles, armored personal carriers and so on. d) The account in Luke describes the ancient method of taking a city that obviously does not apply to modern warfare. “For days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment around you, surround you and close you in on every side, and level you, and your children within you, to the ground; and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not know the time of your visitation” (Luke 19:43-44). Embankments were used to take walled, well-defended cities. The Roman use of this technique is well-documented (cf. Jos. Bel. 5:262 ff., 491 ff.). Modern explosives, jet plane, etc. have rendered such methods unnecessary.

(3) The passage which our Lord calls to the disciples’ attention refers to the destruction of the city and sanctuary by armies that are the consequences of the cutting off of the Messiah. “And after the sixty-two weeks Messiah will be cut off, but not for Himself; and the people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary. The end of it shall be with a flood, and till the end of the war, desolations are determined. Then He shall confirm a covenant with many for one week; but in the middle of the week He shall bring an end to sacrifice and offering. And on the wing of abominations shall be one who makes desolate” (Dan. 9:26-37). Verses 26 and 27 are set in parallel. In verse 26 we learn of two events that are to occur after the 62 weeks. The Messiah will be cut off and the city and temple are to be destroyed. From a study of the chapter and verse 27 we learn that Jesus will be cut off in the middle of the seventieth week. The destruction of the city and temple occurs sometime after the seventieth week is completed. Both verses, however, connect the destruction of Jerusalem and city by an army to the death of the Messiah. Gentry writes, “The indefinite pronoun ‘he’ does not refer back to ‘the prince who is to come’ of verse 26. The word ‘prince’ is a subordinate noun; ‘the people’ is the dominant noun. Thus, the ‘he’ refers to the last dominant individual mentioned: the ‘Messiah’ (v. 26a). The Messiah is the leading figure in the whole prophecy, so that even the destruction of the Temple results from His death. In fact, the people who destroy the Temple are providentially ‘His armies,’ according to Christ (Matt. 22:2-7).”<sup>58</sup> Because the Jews commit an abomination by killing the Messiah they receive the covenantal death penalty and are set apart for destruction. This destruction must occur while those who killed the Messiah are still alive. The Jews have committed an abomination which causes desolation. As a just recompense for their deeds they will witness an abomination, the unclean Roman idolaters will surround their city, holding the

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<sup>58</sup> Ken Gentry, *Perilous Times: A Study in Eschatological Evil* (Texarkana, AR: Covenant Media Press, 1999), 32.

signs of the eagles; thus, the term “on the wing of abominations.” “As soon as Christ’s disciples saw ‘*the abomination of desolation,*’ that is, the Roman ensigns, with their idolatrous emblems, ‘*stand in the holy place,*’ they knew the time for them to escape had arrived; and they did ‘flee into the mountains.’”<sup>59</sup>

Morison concurs, “These images then were emphatically an abomination to the Jews; and being the ensign images of the devastating Romans, they were *the abomination of the devastations*, that devastation which was brought upon Jerusalem and Judea by the Romans.... When we get to the true conception of the reference of the expression then the entire peculiarity of the phraseology is accounted for; as also the peculiarity of the Hebrew expression in Daniel ix. 27, *upon the wing (shall be) the abominations of the desolator*. The standards may either be regarded collectively as *one abomination*, or distributively as *abominations*. They belonged to the *desolator*, that is, to the Romans *conceived collectively*; and they pertained therefore to the *desolation* or *desolations* which resulted from the hostile campaign which the Roman army was engaged in prosecuting.”<sup>60</sup> With this interpretation we see a perfect harmony between Luke’s clarification of the expression “abomination of desolation” for his Gentile readers and the prophecy of Daniel 9:27. Both connect the “abomination of desolation” to the Roman campaign against Israel in A.D. 68 and following.

## Objections

A major objection to the view enumerated above is that the abomination is said to occur within “the holy place.” The expression “the holy place” is taken by a number of commentators to refer to the temple. Thus, it is argued that an idol or an abominable act must take place within the temple to fulfill this prophecy. There are a number of reasons why the expression “the holy place” need not be restricted to the temple. a) The Bible often refers to Jerusalem as a holy place (Neh. 11:1, 18; Isa. 48:2; 52:1; 66:20; Dan. 9:16, 24; Joel 3:17) and thus there is no need to restrict the phrase to the temple. b) Luke, writing under divine inspiration interprets the phrase as inclusive of the whole city and the area surrounding the city (Lk. 21:21). Indeed, Israel itself is called the “holy land” (Zech. 2:12). c) Jesus warns the apostles that all Christians must flee Judea (Mt. 24:16 ff.). The abominable ensigns, the profuse shedding of blood and the desolation affects the whole city and region not just the temple complex. d) The passage that our Lord sets before the disciples (Dan. 9:27) taken in context refers to the city and sanctuary (Dan. 9:26) and calls attention to armies of destruction. “Daniel 9:25 even calls Jerusalem ‘the holy city’ (whereas Matthew speaks of ‘the holy place.’”<sup>61</sup> Given all these considerations there is more than sufficient biblical warrant for regarding the expression “the holy place” as inclusive of the holy city and its environs.

Although, the parallel account in Luke and the reference to Daniel 9:27 make it clear that our Lord was referring to the Roman armies encompassing Jerusalem, one should note that the Roman attack did culminate in an abomination in the temple complex itself. Josephus writes, “And now the Romans upon the flight of the seditious into the city, and upon the burning of the holy house itself, and of all the buildings lying round about it, brought their ensigns to the temple, and set them over against its eastern gate; and there did they offer sacrifices to them, and

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<sup>59</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1987), 347.

<sup>60</sup> James Morison, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, 1981 [1884]), 467-468.

<sup>61</sup> Kenneth L. Gentry, *Perilous Times: A Study of Eschatological Evil* (Texarkana, AR: Covenant Media Foundation, 1999), 60.

there did they make Titus emperor, with the greatest acclamations of joy.”<sup>62</sup> Tertullian the church father said, “That the entire religion of the Roman camp almost consisted in worshiping the ensigns, in swearing by the ensigns, and in preferring the ensigns before all the [other] gods.”<sup>63</sup>

Another objection is that the sign to escape is the Roman armies encompassing Jerusalem (Lk. 21:20-21) how could Christians escape at that time? Wouldn't it be too late to get out of the city? Interestingly, God did give all the Christians adequate time to escape when the Roman general (Cestius Gallus) and his armies fled the area for a time. William Whiston (the translator of Josephus) writes, “There may another very important, and very providential reason be here assigned for this strange and foolish retreat of Cestius; which, if Josephus had been now a Christian, he might probably have taken notice of also; and that is, the affording the Jewish Christians in the city an opportunity of calling to mind the prediction and caution given them by Christ about thirty-three years and half before, that ‘when they should see the abomination of desolation’ (The idolatrous Roman armies, with the images of their idols in their ensigns, ready to lay Jerusalem desolate,) ‘stand where it ought not;’ or, ‘in the holy place,’ or, ‘when they should see Jerusalem encompassed with armies,’ they should then ‘flee to the mountains.’ By complying with which those Jewish Christians fled to the mountain of Perea, and escaped this destruction.”<sup>64</sup> The Christians escaped because they believed Jesus’ prophecy applied to them, to their own generation. The Jews who rejected the Christ stayed in the city and were slaughtered because they mistakenly believed that the Messiah would come and deliver them out of the hands of the Romans. Over one million Jews were slain. It is a good thing that the first century Judean believers were not exposed to Hal Lindsay’s lucrative horror stories. If they had believed such nonsense and not taken our Lord’s words at face value (e.g., “all these things will happen to *this* generation”) they all would have perished.

## Chapter 2: The Great Tribulation

Perhaps the most discussed subject among evangelical prophecy prognosticators is the subject of the “great tribulation.” This (we are told) is the seven year period (many dispensationalists limit the great tribulation to the latter half of the seven years) that begins with the secret rapture of the church and ends with the great battle of Armageddon and second coming of Christ. In between these events the antichrist will be revealed, the mark of the beast will become law and great tribulation will come upon the whole earth. In this section of Matthew 24 we come to passages that futurists argue cannot be explained as having a pre-A.D. 70 fulfillment. As we study this section of Scripture, however, we will see that the common futurist understanding of this section of Scripture is fallacious. Indeed, a pre-A.D. 70 fulfillment is unavoidable if one follows standard historical-grammatical procedures of interpretation. The passage under consideration reads, “For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be. And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect's sake those days will be shortened” (Mt. 24:21-22).

After quoting this passage, futurists will argue that since Jesus refers to a tribulation that is the worst the world has ever seen or ever will see, that it must refer to events that have not yet

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<sup>62</sup> Flavius Josephus, “The Wars of the Jews” (6:6:1), in *Complete Works*, 583.

<sup>63</sup> Havercamp as quoted by William Nimmo in Josephus, 583.

<sup>64</sup> William Whiston as quoted in John Bray, *Matthew 24 Fulfilled*, 57.

occurred, that must immediately precede the second bodily coming of Christ. If we take Jesus' expression regarding the severity of this tribulation in isolation from the rest of Scripture such an objection seems irrefutable. After all, no one would argue that the destruction of Jerusalem was worse than the havoc caused by the black plague in the middle ages, or the slaughter of World War I or World War II. Certainly, it was not as bad as the holocaust where estimates of the Nazi extermination of the Jews reach six million souls. But, if one takes our Lord's statement and interprets it within the broad and narrow context of Scripture this common argument falls to the ground.

There are a number of solid scriptural arguments as to why Jesus' statement applies directly to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. First, (as we noted earlier) the time indicator in verse 34 ("this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place") cannot be dismissed by arbitrary forced interpretations of the word "generation." Our Lord was very specific in His statement. He did not say "some things" or even "the things" but "all these things." Christ's statement should not be ignored or redefined to fit one's own preconceptions about "the great tribulation."

Second, Jesus was using dramatic hyperbole or a proverbial method of speech taken directly from the Old Testament. Note the words spoken by Ezekiel regarding the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. "And I will do among you what I have never done, and the like of which I will never do again, because of all your abominations" (Ezek. 5:9). Does this passage teach that Israel endured the worst judgment in human history in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.? No. No one believes that the destruction wrought by the Babylonians was worse than that of the Romans in A.D. 70. The point is that the destruction will be severe, excruciating and unique. Similarly Daniel says, "...by bringing upon us a great disaster; for under the whole heaven such has never been done as what has been done to Jerusalem" (Dan. 9:12). "And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation, even to that time" (Dan. 12:1). "The language of v. 19 [i.e. Mk. 13:19 the parallel to Mt. 24:21], as also of Dan, 12:1, which it cites, uses traditional expressions to denote severe tribulation, not simply of Israel but of other people also."<sup>65</sup> For example, such language is even used to describe the anguish of the Egyptians after the tenth plague. "Then there shall be a great cry throughout all the land of Egypt, such as was not like it before, nor shall be like it again" (Ex. 11:6; cf. 9:18; 10:14). "The cry of anguish sent up by this destruction will be unique, just as the disaster will be unique."<sup>66</sup> Morison writes regarding Matthew 24:21, "It is superlative in its relation both to the past and to the future. We might explain this superlative mode of representation by the freedom which is universally assumed and accorded in popular speech. Men speak unhesitatingly, when referring to anything remarkable, of the 'highest,' the 'greatest,' the 'extremist.' It is an idiom of hyperbolism."<sup>67</sup>

If futurist interpreters want to insist on taking Jesus' words literally (meaning that a future tribulation is coming that will be by far the worst thing to happen in human history), then they must argue that Ezekiel, Exodus and Daniel were not meant to be taken literally while Jesus' words were. Such a view, however, is both arbitrary and inconsistent. If all are taken literally then Scripture contradicts itself, for two or more different events cannot all be the worst thing that ever happened.

Third, Jesus' words cannot be taken literally because even the typical futurist conception of the "coming" great tribulation with its world-wide calamities (e.g., nuclear war, dreadful

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<sup>65</sup> George R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Last Days*, 481-419.

<sup>66</sup> John I. Durham, *Exodus* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 149

<sup>67</sup> James Morison, *A Practical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 471.

diseases, giant hail, a 200,000,000 men Chinese army, etc.) is nothing compared to the destruction of mankind and the earth that occurred in the days of Noah. The whole human race was exterminated except for one family (8 people). Further, the flood caused such destruction as to eliminate all animal life except the animals that dwelt in the ark. So dramatic was the destruction that even the geological table was greatly affected. The wild speculations and fantasies of the modern prophecy writers do not compare to what occurred during the flood. Does this mean that Jesus was wrong? No, of course not! It simply means that our Lord was using dramatic, prophetic hyperbole.

Fourth, the immediate context in the gospel accounts describes an ancient local event, not a distant, future, worldwide calamity. (1) The army uses ancient tactics of taking a city (i.e. they build siege mounds around the city [cf. Lk. 19:43-44]). (2) The Pharisaical Sabbath laws are still in effect (Mt. 24:20). (3) The disciples are to be persecuted by synagogues and brought before kings (Mk. 13:9). (4) The Christians are to flee *Judea* and go to the mountains (Mt. 24:16). (5) The people are dwelling in flat-roofed houses (Mt. 24:17). It should be obvious to any unbiased interpreter that the “great tribulation” has reference to the Jews living in Palestine in the first century. One cannot even apply this passage to a twenty-first century Jerusalem. For those who do so we ask: What kings will Christians appear before? Why does a mechanized army with missiles, planes and high explosives build a siege mound? Where are the flat roofs that people must not return to? Why is there a concern about the Sabbath laws when the Pharisaical laws have been out of civil use for over nineteen hundred years? What synagogues will stand in judgment over believers? Who in Tibet or Peru will be able to “see” the “abomination of desolation?”

## Shortened Days for the Elect’s Sake

The “great tribulation” that came upon Israel (A.D. 68-70) was shortened for the sake of the elect. Jesus promised, “And unless those days be shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect’s sake those days will be shortened” (Mt. 24:22). The “those days” in context clearly refers to the days of “great tribulation.” the elect in this passage can be interpreted as referring to the Jewish Christians living in Jerusalem. If this interpretation is accepted then our Lord may be referring to the lifting of the siege by Cestius Gallas that allowed the Christians within the city to escape to the mountains. This view fits in well with the previous passages warning believers to flee. If one interprets the word “elect” in this passage as inclusive of people who are elect but who have not yet come to Christ, then Jesus may be referring to the quick manner in which Titus and his troops brought the military campaign to its conclusion. Because of the war there was widespread starvation in the city. There were also warring factions in the city who were butchering their own people like demonic savages. Although roughly 1,000,000 people perished (according to Josephus), it would have been even worse had the days not been shortened.

## A Second Warning against False Christs

Earlier in the chapter Jesus had warned the disciples about false christs (Mt. 24:5) and false prophets (Mt. 24:11). Our Lord (showing His love and concern for the disciples) returns to this theme. “Then if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or ‘There!’ do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. See, I have told you beforehand. Therefore if they say to you, ‘Look, He

is in the desert!’ do not go out; or ‘Look, He is in the inner rooms!’ do not believe it” (Mt. 24:23-36). The place of this warning (i.e. it comes *after* the sign of the “abomination of desolation,” the warning to flee and the description of the severity of “the great tribulation.”) indicates that false prophets and messiahs will come forth in the midst of tribulation. The rise of such imposters is not surprising given the expectations of the Jews of that generation and the severity of the events coming upon them. The Jews who did not believe in Christ were looking for a Messiah to come and save them from the Romans. Our Lord wants to make sure that Christians are not taken in by such expectations and imposters. One must take into consideration the allurements of Jewish pride and nationalism. It is very likely that a Jewish Christian living in A.D. 67 would have wanted Jesus to come and destroy the Romans (cf. Ac. 1:7). Christ wants to make sure the disciples understand that this is not a physical bodily coming but a coming in judgment. Gentry writes, “In essence, the Lord is warning against the notion of an imminent return—a position the wisdom of which history has borne out for the past nineteen centuries. His people could expect only false Christs during the first century. The Lord’s glorious, bodily return will be in the distant future: ‘But while the bridegroom was *delayed*, they all slumbered and slept’ (Matt. 25:5). ‘For the kingdom of heaven is like a man traveling to a *far* country, who called his own servants and delivered his goods to them.... After a *long time* the lord of those servants came and settled accounts with them’ (Matt. 25:14, 19).”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *Perilous Times: A Study of Eschatological Evil*, 69. The book of Acts describes Jesus’ second bodily coming as something very different than His coming in judgment upon Jerusalem. “Now when He had spoken these things, while they watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel, who also said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven’” (Ac. 1:9-11). The phrase “in like manner” (NKJV) means literally “in what manner” or “in that manner in which” (see C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom-Book of New Testament Greek*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960], 132.) In other words “in like manner” means “in the same manner.” “The Greek phrase (*hon trogon*) never indicates mere certainty or vague resemblance; but wherever it occurs in the New Testament, denotes identity of mode or manner” (J. A. Alexander, *Acts of the Apostles* [Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1963 (1857)], 16). Note that “in like manner” and “as you saw Him” are essentially expressions of the same idea twice. “The fact of his [bodily] second coming and the manner of it [are] also described by this emphatic repetition” (A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Baker, n. d. (1930)], 3:12). God wants to make sure that the church gets the doctrine of the second coming right.

Now, let us compare the description of the second coming in Acts 1:9-11 to the coming in judgment that occurred in A.D. 70. (1) Acts teaches that Christ’s return will be *bodily*. He left in the same body in which He lived, was crucified, buried and resurrected. He ascended in His glorified human body and He will descend in the same body. Did Jesus return in His glorified physical body in A.D. 70? No. He most certainly did not. In Matthew 24 we are specifically told that the judgment upon Jerusalem is “the sign of the Son of Man in the heaven” (Mt. 24:30, *Young’s Literal Translation of the Bible*). In other words, Christ judges Jerusalem from His throne in heaven. There is no bodily descent. (2) The account in Acts describes a *literal bodily* coming. Matthew 24 (to verse 33) describes a *non-literal, non-bodily* coming. The coming on the clouds terminology of Matthew 24:30 is taken from the poetic metaphor language of the Old Testament prophets (e.g., Isa. 19:1; Nah. 1:3). In the Old Testament Jehovah did not literally come upon heathen nations riding on the clouds. Acts 1:9-11 however, teaches that just like the apostles, people will be able to see Jesus’ body. (3) The account in Acts emphasizes the fact that our Lord’s ascension was visible. Thus “in the same manner” His second coming will be *visible*. That is, His resurrected body will be on display. In the judgment on Jerusalem, Christ was *invisible*. He was not on display, because He was at the right hand of God in heaven. (4) The account in Acts teaches that Jesus second bodily coming will involve a literal descent from heaven. He will come in a *vertical* descent from heaven to earth. The account of our Lord’s coming in judgment does not describe *vertical* motion but *horizontal*; “as lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west” (Mt. 24:27). The difference between Acts 1:9-11 and Matthew 24:27 is very easy to account for because they are describing two completely separate and different events. In one, Jesus literally in His glorified body descends to

The importance and accuracy of Jesus' prophetic warning can be seen by observing Josephus' account of the fall of Jerusalem. He writes, "A false prophet was the occasion of these people's destruction, who had made a public proclamation in the city that very day, that God commanded them to get upon the temple, and that there they should receive miraculous signs of their deliverance. Now, there was then a great number of false prophets suborned by the tyrants to impose upon the people, who denounced this to them, that they should wait for deliverance from God...."<sup>69</sup> Like the false prophets of old who gave the people a false sense of security during the Babylonian invasion (Jer. 5:2ff.; 6:14; 8:11; 29:9), the various false prophets of the great tribulation caused incredible misery.

## Like Lightning

Jesus emphasized to His disciples that His coming in judgment upon Jerusalem was not a physical-bodily coming. He said that if anyone says, "Look, He is in the desert" (Mt. 24:26) or "Look, He is in the inner rooms" (Mt. 24:26) do not believe it. This coming does not involve Christ's physical presence. Our Lord then explains why the disciples should not pay any attention to reports of His bodily presence among them. He says, "For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be" (Mt. 24:27). Jesus points out that this coming (i.e. the coming in judgment upon Jerusalem) will be a plain unmistakable fact, observable by all.

The majority of commentators ignore the time indicators and context of this passage and argue that Christ's second bodily coming will involve a brilliant display of Jesus' heavenly glory. While our Lord's second bodily coming will no doubt be glorious, there are no solid exegetical reasons for applying this verse to the distant future.

To what then does the lightning refer? The key to understanding this verse is to consider both its broad and narrow context. For the broad context one needs to examine the biblical significance of lightning. (This makes more sense exegetically than speculating about meteorology or guessing about its meaning.) Lightning in Scripture is often associated with God's hatred of sin and judgment. Thunder and lightning accompanied the giving of the Ten Commandments to the covenant people by Jehovah Himself from Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:16). This occurred only "three days" after the people covenanted with God promising obedience (Ex. 19:8). Lightning is often associated with the judgment and destruction of God's enemies. In David's song of deliverance from his enemies we read,

In my distress I called upon the Lord, and cried out to my God; He heard my voice from His temple, and my cry entered His ears. Then the earth shook and trembled; the foundations of heaven quaked and were shaken, because He was angry. Smoke went up from His nostrils, and devouring fire from His mouth; coals were kindled by it. He bowed the heavens also, and came down with darkness under His feet. He rode upon a cherub, and flew; and He was seen upon the wings of the wind. He made darkness canopies around Him, dark waters and thick clouds of the skies. From the brightness before Him coals of fire were kindled. The Lord thundered from heaven, and the Most High uttered His voice. He sent out arrows and scattered them; lightning bolts, and He vanquished them (2 Sam. 22:7-15).

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earth. In the other, Christ never leaves heaven but judges apostate Israel. His coming is figurative. The coming from east to west describes the massive Roman armies moving across the land from east to west. Any one willing to study the Scriptures, who is not spiritually blind, can see that hyper-preterism is heretical nonsense.

<sup>69</sup> Josephus, "Wars of the Jews", (6:5:2), 582.



Lightning is also used to describe God's coming judgment upon Assyria. "Behold, the name of Jehovah cometh from far, burning with his anger, and in thick rising smoke: his lips are full of indignation, and his tongue is as a devouring fire...And Jehovah will cause his glorious voice to be heard, and will show the lighting down of his arm, with the indignation of his anger, and the flame of a devouring fire, with a blast, and tempest, and hailstones" (Isa. 30:27, 30 ASV). Such apocalyptic imagery is also found in Zechariah 9:14: "Then the Lord will be seen over them, and His arrow will go forth like lightning. The Lord GOD will blow the trumpet, and go with whirlwinds from the south."

Lightning and the judgment associated with it is also repeatedly found in the book of Revelation. "And from the throne proceeded lightnings, thunderings, and voices" (4:5). After we read a song celebrating God's power for deliverance and judgment the Holy Spirit says, "And there was opened the temple of God that is in heaven; and there was seen in his temple the ark of his covenant; and there followed lightnings, and voices, and thunders, and an earthquake, and great hail" (11:19 ASV). After the seventh seal of God's wrath is poured out we read, "And there were noises and thunderings and lightnings; and there was a great earthquake..." (Rev. 16:18). The Israelites had violated the covenant, murdered the Messiah and persecuted God's people. Therefore, they will experience the terror and destruction of God's wrath. The lightning signifies a coming in judgment to destroy.

The immediate context supports the coming in judgment interpretation. It is a time of "great tribulation" (Mt. 24:21). Luke refers to this time as the "days of vengeance" (Lk. 21:22). He obviously refers to God's vengeance against Israel. Believers are emphatically warned to flee to the mountains (Mt. 24:16; Mk. 13:14; Lk. 21:21). If this passage was discussing Jesus' second bodily coming which will be accompanied by the general resurrection and final judgment, why would our Lord be so concerned to preserve the lives of Jewish believers? The destruction will be so severe that it needed to be shortened by God to preserve the lives of the elect (Mt. 24:22; Mk. 13:20). This point raises the same question regarding the need to preserve life when believers are about to be resurrected with glorified, immortal bodies. Further, Luke's account clearly says that preconsummate human history will continue after the coming. "For there will be great distress in the land [Israel] and wrath upon this people [the Jews]. And they will fall by the edge of the sword, and be led away captive into all nations. And Jerusalem will be trampled by Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled" (Lk. 21:23-24). Further, the time indicator of Matthew 24:34 places this coming within the generation of people alive when Christ spoke these words. Therefore, this passage cannot refer to our Lord's second *bodily* coming unless one argues for some type of double fulfillment. While the double fulfillment theory may be popular, there is nothing in the context of the passage that supports it exegetically.

Given all these factors, it is best to consider Jesus' statement about His coming being like lightning from the east to the west as figurative of the *dramatic public nature* of His coming in judgment upon Jerusalem. Interestingly, the coming in judgment did literally proceed from the east to the west. The Roman armies with their shields glistening in the sun marched toward the holy city from the east to the west. The spectacle was no doubt as awesome and terrifying to the Jews as thunder and lightning would be to a small child. The Reformed Baptist commentator John Gill (1720-1771) argues that the coming in Matthew 24:27, "must be understood not of his last coming to judgment [i.e. His bodily coming], though that will be sudden, visible, and universal...but of his coming in his wrath and vengeance to destroy that people, their nation, city, and temple: so that after this to look for the Messiah in a desert, or secret chamber, must argue great stupidity and blindness; when his coming [in judgment] was a sudden, visible, powerful,

and general, to the destruction of that nation, as the lightning that comes from the east, and, in a moment, shines to the west.”<sup>70</sup>

## The Eagles Gather

The idea that the coming of Christ in Matthew 24:27 is a coming in judgment and not a literal bodily coming is supported by the following verse. “For wherever the carcass is, there the eagles will be gathered together” (Mt. 24:28). The picture presented here is that of Israel as a carcass (a dead body) that attracts vultures and other meat-eating birds to feast on her flesh. Israel had murdered the prophets (Mt. 23:35) and killed the author of life (Ac. 2:36). Therefore, she received the covenantal death penalty from God (Mt. 21:19-20, 44). The Roman armies would come and devour Jerusalem as birds of prey tear apart a corpse. The word translated “eagles” (*aetoi*) refers to any large carrion eating bird and (although it includes eagles) is best translated as vultures. The most common bird that would be seen feasting on dead bodies after a battle in Israel would be the griffon vulture.

The interpretation that says this verse pictures the armies of Rome descending upon apostate Israel is supported by the Old Testament. The eagle is often employed to describe a nation coming as an instrument of judgment against idolatrous Israel. “The Lord will bring a nation against you from afar, from the end of the earth, as swift as the eagle flies, a nation whose language you will not understand.... They shall besiege you at all your gates until your high and fortified walls, in which you trust, come down” (Dt. 28:49, 52). “He shall come like an eagle against the house of the Lord, because they have transgressed My covenant and rebelled against My law” (Hos. 8:1). “Their horses also are swifter than leopards, and more fierce than evening wolves. Their chargers charge ahead; their cavalry comes from afar; they fly as the eagle that hastens to eat” (Hab. 1:8). “The corpses of this people will be food for the birds of the heaven and for the beasts of the earth. And no one will frighten them away....For the land shall be desolate...” (Jer. 19:7-8).

In the law and prophets, the eagle or eagles are used to describe both the destruction caused by violating God’s covenant and the curse of having the dead bodies exposed to the elements where they are consumed by vultures and wild beasts. In Matthew 24, Jesus follows the law and the prophets in the use of this term. In its immediate context the gathering of eagles indicates a swift, fierce and certain destruction. It also, however, conveys the idea of a curse from Jehovah. The streets of Jerusalem will be filled with the rotting corpses of the covenant-breaking people. The birds will literally feast on their flesh.

## Signs in the Heavens

After describing the great tribulation and the nature and result of the Christ coming in judgment upon Jerusalem, our Lord uses language that seems to describe the collapse of the universe. “Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken” (Mt. 24:29). What does Jesus mean by such language? Is this passage meant to be taken literally? Before we turn our attention to the biblical meaning of this verse, we first need to

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<sup>70</sup> John Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament* (Streamwood, IL: Primitive Baptist Library, 1979 [1809]), 1:292-293.

discuss two common errors associated with this statement. One mistake that is made by a number of competent scholars and commentators is to argue that such language proves that this passage is discussing events surrounding the second *bodily* coming of Christ. Another very common error, which is the stock and trade of the modern prophecy gurus, is to argue that Jesus is referring to literal astronomical events. Modern prophecy books are full of speculations regarding nuclear missiles and their effect (e.g., they darken the sun and turn the moon a blood color because they kick up so much dust), UFOs and alien encounters, giant hail, bombs raining down upon cities (this view was popular during WWII), meteor showers, the “Jupiter-effect,” comets streaking across the sky (and the possibility of devastating impacts) and black holes. Although such phenomena are exciting to read about and it helps to sell a lot of books, we will see that the events described by Jesus were not meant to be and cannot possibly be taken literally.

There are three reasons why we can make such an assertion. First, it is impossible to apply dispensationalism’s literalistic hermeneutic to this passage because the idea of literal stars (which are hundreds and thousands of times bigger than the earth) falling to earth is absurd. Dispensational prophecy writers understand this and thus offer various explanations all of which are not literal. The idea that this passage refers to nuclear weapons, bombs, UFOs or asteroids, etc. is a very non-literal interpretation. If the specific language in the passage cannot be taken literally, then the attempt to link the passage to literal astronomical events is not necessary. Second, this passage lies within the section of the discourse that Jesus unequivocally says must take place in the generation alive at that time (Mt. 24:34). Therefore, this passage (whatever its meaning) took place in the first century. Third, Christ uses apocalyptic language drawn directly from well-known passages from the prophets. Since our Lord is making direct allusions to prophetic apocalyptic language, the only logical and biblical manner of understanding His statement is to examine how such language is employed in the Old Testament. Once again we ask the question: Should we use Scripture to interpret Scripture or should we turn to Newsweek, the New York Times and Scientific American and then guess or speculate about the matter? The answer to this question should be obvious.

An examination of such Old Testament passages will prove that Jesus is using apocalyptic imagery associated with the terror, judgment and destruction of a nation by God. When the prophet Isaiah described the coming destruction of Babylon by the Medes he uttered these prophetic words. “For the stars of heaven and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be darkened in its going forth, and the moon will not cause its light to shine” (Isa. 13:10). One of the central features of apocalyptic “day of the Lord” judgment imagery is that God turns the lights out. God extinguishes the heavenly lights to show that a nation has been set apart for darkness. God has decreed the death of that wicked nation. Isaiah adds, “Therefore I will shake the heavens, and the earth will move out of her place, in the wrath of the Lord of hosts and in the day of His fierce anger” (Isa. 13:13).

The imagery of cosmic convulsions is also applied to Edom. “All the host of heaven shall be dissolved, and the heavens shall be rolled up like a scroll; all their host shall fall down as the leaf falls from the vine, and as fruit falling from a fig tree....For it is the day of the Lord’s vengeance” (Isa. 34:4, 8). “Once again, it is immaterial whether the literal stars will fall in the day of God’s judgment; the point is that even the mysterious, unchanging stars, the seeming guarantors of the universe’s perpetuity, are in the hands of the God of Jerusalem.”<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-39* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 609.

When Ezekiel writing under divine inspiration describes God's destruction of Egypt he says, "When I put out your light, I will cover the heavens, and make its stars dark; I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give her light. All the bright lights of the heavens I will make dark over you, and bring darkness upon your land," says the Lord GOD" (Ezek. 32:7-8). From this and other passages it is clear that God's darkening of the heavenly luminaries symbolizes a day of judgment. The very fabric of creation is in terror and confusion because God is coming in wrath and indignation.

In Habakkuk the mountains tremble and the sun and moon stand still in their habitation as God marches through the land in indignation and judges the nations (Hab. 3:10-12). In the book of Amos God applies the "lights out" terminology to Israel's impending destruction by Assyria (722 B.C.). "And it shall come to pass in that day," says the Lord GOD, "that I will make the sun go down at noon, and I will darken the earth in broad daylight" (Amos 8:9). The prophet Joel uses the lights out theme to point the people of Israel to repentance before the coming of the Lord. "Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble; for the day of the Lord is coming, for it is at hand: a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness....The earth quakes before them, the heavens tremble; the sun and moon grow dark, and the stars diminish their brightness" (Joel 2:1-2, 10). Such dramatic poetic language highlights the glory of the coming event and sets it in its proper category: that of divine intervention for judgment.

The apostle Peter even applies the dissolution of the heavenly bodies' terminology from Joel directly to his own generation. "But this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:... 'I will show wonders in heaven above and signs in the earth beneath: blood and fire and vapor of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the coming of the great and awesome day of the Lord. And it shall come to pass that whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved' (Ac. 2:16, 19-21; cf. Joel 2:30-31)." The apostle informs the Jews that tongues are a sign that the great day of judicial visitation is coming upon the unbelieving Jews and Jerusalem. This interpretation is supported by Paul in 1 Corinthians: "In the law it is written: 'With men of other tongues and other lips I will speak to this people; and yet, for all that, they will not hear Me,' says the Lord. Therefore tongues [Greek: *the* tongues] are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers; but prophesying is not for unbelievers...." (14:21-22). The apostle quotes Isaiah 28:11 which refers to the coming of the Assyrians whose language the Judahites could not understand. Tongues are a sign to unbelieving Israel that the day of wrath and indignation is at hand. The outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost (publicly evidenced by the miraculous speaking in tongues) was visible proof that Christ was sitting at the right hand of Power in heaven. It proved that a change of dispensation, of covenant status was coming upon the Jewish nation. It pointed to revolutionary change in the history of redemption. It was a promise that the covenantal execution of Israel was about to be fulfilled. Kik writes, "With the outflow of the Holy Spirit and the destruction of Jerusalem, the Kingdom was to be enlarged with the inclusion of the Gentiles as these words indicate: 'And it shall come to pass, that *whosoever* shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved'" (Joel 2:32). The kingdom of God was no longer to be limited to the Jews. The mosaic economy with its Levitical priesthood and ceremonial law was finished. The judgment against Jerusalem had brought all this to an end. And now as both Joel and Peter declared, "whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved."<sup>72</sup> The people in Peter's own day were witnessing the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy. The sun, moon and stars were darkened for Israel in that generation.

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<sup>72</sup> J. Marcellus Kik, *An Eschatology of Victory*, 132.

Jeremiah uses the “lights out” terminology to describe the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians (586 B.C.). “At that time it will be said to this people and to Jerusalem...I beheld the earth, and indeed it was without form, and void; and the heavens, they had no light. I beheld the mountains, and indeed they trembled, and all the hills moved back and forth...The whole land shall be desolate...For this shall the earth mourn, and the heavens above be black, because I have spoken” (Jer. 4:11, 23-24, 27-28). In describing God's coming in judgment upon Jerusalem the prophet uses primeval chaos phraseology from Genesis 1:2ff.. Jehovah in His anger takes that which is orderly and reduces it to chaos. The point is that the lives of the people of Jerusalem will be turned upside down and inside out by the coming visitation of wrath. “[T]he language is poetic; Israel's judgment will be *like* a return to primeval chaos.”<sup>73</sup>

Even our Lord's phrase “the powers of the heavens will be shaken” (Mt. 24:29) is an allusion to the Old Testament. Centuries earlier the prophet Haggai said, “For thus says the Lord of hosts: ‘Once more (it is a little while) I will shake heaven and earth, the sea and dry land; and I will shake all nations, and they shall come to the desire of all nations, and I will fill this temple with glory,’ says the Lord of hosts” (Hag. 2:6-7). The author of Hebrews takes the Haggai passage (2:6) and applies it directly to the desolation of the old covenant order and the receiving of the new covenant expression of Christ's kingdom. The inspired writer says that the old ceremonial Levitical system has been surpassed and superseded by the perfect sacrifice of Christ. The destruction of Jerusalem is a shaking of the heavens. The old order is dissolved and replaced by a kingdom that cannot be shaken (cf. Heb. 12:25-29).

After examining how a number of Old Testament prophets used the imagery of cosmic phenomena (e.g., lights out terminology) to describe God's judgment of particular nations (e.g., Isa. 13:10-Babylon; Isa. 34:4-Edom; Ezek. 32:7-Egypt; Am. 8:9-Israel; Joel 2:10--Judah; Joel 2:30, 31-post-resurrection Israel; cf. Dt. 30:4; Isa. 19:1; 27:13; Dan. 7:13; Zech. 2:6; 12:10-14; Mal. 3:1; Rev. 6:12; etc.) that have been fulfilled in history, it is exegetically inexcusable to *arbitrarily* treat Jesus' use of such imagery in a completely different manner (e.g., UFOs, comets, meteorites, missiles, etc.). Interpreting our Lord's language in light of the common Old Testament prophetic use of such terminology can only lead to one conclusion. Christ is going to turn off the lights of the Jewish nation. Jerusalem and the temple will be destroyed by God.

## The Sign of the Son of Man in Heaven

We now must consider the passage that most interpreters insist must refer to the second bodily coming of Christ. “Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” (Mt. 24:30). As we consider this verse it is very important that we are not misled by a poor or biased translation of the Greek. Many translations give the impression that a sign is going to appear up in the sky (e.g., *The New American Standard Bible* reads, “And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky”; note also the *New King James Version* translation above which unfortunately departs from the literal word order of the old Authorized Version). A literal rendering of the Greek reads, “And then will appear the sign of the Son of Man in the heaven.” If we base our interpretation of this passage on a literal rendering of the Greek, then we will not be looking for a sign up in the sky; but, rather a sign that indicates that the Son of Man is in heaven. “The Son of Man does not appear, the sign appears.

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<sup>73</sup> Peter C. Craigie, Page H. Kelley, Joel F. Drinkard, Jr., *Jeremiah 1-25* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1991), 82.

Then Christ defines what the sign signifies: it is the sign ‘of the Son of Man’ (a descriptive genitive).”<sup>74</sup>

Christ is telling the disciples to look for a sign that proves that He is at the right hand of God enthroned in heaven. Remember, the phrase “in heaven” tells us the location of Jesus Christ not the location of the sign. What then is this sign? The text itself does not explicitly tell us what the sign is. Therefore, over the centuries there has been a great deal of speculation regarding this verse. Although there is no explicit reference to the meaning of the sign, the most logical explanation is that the sign is the destruction of Jerusalem itself.

There are a number of reasons why the sign refers to the destruction of Jerusalem; why the coming of Christ in this passage is not a literal bodily coming but a coming in judgment—a spiritual coming. First, it is a sign that points to Jesus’ kingship, power and authority, especially to the unbelieving Jews of that generation. The unbelieving Jews had rejected our Lord’s authority when He ministered to them on earth. They also rejected the abundant “signs” and “miracles” done in their presence that proved He was the Messiah. Not only was our Lord’s kingship rejected but He was persecuted and unjustly crucified as a common criminal. Because of His rejection and murder by the Jews, Christ is going to give them a sign that proves they were wrong and guilty. The sign proves that Jesus indeed is the Lord and Christ, the ruler over all nations. Given the fact that Jesus explicitly told the unbelieving Jews that such destruction was coming, what better sign could there be to prove He was who He claimed to be? The smoking ruins of Jerusalem were a sign that Christ was the exalted Lord who is able to bring vengeance upon His enemies and who rules the nations with a rod of iron (Ps. 2:9).

Second, this view is supported by the immediate context (Mt. 24:30b) where our Lord refers to Daniel 7:13, “I was watching in the night visions, and behold, One like the Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days...” Note that Jesus’ reference has nothing to do with a *descending* in the clouds toward the earth. The passage refers to the Son of Man’s *ascension* to the heavenly throne room of the Father where He was given all power and authority over the nations. The following verse reads, “Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him...” (Dan. 7:14).

In Matthew 24:30 Christ refers to a sign that the Son of Man is in heaven and then quotes a passage in Daniel that explicitly refers to the Messiah’s ascension into heaven to receive power. It should be quite clear by now that our Lord is not referring to His second *bodily* coming but to an enthronement that leads to an exercise of power to destroy apostate Israel. The ascension to power calls to mind Psalm 2 where the Messiah is described destroying enemy nations after being made king over the earth. “Yet I have set My King on My holy hill of Zion. I will declare the decree: The Lord has said to Me, ‘You are My Son, today I have begotten You. Ask of Me, and I will give You the nations for Your inheritance, and the ends of the earth for Your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron; you shall dash them to pieces like a potter’s vessel.’ Now therefore, be wise, O kings; be instructed, you judges of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest He be angry, and you perish in the way, when His wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all those who put their trust in Him” (Ps. 2:6-12).

The assumption of power leading to an execution of judgment is also prominent in our Lord’s trial where Jesus refers to both Daniel 7:13 and Psalm 110:1. “Again the high priest asked Him, saying to Him, ‘Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?’ Jesus said, ‘I am. And you

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<sup>74</sup> Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., *Perilous Times: A Study in Eschatological Evil* (Texarkana, AR: Covenant Media Foundation, 1999), 80.

will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven” (Mk. 14:61-62). When the Jewish leaders rejected the Messiah they secured Jesus’ exaltation, as well as His coming in judgment. At His trial before the Sanhedrin, our Lord’s claims (made during His ministry) were rejected as lacking proof. Christ, therefore, tells the wicked leaders who now stand in judgment over Him that they will see with unmistakable clarity that Jesus is seated at God’s right hand, invested with power and majesty. Many Christians jump to the conclusion that our Lord is referring here to the distant future when Jesus will return bodily to judge the living and the dead. The meaning (it is supposed) is that those who stand in judgment over the Messiah will one day stand before Him as the judge on the day of judgment. This view (which is very common) is obviated by the parallel account in Matthew 24:64 where the evangelist recorded the additional words “from now on” (“hereafter [lit. ‘from now on’ or ‘forward from now’] you will see the Son of Man...”). The phrase means that Christ’s vindication is in the immediate future.<sup>75</sup> Our Lord’s reference to the coming on the clouds and the enthronement at God’s side points not to the second bodily coming but to the resurrection, ascension and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The destruction of Jerusalem is a consequence of the mediator’s enthronement.

The Jewish leaders who rejected the Messiah will live to see their decision overturned when the Father vindicates the Son by the resurrection, ascension and enthronement of Jesus. These men of course will not personally witness these great redemptive events. But they will, however, witness the very public, tangible effects of the enthronement. They were witnesses of Pentecost and the great events associated with it: speaking in tongues, signs and wonders, massive revival (i.e. many thousands were converted to Christ in Jerusalem in a short period of time). They would also be witnesses of the Messiah’s demonstration of kingship and power in the destruction of Jerusalem. Remember that Peter connects the outpouring of the Spirit and the coming wrath of God in his Pentecost sermon. The exaltation of Christ, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the power to destroy enemy kingdoms are all organically connected. The coming of the kingdom *in power* has two sides. The Holy Spirit is poured out by the enthroned Mediator to save and sanctify as well as to judge and destroy. This point is reflected in the words of John the Baptist. “But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, ‘Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ...And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (Mt. 3:7, 10-12).

This point is even clearer as we examine the full context of Psalm 110:1 which our Lord quoted to the Sanhedrin. “The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool.’ The Lord shall send the rod of Your strength out of Zion. Rule in the

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<sup>75</sup> R. V. G. Tasker writes, “*Hereafter* is a rather loose translation of *ap’ arti*, which does not mean ‘at some time in the future’ but ‘from now onwards.’ So RV ‘henceforth.’ It is therefore probable that the first clause in this saying of Jesus addressed to the Sanhedrin should be regarded as a reference to His entering fully into His kingdom after the resurrection, and that only the second clause should be taken as a reference to the Parousia which is not necessarily thought of as imminent” (*The Gospel According to St. Matthew* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961], 256). Given the fact that the second clause is a reference to Daniel 7:13 and the ascension of Christ up into heaven to receive all power, there is no need to arbitrarily declare the second clause as applying to the distant future, second bodily coming. At least Tasker, unlike many other commentators, acknowledges the plain meaning of the Greek passage.

midst of Your enemies! ...The Lord is at Your right hand; He shall execute kings in the day of His wrath. He shall judge among the nations, He shall fill the places with dead bodies, He shall execute the heads of many countries” (Ps. 110:1-2, 5-6). The Priest-King’s enthronement (as in Psalm 2) is but the beginning of a worldwide conquest. The white horse rider conquers by the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit as well as by the rod of judgment. The first nation to be crushed by the Messiah was Israel. This was to be expected given the fact that Jesus rules for the sake of His church and apostate Israel was the first great persecutor of Christians. Note Paul’s words: God “raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places....And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church” (Eph. 1:20, 22). This coming in judgment was one of many that would occur throughout history. This coming receives a lot of attention in the New Testament because the end of the Jewish age was significant. It marked the turning point in history when the covenant transfer from Israel to the church was completed.

Furthermore, this interpretation is supported by the Old Testament prophets who described Jehovah as “coming in the clouds” to indicate His sovereign power over the nations to judge and destroy. “The burden against Egypt. Behold, the Lord rides on a swift cloud, and will come into Egypt; the idols of Egypt will totter at His presence, and the heart of Egypt will melt in its midst” (Isa. 19:1). Does this poetic imagery teach that God will literally come down out of heaven floating on a cloud? No, obviously not. It is simply a dramatic way of describing the coming wrath upon Egypt. Young writes, “God must show that He is sovereign, that His own people may know the folly of trusting in their enemy. Isaiah molds his description with a figure taken from the storm, and depicts the Lord riding upon a light cloud, that He may speedily execute His work of judgment. The scene does not necessarily suggest that the Lord comes from the temple at Jerusalem nor from heaven, but merely that He comes as a judge....Isaiah's figure prepares for the vision of Daniel in which the Son of Man is associated with the clouds of heaven (cf. Dan. 7:13; note also Mt. 24:30, 26:64; Acts 1:7; 14:14 ff.)”<sup>76</sup>

There are other passages that speak of clouds as God’s vehicle. Psalm 104 says that Jehovah makes “the clouds His chariot” (v. 3; cf. Ps. 18:9 ff.). Clouds (as noted) are often associated with God’s power or sovereignty that enables and/or leads to the destruction of the wicked. “Clouds and darkness surround Him; Righteousness and justice are the foundation of His throne. A fire goes before Him, and burns up His enemies round about” (Ps. 97:2-3). “The LORD is slow to anger and great in power, and will not at all acquit the wicked. The LORD has His way in the whirlwind and in the storm, and the clouds are the dust of His feet” (Nah. 1:3). Clouds also are often associated with God’s special presence (e.g., Ex. 13:21; 14:24; 19:9; 20:21; 24:15; 33:9; 34:5; 1 Ki. 8:12).

Lastly, the idea that our Lord is referring to a coming in judgment and not a literal bodily judgment is supported by Christ’s reference to Zechariah in Matthew 24:30: “...[T]hen all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.” Although most believers today would argue that the reference to all the tribes of earth mourning and seeing the Son of Man coming is proof positive that this verse is a reference to the second bodily coming, there are solid exegetical reasons for applying this verse to the generation of Jews who killed the Messiah. For instance, the Greek word (*ges*), usually translated earth in English Bibles, can also be translated as land. This would remove the idea of a worldwide event and limit the coming to the *land* of Judea or Israel. The phrase “the tribes of Israel” is a common biblical expression for the covenant people. This translation is greatly

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<sup>76</sup> Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 2:13-14.



avored by the fact that Matthew 24:30b is an explicit reference to Zechariah 12:12, which virtually everyone acknowledges refers to the tribes of Israel and not the tribes of the whole earth. Gill writes, “*And then shall the tribes of the earth, or land, mourn, that is the land of Judea; for other lands and countries were not usually divided into tribes, as that was; neither were they affected with the calamities and desolations of it, and the vengeance of the Son of Man upon it; at least not so as to mourn on that account, but rather were glad and rejoiced.*”<sup>77</sup>

In addition, the context clearly points to a localized event, not a worldwide catastrophe. Jesus warned the disciples to flee Judea to the mountains when the abomination of desolation took place (Mt. 24:15-16; Mk. 13:14-15). Luke defines the abomination that leads to desolation as “Jerusalem surrounded by armies” (Lk. 21:20). “The Olivet discourse was clearly not a message to the world, but rather a warning to the tribes of Israel of the first century. The tribes of Israel mourned because they understood that judgment was near *for them*. They must embrace the Messiah or perish in the soon coming conflagration.”<sup>78</sup>

Finally, in Matthew 24:30 Jesus conflates Daniel 7:13 and Zechariah 12:12 for a specific reason. We have already noted the significance of Daniel 7:13 where the Messiah ascends to heaven to be enthroned at the right hand of Power. We also have examined how Peter connects the exaltation of Christ (cf. Ac. 2:33-37) with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and the apocalyptic imagery of judgment. (Paul, writing later, will connect the sign of tongues to the destruction of Israel [cf. 1 Cor. 14:21-22]). The Bible organically connects the enthronement of Christ, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the judgment of Israel.

As we examine Zechariah 12:12 we will see that it also applies both to Pentecost and the destruction of Israel. In context the passage reads, “And I will pour on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem the Spirit of grace and supplication; then they will look on Me whom they pierced. Yes, they will mourn for Him as one mourns for his only son, and grieve for Him as one grieves for a firstborn. In that day there shall be a great mourning in Jerusalem, like the mourning at Hadad Rimmon in the plain of Megiddo. And the land shall mourn, every family by itself: the family of the house of David by itself, and their wives by themselves; the family of the house of Nathan by itself...” (Zech. 12:10-12). This passage discusses a great mourning that occurs in Jerusalem. Is this grieving the mourning of true repentance or the mourning brought about by severe judgment? Zechariah is describing a great mourning that results from a pouring out of the Holy Spirit. This prophecy refers to the great revival that occurred after Pentecost (cf. Ac. 2:33-37). When the Holy Spirit was poured out Peter preached the gospel and thousands repented. Note, that Luke emphasizes the sorrow of true repentance in his account. “Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Men and brethren, what shall we do?’” (Ac.2:37). When the exalted King poured out the Spirit of grace and supplication, thousands in Jerusalem looked upon Him whom they pierced with the eyes of faith and were saved.

If Zechariah 12:10 ff. applies to the events at Pentecost, why then does Christ couple this passage with Daniel 7:13 and apply it to His coming in judgment upon Jerusalem? The reason that Jesus applies this mourning to His coming in wrath is identical to Peter’s coupling of the outpouring of the Spirit with the apocalyptic imagery of judgment (cf. Joel 2:28-32). The Mediator’s enthronement at God’s right hand and the coming of the kingdom *with power* leads directly to an exercise of power for both salvation and judgment. The enthroned Messianic King

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<sup>77</sup> John Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament* (Streamwood, IL: Primitive Baptist Library, 1979 [1809]), 1:294-295.

<sup>78</sup> Gary De Mar, *Is Jesus Coming Soon?* (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 1999), 43.

wields the Spirit for both the restoration and destruction of Israel. As we noted earlier when the Messiah is about to come upon the scene, John the Baptist speaks to the people of: “the wrath to come” (Mt. 3:7); “the axe that is laid at the root of the trees” (Mt. 3:10; Lk. 3:9); the One “whose fan is in His hand to thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (Mt. 3:12; Lk. 3:17). While all of this points to the final, worldwide judgment, there is a sense of urgency and immediacy to these words that indicate that the coming of Christ will have a two-fold effect upon Israel. The coming of the kingdom with power means that the King will give an overpowering measure of the Holy Spirit to the elect causing repentance unto life as well as abandonment to destruction and perdition for the non-elect. The consequence of Jesus’ enthronement is first exhibited upon the covenant nation of Israel. The covenant nation, however, is only a localized “day of the Lord” that portends the universal, cosmic day of the Lord at the end of history. “Salvation and perdition are the two stages into which the tremendous future will diverge according to the prophecies: first the descent of the Holy Spirit, and then the day of judgment (cf. Joel 2:28-32; Ezek. 36:26 ff.; Zech. 12:9, 10).”<sup>79</sup>

The obvious objection to all the points enumerated above is that the passage says “they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds” (Mt. 24:30). Doesn’t this mean that people will look up and see Jesus descending from heaven in bodily form? To anyone unfamiliar with the poetic and often metaphorical method of Old Testament prophetic language, it does seem to be the obvious meaning. However, there are a number of reasons why (by way of summary and review), this verse does not describe the Jews observing a literal bodily coming (a descending) but rather a coming in judgment (i.e. they will observe the Messianic King’s glory and power). (1) Matthew 24:30 says that the sign indicates the Son of Man is in heaven. Jesus is seated at the right hand of Power when this coming occurs. (2) The coming on the clouds terminology taken directly from Daniel 7:13 refers to our Lord’s ascension and enthronement. The Jews will observe the visible affect of this enthronement. “[T]he son of man in the clouds means no more on the lips of Jesus than in the writings of Daniel. It denotes in both places a sublime and glorious reality...the son of man came in heavenly power to supplant Judaism by a better covenant, and to make the kingdoms of the world his own, and that parousia [coming] dates from the fall of Judaism and its temple.”<sup>80</sup> (3) The prophetic coming on the clouds terminology in the Old Testament which speaks of Jehovah coming with clouds (e.g., Isa. 19:1; Ps. 97:1-3; Nah. 1:3; etc.) referred to divine visitations of judgment not to literal theophanies floating down out of the clouds. “None of these passages suggest that God came in a visible and personal form to dwell upon the earth at that time; neither is that suggested by Matthew 24:30.”<sup>81</sup> (4) Christ’s reference to Zachariah 12:11-12 refers to the events at Pentecost which both Peter (Ac. 2:20) and Paul (1 Cor. 14:21-22) connect to the destruction of Israel. Given this fact, one is justified in concluding that the mourning of Zechariah 12:12 has a double fulfillment—the mourning of repentance and the mourning as a result of judgment. The coming of Christ that occurred after His death and resurrection in the first century was not a bodily coming but a coming of His Holy Spirit to convict and convert or to destroy. The glorified King employs the sword of the Spirit and the rod of His anger. (5) The Greek word for “see” in this passage (*eido*) does not always mean to observe with one’s eyes. It can mean to know, perceive or understand (e.g., LXX. Isa. 6:10; Jn. 12:40; Mk. 1:44; Lk. 17:22; Ac. 26:18; Rom. 15:21; etc.). In the Gospel of John Jesus

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<sup>79</sup> Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1963), 33.

<sup>80</sup> Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 447 as quoted in John L. Bray, *Matthew 24 Fulfilled*, 158.

<sup>81</sup> George L. Murray, *Millennial Studies*, 124 as quoted in John L. Bray, 160.

told the disciples, “A little while, and you will not see Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me, because I go to the Father” (Jn. 16:16). In this passage Christ equates the disciples observing the spiritual power exhibited at Pentecost as seeing Him. The coming of the Holy Spirit is a coming of the Spirit of Christ. The generation of Jews who crucified the Messiah would not literally see Jesus’ body but they would observe the power of Jesus’ Spirit. “[T]hey would *understand* that His coming would mean wrath upon the land.”<sup>82</sup> (6) In Matthew 26:64 Jesus says directly to the high priest at His trial, “hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power, and coming on the clouds of heaven.” The word “hereafter” means that Jewish leaders would in the near future (while they were still alive) witness the visible effects of the Messiah’s enthronement. These wicked unbelieving men would see the events of Pentecost and its aftermath as well as the destruction of their beloved city and temple. (7) The time indicator of Matthew 24:34 place this “coming on the clouds” within the life time of the Jews alive when our Lord spoke these words. This rules out a visible, literal, *bodily* coming to earth. The second *bodily* coming is still future.<sup>83</sup>

## Gathering the Elect

After Jesus comes in judgment, the elect are gathered together at the command of the Son of Man. “And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other” (Mt. 24:31). Once again we come to a passage that is often associated with the second *bodily* coming of Christ. Many believe that the angels float about gathering the resurrected saints to one place to stand before the judgment seat of Christ. If one has repeatedly been taught that this is what this particular passage means, then any attempt to apply it to something else will usually be viewed as ludicrous. There are two reasons, however, as to why our Lord’s statement does not apply to the final advent but rather applies to the ingathering of the elect throughout history by the preaching of the gospel.

First, the Greek word *angelos* translated angels (in virtually all English translations) can be, and in this passage, should be translated as messengers. In the New Testament this word is

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<sup>82</sup> David Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance: An Exposition of the Book of Revelation*, (Tyler, TX: Dominion Press, 1987), 66.

<sup>83</sup> It is rather ironic that the Olivet Discourse is an excellent section of Scripture to use to disprove full preterism. Hyper-preterists insist that there can be only two comings of Christ and that Matthew 24 describes the second coming. But as we have examined Matthew 24 we have seen that Jesus did not literally or bodily return in A.D. 70. His coming was a coming in judgment; a spiritual coming that is a sign that He is at the right hand of God ruling the nations. When the Westminster Standards refer to the two comings of Christ (e.g., Larger Catechism answer to question number 53) it is speaking of His two *bodily-literal* comings. Both dispensationalists and hyper-preterists make the mistake of either ignoring comings that are divine visitations of judgment in history or of confounding a divine visitation with the second bodily coming. Contrary to hyper-preterism the Bible teaches *very clearly* that: (1) There is a future second *bodily* coming of Christ (e.g., Ac. 1:11; 1 Th. 4:16; 1 Cor. 15:23-24; 1 Jn. 3:2, etc.). (2) There is a future universal, public judgment (e.g., Mt. 11:23-24; 12:41; 13:30 ff.; 25:32 ff.; Jn. 5:28-29; Rom. 2:16; Rev. 20:11-15; etc.) (3) There is a future time when everyone is literally resurrected from the dead (Dan. 12:2-3; Jn. 5:28-29; 1 Cor. 15:12 ff.; Phil. 3:21; etc.). (4) There is a future time when the whole created order is *fully* redeemed and restored to perfection (e.g., Rom. 8:21; 2 Pet. 3:7, 10-13; Rev. 22:3; Col. 1:18-20; Ac. 3:21). (5) There is a future time when death itself is completely abolished (1 Cor. 15:26, 54). (6) There is a future time when believers who are alive at Christ’s coming are caught up in the air to forever be with Him (1 Th. 4:17). (7) There is a future time when Jesus Christ hands the kingdom over to the Father (1 Cor. 15:24, 28). None of these events occurred in A.D. 70 and all of these events are still in our future in the twenty-first century. Full, hyper or radical preterism is a *dangerous* and *heretical* teaching.

frequently used to describe preachers of the gospel. John the Baptist is called a messenger (*angelos*) three times (Mk. 1:2; Mt. 11:10; Lk. 7:24, 27). Jesus' disciples are referred to as messengers in Luke 9:52. Paul uses the word *angelos* to describe the messenger of Satan that came to buffet him. James calls the Jewish spies hidden by Rahab messengers (Ja. 2:25). In the book of Revelation, John is to write down the prophecy of Jesus Christ and send it to the angels of the seven churches in Asia Minor. The letters to the seven churches are not to be given to seven spirit beings but to the seven ministers or preachers of the gospel. It is the preachers that have been given the task of gathering the elect from the four corners of the earth. They are Christ's messengers. The world-wide mission of preaching the gospel to all nations given to the apostles at the great commission (Mt. 28:18) is empowered at Pentecost and then forever separated from Judaism and the old covenant order at the destruction of Jerusalem. Christ's enthronement leads directly to two important events that further the worldwide expansion of the kingdom of God: the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the destruction of the Jewish nation (the Old Testament expression of God's kingdom). In the last section we noted that both Pentecost and the destruction of Jerusalem are organically connected to the coming of the kingdom with power.

Second, Jesus' language of gathering the elect from the four winds is an allusion to a phrase from the Old Testament prophets (e.g., Isa. 11:12; Zech. 2:6). If we examine the manner in which this gathering phraseology is used and how it is applied to the new covenant era by the prophets, will we see that the gathering of the elect refers not to people being gathered for the judgment at the second *bodily* coming but to a progressive gathering by preaching the gospel throughout history. Before we consider the prophetic passages we should consider the background of the gathering idea in the law.

The first discussion of a gathering of Israel comes after a long section dealing with the blessings and curses of violating the covenant in Deuteronomy 28 to 30. God tells the covenant people what will happen if they repent and return to the Lord. "[T]he Lord your God will bring you back from captivity, and have compassion on you, and gather you again from all the nations where the Lord your God has scattered you. If any of you are driven out to the farthest parts under heaven, from there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there He will bring you" (Dt. 30:3-4). Note, that gathering the covenant people in this passage has nothing to do with the final judgment. It refers to a restoration of covenant blessings in the promised land. The phrase from "the farthest parts under heaven" is virtually identical to Jesus' statement in Matthew 24:31. Given the Old Testament usage of this phrase one should not argue that it refers to gathering up saints that are in heaven.

The theme of gathering together the people of God who are dispersed is used by the prophets with a new twist. In the book of Isaiah in the very chapter which depicts the Messiah as ruling (chapter 11) the gathering of the remnant of Israel and Judah in the new covenant era is merged with the gathering of the Gentiles. Isaiah 11:11-12 reads, "It shall come to pass in that day that the Lord shall set His hand again the second time to recover the remnant of His people who are left, from Assyria and Egypt, from Pathros and Cush, from Elam and Shinar, from Hamath and the islands of the sea. He will set up a banner for the nations, and will assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth." Young writes,

The Messiah would be a standard to which the Gentiles might rally. Here also we learn that the Lord will lift up a sign for the benefit of Israel. The Messiah will be a drawing point for the heathen, and through the work of Christian preaching and Christian missionaries He will draw

them unto Himself. How important, particularly in this day and age, therefore, that the church send forth to the four corners of the earth missionaries who are aflame with the truth that apart from the true Messiah, Jesus, there is no salvation!...Isaiah does not intend us to understand that the earth actually has four corners. He is merely employing a manner of speaking taken from the idea of referring to the four corners of a garment as indicating the entirety of the garment. Our Lord was reflecting upon this passage when He said, "And he shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other" (Matt. 24:31).<sup>84</sup>

With Isaiah's prophecy regarding the messianic kingdom in mind, note the prophecy of the high priest regarding Jesus. "[H]e prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for that nation only, but also that He would gather together in one the children of God who were scattered abroad" (Jn. 11:51-52). In the new covenant, Christ has made both Jews and Gentiles into one body (1 Cor. 12:12; Eph. 4:4), one temple (Eph. 2:21), the church. As Paul says, "Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord" (Eph. 2:19-21; cf. 14-22; 3:6).

Another passage that speaks of a gathering together of God's people is Isaiah 27:12-13: "And it shall come to pass in that day that the Lord will thresh, from the channel of the River to the Brook of Egypt; and you will be gathered one by one, O you children of Israel. So it shall be in that day: The great trumpet will be blown; they will come, who are about to perish in the land of Assyria, and they who are outcasts in the land of Egypt." Note that this gathering is preceded by the trumpet blast as in Matthew 24:31. The trumpet blast is a call to gather together. This passage (like Matthew 24:31) does not refer to a gathering together on the day of judgment. The imagery of threshing grain is used to describe the gathering of God's people out of heathen and hostile nations. The phrase "one by one" indicates a progressive gathering. Although this passage is not as clear as the one considered above, it is likely that Isaiah speaks of a new covenant gathering. Young writes, "It is necessary to state the purpose of the re-gathering. It is that the dispersed ones may worship the Lord; it is for the purpose of accomplishing something spiritual, not that the Jews may establish a political state in Palestine. This worship is to be conducted in the mount of holiness in Jerusalem. Isaiah reflects upon his earlier usages, in 24:23, and 25:6, 7 and 10. This is the great and central purpose of the return. The first thing to be accomplished, indeed, the purpose of the entire ingathering, is that the dispersed ones may worship the Lord in Jerusalem. In the light of this description it would seem that the verse refers, not primarily to the exile, but to the return of sinners in Jesus Christ. It is in Him that God has gathered into one His people scattered throughout the earth. 'That in the dispensation of the fullness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him' (Eph. 1:10)."<sup>85</sup> This theme is continued in Isaiah chapter sixty. "The Gentiles shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising. Lift up your eyes all around, and see: they all gather together, they come to you" (vs. 3-4; cf. 60:1-16).

The gathering of the elect from the four winds of heaven and the bringing in of the Gentiles to make one unified people in the kingdom of God is especially clear in Zechariah 2. "Up, up! Flee from the land of the north," says the Lord; 'for I have spread you abroad like the

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<sup>84</sup> E. J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 1:396-397.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:252-253.

four winds of heaven,' says the Lord.... 'Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion! For behold, I am coming and I will dwell in your midst,' says the Lord. 'Many nations shall be joined to the Lord in that day, and they shall become My people. And I will dwell in your midst. Then you will know that the Lord of hosts has sent Me to you'" (vs. 6, 10-11). In the new covenant era the elect of all nations will be gathered together with the penitents of Israel that are scattered throughout the nations. This will be accompanied by God coming and dwelling in the midst of His people. This coming should not be understood as the incarnation of Christ in which He dwelt physically in the land of Israel but rather as the coming of His Spirit at Pentecost.

The gathering of the elect from the four corners under heaven by messengers (i.e. gospel preachers) began in earnest at Pentecost when Christ sent His Holy Spirit to empower the church for victory. In Acts chapter 2 it is emphasized that "Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven" (v. 5) are present to hear the manifestation of the baptism in the Holy Spirit and the gospel message. Peter told them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call" (Ac. 2:38). After Peter's sermon three thousand souls were added to Christ's church. John Gill writes,

The Gospel will be preached in all nations, and multitudes will be converted, and embrace and profess the Christian religion, and join themselves to the churches of Christ, which, in the New Testament, is expressed by being joined to the Lord, Acts v. 13, 14, see Jer. 1.5. and Isa. lvi. 3, 6: and shall be my people; shall appear to be so, who before were not the people of God; did not profess themselves, and were not known to be, the people of God, though they secretly were in the counsel and covenant of God; but now, being called by grace, they become openly and manifestatively his people, 1 Pet. ii. 10: and I will dwell in the midst of thee; in the church, consisting of people of many nations, as well as Jews: and thou shalt know that the Lord of hosts hath sent me unto thee; to the Jews, as well as to the Gentiles.<sup>86</sup>

As the gospel went forth unto the Gentile nations the first Christian churches were usually composed of converted Jews of the diaspora as well as converted Gentiles. The gathering of the Gentiles is so intimately combined with the gathering of the Jewish remnant in the minds of the apostles that James referred to Paul's ministry among the Gentiles as a rebuilding of "the tabernacle of David which has fallen down" (Ac. 15:16). Christ's resurrection and enthronement leads to the gathering of the elect from all nations. "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations" (Mt. 28:18-19).

There is no question that the gathering of the elect is connected by Scripture to the Messiah's enthronement and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. The question that naturally arises regarding Matthew 24:31 is: "why is this ingathering connected to our Lord's coming in judgment on Jerusalem?" The answer to this question is twofold. First, as we noted earlier Jesus' ascension, enthronement, the pouring out of the Holy Spirit and the destruction of Jerusalem are all organically connected in Scripture. The empowerment to disciple the nations and the ability to destroy enemy nations are manifestations of Christ's kingship. Indeed, Pentecost and the destruction of Jerusalem were the two great signs of the Messiah's kingship and reign to that generation. Second, the destruction of Jerusalem brings to a full and complete end the covenant transfer from Israel to the multi-national church of Jesus Christ. The whole period from

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<sup>86</sup> John Gill, *An Exposition of the Books of the Prophets* (Streamwood, IL: Primitive Baptist Library, 1979), 2:686.

Pentecost to the destruction of Israel was unique in salvation history in that there was a brief overlap of two covenantal administrations. Even though the old order was brought to an end at Calvary when our Savior died as a blood sacrifice, God still gave a special priority to the Jewish nation and people in the preaching of the gospel for a whole generation. Not only was a major portion of missionary activity directed to Israel, but even the Jews of the diaspora throughout the Roman Empire received top priority. This apostolic practice explains why the apostle Paul as a set policy always presented the gospel to the Jews before turning to the Gentiles. “Then Paul and Barnabas grew bold and said, ‘It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles’” (Ac. 13:46). When Paul and Barnabas say it was necessary, they mean the necessity of executing the divine plan and purpose with respect to preaching the gospel in that first generation. This was Paul’s practice in Corinth (Ac. 18:6), Ephesus (Ac. 19:9) and Rome (Ac. 28:28). After preaching to the Jews of the diaspora in Rome in which only “some were persuaded” (Ac. 28:24) Paul quotes Isaiah’s prophecy regarding the Jews’ rejection of the gospel and says, “Therefore let it be known to you that the salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will hear it!” (Ac. 28:28). “*To the Gentiles*, literally, *the nations*, i.e. other nations.”<sup>87</sup> The rejection of the gospel on the part of the Jews which led to the destruction of the Jewish nation led to a wider and more rapid spread of the gospel among the Gentile nations. The destruction of Israel was a blessing for the whole world. Paul declared, “...their fall is riches for the world, their failure riches for the Gentiles...their being cast away is the reconciling of the world” (Rom. 11:12, 15). Charles Hodge writes,

The Jews, even those who were professors of Christianity, were, in the first place, very slow to allow the gospel to be preached to the Gentiles; and in the second, they appear almost uniformly to have desired to clog the gospel with the ceremonial observances of the law. This was one of the greatest hindrances to the progress of the cause of Christ during the apostolic age, and would, in all probability, have been a thousand-fold greater, had the Jews, as a nation, embraced the Christian faith. On both these accounts, the rejection of the Jews was incidentally a means of facilitating the progress of the gospel. Besides this, the punishment which befell them on account of their unbelief, involving the destruction of their nation and power, of course, prevented their being able to forbid the general preaching of the gospel, which they earnestly desired to do. 1 Thess. ii. 15, 16, “They please not God, and are contrary to all men; forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles, that they might be saved.”<sup>88</sup>

Further, after the destruction of Israel Christianity was forever separated from its ties to the land of Israel and could now be seen as a true multi-national, pan-ethnic religion. Tasker writes, “It was in fact only after the old order ended with the destruction of the Temple that world evangelism by the Christian Church, now entirely separate from Judaism, could be conducted in earnest. Not till then could the *trumpet* of the gospel be sounded throughout the world. Not till then could the Son of man, having 'visited' the old Israel in judgment, *send his angels* (i.e. His messengers) *to gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of*

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<sup>87</sup> J. A. Alexander, *Acts* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1963 [1857]), 494. In the generation from Pentecost to the destruction of Jerusalem even Jewish Christians were treated differently. They were given one generation to become accustomed to the new covenant order. This point explains why Paul gave Jewish believers the liberty of keeping old covenant holy days (cf. Rom. 14:5 ff.) Even Paul himself went to the temple to fulfill a vow apparently made before he was a Christian (cf. Ac. 21:26). When Israel was destroyed in A.D. 70 by the Romans, the transitional period was over.

<sup>88</sup> Charles Hodge, *Romans* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1972 [1835]), 361-362.

*heaven to the other*, a result which could be obtained only when the gospel had been preached to the whole world (29-31).”<sup>89</sup>

After considering the Old Testament background of this passage and its theological import in the book of Acts and Romans, it is clear that Jesus is speaking figuratively of the great advance of the gospel through His messengers after Israel is destroyed. In that sense it was a procedure that followed His coming in judgment and still continues until the second bodily coming at the end of history.

## The Parable of the Fig Tree

After describing the manner (like lightning), the sign (the smoking ruins of Jerusalem) and the result (the Jews will mourn and the gospel will go forth to the whole world) of His coming in judgment. Jesus returns to the nearness of the fulfillment of His prophecy and the urgency of the matter by giving the disciples a parable. “Now learn this parable from the fig tree: when its branch has already become tender and puts forth leaves, you know that summer is near. So you also, when you see all these things, know that it is near-at the doors” (Mt.24:33)! Our Lord uttered these words on the Mount of Olives in the spring (near the Passover) at the time that fig trees were beginning to sprout new leaves. Unlike almond trees, which come to life in early spring, the fig tree becomes green in late spring, closer to summer. The disciples were likely sitting within sight of fig trees given the fact that the Mount of Olives at that time was noted for its fig trees. The point of this parable is that certain events (i.e. the signs or more specifically the immediate signs) are to convey the unmistakable message that the climax to Jesus’ prophecy is about to take place. As the appearance of new leaves on a fig tree are a sign that summer is right around the corner, the signs of Jesus’ coming indicate the city and temple are about to be destroyed.

This interpretation is supported in a number of ways. First, there is audience relevance. Christ says, “...when you see all these things.” Our Lord is speaking to the disciples of His own generation not to a group of Christians living 2,000 years in the future. This is supported by the parallel account in Luke. “Now when these things begin to happen, look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption draws near” (Lk. 21:28). Gill writes, “...not the redemption of their souls from sin, Satan, the law, the world, death, and hell; for that was to be obtained, and was obtained, before any of these signs took place; nor the redemption of their bodies at the last day, in the resurrection, called the day of redemption; for this respects something that was to be, in the present generation..., but the deliverance of the apostles and other Christians, from the persecution of the Jews, which were very violent and held till these times, and then they were freed from them: or by *redemption* it is meant, the redeemer, the Son of man, who shall now come in power and glory, to destroy the Jews, and deliver his people....”<sup>90</sup>

Second, Christ uses the phrase “all these things” which hearkens back to the disciples’ question in verse 3 as well as verse 8. The phrase “all these things” refers to events that portend the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, not the distant future second bodily coming of our Lord. “Jesus is here saying in effect that it will be certain that Jerusalem will fall when *all these things* (i.e. the appearance of the abomination of desolation, and the advent of false Messiahs,

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<sup>89</sup> R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 227.

<sup>90</sup> John Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament* (Streamwood, IL: Primitive Baptist Library, 1979 [1809]), 1:701.



etc.) have become apparent, as it is certain that summer will follow when the first leaves are seen on the fig tree's tender branches."<sup>91</sup> Morison writes,

To what then does the expression "all these things" refer? The probability is that it is the echo and resumption of certain "things" which had kept afloat on the surface of the minds of the disciples, all through the Savior's apocalyptic conversation and inquiry, before He had given utterance to the general prophetic disclosures of the preceding context. They were the "things" indeed which had given occasion to that apocalypse...When then He here presumptively says, *When ye shall see "all these things,"* the reference is, as we apprehend, to the following effect, *When the woes which I had to utter in reference to the "scribes and Pharisees, hypocrite" (chap. xxiii. 13-36, 38, 39), begin to thicken upon the doomed people; when the temple itself shall be invaded, and its walls, massive though they be and apparently indestructible, become shattered; when the abomination of the desolation gets a footing within its sacred enclosure; and when all the natural accompaniments of such a tragedy are in progress; when ye shall see 'all these things,' then mark what follows.*<sup>92</sup>

Third, there is the time indicator given in the immediate context. "This generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place" (Mt. 24:34; cf. Mk. 13:30; Lk. 21:32). Jesus said to the disciples in plain, unambiguous speech, "this present generation will not die before all these things come to pass." Kik writes, "Here the Lord definitely limits 'all these things' to the contemporary generation. Previously he had employed the phrase in reference to the woes upon the scribes and Pharisees of his generation and in reference to the destruction of the Temple. Here there can be no question as to its reference to the predicted events and especially to the destruction of the Temple for Jesus used the phrase ("See ye not all these things?") when the disciples showed him the buildings of the Temple. Furthermore, when Jesus prophesied that not one stone would be left upon another, the disciples asked, 'When shall these things be?' within the context 'all these things' employed in the parable of the Fig Tree and the time text include all the events enumerated by Christ in answering the question of the disciples. If he meant something entirely different Jesus would have indicated it or else there would be utter confusion in the minds of the disciples."<sup>93</sup> Further, after examining how our Lord's apocalyptic speech (i.e. His use of the Old Testament prophetic imagery of judgment) fits in perfectly with the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, there is no need to torture, twist and convolute the plain contextual meaning of "this generation."

Fourth, the parallel passage in Luke clarifies the punch line of this parable. Matthew and Mark both say "when you see all these things, know that it is near-at the doors" (Mt. 24:33; Mk. 13:29b). Luke, however, writing for a Gentile audience says, "when you see these things happening, know that the kingdom of God is near" (Lk. 21:31). Does Luke mean that when you see these things the second bodily coming of Christ is near? No. The coming of the kingdom of God in Luke refers to the ascended enthroned Messiah's exercise of power in the destruction of Jerusalem. Note how the *identical* phrase is used in Luke 9:27: "But I tell you truly, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the kingdom of God." The parallel in Matthew says, "the Son of Man coming in His kingdom" (Mt. 16:28) while Mark reads, "till they see the kingdom of God present with power" (Mk. 9:1). As we noted earlier in this study, Luke is referring to something far enough off into the future that many disciples would be dead while

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<sup>91</sup> R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 227.

<sup>92</sup> James Morison, *A Practical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 482-484.

<sup>93</sup> J. Marcellus Kik, *An Eschatology of Victory*, 155.

some would still be alive to witness the kingdom present with power. This rules out the transfiguration and resurrection, which were in the immediate future, as well as the second bodily coming when all the disciples would be long dead and buried. The kingdom of God was present while Jesus walked the earth (Mt. 12:28; Lk. 16:16, 17:21). However, the kingdom was not present with power until the resurrection (Mt. 28:19; Rom. 1:4), ascension and enthronement of the Messiah (Dan. 7:13-14; Ps. 2:6 ff.; 110; etc.). Since Jesus Himself connects His ascension and enthronement to the right hand of Power with the destruction of Jerusalem (Mt. 24:30; 26:64) the nearness of the kingdom of God in Luke refers to a manifestation of kingdom power (i.e. the destruction of Israel by the enthroned Mediator). “The destruction of Jerusalem, witnessed by S. John and perhaps a few of those present, swept away the remains of the Old Dispensation and left the Gospel in possession of the field.”<sup>94</sup>

Before turning our attention to the time text we need to briefly consider an erroneous yet extremely popular modern interpretation of the parable of the fig tree. Various dispensational authors and some television preachers (e.g., Hal Lindsey, Jack Van Impe, Chuck Smith, etc.) have argued that the parable of the fig tree teaches that the great sign of the second *bodily* coming of Christ is Israel’s re-establishment as a nation in 1948. The fig tree we are told is a “historic symbol of national Israel.” The budding and setting forth of new leaves (according to this view) represents the rebirth of national Israel. Therefore, the generation alive in 1948 when Israel became a nation will not pass away before the second bodily coming of Christ occurs.

Although this interpretation is very popular today, there are many reasons why we must reject it as unscriptural. First, there is not a shred of evidence within the immediate or broader context that our Lord has the rebirth of Israel in mind. Jesus is using the fig tree getting leaves in the spring as a simple illustration of the fact that when the signs that *He has already discussed* come to pass, His coming in judgment will occur very soon. The Hal Lindsey interpretation wrenches the fig tree parable out of its context and assumes the fig tree’s new leaves represent something *completely new* that will occur in the distant future. The idea that Christ is bringing in a new and separate sign is disproved by the immediate context where our Lord says, “when you see all these things [plural], know that it is near-at the doors!” (Mt. 24:33; cf. Mk. 13:28; Lk. 21:31 reads, “when you see all these things [plural] coming to pass...”).<sup>95</sup> The fig tree parable has reference to *a number of things* coming to pass, *not just one thing*--the rebirth of Israel. This point also proves that the fig tree does not represent the nation of Israel in this passage. Further, in the Olivet discourse, Jesus had already identified the central sign of the nearness of His coming in judgment as “the abomination of desolation.”

Second, the Hal Lindsay interpretation of the fig tree assumes the radical, futurist, dispensational understanding of the Olivet Discourse. We have already seen that all the things discussed by our Lord up to verse 34 refer to the contemporary generation that will be alive to witness the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. Jesus is describing events that took place prior to A.D. 70. Hal Lindsay’s contention that verse 34 (“Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place”) refers to a generation alive over nineteen centuries in the future, completely ignores the plain grammatical meaning of Christ’s

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<sup>94</sup> Alfred Plummer, *The Gospel According to S. Luke* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1981 [1896]), 250.

<sup>95</sup> Why do most translations say “it is near” rather than “He is near”? Ralph Earle offers an excellent explanation. He writes, “[verse] 33 **It** in Greek, no pronoun expressed--as in Latin, it is included in the verb--so *est in* can be translated either ‘it is’ (KJV, NIV) or ‘He is’ (NASB). But since the parallel passage in Luke (21:31) says ‘the kingdom of God is near,’ it would seem best to use ‘it’ rather than ‘He’” (*Word Meanings in the New Testament* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1974], 22).

words, audience relevance and the context of the passage. His interpretation is completely arbitrary because he is forcing the passage into an erroneous system of eschatology.

Third, that Jesus is just using the budding fig tree as an analogy of the closeness of summer (i.e. the destruction of Israel) and not as a symbol of the rebirth of Israel is proved by the parallel account in Luke. The evangelist writes, "Look at the fig tree, *and all the trees*. When *they* are already budding, you see and know for yourselves that summer is now near" (21:29-30). If our Lord is making a cryptic prediction regarding the future rebirth of Israel in Matthew 24:32 then what, we ask, does the rebudding of these other trees (plural) refer? Are there several other nations that must be reborn before the second coming of Christ? No, of course not! The fact that Jesus includes trees in general proves that this passage has nothing to do with the formation of the secular, heathen, anti-Christian state called Israel in 1948.

Fourth, the phrase "it is near-at the doors" means that the event to which Christ refers will occur in *the immediate future*. That is it will likely happen in a few months at the most. When Jesus says "this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place" (Mt. 24:34), He means the generation alive at the time He uttered the prophecy, *not* the generation to witness the budding of the fig tree. The Olivet discourse was spoken some time in or around A.D. 30. Thus, a person who heard this prophecy could expect its fulfillment by A.D. 70, which is precisely what occurred. The budding of the fig tree, however, refers to the disciples seeing the signs come to pass. This places the fulfillment of the fig tree analogy, at the most, only months away from the complete destruction of Jerusalem. Of the account in Mark 13:29, Lane writes, "The application of the parable in verse 29 places the accent on proximity more vigorously: 'it is near, at the door.' The catastrophe of sacrilege that will profane the Temple (verse 14) will enable the disciples to know that the destruction of the Temple is imminent in the same manner that the coming of summer is imminent to the moment when the fig tree covers itself with leaves. In verse 29 the words 'when you see these things happening' appear to be an intentional echo of the beginning of verse 14, 'when you see the appalling sacrilege.' That catastrophe, which will take place in the Temple, will be the signal for flight from unheard of distress. The parable and its applications invite the reader of the Gospel to see in the misfortunes which will overtake Jerusalem the evidence that its devastation and ruin is near."<sup>96</sup> But, according to Hal Lindsay the statement "it is near-at the doors" does not teach immediate proximity but can and does refer to several decades. Such an interpretation, however, violates the plain meaning of Jesus' words. "A single reason is in view, not forty or fifty seasons."<sup>97</sup> According to Hal Lindsey the prophetic time clock that is counting down toward the day of our Lord's second bodily coming began in May 1949, 53 years ago! It ought to be obvious to any unbiased interpreter that the Hal Lindsey interpretation of the budding fig tree is totally off the mark.

Fifth, the idea that the fig tree represents the restoration of the Jewish nation cannot be demonstrated from any place in Scripture. Interestingly, if one compares every place in the Bible where figs or a fig tree is used to illustrate something regarding the nation of Israel, every instance is associated with judgment (cf. Jer. 8:13; 24:1-10; 29:17; Joel 1:7; Hos. 9:10, 16; cf. Mic. 7:1-6. There are good figs in Jeremiah 24:2-5. However the good figs merely represent those captives taken to Babylon who will be allowed to return after 70 years.) In Mark 11:12-14, 20-21, Israel is compared to a barren fruit tree. "In this context the fig tree symbolizes Israel in

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<sup>96</sup> William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, 479.

<sup>97</sup> Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness*, 179.

Jesus' day, and what happens to the tree-the terrible fate that inevitably awaited Jerusalem."<sup>98</sup> Similarly, Luke 13:6-9 (the parable of the unfruitful fig tree) compares Israel in the days of our Lord to a barren fig tree. The barren fruit tree illustration makes it abundantly clear that *as a special covenant nation* Israel would *never* bear the fruits of righteousness again. "Jesus said to it, 'Let no one eat fruit from you ever again'" (Mk. 11:14). Using the symbolism of the barren fig tree Christ spoke of God's judicial action against the covenant nation that would forever remove her covenant status as Jehovah's special nation. The means of grace (the word and sacraments) as well as discipline and government passed completely to the church of Jesus Christ. If Jews are to minister fruits of righteousness they can only do so by joining the multinational, pan-ethnic body of Christ. The nation of modern Israel has no more significance in God's eyes than Japan or Brazil. The church is the true Israel of God (Eph. 2:14, 19, 21; 3:6; Ac. 10:47; 15:14-17; Mt. 21:43; Rom. 3:29, 30; 4:13; 9:6-8, 23-33; Gal. 3:7, 28-29; 5:6; 6:15, 16; 1 Pet. 1:1-2; Rev. 3:9; etc.). Further, the "New Testament makes it very clear that the preferred symbols for spiritual Israel are the vine (John 15:1-11), the olive tree (Rom. 11:16-24), the lump of dough (11:16), and the flock (Isa. 40:11; Jer. 23:2; Mt. 26:31; Lk. 12:32; Jn. 10:16; 1 Pet. 5:2)."<sup>99</sup> If Jesus wanted to tell the disciples about something as dramatic and important as the rebirth of national Israel, one could expect Him to do so in a manner that would be clear enough to be understood by the disciples. (This author consulted over 40 commentaries on the synoptic gospels from the 1600s to the 1980s from Reformed, Lutheran, Baptist and Modernist scholars and *not one* saw a connection between the new leaves on the fig tree and the rebirth of national Israel.)

### Chapter 3: The Time of the Text

As Jesus draws to a conclusion His prophecy regarding the destruction of Jerusalem, the temple and the dissolution of Israel as a special covenant nation, He presses upon the disciples the urgency and certainty regarding His prediction. The urgency and need to be prepared is set forth in the illustration of the fig tree. The certainty of Christ's words coming to pass in that evil and adulterous generation is presented in our Lord's twofold solemn pronouncement of verses 34 to 35. "Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away" (Mt. 24:34-35; cf. Mk. 13:30-31; Lk. 21:32-33). This passage is crucial to understanding the whole preceding discourse. The importance of what Jesus says can be ascertained by our Lord's use of "Amen, I say to you." The word "amen" (a transliteration of the Hebrew word for truth) translated as truly, assuredly, verily, or solemnly, indicates the *absolute veracity* of the words of our Lord whose every word is truth. The statement "I say to you" indicates the *absolute authority* of the Mediator. Jesus only uses this introduction at the head of statements that He wants to underline and embolden with divine authority. The absolute truth and authority of Christ's words

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<sup>98</sup> William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, 400. Lane writes, "The explanation was already put forth by Victor of Antioch, in the oldest existing commentary on Mark, that Jesus had 'used the fig tree to set forth the judgment that was about to fall on Jerusalem.' This is certainly the evangelist's understanding of the episode, for in the Gospel of Mark Jesus' action in the Temple is firmly embedded within the fig tree incident. The a-b-a structure of Ch. 11:12-21 (fig tree-cleansing the Temple-fig tree) serves to provide a mutual commentary on these two events. Just as the leaves of the fig tree concealed the fact that there was no fruit to enjoy, so the magnificence of the Temple and its ceremony conceals the fact that Israel has not brought forth the fruit of righteousness demanded by God. Both incidents have the character of a prophetic sign which warns of judgment to fall upon Israel for honoring God with their lips when their heart was far from him (cf. Ch. &:6) (*Ibid.*).

<sup>99</sup> Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness*, 179.

are restated in verse 35 which indicate that our Lord's words are more lasting, abiding or permanent than even heaven and earth.<sup>100</sup> They will stand the test of time. "You can be assured that not one word will fall to the ground unfulfilled." Verse 35 applies not only to verse 34 but to the whole preceding prophecy.

As we turn our attention to the key text (i.e. v. 34) for the understanding of the preceding section of the Olivet Discourse, we will review our previous discussion of this passage as well as consider more in depth the most common interpretation, that the word "generation" refers to the Jewish race.

When Jesus says that "this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place" (v.34), He means that *all of the things* He prophesied prior to verse 34 would occur during the generation of Jews who were alive when He spoke those words. That this verse is incapable of any other meaning is proved by the following points.

The word generation (*genea*) in the gospels *always* refers to a specific generation living at the same period of time.<sup>101</sup> Since this point was demonstrated by an examination of several biblical passages earlier in this study, we will now examine the definition of this word by various Greek scholars and commentators. a) After noting that *genea* can mean a clan, race or kind in ancient Greek literature (Walter Bauer cites Luke 16:8 as the only possible New Testament example of such a usage), Bauer writes, "basically, the sum total of those born at the same time, expanded to include all those living at a given time *generation, contemporaries...*Jesus looks upon the whole contemporary generation of Jews as a uniform mass confronting Him...Mt. 11:16; 12:4 f.; 23:36; 24:34; Mk. 13:30; Lk. 7:31; 11:29-32, 50 f.; 17:25; 21:32."<sup>102</sup> Note that Bauer references Matthew 24:34 and its parallels (Mk. 13:30 and Lk. 21:32) as examples of *genea* meaning generation or contemporaries. b) After Thayer discusses the classical Greek usage of *genea* he writes, "*the whole multitude of men living at the same time*: Mt. xiv. 34; Mk. xiii. 30;...Lk. xxi. 32."<sup>103</sup> Once again note that Matthew 24:34 and its parallels are cited. c) Greek scholar V. Hasler writes, "Of the 43 references to *genea* in the NT, 33 are in the Synoptic, where the word refers in 25 of its occurrences to the Jewish people in the time of Jesus, 17 times in the expression '*this generation*.'"<sup>104</sup> In other words every time the expression "this generation" occurs in the synoptic gospels it refers to the Jewish people living in the time of Jesus. d) After noting that *gennoma* in the New Testament means "race, stock or family" Abbott-Smith writes

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<sup>100</sup> Jesus' reference to heaven and earth passing away may refer to the dissolution of the Mosaic economy. The Old Testament prophets often used language relating to the universe's collapse or returning to chaos to describe judgments on various nations. Plummer writes, "Heaven and earth shall pass away' perhaps looks back to ver. 29, where the beginning of a break-up of the universe seems to be indicated [i.e. figuratively]. But as in ver.35, the 'passing away of heaven and earth' may be a figurative expression for the end of the existing dispensation, of all that was regarded as most durable and permanent. Christ's words will be more sure than anything, -His words in general, but especially His words about the coming judgment" (*An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel to St. Matthew*, 338). See the section above that discusses "signs in the heavens."

<sup>101</sup> The one possible exception, Luke 16:8 is discussed in footnote number 10.

<sup>102</sup> F. Wilbur Gingrich and William F. Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature: A Translation and Adaptation of the Fourth Revised and Augmentation Edition of Walter Bauer's Griechisch-Deutsches Worterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der Übrigen Urchristlichen Literatur* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979 [1957]), 154.

<sup>103</sup> Joseph Henry Thayer, *The New Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Lafayette, IN: APXA, 1979 [1889]), 112.

<sup>104</sup> V. Haster, "genea" in Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider editors, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 1:241.

regarding *genea*, “of all the people of a given period: Mt. 24:34, Mk. 13:30, Lk. 21:32...”<sup>105</sup> e) A. T. Robertson writes, “In the Old Testament a generation was reckoned as forty years. This is the natural way to take [Matthew 24] verse 34 as of 33 (Bruce), ‘all things’ meaning the same in both verses.”<sup>106</sup> f) Bushel writes, “In the NT *genea* is common in the Synoptic, rare in Paul, absent from Jn., including Rev. As a purely formal concept it is always qualified. It mostly denotes ‘generation’ in the sense of contemporaries. We often have the formula *hegenea haute* [this generation], as at Mk. 8:12 (Lk. 11:29, 30); 13:30 (Mt. 24:34; Lk. 21:32)... This generation is to be understood temporarily...”<sup>107</sup> (g) Morgenthaler writes, “In Matt. it has the sense of *this generation*, and according to the first evangelist, Jesus expected the end of this age...to occur in connection with the judgment on Jerusalem at the end of that first generation (see Mk. 9:1 and Matt. 16:18).”<sup>108</sup> (h) Conrad writes, “Hebrew *dór*, Aram. *dar* and Gk *geneà* refer to a period of time loosely defined as the time between a parent's prime and that of his child....Those living at a given time in history are referred to as a generation (Jer. 2:31; Mt. 11:16), and can be characterized as a whole, e.g., as a ‘perverse and crooked generation’ (Dt. 32:5), as a ‘faithless and perverse generation’ (Lk. 9:41).”<sup>109</sup> (i) Cranwell says that *genea* refers to, “the people of a period: ‘this generation shall not pass away’ (Lk. 21:32).”<sup>110</sup>

Now let us turn our attention to the comments of the great Bible expositors of the past and present. This section is important for it proves that what has been labeled partial or orthodox preterism is not a new or recent doctrine among Protestants.<sup>111</sup>

- a) The greatest of Bible interpreters among the reformers was John Calvin (1509-1564). He writes, “‘This generation shall pass away.’ Though Christ employs a general expression, yet he does not extend the discourses to all the miseries which would befall the Church, but merely informs them, that before a single *generation* shall have been completed, they will learn by experience the truth of what he has said. For within fifty years the city was

<sup>105</sup> G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1937), 89.

<sup>106</sup> Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, no date [1930]), 1:94. Robertson leaves open the possibility that Christ is speaking about a specific generation at the end of the world. He writes, “The problem is whether Jesus is here referring to the destruction of Jerusalem or to the second coming at the end of the world. If to the destruction of Jerusalem, there was a literal fulfillment” (*Ibid.*, 193).

<sup>107</sup> Frederick Bushel, “*Genea*” in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 1:663.

<sup>108</sup> R. Morgenthaler, “Generation” in *New International Dictionary of the New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 2:37-38; as quoted in Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness*, 186.

<sup>109</sup> E. W. Conrad, “Generation” in general editor, Geoffrey Bromiley, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 2:431.

<sup>110</sup> Philip Wendell Cranwell, “Generation” in general editor James Orr, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939 [1929]), 2:1199. Earlier Cranwell does argue that generation (*genea*) does mean race in Matthew 17:17. However, (as we noted before) it can only mean a race or nation at a particular point in history. The Jews were not always guilty of gross covenant breaking during their history.

<sup>111</sup> Some of the commentaries quoted are not partial preterists in the modern sense of believing everything up to verse 34 refers to the destruction of Israel (e.g., John Calvin, David Dickson, Matthew Poole, Matthew Henry, J. A. Alexander and C. H. Spurgeon). These men are quoted because they take Matthew 24:33-34 literally or at face value and thus apply the time text to the generation of people alive to witness the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. These men avoid the obvious import of the phrase “all these things” by means of appealing to double fulfillment, or the destruction of Jerusalem as a type of the end of the world, or arbitrarily applying “all these things” to only most of or part of the things discussed, or appealing to the common Old Testament prophetic method of slipping prophecies regarding the distant future into prophecies dealing with events in the immediate future. While this author has the utmost respect for these excellent scholars, he is not willing to circumvent the obvious meaning of “all these things will come to pass in this generation.”

destroyed and the temple rased, the whole country was reduced to a hideous desert, and the obstinacy of the world rose up against God...Now though the same evils were perpetrated in uninterrupted succession for many ages afterwards, yet what Christ said was true, that, before the close of a single *generation*, believers would feel in reality, and by undoubted experience, the truth of his prediction.”<sup>112</sup>

- b) The covenanter Matthew Poole (published 1685) writes, “There are several notions men have of that term, *this generation*, some by it understanding mankind; others, the generation of Christians; others, the whole generation of Jews: but doubtless our Savior means the set of men that were at that time in the world: those who were at that time living should not all die until all these things shall be fulfilled, all that he had spoken with reference to the destruction of Jerusalem...”<sup>113</sup>
- c) The professor of Divinity in Glasgow during the second reformation in Scotland-David Dickson (1583-1663) writes, “And at first, he certifies them of the destruction of the temple under the parable of the fig tree; that when the fig-tree begins to bud summer is near. So when they should see the Jews doting on false christs, hearkening to false prophets, persecuting the preachers of the gospel, growing tumultuous and seditious under hopes of a bodily liberation from the yoke of the Romans, rumors of wars arising, armies coming in upon Judea, then let them persuade themselves, says he, that when these signs should appear judgment was at the door upon that nation, and that both these signs and the destruction of Jerusalem with the temple should all come to pass in the days of them that were then living (vv 33, 34).”<sup>114</sup>
- d) The most popular of Protestant commentators-Matthew Henry (1662-1714) writes, “As to these things, the wars, seductions, and persecutions, here foretold, and especially the ruin of the Jewish nation; ‘This generation shall not pass away, till all these things be fulfilled (Mt 24:34); there are those now alive, that shall see Jerusalem destroyed, and the Jewish church brought to an end.’ Because it might seem strange, he backs it with a solemn asseveration; ‘Verily, I say unto you. You may take my word for it, these things are at the door.’ Christ often speaks of the nearness of that desolation, the more to affect people, and quicken them to prepare for it.”<sup>115</sup>
- e) The great reformed Baptist scholar John Gill (1679-1771) writes, “‘Verily I say unto you, this generation shall not pass,’ &c. Not the generation of men in general; as if the sense was, that mankind should not cease, until the accomplishment of these things; nor the generation, or people of the Jews, who should continue to be a people, until all were fulfilled; nor the generation of Christians; as if the meaning was, that there should be always a set of Christians, or believers in Christ in the world, till all these events came to pass; but it respects that present age, or generation of men then living in it; and the sense is, that all the men of that age should not die, but some should live ‘till all these things

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<sup>112</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 3:151.

<sup>113</sup> Matthew Poole, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 3:116.

<sup>114</sup> David Dickson, *Matthew*, 334.

<sup>115</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (McLean, VA: McDonald Publishing, n. d.), 5:361.

were fulfilled'; see Matt. xvi. 28. as many did, and as there is reason to believe they might, and must, since all these things had their accomplishment, in and about forty years after this: and certain it is, that John, one of the disciples of Christ, outlived the time by many years; and, as Dr. Lightfoot observes, many of the Jewish doctors now living, when Christ spoke these words, lived until the city was destroyed; as Rabban Simeon, who perished with it, R. Jochanan ben Zaccai, who outlived it, R. Zadoch, R. Ishmael, and others: this is a full and clear proof, that not any thing that is said before, relates to the second coming of Christ, the day of judgment, and end of the world; but that all belong to the coming of the son of man, in the destruction of Jerusalem, and to the end of the Jewish state."<sup>116</sup>

- f) Professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, J. A. Alexander writes (published 1858), "But the critical word in this critical sentence is *generation*, which some make here synonymous with *race* or *nation*, and apply it to the Jews, who are not to lose their separate existence until all these changes have been realized. This gives a wide scope to the prophecy, and readily enables us to transport what is said in vs. 24-27 to an indefinitely distant future. But although some English writers, for this reason, still adhere to that interpretation, others of the same class, and the German philologists almost without exception, treat it as a sheer invention without any authority either in classical or Hellenistic usage, so that some of the best lexicons do not give this definition, even to condemn it. Of the few alleged examples, chiefly in the Septuagint version, all admit of being taken in one of the acknowledged senses, which in the New Testament are three in number, all reducible to one and the same radical idea, that of a contemporary race, or the aggregate of those living at the same time. This is the direct sense in the great majority of cases (such as 8, 12, 38, 9, 19, Matt. 11, 16, 39-45, 16, 4, 23, 36, Luke 7, 31, 16, 8, 17, 25, Acts 2, 40, 13, 36, Phil. 2, 15, Heb. 3, 10), and is scarcely modified when transferred from men to time (as in Acts 14, 16, 15, 21, Eph. 3, 5, 21, Col. 1, 26), or to the stages of descent and degrees of genealogical succession (as in Matt. 1, 17.) Common to all cases is the radical idea of *contemporaneous existence*, which it would be monstrous therefore to exclude in that before us, as we must do, if we understand it of the whole race in its successive generations. It follows, therefore, that unless we forge a meaning for the word in this place, which is not only unexampled elsewhere, but directly contradictory to its essential meaning everywhere, we must understand our Lord as saying, that the contemporary race or generation, i.e. those then living, should not pass away or die till all these prophecies had been accomplished."<sup>117</sup>
- g) James Morison (1816-1893), a college professor in Scotland, writes, "But it does always, when used absolutely, and it does always in the New Testament, involve as an element of its import, either outstandingly and obtrusively or inobtrusively and implicitly, a reference *to limit a period of durations, and such a limited period too as may be measured by the natural life-term of the persons referred to as generated*. That natural life-term may be generalized into an average, or looked at in some of its manifold actual variations; but the word has reference to it. Hence the processional expression in Luke i. 50, 'from generation to generation.' Hence too the implicitly contrastive expression in

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<sup>116</sup> John Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament*, 1:296.

<sup>117</sup> J. A. Alexander, *Mark*, 362-363.



Acts xiii. 36 concerning David, ‘after he had served *his own generation*, he fell on sleep.’ Hence too the plural expression in Col. i. 26, ‘hid from ages, *and from generations*.’ Comp. Eph. iii 5, 21, Acts xvi. 16. Hence also the expression, also implicitly contrastive, in Heb. iii. 10, ‘I was grieved *with that generation*’ ‘and I swore in My wrath, *They shall not enter into My rest.*’ As to the expression before us, *this generation*, it evidently means, as in all the other passages where it occurs (Matt. xi. 16, xii. 41, 42, xxiii. 36; Mark viii. 12; Luke vii. 31, xi. 30, 31, 32, 50, 51, xvii. 25), *this present generation*. The verb with which it is connected, *shall (not) pass*, literally *shall (not) go by*, that is *shall (not) pass away*, is appropriate to describe the fleeting course of a generation. See Eccles. i. 4. It would by no means be so appropriate if used in reference to the fate of a people, as a people. And then, besides, the corresponding expression in Matt. xvi. 28, ‘Verily I say unto you, *there be some standing here, which shall not taste of death* till they see the Son of man coming in His kingdom,’ settles our Saviour’s reference. The great body of critics agree with us. They are firm in the conviction that the expression must mean *this present generation*.<sup>118</sup>

- h) Thomas Scott writes, “Our Lord here answers the former part of the apostle’s questions, concerning the time when these events would take place. In general he assured them, that their approach would be as certainly determined by the signs that he had mentioned, as the approach of summer was by the budding and the tender branch of the fig-tree, and that they would all be accomplished before the generation was passed away. This absolutely restricts our primary interpretation of the prophecy to the destruction of Jerusalem, which took place within forty years.”<sup>119</sup>
- i) John Lightfoot writes, “*This generation shall not pass*, &c. Hence it appears plain enough, that the foregoing verses are not to be understood of the last judgment, but, as we said, of the destruction of Jerusalem. There were some among the disciples (particularly John), who lived to see these things come to pass. With Matt. xvi. 28, compare John xxi. 22. And there were some Rabbins alive at the time when Christ spoke these things, that lived till the city was destroyed, viz. Rabban Simeon, who perished with the city, R. Jochanan Ben Zaccai, who outlived it, R. Zadoch, R. Ismael, and others.”<sup>120</sup>
- j) The great reformed Baptist preacher C. H. Spurgeon (1834-1891) writes, “The King left his followers in no doubt as to when these things should happen: ‘Verily I say unto you, *This generation shall not pass, till and these things be fulfilled.*’ It was about the ordinary limit of a generation when the Roman armies compassed Jerusalem, whose measure of iniquity was then full, and overflowed in misery, agony, distress, and bloodshed such as the world never saw before or since. Jesus was a true Prophet; everything that he foretold was literally fulfilled.”<sup>121</sup>

<sup>118</sup> James Morison, *A Practical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 485.

<sup>119</sup> Thomas Scott, *Commentary on the New Testament* (Cornhill, England: Samuel T. Armstrong, 1817) as quoted in John L. Bray, *Matthew 24 Fulfilled*, 200.

<sup>120</sup> John Lightfoot, *A Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Hebraica* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1961 [1859]), 2:320, as quoted in John L. Bray, 201.

<sup>121</sup> Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1987), 353.

- k) The Episcopal scholar Ezra P. Gould (p. 1896) writes, “*this generation*. The word is always used by Jesus to denote the men living at the time. This use is sufficient against the supposition that it means the Jewish race, or the human race, devices introduced to make it possible to interpret the prophecy as applying to the end of the world. But what meaning would either have as marks of time for the general winding of human affairs? No, the statement means that these events are to take place during the lifetime of Jesus’ contemporaries, and the events are, therefore, what the whole prophecy surely indicates, those connected with the fall of the Jewish state and the destruction of Jerusalem. *panta tauta*- Here is the answer to those who suppose that the prophecy is to be divided into two parts, one prediction the Jewish catastrophe, and the other the world-catastrophe. All these things, and not the minor part of them, are to take place within that generation.”<sup>122</sup>
- l) Alfred Plummer (p. 1909) writes, “[W]e need not make ‘all these things’ refer to anything beyond the judgment on Jerusalem and the tribulation which preceded the execution of it. If the Day of Judgment is in any way included, it is as being symbolized by the judgment on the guilty city. It is not satisfactory to extend the meaning of ‘this generation’ to future generations of either the Jewish or the whole human race. ‘This generation’ (*he genea haute*) is an expression of common and definite meaning; viz. ‘the generation which was alive when the words were spoken,’ many of whom did live to see ‘the abomination of desolation’ and the subsequent desolation of Jerusalem.”<sup>123</sup>
- m) Henry Barclay Swete (p. 1913) writes, “*he genea haute* is frequent in the Gospels (cf. e.g., viii. 12 (note), 38, Mt. xi. 16, xii. 41 ff., xxiii. 36, Lc. xvii. 25), referring apparently in every instance to the generation to which the Lord Himself belonged. In the present context it is certainly more natural to take *genea* in its normal signification; the passage is similar to Mt. xxiii. 36, where there can be no doubt as to the meaning. Men who were then alive would see the fulfillment of the sentence pronounced upon Jerusalem (v. 2).”<sup>124</sup>
- n) R. V. G. Tasker writes, “Jesus is here saying in effect that it will be as certain that Jerusalem will fall when *all these things* (i.e. the appearance of the abomination of desolation, and the advent of false Messiahs, etc.) have become apparent, as it is certain that summer will follow when the first eaves are seen on the fig tree’s tender branches. Moreover, the generation He is addressing will live to see it all. So sure is He of this, that He affirms that His words on this, as on other subjects, will be shown to possess everlasting power and validity (32-35).”<sup>125</sup>
- o) William L. Lane writes, “The significance of the temporal reference has been debated, but in Mark ‘this generation’ clearly designates the contemporaries of Jesus (see on Chs. 8:12, 38; 9:19) and there is no consideration from the context which lends support to any

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<sup>122</sup> Ezra Gould, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Mark* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975 [1896]), 253.

<sup>123</sup> Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982 [1909]), 338.

<sup>124</sup> Henry Barclay Swete, *Commentary on Mark* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1977 [1913]), 315.

<sup>125</sup> R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 227.

other proposal. Jesus solemnly affirms that the generation contemporary with his disciples will witness the fulfillment of his prophetic word, culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem and the dismantling of the Temple. With this word Jesus responds to the initial question of the disciples regarding the time when 'these things' will take place."<sup>126</sup>

- p) Beasley-Murray writes, "The phrase 'this generation' should cause no difficulty for interpreters. While admittedly *genea* in earlier Greek meant birth, progeny, and so race, in the sense of those descended from a common ancestor, in the LXX it most frequently translated the Hebrew term *dor*, meaning age, age of humankind, or generation in the sense of contemporaries. The expression 'this generation' is often found on the lips of Jesus in the Gospels, but rarely elsewhere in the NT. In sayings attributed to Jesus the term appears to have twofold connotation: on the one hand it always signifies his contemporaries, and on the other hand it always carries an implicit criticism."<sup>127</sup>
- q) Robert H. Gundry writes, "[T]he combinations of 'you' and 'this' in Mark 13:29-30 (note esp. the emphatic *umeis* in v. 29) makes a reference to Jesus' contemporaries much more natural. We might therefore restrict 'these things...all these things' to the destruction of the Temple, which, occurring in A.D. 70, did fall within the lifetime of Jesus' contemporaries. Support for this restriction comes from the appearance of 'these things...all these things' in the question of the disciples, who, so far as we can tell from the text, had in mind only the destruction of the Temple, which Jesus had just predicted."<sup>128</sup>

The meaning of Jesus' words "this generation will not pass away until all these things take place" is so clear that most competent scholars take the statement at face value. The only reason that so many responsible theologians and exegetes often end up torturing and convoluting the clear meaning of this passage is their mistake in applying the apocalyptic and "coming" terminology (prior to verse 34) to the second bodily coming of Christ which is still future. We have demonstrated in our examination of these passages (above) that they do not apply to Christ's second and still future bodily coming but to His coming in judgment upon Jerusalem. (Now, let us return to a review of our consideration of the phrase "this generation").

The "this generation" of Matthew 24:34 is a repetition of the same phrase used in Matthew 23:36 "all these things will come upon this *generation*." In normal didactic interpretation, if a word or phrase is used by the author or speaker in a certain manner with a specific meaning during a discourse or passage, we would expect him to continue to use it in the same manner at the end. Therefore, contextually "the 'this generation' of Matthew 24:34 *must* speak of the same idea as that of Matthew 23:36."<sup>129</sup> To argue otherwise is to assert that our Lord with no warning or explanation arbitrarily changed the meaning of the phrase "this generation" within the space of an hour or two. This would mean that Christ purposely misled the disciples after saying "Take heed that no one deceives you" (Mt. 24:4). Such an interpretation is obviously exegetically and theologically unacceptable. In addition, the use of the word "this" indicates that

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<sup>126</sup> William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, 480.

<sup>127</sup> George R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Last Days*, 444.

<sup>128</sup> Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 490.

<sup>129</sup> Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *He Shall Have Dominion* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1992), 162.

our Lord had in mind that which is near or distinguished from that which is distant. If Jesus had in mind events two thousand years in the future He would have said, “that generation” (see the discussion of the normal meaning and usage of the word “this” above).

That “this generation” means the generation alive when Christ spoke those words is supported by audience relevance. Throughout the discourse, our Lord looked the disciples in the eye and use the personal pronoun “you” 26 times. In the illustration of the fig tree Jesus said, “So you also, when you see all these things, know that it is near-at the doors” (Mt. 24:33)! “The expression ‘Ye shall see’ would not be proper if spoken of something which the hearers would none of them live to witness, and which would not take place for thousands of years.”<sup>130</sup> Further, that “this generation” refers to the contemporary generation of Jews is supported by the repeated use of the phrase “*all these things*.” After the scathing condemnation of the Jewish leaders of His day and the promise of severe judgment our Lord said “Assuredly, I say to you, *all these things* will come upon this generation” (Mt. 23:36). He then added, “See! Your house is left to you desolate” (23:38). Then when Jesus and the disciples left the temple area and the disciples pointed out the magnificence of the buildings, Christ said “Do you not see *all these things*” (24:2). This statement is immediately followed by a prophecy of the destruction of the temple complex. Then when the disciples were seated on the Mount of Olives overlooking the temple complex, their minds still engrossed with the Savior's words regarding “*all these things*,” they asked, “Tell us, when will *these things* be? And what will be the sign when *all these things* will be revealed” (Mk. 13:4). Then toward the end of the discourse when Jesus warned the disciples to be on the alert, our Lord said, “when you see *all these things*” (Mt. 24:33). Then, to close His discussion of the destruction Jerusalem and the temple, our Lord said, “Assuredly I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till *all these things* take place” (Mt. 24:34). The expression “all these things” is repeated with explicit reference to the destruction of Jerusalem in Mt. 23:36; 24:2, 3 and 24:33. It should be obvious to any unbiased interpreter that the phrase “all these things” in Matthew 24:34 must refer to the same judgment event predicted in Matthew 23:36, 24:2-3 that precipitated the disciples’ (“all these things”) question in Matthew 24:3. “This is the only interpretation which the words will bear; every other involves a wresting of language, and a violence to the understanding.”<sup>131</sup>

Before we conclude our consideration of verse 24 we will briefly return to an examination of the idea that “generation” in Matthew 24:34 means the Jewish race. The *New Scofield Bible* reads, “The word ‘generation’ (Gk. *genea*) may be used in the sense of *race* or *family*, meaning that the nation or family of Israel will be preserved ‘till the day all these things take place,’ a promise wonderfully fulfilled to this day.”<sup>132</sup> Earlier we noted that in the Bible *genea* is never used to denote a race, but virtually always used to describe a group of people living during a particular period of time. The New Testament authors used a different Greek word *genos* when they wanted to convey the idea of race (cf. Mk. 7:26; Ac. 4:36; 7:19; 13:26; 17:28; 18:24; 2 Cor. 11:26; Gal. 1:14; Phil. 3:5; 1 Pet. 2:9). Perhaps this is why virtually all English translations and paraphrases of the Bible translate *genea* in Matthew 24:34 as generation, not race.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> J. Stuart Russell, *The Parousia* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990 [1881]), 115.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>132</sup> *The New Scofield Study Bible*, 1169, footnote number 2.

<sup>133</sup> Note the following translations and paraphrases: (1) “This *generation* shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled” (KJV). (2) “This *generation* may not pass away till all these things come to pass” (Young’s Literal Translation). (3) “This *generation* shall not pass away, till all these things be accomplished” (ASV). (4) “This *generation* will not pass away till all these things take place” (RSV). (5) “This *generation* will not disappear till all

However, even if we presuppose the possibility that the word *genea* (“generation”) could be translated race in Matthew 24:34 the context of the passage would disallow it. To prove this point, just substitute the word “race” for “generation.” “The Jewish race will not become extinct until all these things take place.” This translation removes the problem of reconciling our Lord’s statement with the fact that the second bodily coming has not occurred almost 2,000 years after He uttered those words. (Note that such a serious contradiction only exists for those who believe the preceding passages are discussion the second *bodily* coming of Christ). This solution to the alleged “problem,” however, renders Jesus’ solemn statement rather absurd and meaningless as a warning. Russell writes,

Imagine a prophet in our own times predicting a great catastrophe in which London would be destroyed, St. Paul’s and the Houses of Parliament leveled with the ground, and a fearful slaughter of the inhabitants be perpetrated; and that when asked, “When shall those things come to pass?” he should reply, “The Anglo-Saxon race shall not become extinct till all these things be fulfilled!” Would this be a satisfactory answer? Would not such an answer be considered derogatory to the prophet, and an affront to his hearers? Would they not have reason to say, “It is safe prophesying when the event is placed at an interminable distance!” But the bare presupposition of such a sense in our Lord’s prediction shows itself to be a *reductio ad absurdum*. Was it for this that the disciples were to wait and watch? Was this lesson that the budding fig-tree taught? Was it not until the Jewish race [i.e. nation] was about to become extinct that they were to “look up, and lift up their heads?” Such a hypothesis is its own refutation.<sup>134</sup>

When Jesus says “this generation will not pass away until all these things take place” (as a prophet) He is doing two things. First, He is warning His audience to be on the alert, for some will still be alive when this catastrophe occurs. Second, He is being very specific with regard to the time of fulfillment so that everyone will know that He was a true prophet; that He really was the Christ, the Son of the living God. If we ignore the plain *literal* meaning of generation and substitute the “Jewish race” then the whole purpose of our Lord’s statement falls to the ground. We could paraphrase Jesus’ statement as follows: “Truly I say to you (My disciples living in the first century), there will still be ethnic Jews around when the tribulation occurs and I return in glory thousands of years from now.” The natural response to such a general statement would be: “Yes, so what.” The only thing such a statement proves is that the Jews (like everyone else) have the ability to beget children.

Yes, (but some may object) isn’t the fact that Jews have maintained a separate identity as a people over the last nineteen centuries remarkable and miraculous given the fact they were often a hated and persecuted people? No. This historical fact is not significant at all. When

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this has taken place” (J. B. Phillips). (6) “This *generation* will not pass away until all these things take place” (NASB). (7) “All these things will take place before this present *generation* passes on” (Modern Language Bible). (8) “Before this *generation* has passed away all these things will have taken place” (Jerusalem Bible). (9) “This *generation* will by no means pass away till all these things take place” (NKJV). (10) “This *generation* will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened” (NIV). (11) “The present *generation* will live to see it all” (NEB). (12) “All these things will happen before the *people now living* have all died” (TEV). (13) “The present generation will not pass away, till all this happens” (James Moffat). (14) “The present *generation* will certainly not pass away until all this has taken place” (Weymouth). (15) “The present *generation* will not pass away until all this takes place” (New American Bible). (16) “This *generation* will not pass away until all these things have taken place” (NRSV).

<sup>134</sup> J. Stuart Russell, *The Parousia*, 87.

Jerusalem was destroyed in A.D. 70 and when the last Jewish communities were swept out of the area around Galilee by the Romans in A.D. 135, there were thriving Jewish communities in almost every major city of the Roman Empire (i.e. in North Africa, Asia Minor, the Middle East, Rome, Greece, Syria, etc.) and even in areas outside the Roman Empire (e.g., Babylon). That a group of people united around a monotheistic religion and a distinct culture, already accustomed to living a somewhat segregated lifestyle, could maintain some type of separate identity is actually to be expected.

## Chapter 4: Are the Jews a Distinct Race?

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.”<sup>135</sup>

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.”<sup>136</sup>

*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.”<sup>137</sup>

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

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<sup>135</sup> *The Encyclopedia Britannica* (New York, 1973), 12:1-54; as quoted in John L. Bray, 206.

<sup>136</sup> *The Encyclopedia Americana* (New York, 1986), 16:71; as quoted in John L. Bray, 207.

<sup>137</sup> *Collier's Encyclopedia* (1977), 13:573; as quoted in John L. Bray, 207.

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 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.”<sup>138</sup>

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.”<sup>139</sup> 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.”<sup>140</sup> 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.<sup>141</sup> 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

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<sup>138</sup> *Encyclopedia Judaica Jerusalem* (1971), 3:50; as quoted in John L. Bray, 206.

<sup>139</sup> *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary*, Unabridged (Collins World, 1978), 2120.

<sup>140</sup> *The Encyclopedia Britannica: A Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, Literature & General Information* (New York: The Encyclopedia Britannica, 1926 [1911]), 15:774.

<sup>141</sup> 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.

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 (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 12<sup>th</sup> 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!<sup>142</sup>

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,<sup>143</sup> 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."<sup>144</sup>

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

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<sup>142</sup> John L. Bray, *Matthew 24 Fulfilled*, 209.

<sup>143</sup> 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).

<sup>144</sup> James Jordan, *The Future of Israel Reexamined (Part I)* (Niceville, FL: Biblical Horizons, 1991), Internet Article.



(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,

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."<sup>145</sup>

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

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<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

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 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).<sup>146</sup>

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

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<sup>146</sup> John L. Bray, *Matthew 24 Fulfilled*, 219.

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, 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.<sup>147</sup>

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 (Riderbos, *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."<sup>148</sup> 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.).

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<sup>147</sup> John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959, 1965), 2:9-10.

<sup>148</sup> William Hendriksen, *Galatians and Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967-68), 1:151.

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 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.<sup>149</sup> Pastors, scholars and writers who interpret the word generation in

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<sup>149</sup> 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 covert 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

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

## Chapter 5: That Day and Hour

We now come to the section of the Olivet Discourse (Mt. 24:36-25:46) over which there is wide disagreement even by partial (i.e. orthodox preterists). Before analyzing this section of Scripture we will give a brief overview of the different preterist interpretations of this section of the discourse. This overview will be helpful because there are problems that each view must contend with that need to be analyzed before coming to a conclusion.

If we include full or heretical preterism there are essentially four different views of Matthew 24:36ff.

(1) The hyper-preterist believes that everything predicted in the New Testament has already come to pass by A.D. 70. The hyper-preterist, therefore, has absolutely no problem placing the resurrection of the body, the second coming of Christ and the final judgment within the time frame of the destruction of Israel and Matthew 24:36-25:46. Because such a view contradicts so many clear teachings of the Bible and thus violates the analogy of Scripture we must reject the hyper-preterist interpretation. It is heretical nonsense.

(2) The second view is from the orthodox preterist John Gill. Gill argues that in Matthew 24:36-51 Jesus is still discussing the subject of the destruction of Jerusalem and the need to be prepared for temporal judgments. “*But of that day and hour knoweth no man &c.]* Which is to be understood, not of the second coming of Christ, the end of the world, and the last judgment; but of the coming of the son of man, to take vengeance on the Jews, and of their destruction; for the words manifestly regard the date of the several things going before, which only can be applied to that catastrophe, and dreadful desolation.”<sup>150</sup> Gill then argues that it is likely that a change of subject occurs with the parables that begin in Matthew 25:1. He writes,

Ver. 1. *Then shall the kingdom of heaven, &c.]* The Gospel church-state; see the note on ch. xiii. 24. either as it would be a little before the coming of the son of man to take vengeance on the Jews; or as it will be a little before his second coming in judgment: the parable is manifestly connected with, and refers to the preceding chapter, which chiefly treats of Jerusalem’s destruction: but though the Jews were in great security before their utter ruin, yet it does not appear that the Christian church was then in such lukewarm, drowsy, and sleepy condition, as this parable represents; and since, in the latter part of the preceding chapter, there are some hints of Christ’s second and last coming; when the servant found doing his Lord’s will, will be greatly honored, and the wicked, cruel, and licentious servant will be severely punished; and since, at the close of this and the following parable, there is a very lively description given of the last judgment; as also, because it appears elsewhere, that such will be the formal, lukewarm, cold, indifferent, secure, and sleepy state of the church, before the second coming of Christ: it seems right and best to understand this parable, and the following, as having respect to that: and

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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 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).

<sup>150</sup> John Gill, *Exposition of the New Testament*, 1:296.

that the design of it is to shew, what will be the case of professors at that time; the difference between nominal and real Christians; how far persons may go in a profession of religion, and yet, at last, be shut out of heaven: as also the suddenness of Christ's coming; the necessity of being ready for it; and how watchful the saints should be, that they be not surprised with it.<sup>151</sup>

(3) The third view also says that Matthew 24:36 ("But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only") is not a transitional verse to a completely new subject (the second bodily coming of Christ). These partial preterists argue that the whole Olivet Discourse (Mt. 24:4-25:46) must be connected to the judgment of Israel; but, the parables and the picture of judgment do not refer to a single event in time (the destruction of Jerusalem). They rather refer to a process of judgment that begins with the judgment of Israel and continues until the last day. Milton S. Terry writes,

The ideal of judgment presented in Matt. xxv, 31-46, is therefore no single event, like the destruction of Jerusalem. It is not to be explained literally as a formal assize not to open until the end of human history on earth. It is, rather, a most impressive parabolic picture of the age-long administration of Jesus Christ, from the hour of the single overthrow of Jerusalem until "he shall deliver up the kingdom to the Father" (1 Cor. xv, 24). The anointed King of glory is judge of the living as well as the dead, and it is a grave error to represent "the day of the Lord" or "the day of judgment" as something deferred to the end of time....The Old Testament doctrine is that "the kingdom is Jehovah's, and he is ruler among the nations." (Psalm xxii, 28). "Say ye among the nations, Jehovah reigneth; he shall judge the peoples with equity. He cometh, he cometh to judge the earth; he shall judge the world in righteousness, and the peoples in his truth" (Psalm xcvi, 10-13). The day of judgment for any wicked nation, city, or individual is the time when the penal visitation comes; and the judgment of God's saints is manifest in every single event which magnifies goodness and condemns iniquity.<sup>152</sup>

This view is also held by Gary De Mar. He writes, "There is no indication that Matthew 25:31-46 describes a single event. Rather, the passage describes a judgment over time, related to Jesus' dominion as an 'everlasting dominion' (Dan. 7:14). Jesus was 'exalted to the right hand of God' where He rules until all His enemies are made a 'footstool for [His] feet' (Acts 2:33, 35). Paul writes that Jesus 'must reign until He has put all of His enemies under His feet' (1 Cor. 15:25).<sup>153</sup> These authors do not say if these progressive judgments lead to or culminate in the final judgment at the end of history. One thing, however, is clear. They do not regard Matthew 25 as referring to a single judgment event at the end of history.

(4) The fourth view regards Matthew verses 34 to 35 as a concluding statement to the preceding prophecy with verse 36 setting a contrast between different (yet related) subjects. This view is held by the orthodox preterist scholars J. Marcellus Kik and Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr.. Gentry writes, "One coming is his *coming upon Jerusalem* in temporal judgment to end the old covenant era; the other is his coming at the Second Advent in final judgment to end history (24:36 ff.). These two 'comings' are theologically related while historically distinct."<sup>154</sup> In other words, everything prior to the time text of Matthew 24:34 refers to the destruction of Jerusalem. Everything from Matthew 24:36 and following refers to the second bodily coming of Christ which is accompanied by the final judgment.

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<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:301.

<sup>152</sup> Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Apocalyptic* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988 [1898]), 251.

<sup>153</sup> Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness*, 200.

<sup>154</sup> Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *Perilous Times*, 90.

## Analysis of the Different Partial Preterist Views

As we study each of these views, we will note that legitimate exegetical objections can be made against each view. Determining the exact meaning of Matthew 24:36 ff. is not as easy as it first appears.

(1) Since John Gill is the only one that this author is aware of that adheres to his view we will be brief in our analysis of his interpretation. The criticism of Gill’s position that could be made is that his choice of Matthew 25:1 as a transition verse to a different subject has very little to support it. The point of the subject matter in Matthew 25:1 ff. is clearly related in some manner to Matthew 24:37 ff. and the purpose of Matthew 24:43 ff. is virtually identical. Gill’s position, however, does have certain advantages. It avoid the problem of having to deal with (i.e. harmonize) Luke 17:22-37. The passage from Luke needs to be explained by those who choose Matthew 24:36 as the transitional verse (see below). It also avoids the problems associated with turning Matthew 24:36 ff. into a discourse on temporal judgments in history.

(2) The position which says that Matthew 24:36 ff. is *not* a transitional verse to the subject of the second coming is based on a number of arguments. First, the change from the near demonstrative “this” in verse 34 to the far demonstrative “that” in verse 36 would almost certainly not be understood by the disciples as a change of discussion from their own generation to thousands of years in the future. Jesus changes from this to that because he switches from a discussion of something then in existence (“this generation”) to an event that is to occur in the future (“that day”). In other words if we allow the context of verse 36 to determine the meaning of “that day,” the “that day” is the final destruction of the city and temple 37 years in the future.

Second, in Luke 17:22-37 Jesus mixes together prophetic events and warning analogies found on both sides of what many consider to be the transition text, Matthew 24:36. Note the identical prophecies and warnings in the following table.

<b>Matthew 24</b>	<b>Luke 17</b>
“Let him who is on the house top not go down to take anything out of his house” (v. 17).	“In that day, he who is on the housetop, and his goods are in the house, let him not come down to take them away” (v. 31).
“Then if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or ‘there!’ do not believe it” (v. 23).	“And they will say to you, ‘Look here!’ or ‘Look there!’ Do not go after them or follow them” (v. 23).
“For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be” (v. 27).	“For as the lightning the flashes out of one part under heaven to the other part under heaven, so also the son of Man will be in His day” (v. 24).
“For wherever the carcass is, there the eagles will be gathered together” (v. 28).	“Wherever the body is, there the eagles will be gathered together” (v. 37).
“But as the days of Noah were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and did not know until the flood came and took them all	“As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be also in the days of the Son of Man: They ate, they drank, they married wives, they were given in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all” (vs. 26-27).

away, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be” (vs. 37-39).	
“Then two men will be in the field: one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding at the mill: one will be taken and the other left” (vs. 40-41).	“Two women will be grinding together: the one will be taken and the other left. Two men will be in the field: the one will be taken and the other left” (vs. 35-36).

The problem that Luke 17:22 poses for the orthodox preterist who uses Matthew 24:36 as a dividing line between the destruction of Jerusalem and the second bodily coming is that Luke places statements that are applied to the destruction of Jerusalem by Matthew (e.g., “the lightning that flashes...,” “...the eagles will be gathered together,” “let him not come down to take them away”) together with the identical warnings regarding what these interpreters say applies to the second bodily coming (e.g., “as it was in the days of Noah...,” “Two women will be grinding at the mill...”). In other words, what Matthew is said to divide, Luke organizes as a single eschatological event. Further, Luke even uses the expression “that day” in conjunction with the same terminology that Matthew applies to the destruction of Jerusalem. These observations leave those expositors who divide the discourse at Matthew 24:36 in an exegetically awkward position. They must ignore one of the following positions. First, Luke 17:23-37 applies to the second bodily coming of Christ even though Luke uses some of the same terminology that Matthew uses to describe the destruction of Jerusalem. Although there is prophetic terminology that can be applied to different judgment events (e.g., the day, the day of the Lord, the day of visitation, etc.), it is not likely that Luke (who probably had the Gospel of Matthew in hand when he wrote his gospel) would use such terminology in a different manner. Second, Luke 17:23-37 applies to the second bodily coming and therefore some of the material in Matthew 24:4-34 may indeed apply to the second bodily coming of Christ. The excellent scholar J. Marcellus Kik (an early exponent of the partial preterist position) does apply Matthew 24:27 (“as the lightning flashes”) to the second bodily coming of Christ. Once, however, one starts applying portions of the discourse prior to verse 34 to the distant future then one cannot consistently use the time-text as a guide to the meaning of other portions of the discourse prior to verse 34.

Third, the parallel account in Luke (like Matthew) changes subjects after the time text to the subject of watchfulness, then also uses terminology tied to the part of the Olivet Discourse that everyone acknowledges refers to the destruction of Israel. “Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away. But take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that Day come on you unexpectedly. For it will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth. Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man” (Lk. 21:32-36). Note: they are to watch and pray to escape “all these things.” The phrase “all these things” harkens back to the “all these things” of Matthew 23:36; 24:2, 3, 33-34. The disciples would be thinking of their original question: “Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign when all these things will be fulfilled” (Mk. 13:4)? The phrase “all these things that will come to pass” in Luke 21:36 (given after the supposed dividing line between the destruction of Jerusalem and the second coming) is virtually identical to the “all these things will be fulfilled” of Mark 13:4 (cf. 27:7; Mt. 24:3).



Fourth, Matthew 16:21 (which is virtually identical to Matthew 25:31) very clearly connects the coming of Christ to a judgment of men *that is to occur in the contemporary generation*. Note the similarities of the two passages:

For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works. Assuredly, I say to you, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom (Mt.16:27-28).

When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory (Mt. 25:31).

In both passages the Son of Man comes in His glory, with His angels followed by a judgment of men. Matthew 25:32 makes it clear that this is a judgment upon every nation.

With this interpretation the judgment of Matthew 25:31 ff. must be understood not as a single event that occurs at the end of history, but describes the progressive result of Christ's enthronement at the right hand of God. (This interpretation does not necessarily mean or imply that there is not a final, public judgment at the end of history.) The exaltation of Jesus to the throne of His glory results in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Ac. 2:2 ff.) by which our Lord conquers the nations by the gospel. This exaltation also places the Messiah in the position of ruling the nations with the rod of His power (Ps. 2; 110). The destruction of Israel is simply the beginning of this long process of judgment that will occur throughout the millennium until "He puts an end to all authority and power. For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet" (1 Cor. 15:24-25).

(3) As we turn our attention to the view that Matthew 24:36 is a transitional verse to the subject of the second bodily coming of Christ we will consider some of the common objections to the view presented above. There are a number of reasons why competent partial preterist scholars regard verse 36 as a dividing line between the two related yet different subjects.

First, verses 34 to 35 have all the characteristics of a concluding statement to the preceding prophecy. Further, the grammatical construction of verse 36 definitely indicates a new subject. The "but of" or "but concerning" phrase is used when a speaker or writer wants to change the subject.<sup>155</sup> (Those who do not regard verse 36 as a transition to the second bodily coming could argue that while there is no question that a transition occurs in verse 36; it is not a transition to the second bodily coming, but to the necessity of being ready or prepared for the coming discussed in the previous section.)

Second, in verse 36 a change of subject matter is indicated by the use of the far demonstrative-that (as in "that day"). From 23:36 to 24:34 Jesus discusses events that will happen to "this generation" (near demonstrative). However, in verse 36 He changes to a distant event with the use of the far demonstrative—"that day." This argument is countered by the fact that the far demonstrative ("that") can be used of events only a few years away. Our Lord gave the Olivet Discourse 37 years before the destruction of Jerusalem, which is more than enough time to justify the use of "that day."

Third, the best argument for a change to the second bodily coming (in v. 36 ff.) is the change of subject matter from an event that is very predictable to an event that is totally unpredictable. Throughout the Olivet Discourse up to verse 34 Christ goes out of His way to

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid. Gentry references Ardent-Gingrich-Danker, *Lexicon* (p. 645) and R. T. France, *Matthew* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity, 1985), 347.

make sure the disciples know when Jerusalem will be destroyed. He gave preliminary signs (Mt. 24:5-8), the beginning of sorrows. Then He spoke of persecutions (v. 9), betrayal (v. 10), false prophets (v. 11), lawlessness (v. 12), and the spread of the gospel throughout the Roman Empire (v. 14). Then He gave a very specific sign, “the abomination of desolation” (v. 15). When the disciples see this specific sign they are to immediately flee to the mountains to avoid destruction. That the disciples can know the close proximity of the Lord’s coming in judgment is proved by Jesus’ final warning, “when you see all these things know that it is near-at the doors” (v. 33)! Obviously Christ knew the close proximity of His coming in judgment and He prophetically gives this crucial information to the disciples.

The emphasis of Matthew 24:36 ff. is on the fact that no one knows the time of our Lord’s coming. The angels and even the Son do not know the critical moment of the Lord’s arrival (Mt. 24:36; Mk. 13:22). Indeed, the central proposition in the section after verse 36 is, “Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming” (Mt. 24:42; 25:13). Christians are to watch, stay alert, and remain awake because of the uncertainty of the time of the coming. This central proposition is supported by five parables (the porter [Mk. 13:35-37], the master of the house, the faithful servant and the evil servants, the ten virgins, the talents) and a description of the judgment that contains parabolic elements (e.g., the use of sheep and goats). Throughout the parables there is an emphasis upon the fact that Jesus’ coming will be a total surprise. People are going to be caught off guard and many will not be prepared to meet the Lord. Men “did not know until the flood came and took them away” (v. 39). The master did not know “what hour the thief would come” (v. 43); “the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect” (v. 44). “The master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for him and at an hour that he is not aware of” (v. 58). The bridegroom comes at an unexpected time and the unprepared virgins are shut out of the wedding (25:10). The parable of the porter adds this warning, “Watch therefore, for you do not know when the master of the house is coming-in the evening, at midnight, at the crowing of the rooster, or in the morning-lest coming suddenly, he find you sleeping” (Mk. 13:35-36).

All of this raises a crucial question. Can one apply the fact that the day of Jesus’ coming is totally unexpected to the coming in judgment upon Jerusalem in A.D. 70? It appears to be very difficult if not impossible to apply these passages to the destruction of Jerusalem because Christ gave the disciples a number of signs (i.e. a head-up alert) so that they could discern the coming judgment and avoid the devastation by fleeing to the mountains. This point has been used by a number of commentators and scholars to argue for a change of subject in verse 36. Note the following comments. Matthew Henry writes, “‘*Verily, I say unto you. You may take my word for it, these things are at the door.*’ Christ often speaks of the nearness of that desolation, the more to affect people, and quicken them for it...But as to *that day and hour* which will put a period of time, *that knoweth* no man, v. 36. Therefore take heed of confounding the two, as they did.”<sup>156</sup> Spurgeon writes, “There is a manifest change in our Lord’s words here, which clearly indicates that they refer to his last coming to judgment.”<sup>157</sup> Lane writes, “In order to understand the relationship of this affirmation to the assurance given in verse 30 that the events preliminary to the destruction of the Temple will occur within the experience of that generation, it is necessary to give full force to the adversative particle in verse 32: ‘I say unto you solemnly, this generation shall not pass away...As for you that day and that hour, *on the contrary*, no one knows...’ While the parable of the fig tree illustrates the possibility of observing the proximity of the first event,

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<sup>156</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:361.

<sup>157</sup> Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 353.

another comparison is developed in connection with verse 32 that underscores the impossibility of knowing the moment of the Lord's return. Verses 30 and 32 concern two distinct events (the taking of Jerusalem by the Romans, and the Day of the Lord, respectively).<sup>158</sup>

Those who believe that the destruction of Jerusalem theme continues through chapter 25 have a number of arguments that they use to attempt to circumvent this objection. One argument is that the term "hour" is used figuratively to describe the "season" of His coming. In other words we should not view the term hour literally but should understand it as speaking to the general overall calamity that came upon the Jews. The judgment event as a whole would come as a total surprise, therefore Christians must watch and remain alert. Adam Clark writes, "[The Greek word] *Ora* is translated *season* by many eminent critics, and is used in this sense by both sacred and profane authors. As the day was not known in which Jerusalem should be invested by the Romans, therefore the Lord advised his disciples to pray that it might not be on a *Sabbath*; and as the *season* was not known, therefore they were to pray that it might not be in *winter*; verse 20."<sup>159</sup>

While this argument at first glance appears solid it does have serious problems. First, if one interprets *hora* as season instead of day and then argues for a general period of time as Clark has done, then the Olivet Discourse has two separate comings of Christ. There would be a general coming beginning with the abomination of desolation (Mt. 24:15-22) and the specific coming that Jesus says will occur, "Immediately *after* the tribulation of those days" (Mt. 24:29). The disciples will "know that it is near-at the doors" when they "see all these things" (Mt. 24:33). The phrase "all these things" obviously includes the abomination of desolation. Matthew 24:20 applies to the flight connected to the abomination of desolation, not to the day and hour of Jesus' coming. Second, while the Greek word *hora* can mean a season in certain contexts (e.g., Jn. 5:35; 2 Cor. 7:8) it almost certainly does not mean season in the parabolic contexts of Matthew 24:37 ff. The emphasis of the parables is on the specific time, not a general season. Indeed, the word *hora* can refer to a definite point of time (e.g., "the hour is at hand," Mt. 26:45; lit., "at the hour of incense," Lk. 1:10; "that hour Jesus rejoiced," Lk. 10:21; "at supper time" or literally "at the hour of supper," Lk. 14:17; etc). If one substitutes the word season for hour in the in the parables of Matthew 24:27 ff. one will see the absurdity of the "season" interpretation. Lastly, the "season" interpretation is conclusively disproved by the parallel account in Mark where evening, midnight, the crow of the rooster and morning are specified (13:35b). In this passage Mark refers to the four night watches, which was the Roman method of reckoning time. The modern equivalent to Mark's statement would be, "Watch, therefore, for you do not know when the master is coming-at 9:00pm, midnight (12:00am), 6:00am, or 9:00am" (13:35). It is rather obvious that the term hour (*hora*) is used in the parables to denote the exact time of the Lord's arrival.

The best method for dealing with the argument that the coming cannot be accompanied by many signs and still be a total surprise is the one which asserts that although it is true that our Lord gave very specific signs to the disciples for the destruction of Jerusalem, the exact day is still not specified. Therefore, even though the disciples have a general idea as to when Jesus will come, they need to be extra alert in order to be prepared for the exact time of His arrival.

Although one can understand how such an argument could apply to the traditional understanding of the second bodily coming of Christ, it does not work well with the destruction of Jerusalem. This scenario does not make any sense. According to this view the disciples have

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<sup>158</sup> William Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, 481-482.

<sup>159</sup> Adam Clark, *Clark's Commentary: Matthew-Revelation* (Nashville, TN: Abington Press, n.d. [1824]), 234.

already observed the signs of Jesus' coming. They have witnessed the abomination of desolation and have fled to the mountainous area of Pella to avoid destruction. Yes, but they do not know the exact time when Jerusalem and the Temple will be destroyed. Therefore, they need to watch and be on the alert constantly for Jesus can come and demolish the city and sanctuary at any moment. This scenario raises the obvious question. If they have already fled to safety in the mountains (which according to Josephus is exactly what happened) and are no longer in any danger of being harmed by the Roman armies encompassing Jerusalem, then why do they need to watch? They are already safe. The important event that the disciples must watch for in Matthew 24:4-34 is not the day or hour the city and temple went up in flames but the abomination of desolation (Mt. 24:15).

Another argument deals with the lack of signs by saying that with Matthew 24:36 ff. "The topic changes from signs leading up to the temple's destruction to watchfulness and expectation during the interim."<sup>160</sup> If by "interim" one means the period of time between the Olivet Discourse and the appearance of signs, then one has adopted a position that contradicts the explicit teaching of the parables (Mt. 24:36 ff.) where believers are told not to look for signs but for Christ's arrival. Further, if the disciples are just being told that they must be ready for the calamity that is to come upon the land of Israel, then the repeated emphasis on the day and hour (i.e. the exact time of Jesus' coming) seems totally out of place. If by "interim" one means the period of time between the appearance of the signs and the exact day or time of Jesus' coming, then one still must answer the question: Why is watchfulness for the exact time of our Lord's arrival (i.e. the destruction of the city and temple) a critical issue when all the believers are already safe and secure in the mountains? While it is obvious why such watchfulness is needed for the second bodily coming of Christ (which is accompanied by the general resurrection and last judgment), there is no need for Christians in Pella to be concerned about the exact time the temple is to go up in flames. Further, only Christ's enemies, the unbelieving Jews who were guilty of persecuting Christians were slaughtered by the Romans on the day the city and sanctuary were destroyed. For Christians, life went on while their Jewish persecutors were crushed and subdued.

Interpreters who argue for a change at verse 36 often point out that the analogy between life in the days of Noah and life in Israel prior to the day of Jesus' coming does not work.<sup>161</sup> The comparison between the flood event and the coming of Christ in Matthew 24:31 ff. is twofold. (1) The people are completely taken by surprise by the flood. They "did not know until the flood

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<sup>160</sup> Gary De Mar, *Last Days Madness*, 194.

<sup>161</sup> Another common argument for a transition at verse 36 is that the parables indicate a long delay in Christ's coming which is inconsistent with the teaching of the parable of the fig tree (Mt. 24:32-33) as well as the statement "this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place" (Mt. 24:34). "But if that evil servant says in his head, 'My master is delaying his coming'" (24:48). "But while the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept" (Mt. 25:5). "After a long time the lord of those servants came and settled accounts with them" (Mt. 25:19). Expositors who connect all of chapter 24 and 25 to the destruction of Jerusalem argue that the thirty-seven years between the time that Jesus uttered these words and the Jewish war are more than adequate to account for the terminology of a long delay. They also will appeal to 2 Peter 3:4 which they believe indicates that within one generation scoffers will be asking, "Where is the promise of His coming?" Those who believe in a long delay will counter by arguing that all of the parables presuppose the absence of signs. In other words, how could that first generation of Christians say that the Lord was delaying His coming when there were preliminary signs as well as a very specific sign of the coming in judgment. Also, the view that this long delay applies to the 37 years contradicts Jesus' statement that the disciples would see the signs and know the event was at the door. Further, the parables do not speak of Jesus' coming to judge Jerusalem (a city of apostate unbelievers), but a coming to judge and evaluate faithful believers and hypocritical professors of Christianity at an unknown time.

came and took them all away” (Mt. 24:39). (2) The people in Noah’s day were living a normal lifestyle. They were “eating and drinking” and “marrying and giving in marriage” (Mt. 24:38). These two points are intimately related. Because people are completely unaware that the flood event is almost upon them, they live life as though nothing unusual is going to happen. In other words, there were no signs preceding the flood and thus the people followed their ordinary pursuits until the day of the flood swept them away.

If we take the term “day” literally, does this analogy apply to the time period immediately prior to the destruction of Jerusalem? Were the inhabitants of Jerusalem taken by surprise by the destruction of their city by the Romans? No. Jerusalem was under siege for months. The Roman armies had destroyed Jewish cities before they had even reached Jerusalem. One could say that the beginning of the war was a surprise. But the outcome was not. Further, (as noted) the destruction of the city and sanctuary was preceded by many signs. Thus, it was a very predictable event. Also, were the people of Judea and Jerusalem living normal lives until the day the temple went up in flames? No. The Jewish war lasted 3½ years. Their lives had been turned upside down by warfare, famine, disease, death and economic chaos. Trade had been interrupted. Crops had been confiscated and destroyed. Cities had been laid waste. Many thousands of people had already been slaughtered or led away as captives to a life of slavery. While the circumstances between the second bodily coming and the day the flood swept the people away make sense, the comparison with the destruction of Jerusalem has its problems.

Although the objections (given above) to the idea that the parables after Matthew 24:36 deal with the destruction of Jerusalem are solid; there is a way to undercut these arguments. One can appeal to Luke 17:23-37 where the comparison to the days of Noah is placed in a section that probably deals solely with the destruction of Jerusalem (Lk. 17:27). Further, one could argue that the term “day” does not always refer to a literal twenty-four hour period but can refer to a general period of time. In other words it does not always describe events that are to occur on a single day, but is used in a prophetic way to denote the judgment event as a whole. In the opinion of this author, this is the only reasonable explanation of how there could be many signs indicating the proximate time of the coming coupled with the idea that the day is a total surprise and an event that occurs in the midst of normal everyday life. That the term "day" may not always be used in the same manner is indicated by the apparent contradiction between Luke 17 and Matthew 24. Note that Luke applies statements that Matthew applies to the abomination of desolation to the very day Christ comes.

Even so will it be in the day when the Son of Man is revealed. In that day, he who is on the housetop, and his goods are in the house, let him not come down to take them away (Lk. 17:30-31).	Therefore, when you see the abomination of desolation... Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let him who is on the housetop not go down to take anything out of his house (Mt. 24:15-17).
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In Matthew 24 the escape that occurs when the abomination of desolation is observed is clearly not coterminous with the coming of the Son of Man. This discrepancy can only be explained in three different ways:

a) The phrase “that day” is used loosely to describe a period of time or any important event associated with the judgment that came upon Israel. If one adopts this view (and this [from a logical standpoint] is the only viable option for the full preterist) then one must abandon the hyper-preterist understanding of Matthew 24 which views the destruction of Jerusalem as the

time when the final judgment, the second bodily coming and general resurrection took place. The reason this interpretation destroys hyper-preterism is that it can only be adopted if one considers the coming of the Son of Man in Matthew 24 to be figurative of a coming in judgment. If one views the coming of Christ in the Olivet Discourse to be literal then there are two separate comings of Christ in Luke 17 and Matthew 24. According to the hyper-preterist this would also mean two separate judgments and resurrections.

b) Another possible option is that believers are to flee immediately the day Christ returns. This view must be rejected because it explicitly contradicts Christ's warning regarding the abomination of desolation. He teaches that if believers do not immediately flee when the abomination of desolation occurs then it will be too late to be saved from utter destruction. Indeed, Josephus has recorded that Jesus' words were precisely true. Those who did not escape when they could were trapped and suffered the consequences.

c) A third possibility is that Luke 17:23-37 has nothing to do with the destruction of Jerusalem, but applies solely to the second bodily coming of Christ. This is actually the view of many commentators (e.g., Plummer, Alford, Lenski, Manson, Hendriksen, Stein, Marshall). Although this view would make it easy to divide the Olivet Discourse at verse 36, it is unlikely that so much material from Matthew 24 would be used by Luke with absolutely no connection to the destruction of Israel.

Thus far we have seen that there are only two viable options regarding the parables after Matthew 24:36. One can argue (based on the "discrepancy" between Lk. 17:30-31 and Mt. 24:15-17 as well as the fact that the Lukan discourse [i.e. in chapter 17] mentions nothing about the destruction of Jerusalem or Roman armies) that Luke 17 only refers to the end of the world (i.e. Jesus' second visible bodily coming, Ac. 1:9-11). If true, Matthew 24:36 would make a logical dividing line to a new (yet related) subject. The other view says that Luke 17:23 ff. does apply to the destruction of Jerusalem and therefore at least some of the material after Matthew 24:36 must be connected to the destruction of Jerusalem. Therefore, given the emphasis on the surprise or unexpectedness associated with the coming and the portrait painted of normal living, one must not over literalize "day," but consider the warning as applying to the judgment event as a whole (i.e. an eschatological "day of the Lord").

## Chapter 6: The Judgment: Past, Progressive or Final

The fourth objection (and the second *major* objection) to the idea that all of Matthew 24 and 25 concerns the destruction of Jerusalem is based on the descriptions of judgment following Christ's coming. A very strong case can be made that Jesus uses the urgency associated with the destruction of Jerusalem as a springboard to warn all Christians to be ready for the final judgment at the second bodily coming. There are a number of reasons for this interpretation.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> The idea of a progressive judgment (which is advocated by interpreters such as Milton Terry and Gary De Mar) is very attractive for a number of reasons. First, it avoids having to posit a jump from the destruction of Jerusalem to the final judgment thousands of years in the future. Second, it comports well with the picture of Christ's kingship found in passages such as Psalm 2 and 110 where the Messiah is pictured ruling and destroying enemy kings and nations progressively by the rod of His power. Third, it applies well to the destruction of Jerusalem, which is the first and major example of a progressive judgment. Fourth, the parables apply well to that situation because the nation of Israel (which was at that time the covenant people) were not ready to meet the master and thus were cast out of the kingdom. The progressive judgment interpretation, however, is subject to a number of objections by final judgment advocates. First, the idea of a progressive judgment is not stated or taught in any of the parables or the judgment scene of Matthew 25:31 ff. It is inferred solely from the alleged necessity of tying the parables and

(1) The reason given for watchfulness in the parables is that when Jesus returns He will mete out immediate and terrible punishments to all hypocrites while giving rewards to all those who are faithful. (The purpose of these parables is to call believers to watchfulness. All Christians must be spiritually alert and biblically engaged in the Master's service and thus be ready at every moment to stand before Jesus Christ and give an account.) Throughout these parables we observe the terminology not of conquering armies, national disasters or physical slaughter, but the terminology associated with the final judgment when people are judged and cast into heaven or hell. The master of the servant "will cut him in two and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Mt. 24:51). The "good and faithful servants" hear, "enter into the joy of your lord" (Mt. 25:21c) while "the wicked and lazy servants" hear "cast the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Mt. 25:30).

While there is no question that watchfulness is needed to avoid the coming calamity upon Israel, *the believers living in A.D. 70 were not judged by Christ for they escaped the wrath of God and continued to live normal lives*. For partial preterists who apply Matthew 25 to believers meeting Christ throughout history (i.e. a progressive judgment) this is not a major problem. However, full preterists (who teach that *everything* was fulfilled in A.D. 70) cannot explain how the final judgment took place without resorting to bizarre speculations that not only contradict the clear teaching of God's word regarding the day of judgment, but also do great violence to common sense. The major alternatives presented by hyper-preterists are a representative judgment or a secret judgment. Full preterists usually argue that all people whether alive or dead were judged in A.D. 70; that people living were judged without being aware of it; that people were judged who were not yet born for lives not yet lived. Scripture twisting and bare assertions without a shred of biblical evidence are the twin pillars of heterodoxy.

(2) The Lord's injunction to watch is directly applied by Jesus not merely to and for His apostles, but to and for every Christian in *all places and times*. Note the parallel account in Mark: "And what I say to you, I say to all: Watch" (13:37). "In Mark's view 'all' naturally includes in its scope all believers....It makes explicit the hints scattered through the discourse that in the instruction delivered to the disciples the church is being addressed."<sup>163</sup> "[T]he Master

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judgment scene somehow to the destruction of Israel in A.D. 70. Given the manner in which the Old Testament prophets jumped without warning from events that were near to events that were far off, the necessity of connecting the judgment scenes to A.D.70 is overstated. Second, the condemnation terminology of the parables and final judgment scene are virtually identical to other descriptions of the final judgment (Mt. 8:12; 13:41-43; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; Lk. 13:28; Rev. 20:11-15). Third, historical judgment events like the destruction of Jerusalem are God's way of dealing with unbelievers and persecutors. Faithful Christians are spared and continue to live their normal lives. The parables and judgment scene focus their attention on faithful believers and hypocritical Christians. Rank unbelievers are ignored. Fourth, the parable of the wheat and the tares (Matthew 13), which discusses the final harvest in which believers and hypocrites are separated, occurs at the end of the new covenant age not the beginning. Fifth, the judgment scene in Matthew 25:31 ff. describes a large group of people being judged simultaneously. While there are numerous examples of God crushing nations in Scripture, the Bible (with the possible exception of this one verse) contains no examples or description of public (i.e. many people) yet partial judgment scenes. Sixth, the parables and judgment scene describe a literal bodily coming of the Master in which everyone must stand in His presence to be sentenced. The judgment upon Jerusalem by our Lord did not involve a literal bodily descent upon Jerusalem. One cannot assert that Jesus literally came in A.D. 70 without denying the true humanity of the Messiah. If He came literally how come no one saw Him? Where is He now? Was there a second hidden ascension? While the progressive judgment view is an acceptable interpretation (unlike the full preterist view which is heretical), the final judgment view is superior in the opinion of this author.

<sup>163</sup> George R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Last Days*, 474. "Luke follows the...parables of the Watching Servants and that of the Burglar with the question of Peter, 'Lord, are you speaking this parable to us or to all?' (Luke 12:41)"

wanted to impress upon his disciples the fact that his admonition to be and remain alert...was of supreme value not only for them but also for all other believers both then and later.”<sup>164</sup> [W]hat I say to you of this generation, I say to all that shall believe in me, through your word, in every age, *Watch, watch*, expect my second coming, prepare for it, that you may be found in peace, without spot, and blemish.”<sup>165</sup> If Christ literally returned in A.D. 70 and the final judgment has already taken place then obviously the injunction to watch does not apply to any believers after A.D. 70. Indeed, many of the central imperatives in the New Testament connected with the church’s sanctification do not apply to us. Full preterists can say such injunctions apply. However, if they do they are explicitly contradiction their own teaching regarding the coming of Christ.

(3) The Lukan account of Jesus’ discourse makes it clear that our Lord looks beyond the destruction of Jerusalem to the final judgment when faithful believers will stand by grace before the Son of Man. “Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man” (Lk. 21:36). The phrase “to stand before the Son of Man” without doubt is a reference to the final judgment when believers will stand before the judgment seat of Christ. Note the following passages that confirm this assertion: “For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ....So then each of us shall give account of himself to God” (Rom. 14:10, 12). “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad” (2 Cor. 5:10). “These two texts therefore place beyond all dispute the certainly of future judgment for believers.”<sup>166</sup> “And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened....And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books” (Rev. 20:12).

The Bible says nothing about a representative or secret judgment. All believers will stand before the King. Did the believers who were alive in A.D. 70 stand before Jesus and give account? Did all the believers who had not yet been born and thus did not even exist stand in the presence of Christ in A.D. 70? Were all the secret sins of every human being publicly exposed in A.D. 70 (cf. Mt. 10:26; 12:26; Rom. 2:16)? Did believers hear the words “Enter into the joy of your Lord” (Mt. 25:21) in A.D. 70? Were all the people whether alive or dead consigned to their eternal state in both *body* and *soul* (cf. Mt. 10:28) in A.D. 70? The answer to all of these questions is an emphatic no, absolutely not.

(4) The strongest evidence against the full preterist interpretation of Matthew 25 comes from the description of the judgment in Matthew 25:31-46. Jesus ends the parabolic section of the Olivet Discourse with a non-parabolic (i.e. a literal description with a few parabolic or metaphorical elements, e.g., “sheep” and “goats”) description of the final judgment in order to clarify or explain the urgency of the former parables. Christians need to remain spiritually awake because when Jesus returns at the end of history everyone must stand before the judgment seat of Christ. This section of the discourse (like the parables) is directed to professing Christians in all

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(*Ibid.*). This fact indicates that when Jesus says “all” He was not merely expanding His injunction to the rest of the twelve apostles. Further, the fact that the twelve had listened very carefully to the whole discourse renders the idea that the use of all is merely an expansion to the twelve apostles superfluous.

<sup>164</sup> William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975), 544.

<sup>165</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:545.

<sup>166</sup> John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968 [59, 65]), part 2, 184.



nations throughout history. The persons judged in this section are either faithful believers (Mt. 25:34-40) or hypocritical professors (Mt. 25:40-46).

There are a number of reasons why this portion of the discourse is incompatible with an A.D. 70 fulfillment.

a) Matthew 24:15-34 describes a *local* judgment (i.e. God's wrath that came upon rebellious apostate Israel). Matthew 25:31 ff. describes a *universal* judgment. "All the nations [Gk. *ethne*] will be gathered before Him" (Mt. 25:32). "The judgment of the great day will be a general judgment. All must be summoned before Christ's tribunal...all those nations of men that are made of one blood, to dwell on all the face of the earth."<sup>167</sup> The coming in judgment upon Jerusalem led to the slaughter of over one million Jews. The judgment of Matthew 25:31 involves all men of every nation.

b) Matthew 25:31 ff. describes a personal judgment. The professing Christians involved stand before Christ and have direct communication with Him. Our Lord commends the faithful believers for their works of faith. The hypocrites are condemned for the lack of the works of saving faith. Both the faithful and unfaithful are permitted to ask questions of the Judge. This whole scene of judgment is totally incompatible with an A.D. 70 fulfillment for a number of reasons. First, it destroys the full preterist notion of a secret impersonal judgment of which most people are totally unaware. The great judgment will be like a court with people present and questions asked. Second, the judgment event of A.D. 70 involved unbelievers, not professing Christians. Believers observed the signs and escaped to the mountainous area of Pella and thus were not killed. If believers remained alive why would they be pictured as standing before Christ in heaven?

c) Matthew 24:31 teaches that our Lord's judgment of Israel inaugurated a great gathering of the elect throughout the whole earth through the preaching of the gospel. (In other words the destruction of the old rebellious covenant nation pushed the Great Commission [Mt. 28:19-20] into high gear.) Matthew 25:32, however, pictures all the nations (people both saved and lost) already standing before Him. Matthew 24:31 pictures the beginning of the gospel age while Matthew 25:32 sets forth the end of this process. The wheat and the tares (Mt. 13:25-40), the sheep and the goats (Mt. 25:32) are separated. Full preterism has both the beginning and ending of new covenant history occurring simultaneously.

d) The judgment scene of Matthew 25:31 ff. describes the assignment of both the righteous and the wicked of every nation to their eternal rewards. "And they will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life" (Mt. 25:46). The fact that both the righteous and the wicked go either to eternal life or to everlasting punishment cannot be harmonized with the A.D. 70 judgment event upon Israel. Believers in A.D. 70 were not killed and thus did not stand before Christ. If full preterists argue that Christians were given eternal life (i.e. salvation) in A.D. 70 then they have also contradicted Scripture. Everyone with genuine faith in Jesus in A.D. 70 was already born again and in possession of eternal life (Jn. 3:36). Matthew 25:46 must refer to the full redemption of both body and soul on the final day after the resurrection of the body.

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<sup>167</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:379.

(5) The full preterist interpretation of Matthew 25 is disproved by the biblical teaching regarding the final judgment. Whenever any portion of the Bible is interpreted it must be analyzed within the overall context of Scripture. The full preterist teaches that the final judgment occurred in A.D. 70. A study of the biblical teaching regarding the final judgment proves beyond a shadow of doubt that the full preterist view is exegetically, theologically and logically impossible. Note the following proofs:

a) Jesus taught that at the final judgment God will cast the damned both *body* and soul into hell. “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (Mt. 10:28). “Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation” (Jn. 5:28-29). “The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works” (Rev. 20:13). Were evil unsaved persons resurrected and then cast into the lake of fire in A.D. 70? No. It didn’t happen. And even if it did occur, what about evil unsaved people who die after A.D. 70? Do they get to avoid the punishment promised by Jesus in Matthew 10:28 because they live after the resurrection occurred? The full preterist can’t answer these questions without totally twisting the plain meaning of Scripture.<sup>168</sup>

b) Our Lord explicitly said that non-Jewish pagans who had been dead for thousands of years would be involved in the day of judgment. Note, the following passages: “Assuredly, I say to you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in

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<sup>168</sup> The average Christian reader of Matthew 25:31-46 will immediately recognize a description of the final judgment. And he is right. That is what this section of Scripture describes. But the full preterist says, “No, it’s not that simple let me explain it to you.” Note the incredible Scripture twisting of the full preterist Max King. He writes, “‘All nations’ may include Gentiles, but it is the author’s view that Matt. 25:31-46 is equated with Matt. 13:37-43 and Revelation 14:14-20. ‘Nations’ is a term that also applies to the Jewish tribes or people (Rev. 20:3, 8; 2:26; Matt. 21:43), and here this judgment seems to involve *all nations* or all the *tribes of Israel*. It was a judgment to determine true spiritual Israel from rebellious fleshly Israel. The nations were divided or separated into two groups. Those on the right hand received the kingdom (verse 34). Those on the left hand were removed from the kingdom (verse 41). This corresponds with Matt. 21:43: ‘Therefore say I unto you, the kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof.’ The kingdom of God was never taken from *Gentiles* for they never had it (Eph. 2:12). Nor were the *Gentiles* ever cast out of the kingdom, for they were never in it. (Matt. 13:41, 42; Matt. 25:41). Thus, it is quite obvious that the judgment of Matt. 25:31-46 belongs in the *Jewish setting* wherein it was spoken and to which it applied. Jesus was merely showing how the children of the kingdom (the Jews) would be cast into outer darkness and the kingdom would be possessed by another nation, namely the sons of God born of spiritual birth by Abraham’s spiritual seed (Gal. 3:16-29)” (*Spirit of Prophecy* [Warren, OH: Parkman Road Church of Christ, 1971], 170). Note that Matthew 25:31 does not say “tribes of the land” but “all nations.” The term nations (*ethne*) is never used in the Bible as a designation for Israel.

Another full preterist, Dr. Kelly Nelson Birks, argues that Matthew 25:31 ff. does indeed describe the last judgment. According to Birks the last judgment occurred in 70 A.D. Birks argues that God looked throughout human history and saw the lives of all men before they were even born and evaluated them when Jesus returned in A.D. 70. Not only is Birks’ theory a bare assertion without a shred of biblical evidence (in other words he just made it up), it also contradicts the explicit teaching of Matthew 25:31 ff. that all the nations are *present* before Christ, that all men are there before the King to be questioned and rebuked. Remember the old saying “one heresy leads to another.” The full preterist treatment of the last judgment passages are more convoluted, bizarre and dangerous than the worst theories of the dispensational sensationalists.

the day of judgment than for that city” (Mt. 10:15; cf. 11:23-24)! “But I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you” (Mt. 11:22). “The queen of the South will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and indeed a greater than Solomon is here” (Mt. 12:42). Jesus said that the rank heathen sex perverts of Sodom and Gomorrah who were destroyed in a temporal judgment 2,000 years before our Lord spoke these words would be judged in the future on the day of judgment. Likewise, the evil Phoenician cities of Tyre and Sidon who received historical judgments long ago (e.g., Ezek. 26:3-21, 28:20-24; Amos 1:9; Joel 3:4-6; Isa. 23:12; Jer. 27:3-6) would some day be judged with the wicked Israelites of Jesus' generation. Even the righteous Ninevites (c. 899 B.C.) who repented under Johah's preaching will be judged on the same day-the day of judgment. The fact that the non-Jewish people of Sodom and Gomorrah, Nineveh, Tyre, and Sidon, and the Ethiopian queen of Solomon's day are all to be judges together with the Jews of Jesus' generation totally disproves the hyper-preterist contention (e.g., Russell, King) that the day of judgment was a strictly Jewish affair. It also disproves the full preterist concept of a representative judgment.

The final judgment is universal (i.e. it involves all nations). It involves all people who ever lived throughout all of human history. This point raises the question: Were the ancient people of Sodom and Gomorrah, Nineveh, Tyre and Sidon and Ethiopia judged in A.D. 70 when Christ destroyed Israel? No. The final judgment hasn't happened yet. Further, Christ said that the inhabitants of ancient Nineveh and the Queen of the South of Solomon's day “will rise up in the judgment with this generation” (Mt. 12:42). In other words, everyone who lived throughout history will be raised from the dead in order to appear before Christ at the final judgment. Note, that this resurrection from the dead includes the contemporary generation of Jews (“with this generation”). This statement from the lips of Jesus presupposes that the general resurrection occurs at a point in the future in which all the inhabitants of Christ's day have passed away. Our Lord's teaching explicitly places the general resurrection at a future point in time beyond the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. It is absolutely impossible to reconcile our Lord's teaching regarding the final judgment and the general resurrection with the full preterist's concept of an A.D. 70 fulfillment.

c) The New Testament teaching regarding the final judgment completely contradicts the full preterist idea of a secret, hidden judgment. Jesus said, “But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, that your charitable deed may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly” (Mt. 6:3-4; cf 6:6; Note the plural demonstrative (“those”) in Matthew 25:34, 41). Later, He spurred the disciples to courageous action saying, “For there is nothing covered that will not be revealed, and hidden that will not be known” (Mt. 10:26). After rebuking the Pharisees for blaspheming the Holy Spirit our Lord declared, “But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment” (Mt. 12:36). “There shall be a day of judgment wherein all sins, even words, shall come to be judged: for here *a day of judgment* shall pass upon particulars, even upon words.”<sup>169</sup> Paul concurred: “In the day when God will judge the secrets of men by

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<sup>169</sup> David Dickson, *Matthew*, 173.

Jesus Christ, according to my gospel” (Rom. 2:16). Were all believers rewarded openly in A.D. 70 for their charitable deeds? No. They were not. Were all the hidden sins revealed when Jerusalem was destroyed? No. The hidden deeds are still hidden. They have not been made public. Have all men given account for every idle word they have spoken? No. In fact men continue to spout filth, hatred and perversion. Has God already judged the secrets of everyone? Has He exposed hypocritical professors of religion as in Matthew 7:22-23 or 25:42 ff.? No. He clearly has not. The hyper-preterist understanding of the final judgment ignores the Bible's own description of that solemn day.

d) The full preterist teaching regarding an A.D. 70 final judgment also explicitly contradicts Revelation 20. In Revelation 20, we are told that Satan is bound at the beginning of the millennium (20:1-3). Virtually all amillennial and postmillennial scholars teach that the devil was bound at the first coming as a result of Jesus’ death and resurrection (cf. Mt. 12:28-29; Jn. 12:31-32; Lk. 9:1; 10:18-19; Heb. 2:14; 1 Jn. 3:8). In Revelation 20:7 it says that at the end of the 1,000 years (the millennium) Satan is released from prison to gather the nations of the earth to attack the saints and the beloved city (v. 9). This attack does not succeed because fire comes down from heaven, destroys the enemy armies and then the devil is cast into the lake of fire (vs. 9-10). According to the full preterist this has already taken place in A.D. 70. They teach that the final judgment is coterminous with Satan's final defeat and judgment. The hyper-preterist interpretation raises the following questions. Why is the millennium (which according to the hyper-preterist lasted only around forty years) described as a thousand year period? While there is no question that the phrase “one thousand years” is symbolic of an indefinite period of time, the number 1,000 is never used in Scripture to describe a small number but always a vast number. For example, God owns the cattle on a thousand hills (Ps. 50:10). This indicates that God owns all the cattle (i.e. thousands of cattle and hills; cf. Dt. 1:11; 7:9; Ps. 68:17; 84:10; 90:4).

The use of one thousand years to describe the period between the first and second *bodily* coming of Christ to judge the world cannot be explained away (i.e. in a biblical, exegetical or logical manner) by the full preterist. Further the description of what occurs at our Lord's return in Revelation 20 explicitly contradicts what occurred in A.D. 70. In A.D. 70 the Roman armies conquer the city, slay its inhabitants and march back to Rome victorious. In Revelation 20:9 the armies are not victorious, nor do they remain alive, but are obliterated instantly by fire from God. In Revelation 20:9 the beloved city is the encampment of the saints. In the Jewish war the city is completely abandoned by Christians who flee to Pella to escape the destruction. In A.D. 70 the city is the encampment of apostate Christ-hating, Jewish unbelievers. How can Revelation 20 be harmonized into the hyper-preterist system when it teaches almost the exact opposite of what full preterists teach?

It is one thing to observe how apocalyptic imagery and Old Testament prophetic terminology are used by Jesus in order to give a careful, responsible exegesis of Matthew 24:4-35. It is quite another thing to allegorize straight forward passages, invent bizarre new theories and make up new teachings out of thin air to fit the judgment scene of Matthew 25 into the full

preterist paradigm. Arbitrary, fanciful eisegesis is the only way that full preterists can redefine long established orthodox confessional doctrines.<sup>170</sup>

(6) The obvious objection that a shift occurs from a discussion of the judgment upon Jerusalem to the necessity of being ready to stand before Christ on the day of judgment (the logical point to make this shift would be Matthew 24:42) is that the disciples would have been completely oblivious to such a change. While it may be true that the apostles would have had a difficult time understanding that Jesus was now warning all believers of every nation throughout history of the necessity of being ready to stand before the King, there are good reasons for acknowledging such a change. First, (as noted) a careful study of the rest of the New Testament reveals that the public separation of the sheep and the goats of all the nations is to occur at the end of history, not in the middle of history. The New Testament teaching regarding the final judgment cannot be harmonized with an A.D. 70 fulfillment without departing from several well established orthodox and confessional doctrines (e.g., the time and nature of the resurrection, the rapture, the second bodily coming of Christ, the consummation of the kingdom and the beginning of the final state, etc.). Second (as noted) Mark's account makes it clear that our Lord is speaking to the whole church, not merely the apostles or the Christians in Palestine (cf. Mk. 13:37).

Third, a study of Old Testament prophecy reveals that shifts within prophecies of events that are near (or about to occur) to events that are distant often are difficult or even impossible for the original audience to discern. Note the following examples. In Isaiah chapter 7 the prophet approaches King Ahaz in a time of crisis (Judah is under attack by Syria and Israel, c. 734 B.C.). Jehovah through the prophet tells the king that within 65 years Ephraim will be broken (Ephraim and Israel are the collective names of the ten northern tribes). Israel is defeated in 722 B.C. and the northern kingdom completely ceased to exist within the 65 years. In the midst of prophecies dealing with the immediate future, God orders Ahaz to ask for a sign. Ahaz refuses to ask for a sign, then God says, "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel....For before the Child shall know to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land that you dread will be forsaken by both her kings" (Isa. 7:14, 16). If we apply the full preterist hermeneutic to this portion of Scripture we would achieve a completely erroneous interpretation. The discussion of the child who is to be born comes within the context of a prophecy regarding events that are to take place within 65 years (Isa. 7:8). In verse 16 God even switches *mid-sentence* from a discussion of the Messiah (who will not be born for another 730 years) to the end of the military campaign by the kings of Israel and Syria that were in Ahaz's immediate future. Would the people who heard this prophecy understand or perceive that God was switching back and forth several centuries in time? No. They almost certainly would not. Does this make the prophecy any less true or relevant? No. It does not. Further, this prophecy punches large irreparable holes in the full preterist over-use of the word "you" and audience relevance. Jehovah through Isaiah tells Ahaz directly that, "the Lord Himself will give you a sign" (v. 14). According to the full preterist method of interpretation this passage must teach that Ahaz himself would be alive to witness the virgin

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<sup>170</sup> For example, the Bible teaches (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:52 ff.; Phil. 3:21, etc.) that when Christ returns all believers are to receive new glorified spiritual bodies. This event, obviously, has not happened yet. That truth doesn't stop hyper-preterist interpreters from spreading heresy. One full preterist (Dr. Kelly Birks) argues that all believers past, present and future did in fact receive their new resurrected glorified bodies in A.D. 70. For Christians who did not yet exist in A.D. 70 these bodies were placed in storage in heaven for the future. While a creative imagination is very useful when writing fiction, it is not helpful when writing theology.

birth. However, we know from the New Testament that it was his relatives far off in the future that were alive to witness this great redemptive event.

In Isaiah chapter 11 there is a wonderful prophecy regarding Jesus Christ and His kingdom. This prophecy without any warning or indication of a change of time fulfillment is given in the same prophetic discourse that deals with the imminent destruction of Assyria. Note the passage that gives the time indicator: “For yet a very little while and the indignation will cease, as will My anger in their destruction” (Isa. 10:25). “From the time of Tiglath-pileser to Sennacherib was roughly about thirty years. In the prophetic view, it was a short time.”<sup>171</sup> If the full preterist was consistent with his method of dealing with time indicators he would have to argue that the Jews of Isaiah’s day should have expected the Messiah in “a very little while.” A consistent preterist would say, “The Jewish audience who heard or read this prophecy would have had no way to distinguish between events that are near at hand and events that are several centuries in the future. Therefore, we must not arbitrarily divide them without solid evidence.” But, we know from the completed canon that God has no problem placing prophetic events that are to take place several centuries apart next to each other with no explanation whatsoever. The full preterist hermeneutic is over simplistic and defective. Prophetic discourse is often not as clearly or logically laid out as we would like.<sup>172</sup> Given the manner in which the Old Testament prophets often mingled events which were about to take place with distant events without explanation, it would not be out of character or unusual if Jesus went from a discussion of the day of the Lord that occurred in A.D. 70 to the final and ultimate day of the Lord at the second bodily coming of Christ.

## Conclusion

The Olivet Discourse has been greatly abused by prophetic sensationalists, dispensationalists and radical futurists. The section of the discourse (Mt. 24:2-34) so often used to scare believers and sell books has already come to pass over nineteen centuries ago. Further, Jesus said that the time of His second coming is a secret (Mt. 24:36). Date setting and wild speculations about the “terminal generation” have done great harm to the cause of Christ and the reputations of Christians in general. However, the fact that no one knows the time of the second coming (except God) is not and should never be used as an excuse by believers to be lazy, complacent or disobedient. On the contrary, our Lord emphasizes in the “watch” parables and the description of the last judgment that all professing Christians must live every moment of every day as if Jesus could appear at any moment. Biblical Christianity is not a religion of escape, hedonism or retreatism, but a religion of day-by-day fervency, service, kingdom building and repentance. The major thrust of the Olivet Discourse is not on the fun and excitement of prophecy but on the motivation and necessity for spiritual alertness, sanctification and the day-by-day struggle for personal holiness.

A proper understanding of the Olivet Discourse will help fend off the retreatist pietism and belly-button theology of much of modern evangelicalism. However, in our battle with the radical futurism of dispensationalism we must avoid the theologically fatal doctrine of full preterism (or hyper-preterism, pantelism, consistent preterism, radical preterism, etc.). While

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<sup>171</sup> Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 1:372.

<sup>172</sup> For an excellent refutation of the full pretest interpretation methodology of using imminency passages to force everything into an A.D. 70 fulfillment see C. Jonathan Seraiah, *The End of All Things: A Defense of the Future* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 1999), 98-102.

dispensationalism neuters the church by eliminating the Great Commission concept of building Christian cultures and nations over the long haul, full preterism destroys the church by denying (through complete redefinition; like modernists but in a different more clever manner) doctrines central to the Christian faith (e.g., the second bodily coming of Christ, the resurrection, the final judgment, the full victory of Jesus' resurrection in history, etc.). “Too many people have been leaning away from the briar patch of dispensationalism on their left only to fall from their horse into the pit of the damnable heresy of pantelism on their right.”<sup>173</sup> Given this fact we must approach Matthew 24 with utmost care and reverence, recognizing the analogy of faith and the difficulties involved in understanding certain sections of the discourse. It is our hope and prayer that a more biblical understanding of the Olivet Discourse will point the modern evangelical church away from rapture fever toward the important task of working for godly dominion in family, church and state.

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<sup>173</sup> R. C. Sproul, Jr., “Foreword” in C. Jonathan Seraiah, *The End of All Things*, 10.