

PRETERISM AND “THIS GENERATION”

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IN JESUS’ FIG-TREE PARABLE HE SAID, “Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place” (Matt. 24:34; cf. Mark 13:30 and Luke 21:32). Bible students differ on the meaning of the independent statement, “this generation will not pass away,” and the modifying phrase, “until all these things take place.”

THE PRETERIST VIEW

Preterism is the eschatological system that teaches that most (moderate, or partial preterism), if not all (extreme, or plenary preterism), of Jesus’ predictions in the Olivet Discourse were fulfilled at the time of Jerusalem’s desolation and the temple’s destruction in A.D. 70.¹ Assuming that a generation is thirty or forty years in length, preterists contend that either in whole or in part, the events Jesus predicted occurred within the lifetime of those who were Jesus’ contemporaries (i.e., within “this generation”).² One preterist notes, “Not only was something significant about to happen, it was to happen in their lifetime.”³

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¹ R. C. Sproul distinguishes between “radical preterism” (all New Testament prophecies have been realized) and “moderate preterism” (many but not all New Testament prophecies have been realized) (*The Last Days according to Jesus* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998], 24).

² The interpretation of Matthew 24:34 relates to several other texts foundational to preterism including Revelation 1:1, 3, 19; 3:10; 22:6–7, 10, 12, 20.

³ John Noë, *Beyond the End Times: The Rest of the Greatest Story Ever Told* (Bradford, PA: Preterist Resources, 1999), 111. Kenneth Gentry states, “This statement of Christ [in Matt. 24:34] is indisputably clear—and absolutely demanding of a

THE FUTURIST VIEW

On the other hand futurists believe that the Olivet Discourse describes the progress of this evil age until the "parousia-end"⁴ (Matt. 24:29–31). Futurism allows for the indefinite postponement of events—the "abomination of desolation" (v. 15), the "tribulation" (vv. 21–28), and Jesus' second coming (v. 30)—leading up to the end of the age and the judgment of earth's inhabitants (24:50–51; 25:30, 46). Preterists believe that those events either in part or the whole already occurred circa A.D. 70. So the question is, Did Jesus teach that the tribulation would occur and that He would return before some of those who heard His predictions died, or do those predictions await future fulfillment?

This article argues that the exegetical data of the Gospels do not support preterism's contention that "this generation" establishes a time frame within which all of the Olivet Discourse would take place. Neither the Lord nor Matthew meant that "this generation" is a temporal straightjacket into which all aspects of the Discourse were fitted for fulfillment. Instead the Scriptures assert that there will be an undetermined and indefinite hiatus before "all these things" are fulfilled.

THE OLIVET DISCOURSE

JERUSALEM REJECTED JESUS

Jesus predicted that desolation would befall Jerusalem because of the nation's resistance to His messianic ministry. Jerusalem's rejection of Jesus paralleled the manner in which Israel had refused God's prophets in previous generations (Heb. 11:32–38).

To understand Jesus' curse on Jerusalem in Matthew 23:34–36 one must look at the Chronicles text to which the Lord alluded when He cursed the city. "The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent word to them again and again by messengers, because He had compassion on His people and on His dwelling place; but they con-

first-century fulfillment of the events in the preceding verses, including the Great Tribulation (v. 21)" (see Thomas Ice and Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., *The Great Tribulation: Past or Future?* [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999], 26–27). Sproul adds, "The central thesis of . . . all preterists is that the New Testament's time-frame references with respect to the Parousia point to a fulfillment within the lifetime of at least some of Jesus' disciples" (*The Last Days according to Jesus*, 25).

⁴ The word "parousia" (παρουσία) means "presence," that is, the personal and physical presence of Jesus Christ when He returns to the earth (Matt. 24:27, 37, 39). "The end" (τὸ τέλος) designates the eschatological "end" associated with Jesus' coming (vv. 6, 14).

tinually mocked the messengers of God, despised His words and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the LORD arose against His people, until there was no remedy" (2 Chron. 36:15–16).

In denouncing Jerusalem Jesus assessed His generation to be in line with preceding ones described by the chronicler. When the city's resistance to Jesus reached its zenith, there was no divine recourse other than judgment (Dan. 9:26). Jesus therefore pronounced judgment on His generation, a generation that stood in solidarity with the rebels of previous generations (Matt. 23:29–36).

JESUS CENSURED JERUSALEM

When the Jewish leaders rejected Jesus as a prophet of God, Jesus pronounced "woes" on the nation and its leaders (Matt. 21:42–43; 23:1–36). Concluding His censure of Jerusalem, Jesus predicted that the city would be devastated (23:38). But He also forecast a day when Jerusalem would sincerely say to Him, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!" (v. 39; cf. 21:9).

After leaving the temple precinct and pausing on the Mount of Olives overlooking Mount Zion, the disciples questioned Jesus about Jerusalem's coming destruction, pointing out the massive and magnificent temple complex under construction. The Jews thought the temple would last forever. Countering that assumption, Jesus reaffirmed, "Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, not one stone here will be left upon another, which will not be torn down" (24:2).

The first prediction befell Jerusalem and her environs in A.D. 70. The world awaits fulfillment of the day when Jerusalem will finally welcome the One "who comes in the name of the Lord."

INTERPRETIVE ISSUES

Jesus' two predictions—of the coming desolation of the city and then of the future day when Jerusalem will welcome Jesus—aroused the disciples' curiosity.⁵ Therefore they asked two questions: "Tell us, when will these things happen, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?" (Matt. 24:3). Thinking that the desolation of Jerusalem and the eschatological end comprised one event, they asked the questions together.⁶

⁵ Mark 13:3 states that the questioners were Peter, James, John, and Andrew.

⁶ C. E. B. Cranfield notes that the disciples thought "the destruction of the Temple would be part of a complex of events leading to the End" (*The Gospel according to St. Mark* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1959], 393). A. B. Bruce also saw that "the questioners took for granted that all three things went together; destruction of the temple, advent of the Son of Man, end of the current age" ("The

The grammar indicates that they asked two questions. First, they asked "when" the temple would be destroyed; second, they asked, "what" would be the sign of the end.⁷

Some interpreters mix Jesus' predictions about Jerusalem's destruction and Jesus' second coming.⁸ Carson observes that "the Fall of Jerusalem and the return of the Son of Man . . . appear to be so tightly intertwined that it is impossible to separate them."⁹ If this is the case, then one must decide whether Jesus' predictions refer to the destruction of Jerusalem *and/or* the end of this age. Such an approach, however, confounds the disciples' questions.

The disciples' *assumption* that Jerusalem's destruction and the eschatological end would occur close to each other should not determine the sermon's interpretation. The Lord answered the disciples' questions directly,¹⁰ but He did not address the "when" of the disciples' question. Matthew's account does not place the different

Gospels according to Matthew, Mark and Luke," in *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, ed. W. Robertson Nicole [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970], 1:289). John Calvin wrote that the disciples thought of "the coming of Christ and the end of the world with the overthrow of the temple as inseparable events" (*A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke*, trans. A. W. Morrison, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972], 1:75).

⁷ One article governs "coming" and "end" (τῆς οἰκίας παρουσίας καὶ συντελείας τοῦ αἰῶνος). The second question can therefore be translated, "What will be *the* sign of Your coming and end of the age?" Craig L. Blomberg states, "By not repeating the definite article ('the') before 'end of the age,' Matthew's rendering of Jesus' words is most likely linking the coming of Christ and the end of the age together as one event (Granville Sharp's rule)" (*Matthew* [Nashville: Broadman, 1992], 353). By inserting the article "the" before "end of the age," several English versions (KJV, NASB, NIV, NKJV, and NRSV) are not acknowledging Sharp's rule.

⁸ Though Luke mentioned the destruction of Jerusalem (Luke 21:20–24), this emphasis is not in Matthew and Mark.

⁹ D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 8:491. J. Stuart Russell concurs. He wrote, "So intermingled, however, are the allusions—now to Jerusalem and now to the world at large; now to Israel and now to the human race; now to events close at hand and now to events indefinitely remote;—that to distinguish and allocate the several references and topics, is exceedingly difficult, if not impossible" (*The Parousia* [1887; new ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983], 55).

¹⁰ The Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24–25 is one sermon. However, a break exists at the end of Matthew 24:14, with verses 4–14 describing the general course of the age and verses 15–31 introducing the events of the tribulation and Jesus' return. This division is supported by Matthew's use of the adverb "then" (τότε) in the final clause of verse 14 ("then the end will come"). Τότε is "a correlative adv[erb] of time" that introduces "that which follows in time" (Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., rev. and ed. Frederick W. Danker [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000], 1012).

events together. Though Jesus predicted the desolation of Jerusalem (23:36; 24:2), He commented no further on the temple's impending destruction in His extended answer about the progress of the age to the end (24:4–41).

Three times Jesus mentioned "the end" (24:6, 13–14), and in verse 14 He associated His "coming" with it (cf. references to His coming in vv. 27, 30, 37, 39, 42, 44; 25:31).¹¹ Yet why did He not mention the stones again?

Perhaps that is because Matthew viewed Jesus' prediction of Jerusalem's destruction as a *fait accompli* and separate from the end-time events.¹² Despite the disciples' curiosity Jesus' prediction of Jerusalem's desolation needed no further explanation.¹³ Making

11 "The end" is used in two ways. First, in English "the end" can communicate the *terminus ad quem* to which faithfulness and perseverance by Jesus' disciples is encouraged. In this instance forms of the Greek word τέλος without the article are employed (e.g., Matt. 10:22; 24:13; Mark 13:13; John 13:1). Second, "the end" can refer to end-time events. In this case the Gospels use variants of τέλος with the definite article (τῆς συντελείας in Matt. 13:40, 49; 24:3; 28:20; and τὸ τέλος in 24:6, 13–14; Mark 13:7; Luke 21:9).

In Matthew 24:13 Jesus exhorted believers to live faithfully to "the end" (τέλος without the article). And in verse 14 He announced that "the end" (το τέλος) will follow the worldwide preaching of the gospel. Based on the recurrence of the same English word in these two verses, readers might mistakenly presume that the disciples would live to observe the eschatological end.

As R. T. France writes, "To the end does not necessarily point to the apocalyptic consummation (as though those who have lived earlier cannot be saved!), but is a standard phrase for 'right through it' (it lacks the article, which would be needed, as in vv. 6 and 14, to refer to 'the End')." Regarding Matthew 10:23 France concludes, "The whole verse is repeated from 10:22, where it clearly related to the contemporary situation of the mission to Israel, not to 'the close of the age'" (*Matthew* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985], 339).

12 In Matthew 23:36 Jesus announced, "Truly I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation." The verb "will come" (ἔξει) can refer to coming divine judgment, and "has the force of a perfect" (J. Schneider, "hēkō [to come]," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, abridged in one volume by Geoffrey W. Bromiley [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985], 306). A perfect tense indicates "the present state of affairs resulting from past action" (Maximilian Zerwick, *Biblical Greek* [Rome: Scripta Pontificii Instituti Biblici, 1963], 96). This promised judgment on Jerusalem guarantees the coming judgment in the end times (Matt. 24:50–25:46).

13 Luke mentioned the "desolation" of Jerusalem, but in the context of ongoing Gentile supremacy "until [ἀχρι οὗ] the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled" (Luke 21:24). The desolation (i.e., trampling under foot by Gentiles) of Jerusalem is ongoing, thereby indicating that the present age is still in "the times of the Gentiles." Those times commenced when Babylon conquered Jerusalem in 586 B.C., they continued during the Roman occupation of the Holy Land at the time of Christ, and they will culminate at the Lord's return. The Roman devastation of Jerusalem marked no *terminus ad quem* for the fulfillment of the Olivet Discourse prophecy. Instead the Roman destruction of Jerusalem affirmed the ongoing Gentile dominance over Jerusalem during the interadvent age.

a terse and final notice of judgment was not uncommon for Jesus, especially when declaring it on a people or a place (e.g., 12:38–45). Therefore in Matthew's account of the Lord's answer to the disciples, Jesus' mention of "all these things" (24:34) need not include the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.¹⁴

SERMON SUMMARY

SIGNS OF THE AGE

In His sermon Jesus first predicted signs common to *this age*—the appearance of false Christs, wars, famines, earthquakes, pestilence, persecution, worldwide preaching of the gospel (Matt. 24:6–14a). He called these "the beginning of birth pangs" (v. 8). These recurrent birth pains should not alarm Christians. Believers should not allow "doomsday" prophets and antichrists—who use the occasion of disasters to attract a following—to deceive them.¹⁵ Continuing disasters indicate that Jesus has not yet returned and God's kingdom has not been fully realized (Isa. 11:6–9). Yet these recurrent "birth pangs" indicate that the present age remains "pregnant" with the promise of the Lord's return.

In a parallel passage Luke recorded Jesus as having said, "When you hear of wars and disturbances, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end does not follow im-

As it relates to God's prophetic plan, the preposition/pronoun "until" (ἄχρι οὗ) denotes that the Gentile domination of Jerusalem can last for hundreds if not thousands of years (for this inference of ἄχρι οὗ see Acts 7:18; Rom. 11:25; 1 Cor. 11:26; 15:25; Gal. 3:19; Heb. 3:13; and Rev. 2:25). This further contradicts the preterist notion that everything Jesus predicted in the Olivet Discourse demanded an immediate fulfillment.

¹⁴ "Lk. frames his discourse to bear mainly on the destruction of Jerusalem." But as recorded by Mark and Matthew, "the discourse . . . speaks neither of temple nor city being destroyed" (Alan Hugh McNeile, *The Gospel according to St. Matthew* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1915], 343–44). Regarding Jesus' answer, H. Wayne House and Thomas D. Ice observe, "The first question is answered in Luke 21:20–24, since Luke is the one who specializes in the events pertaining to A.D. 70. Luke records Jesus' warning about the soon-to-come destruction of Jerusalem—the days of vengeance. The second and third questions [combined by one article; see n. 7] are answered in Matthew 24" (*Dominion Theology: Blessing or Curse?* [Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1988], 293–94).

¹⁵ As John F. Walvoord noted, Matthew 24:5–14 does not necessarily record signs of the end. He said this passage "deals with events which are not signs of the end, but only signs of progress. . . . History," he wrote, "clearly supports the view that all of these things have in large measure characterized [and continue to characterize] the entire age" ("Christ's Olivet Discourse on the Time of the End," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 128 [July–September 1971]: 208–9). Alfred Plummer also wrote that Matthew 24:4–14 describes "events which must precede the End" (*The Gospel according to St. Matthew*, reprint [Minneapolis: James Family Christian, n.d.], 330).

mediately” (Luke 21:9). Luke’s use of “first” (πρῶτον) “makes the time sequence clear. There may be chaos, but God is not surprised. There may be chaos, but the end is not near. Jesus said that even when these events are present, the end does not follow immediately (εὐθέως).”¹⁶

SIGNS OF THE END

Jesus then predicted exceptional signs of *the end*—the “abomination of desolation,” unprecedented tribulation, continuing deception, cosmic disturbances (Matt. 24:14b-31).

THE REST OF THE SERMON

In the rest of the sermon Jesus *certified* His predictions, *exhorted* His disciples to service and watchfulness, and *described* the judgment on earth’s inhabitants (24:32–25:46). Jesus also stated that the time of the end is known only by His Father (24:36).

IS FUTURISM UNTENABLE?

Assuming the Olivet Discourse provides a unified account of the course of this age to the end, questions can be asked of that sermon about the futurist (postponement) position as opposed to a preterist (nonpostponement) view. J. Stuart Russell (1816–1895), a preterist, once stated, “*The events specified in [Jesus] prediction would assuredly come to pass before the existing generation had wholly passed away.*”¹⁷ Then he dogmatically asserted, “This is the only interpretation which the words will bear.”¹⁸

Is this true? Or does the sermon challenge such confidence? Answers are found in lexical, grammatical, contextual, theological, and historical data in Matthew’s record.

THE LEXICAL DATA¹⁹

The word “generation” (γενεά) is used in a number of ways. They are “1. those exhibiting common characteristics or interests, *race*, kind . . . 2. the sum total of those born at [or living at] the same

¹⁶ See Darrell L. Bock, *Luke, Volume 2: 9:51–24:53*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 1666.

¹⁷ Russell, *The Parousia*, 87 (italics his).

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Hank Hanegraaff writes that “‘this generation’ appears with surprising regularity in the Gospels, and it *always* applies to Jesus’ contemporaries” (*The Apocalypse Code* [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007], 77, italics added).

time, expanded to include all those living at a given time . . . *generation, contemporaries* . . . 3. the time of a generation, age . . . 'a period of time.'"²⁰

"GENERATION" AS "RACE"

Some futurists say "generation" means "race." They say that ethnic Jews will persevere through the age until the fulfillment of "all these things." "If that meaning is tenable, then Jesus says that the nation . . . would not lose its identity before the end of the world. A practical application would be that the very existence of this nation before our eyes, even though in the main it is dispersed all over the world, would remind us of the eschatological discourse of Jesus and of the coming of Judgment Day."²¹

Thus despite the Jews' rebellion against the Messiah, the devastating judgment and dispersion that befell them in A.D. 70, and the opposition and the anti-Semitism that has continued throughout world history, the Jewish people will survive "until all these things take place" (Matt. 24:34–35; cf. Jer. 31:35–36; 33:25–36).²²

"GENERATION" AS "THOSE ALIVE AT THE SAME TIME"

Preterists assert that "generation" means *the sum total of those born at about the same time*.²³ Preterists say that when the word "generation" is coupled with the demonstrative pronoun "this," it designates a time frame within which the events of the Olivet Discourse, including Jesus' second coming, must have occurred.²⁴ In their view a thirty-to-forty-year countdown to the "end" began when Jesus uttered His prediction in Matthew 24:34. For this reason preterists advocate an early date for the writing of the Book of Revelation (i.e., before A.D. 70), and they define Jesus' return as a "judgment coming" on the Jewish nation in the first century.²⁵

²⁰ Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 191–92 (italics theirs).

²¹ William F. Arndt, *The Gospel according to St. Luke* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1956), 426. Though Lutheran, Arndt provides a dispensational meaning of "this generation."

²² A textual note in the NIV of Matthew 24:34 suggests that "generation" may be translated "race."

²³ In the present Western culture an equivalent meaning would be "the Baby Boomer" generation or "Gen-X."

²⁴ "Jesus clearly says that 'all these things' will occur *before* 'this generation' passes away" (Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion* [Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1992], 162, italics his).

²⁵ The early dating of Revelation (i.e., during Nero's reign, A.D. 54–68) contradicts

Admittedly “this generation” does carry a sense of urgency for the city of Jerusalem. Students of Bible prophecy agree that A.D. 70 fulfilled Jesus’ prediction of Jerusalem’s desolation (Matt. 23:38; 24:2). But after that, agreement between preterists and futurists ends. While Jesus could have returned before His contemporaries died, history indicates He did not, unless the Second Coming is defined as something other than personal and physical (cf. Acts 1:11).

Ironically some futurists agree with preterists that “this generation” has a static meaning in estimating the time of the end.²⁶ But in doing so, they too deny the imminency of Jesus’ return.²⁷

“GENERATION” AS “AGE”

The third category of meaning for generation—that of “age” emerging into “a period of time”—allows for an expanding temporal meaning for the term (see Luke 16:8).

“GENERATION” AS A “TYPE OF REBELLIOUS PEOPLE”

Lövestam holds to a dynamic meaning for “this generation,” a meaning rooted “in the Old Testament/early Jewish world of ideas.”²⁸ He states that Jesus “used this term about those to whom

the traditional dating of the book as written in the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian (A.D. 81–96). Assuming the early date, Gentry writes that “it would seem certain that the theme of Revelation deals with Christ’s Judgment-Coming upon the generation of those Jews who crucified Him” (*Before Jerusalem Fell* [Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989], 131, italics his). However, it is difficult to see how the A.D. 70 generation of Jews would have welcomed a so-called “coming” that devastated them.

²⁶ Thomas Ice points out the inconsistency of futurists who attempt to date prophetic events. Such date setting is the method of historicism, not futurism (“Back to the Future: Keeping the Future in the Future,” in *When the Trumpet Sounds*, ed. Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy [Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1995], 19).

²⁷ Futurist Hal Lindsey identified Israel’s reconstitution as a nation in May 1948 as the fulfillment of Jesus’ fig-tree parable and the signal event from which to calculate the time of the end (i.e., within a “generation,” Matt. 24:34). But since six decades of time have elapsed since May 1948, Lindsey’s failed interpretation is obvious (Hal Lindsey with C. C. Carlson, *The Late Great Planet Earth* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970], 53–54).

Tim LaHaye also places himself in the same corner. Saying that a generation extends for one hundred years, he calculated that the Second Coming will occur between the years 2031 and 2050 (Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Are We Living in the End Times?* [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1999], 60).

²⁸ Evald Lövestam, *Jesus and “This Generation”* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1995), 8. Lövestam finds perspective for the meaning of γενεά from the Hebrew word for generation, דור. Robert L. Thomas notes that “generation” refers to “a kind of people Jesus encountered at his first advent and also to the same kind of people who rebelled against God’s leadership throughout the Old Testament” (“The Place of Imminence in Recent Eschatological Systems,” in *Looking into the Future*, ed. David W. Baker [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001], 204). Another noted, “The use of

he addressed his message and in the midst of whom he did his mighty works, but who repulsed and rejected him."²⁹ Likewise Thomas notes that "this generation" is "a qualitative expression without chronological or temporal connotations."³⁰ When combined with censorious adjectives, "generation" is pejorative.³¹

Lövestam notes that "this *genea*" is not "a special, isolated expression of time, the extent of which can be fixed in terms of years and decades."³² Such understanding is evident where Jesus linked that "generation" to the slaughter of all the "righteous" from Abel to Zechariah (Matt. 23:35–36). Jesus accused His contemporaries: "So you testify against yourselves, that you are sons of *those* [τῶν] who murdered the prophets" (v. 31, italics added). The Lord told them that even though they were removed by centuries of time from those murderers, they were guilty of those crimes ("whom *you* murdered," v. 35). About the unity of guilt incurred by those who murdered the prophets, Morris notes that the designation "implies the solidarity of the race through the years."³³ Likewise Johnson concludes, "The predominant use for 'this generation' (γενεά) in Luke [and presumably in Matthew] is evil and resistant to the prophet. . . . The statement . . . is less directly temporal than it might at first appear."³⁴ Rieske concludes that "this generation" is best understood as referring to "*an evil spiritual family*" who "*throughout time . . . killed God's messengers.*"³⁵ In contrast to the chronological assertion by preterists that "generation" designates Jesus' Jewish contemporaries, lexically and contextually "generation" can possess an expanded range of meanings.

'generation' by Jesus expresses his comprehensive purpose: he aims at the whole people and is conscious of their solidarity in sin" (F. Büchsel, et al., "*geneá* [descent]," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, abridged ed., 114).

²⁹ Lövestam, *Jesus and "This Generation,"* 102.

³⁰ Thomas, "The Place of Imminence in Recent Eschatological Systems," 204.

³¹ Regarding its frequent occurrence in the Gospels Henry Alford notes that *γενεά* has a "pregnant meaning, implying that the character of one generation *stamps itself upon the race*" (*The Greek Testament*, rev. Everett F. Harrison [Chicago: Moody, 1968], 1:244, italics his).

³² Lövestam, *Jesus and "This Generation,"* 85.

³³ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 612.

³⁴ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1991), 328.

³⁵ Susan M. Rieske, "What Is the Meaning of 'This Generation' in Matthew 23:36?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 165 (April–June 2008): 225 (italics hers).

WHAT DOES “THIS GENERATION” MEAN?

Though reputable scholars understand “this generation” as referring to “people alive at the same time,” the dictionary meaning of “generation,” even in combination with the demonstrative “this,” does not demand it. In fact various meanings of the word may interface, giving “generation” a multifaceted and dynamic meaning.

It may be better to understand “this generation” as a pejorative designation employed by Jesus to point to the continued Jewish resistance against Him as God’s Messiah, a concerted rebellion that commenced during the Old Testament era, continued during the Lord’s earthly ministry, and will be consummated when the end arrives (cf. Dan. 9:24). For the duration of the interadvent age Israel will continue to be “a disobedient and obstinate people” (Rom. 10:21). The nation will persist in rebellion against Messiah Jesus “until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in” (11:25). Thus “this generation” refers not to a *particular time* in which people live, but rather to a *perennial type* of rebellious and ungodly people. This understanding finds support from the historical context from which Jesus drew the term (see Matt. 23:34–36).

THE GRAMMATICAL DATA

Russell wrote that if Jesus intended to give a “prophetic glance into the ages of a distant futurity . . . we should expect to find some hint or intimation of the fact; some well-defined line between the immediate future and the indefinitely remote.”³⁶ However, though ignored by preterists, evidence exists in Matthew 24:34 and its context that places the fulfillment of “all these things” in the indefinite future.

THE VERBS

The verbs in Matthew 24:34—“pass away” and “take place”—show the time frame Jesus intended. But preterists overlook these verbs and focus only on the noun “generation” (γενεά) with its demonstrative pronoun “this” (αὕτη). Verbs communicate time, and the tense (aorist) and mood (subjunctive) of the verbs do not indicate a definite time period within which “all things” must have taken place.

THE TENSE OF THE VERBS

Mounce notes that the aorist tense of “take place” (γένηται) may be an ingressive aorist. If so, the meaning would be that “before the

³⁶ Russell, *The Parousia*, 60.

generation alive at that time had died, all the things described in connection with the end *will have started to take place*.³⁷ If this is so, then the ingressive sense complements a futurist understanding of the Olivet Discourse. Beginning with Jesus' resurrection and ascension, this present age—characterized by a "beginning" of birth pangs (Matt. 24:4–13)—continues to be pregnant with the prospect of Christ's return.

Regarding the certainty of His prophecy's fulfillment Jesus explained, "Heaven and earth will pass away [future tense, indicative mood], but My words will not pass away [aorist tense, subjunctive mood]" (v. 35). Two things may be noted in this statement. First, Jesus envisioned a definite time when the created order *will* end.³⁸ Second, He said His prophecy will coexist with and beyond the created order. By linking the fulfillment of "all these things" to the continuing order of creation, Marshall observes that the parallelism stresses "the certainty of the End rather than . . . limiting the date of the end."³⁹ This explanation by Jesus helps clarify the sense of the tense in verse 34.

If Matthew had understood Jesus to have specified a definite time (A.D. 70) for the fulfillment of "all these things" (v. 34), he might have employed the future rather than the aorist tense. But he did not. As recorded by Matthew, Jesus' assertion reads as a promise in the midst of His prophecy.⁴⁰ Jesus *predicted* (future tense) a definite consummation of the created order (v. 35), but He *promised* (aorist tense)⁴¹ an indefinite continuance of "this generation" until the fulfillment of "all these things" (v. 34). If Jesus had intended His words to be applicable only to the generation alive at that time, Matthew would have recorded the assertion—"this gen-

³⁷ Robert H. Mounce, *Matthew* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 228 (italics his).

³⁸ Daniel B. Wallace states that the indicative mood "is the mood of assertion, or presentation of certainty" (*Greek Grammar beyond the Basics* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996], 448 [italics his]). In Matthew 23:36 the future indicative is employed. Jesus said, "Truly I say to you, all these things shall come [ἴξεῖ, i.e., 'be present'] upon this generation" (cf. 24:14). This is not the same verb, tense, or mood as in Matthew 24:34.

³⁹ I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 780.

⁴⁰ The construction consists of an emphatic double negative (οὐ μὴ) plus the aorist subjunctive. Of this combination Wallace notes that "while οὐ + the indicative denies a *certainty*, οὐ μὴ + the subjunctive denies a *potentiality*" (*Greek Grammar beyond the Basics*, 468, italics his).

⁴¹ Buist Fanning states that the aorist tense "presents an occurrence in summary, viewed as a whole from the outside, without regard for the internal make-up of the occurrence" (*Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1990], 97, italics his).

eration will not pass away”—in the future tense and indicative mood.

THE MOOD OF THE VERBS

The subjunctive mood of the verbs “pass away” (παρέλθῃ) and “take place” (γένηται) indicates that the time in which Jesus’ predictions will be fulfilled is uncertain. As Mounce states, “A verb in the subjunctive has *no time significance*.”⁴² And Wallace notes, “In general, the subjunctive can be said to *represent the verbal action (or state) as uncertain but probable*.”⁴³

In Matthew 24:34–35 three verbs are in the subjunctive mood, and one is in the indicative mood. First, Jesus predicted, “This generation will not pass away” (παρέλθῃ, subjunctive mood, v. 34a). Next He promised, “Until all these things take place” (γένηται, subjunctive mood, v. 34b). Then He predicted, “Heaven and earth will pass away” (παρελεύσεται, indicative mood, v. 35a). Then He said, “But My words will not *pass away*” (παρέλθωσιν, subjunctive mood, v. 35b).⁴⁴

The subjunctive mood indicates that Matthew considered the fulfillment of Jesus’ three promises to be “open-ended.” If Matthew had understood that Jesus meant that “all these things” were to be fulfilled within a period of time, he might have employed the indicative mood, thereby making the time frame definite. But he did not.⁴⁵

⁴² William D. Mounce, *Basics of Biblical Greek* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 281, italics his. The subjunctive “indicates what *may* take place” (James A. Brooks and Carlton L. Winbery, *Syntax of New Testament Greek* [Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1979], 107, italics added).

⁴³ Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics*, 461 (italics his). He also notes that “the subjunctive is frequently used after a *temporal adverb* (or *improper preposition*) meaning *until*” (ibid., 479, italics his). See also Fanning, *Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek*, 400–401.

⁴⁴ In parallel passages the verb παρέρχομαι occurs in the future indicative (Mark 13:31; Luke 21:33).

⁴⁵ In announcing in Matthew 23:26 the judgment that was to befall Jerusalem, the verb is in the future tense and the indicative mood: “Truly I say to you, all these things will come [ἴσχει] upon this generation.” This places the time of Jerusalem’s coming judgment as *future-definite*. This contrasts with the use of the aorist tense and subjunctive mood in 24:34 (παρέλθῃ), which marks the fulfillment as *future-indefinite*. This verbal contrast suggests that Jesus did not view the coming destruction of Jerusalem (23:36) as concomitant with the fulfillment of “all these things” (24:34). The former was to be “*coming-definite*,” and the latter was to be “*coming-indefinite*.” With the exception of a single instance in the Synoptic Gospels (Luke 11:50), the future tense and the indicative mood are employed to indicate coming judgment on the Jews who were contemporary with Jesus. If the Synoptic writers had intended that Jesus’ contemporaries would witness the end times, they might

Also the verb *παρέρχομαι* ("pass away") occurs three times in verses 34 and 35 and links what Jesus stated in verse 34 to what He stated in verse 35. Alford observed, "The continued use of *παρέρχομαι* in vv. 34, 35, should have saved the Commentators from the blunder of imagining that the then living generation was meant, seeing that the prophecy is by the next verse carried on to the end of all things."⁴⁶

Jesus stated in verse 36 that He did not know the day or hour of His return; this was known only by the Father. How then can one say that Jesus' assertion—that He was coming within a generation—was definite when in the immediate context He denied knowledge of the time?⁴⁷ Preterism places Jesus in the awkward position of contradicting Himself, for in one breath He allegedly claimed to know the time of His coming (i.e., within a generation) while in the next He denied knowledge of His return. The indefinite mood also complements the point that "this generation" refers to a perennial people—"to the wicked people of *all* time, those before the Messiah and those after."⁴⁸

Jesus' confessed ignorance of the day and hour of His coming (v. 36) and the subjunctive mood mark the timing of the fulfillment as open-ended.

THE PREPOSITION "UNTIL"

The word "until" (*ἕως ἄν*) is another piece of evidence that marks the fulfillment of "all these things" as indefinite.⁴⁹ The particle *ἄν* implies "vagueness and uncertainty," especially when "used with the subjunctive and optative moods, which affirm things with vary-

have written the verbs "pass away" and "take place" in the future tense and indicative mood. But they did not. The Gospel writers employed the aorist tense and subjunctive mood (*παρέλθῃ . . . γένηται*) when projecting the coming end times (Matt. 24:34).

⁴⁶ Alford, *The Greek Testament*, 1:245.

⁴⁷ Preterists argue that in verse 36 Jesus denied knowing the "day and hour" of His return, but that He knew He would return in that "generation." Robert L. Thomas argues that any ignorance of the lesser assumes ignorance of the greater. "The day or the hour includes references to the week, month, year, and period of years that include the day and hour" ("A Classical Dispensationalist View of Revelation," in *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, ed. C. Marvin Pate [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998], 228).

⁴⁸ Rieske, "What Is the Meaning of 'This Generation' in Matthew 23:36?" 226 (italics hers).

⁴⁹ This combination of preposition and particle (*ἕως ἄν*) occurs twenty times in the Greek New Testament (Matt. 2:13; 5:18 [twice], 26; 10:11, 23; 12:20; 16:28; 22:44; 23:39; 24:34; Mark 6:10; 9:1; 12:36; Luke 9:27; 20:43; 21:32; Acts 2:35; 1 Cor. 4:5; Heb. 1:3). In every instance the words indicate a temporal hiatus.

ing degrees of uncertainty.”⁵⁰ In the seventeen occurrences of ἕως ἄν in the Gospels, the time period can be either short or long. It can refer to a period *as brief* as a stay in a person’s home (e.g., Mark 6:10) or *as long* as an age (e.g., Luke 20:43). In every instance ἕως ἄν shows that the length of time is vague.

Concluding the pronouncement of “woes” on the Jewish leaders and the prediction of Jerusalem’s coming desolation, Jesus told the city not to expect to see Him again “until [ἕως ἄν] you say [εἴπητε, subjunctive mood], ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!’ ” (Matt. 23:39). The preposition and the verb’s subjunctive mood suggest that between Jerusalem’s desolation (v. 38) and the city’s change of heart toward Jesus (v. 39) an undetermined period of time will elapse.⁵¹ This grammatical feature indicates that the desolation of Jerusalem and the blessing of that city on the Messiah were disparate events separated by an indefinite period. Evidently the welcome Jesus envisioned was to be postponed, and Matthew’s use of “until” allows for it. As Edersheim observed, “Between the desolation of the House [*sic*] and their welcome to Him, would intervene a period of indefinite length, during which they would not see Him again.”⁵²

With the hiatus between the desolation of Jerusalem and that city’s welcoming of the Son of Man, an undetermined period would separate His Jewish contemporaries from the fulfillment of “all things.” The preposition “until” in 23:39 shows that the period between “this generation” and the fulfillment of “all these things” (v. 36) is open and indefinite. When combined with the verb’s subjunc-

⁵⁰ H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1955), pars. 228, 259–60. Preterists say the time period is closed. However, the particle ἄν marks it as open (i.e., “whenever”).

Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich state, “In temporal clauses ἄν is found w[ith] the subjunct[ive] when an event is to be described which can and will occur, but whose occurrence cannot yet be assumed w[ith] certainty” (*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 57). Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida note that ἄν is a marker “of the possibility of any number of occurrences of some event—‘ever’ (wherever, whatever, whoever, however)” (*Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* [New York: United Bible Societies, 1989], 1:669). According to preterism the period for the fulfillment of all things is past. But the particle ἄν (“whenever”) makes it yet future.

⁵¹ When used with the aorist tense and subjunctive mood, ἕως denotes “that the commencement of an event is dependant on circumstances” (Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 222–23). What is the circumstance surrounding Jerusalem’s sighting of Jesus again? Obviously the Son of Man’s coming again and the city’s blessing of Him. This prophecy of Jesus remains unfulfilled.

⁵² Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah: New Updated Edition* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 773.

tive mood, the subordinate clause might be translated, "until whenever these things come to be."⁵³ This understanding harmonizes with the doctrine of futurism (24:36, 42–44; 25:13, 19).

According to preterism the fulfillment of most if not *all* "these things" is definite and closed. But the grammatical factors—the preposition ἕως ἄν (23:39; 24:34), the aorist tense, the subjunctive mood of the verbs παρέλθη and γένηται—and Jesus' follow-up statement that He did not know the "day or the hour" (24:36) show that the time frame is indefinite, open, and the events unfulfilled. Neither the verbs nor the preposition substantiate the preterist dogma that "this generation" means a period of time of thirty or forty years.

THE PRONOUNS

Preterists claim that the frequent occurrence of the pronoun "you" in the Olivet Discourse supports the meaning they assign to "this generation."⁵⁴ Yet the second-person pronoun is not the only designation Jesus employed in His prophecy. For example He mentioned "those" (οἱ, Matt. 24:16; ταῖς, v. 19), "many" (24:5 [twice], 10, 11 [twice]), "his" (vv. 17–18), and "one another" (24:10 [twice]).⁵⁵ By His use of varying pronouns and designations, Jesus distinguished the disciples He immediately addressed from others on whom the predicted events would eventually fall. One example in His sermon is telling.

In Matthew 24:30 Jesus said, "And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then *all the tribes of the earth will*

⁵³ Mark varies from Matthew and Luke by using μέχρις ου instead of ἕως ἄν. I. Howard Marshall comments, "The thrust of the saying may be either that the End is sure to come before the passing away of this generation (i.e. the date is limited) or that the End is sure to come as this generation will continue to exist, or that this generation can be sure that the last events have begun and will be brought to a consummation. The last of these three possibilities gives the best sense" (*The Gospel of Luke* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978], 780). When combined with verbs in the subjunctive mood, the indefiniteness communicated by the particle ἄν eliminates the preterist option Marshall mentions first.

⁵⁴ For example Hanegraaff writes, "Little wonder then that all who read Christ's Olivet Discourse—whether skeptic or seeker—immediately presume that when Jesus uses the pronoun *you*, he is directly and obviously addressing a first century audience. When someone attempts to convince them otherwise, their baloney detectors should immediately register full" (Hanegraaff, *The Apocalypse Code*, 86). See also Dave Hunt v. Gary DeMar, "Debate: Are We Living in the Last Days?" CD050 (compact disc) (Bend, OR: *The Berean Call*, 2002). The pronoun "you" occurs eighteen times in Matthew 24:4–44.

⁵⁵ Other designations occur numerous times in Matthew 24. They include "those," "they," and "the elect."

mourn, and *they* will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory” (italics added). Why did Jesus say “they [not ‘you’] will see the Son of Man coming”? Because He distanced His disciples from those who would witness the eschatological end. The timing of His return will be as unknown to them as it was to Him.

Preterist Gentry acknowledges a gap between the tribulation and the Second Advent when he distinguishes between “*this* generation” (v. 34) and “*that* day” (v. 36). He reasons, “The coming tribulation . . . was to come upon ‘this generation’ and was to be foreshadowed by certain signs. . . . But the Second Advent was to be at ‘that’ far day and hour.”⁵⁶ Based on a contrast between “this” and “that” Gentry separates the time between the tribulation and the Second Coming.⁵⁷ Futurists, it seems, are not the only ones who teach postponement! The contention is not over whether events are delayed, but over which events are delayed. Preterists like Gentry espouse a “two comings” theory—one in A.D. 70 and the other at the end of this age.

Yet the prophetic scenario Gentry devises—that the tribulation and the personal and physical Second Advent are now separated by two thousand years—contradicts Jesus’ statement that His return will *follow* the tribulation without delay: “Immediately [Εὐθέως] after the tribulation of those days . . . they will see the Son of Man coming” (vv. 29–30).⁵⁸

The Lord’s change of pronouns from “you” to “those” in verses 15–16 implies a relevance of His words and warnings to people beyond the generation He immediately addressed.⁵⁹ As with the aorist tense and the subjunctive mood of the verbs, and the prepo-

⁵⁶ Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion*, 162–63.

⁵⁷ To protect the accuracy of the Lord’s prediction that He would come within a generation Gentry argues that Matthew 24:30 describes “not a physical, visible coming, but a judgment-coming upon Jerusalem” (*The Great Tribulation*, 60). Yet he also holds “to a future, glorious, public, physical return of Christ that will conclude temporal history” (ibid., 198). In common with dispensationalists Gentry espouses a “two-comings-of-Jesus” eschatology, something many Reformed theologians oppose.

⁵⁸ The adverb εὐθέως means “at once, immediately Mt 4:20, 22; 8:3; 13:5; 14:31” (Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 320, italics theirs).

⁵⁹ Preterists accuse futurists of rendering Jesus’ words irrelevant to the generation He addressed. They claim that only their interpretation makes the sermon relevant to Jesus’ generation. But this criticism cuts both ways. If “all these things” were fulfilled in that generation, then what is the relevance of the entire sermon to believers today?

sition "until," these differing pronouns show that the time for the fulfillment of Jesus' predictions is yet future.

A RHETORICAL DEVICE

Shank contends that Jesus addressed the apostles "not merely as individuals, but as representatives of the entire body of the faithful from that time until the end of the age and the return of Jesus."⁶⁰ Shank finds precedent for the manner in which Jesus spoke to His generation in the way in which Moses addressed his generation (Deut. 4:25–31). Before the Conquest Moses predicted Israel's future dispersion and restoration. Though the predicted events would not happen to the nation until centuries later, Moses, a true prophet, spoke to his generation ("you") as if the dispersion would happen to them.

Just as Moses addressed his generation in continuity with future generations, so Jesus addressed His murderers in solidarity with past generations. In answer to their claim that they would not have killed God's prophets if they had lived in past generations, Jesus accused the Pharisees of murdering Zechariah ("whom you murdered," Matt. 23:35). Obviously, then, the pronoun "you" and its variations can assume a transgenerational meaning.

Jesus' interweaving of various designations—"you," "many," "one another," "most people's," "the one," "whoever," "those," and "those days"—suggests that the fulfillment of the predicted events was indefinite.

THE CONTEXTUAL DATA

"THIS GENERATION" AND THE CREATED ORDER

Jesus linked the duration of His predictions (i.e., "all these things," Matt. 24:34) to the created order (v. 35). In contrast to "heaven and earth," which will "pass away," Jesus' prophetic words "shall not pass away." This fact links the duration of Jesus' prophecies to an age, not decades.

If Jesus had meant to say that His predictions were on a fast track to be fulfilled within thirty or forty years, why did He certify that His predictions would run contemporaneously with the created order of heaven and earth? Jesus intended His promises in the Olivet Discourse to be coextensive with the created order "until"

⁶⁰ Robert Shank, *Until the Coming of Messiah and His Kingdom* (Springfield, MO: Westcott, 1982), 367–68.

(*whenever*, εὐθέως) the end comes.⁶¹ When that time comes, the created order will become chaotic (v. 29). The fact that Jesus employed the analogy of the created order to certify His predictions indicates that He viewed the possibility for the fulfillment of “all these things” to be beyond any immediate temporal constraints.

PARABLES FOR THE AGE

In His parables Jesus implied there was to be a time gap before the coming eschatological judgment. In the parable of the evil slave, the servant thought, “My master is not coming for a long time” (24:48). Jesus enjoined the ten virgins to watch and prepare “while the bridegroom was delaying” (25:5). In the parable of the talents Jesus encouraged faithful working, because “after a long time” His servants would be called into account (v. 19). The emphasis on delay in these parables is consistent with the indefiniteness Jesus communicated about the time of His return. To restrict the application of these parables to a few decades in the first century does injustice to the parables.

THE THEOLOGICAL DATA

Though moderate preterism allows for a *future* physical presence of Christ on the earth, radical preterism does not.⁶² Radical preterists do not anticipate a future advent of Jesus because they hold that Jesus returned spiritually in the first century. And what was *imminent and immediate* to Jesus’ generation then cannot be *imminent and impending* to generations today. However, the prospect of the Lord’s imminent return should ever remain a stimulus to holy living and service until He comes (1 John 3:2–3).⁶³ Many New Testament passages anticipate the personal and physical coming of Jesus Christ.⁶⁴ In other words just as Jesus was historically and corporeally present on earth in the past, He is physically present in

⁶¹ Noë, a preterist, proposes that believers are already in the new creation (2 Pet. 3:10–13). He states, “The world is never, I repeat never-ever, going to end. We live in a never-ending world” (*Beyond the End Times*, 45, 63). But he makes this assertion in spite of Isaiah’s statement that “the earth will wear out like a garment” (Isa. 51:6). If people are already living in the new heavens and the new earth, Jesus’ prophetic words in Matthew 24:35 are now obsolete.

⁶² Noë, *Beyond the End Times*, 125–29.

⁶³ Imminency means that the Lord’s coming is impending, that is, it is likely to occur at any moment.

⁶⁴ Passages highlighting Jesus’ return include 1 Corinthians 1:7; 4:5; 15:51–52; 16:22; Philippians 3:20; 4:5; 1 Thessalonians 1:10; 2 Thessalonians 3:10–12; Titus 2:13; James 5:7–9; 1 John 2:28; and Revelation 3:11; 22:7, 12, 17, 20.

heaven now, and one day He will be present on earth again (Acts 1:11). If the Second Coming means anything at all, it means that.

THE HISTORICAL DATA

The Lord's predictions extend beyond the world of the first century. References to catastrophic global and cosmic events dominate the Olivet Discourse, and from the moment Jesus gave this discourse some of the predictions needed time to develop. As Carson observed, "Jesus' warnings presuppose that a substantial period of time will elapse before the end comes. It takes *time* for nation to rise against nation, and it takes *time* for the gospel to be preached in the whole world."⁶⁵ These events require more time than a few decades.

Jesus explained that His coming would be sudden, like that of a thief (24:42–44). In another context Jesus affirmed that He is "coming as a thief" (Rev. 16:15). To avoid detection when they commit thievery, robbers do not give advance notice of when they will arrive. They enter and then escape as quickly from the scene of the crime as they can. In light of the fact that thieves do not "advertise" their coming, France remarks, "It is astonishing that some Christians can still attempt to work out the date of the parousia!"⁶⁶

If Jesus returned in the first century, His thievery metaphor presents a problem for preterism. The solar system remains intact; history is ongoing; the world is still looking for evidence that Jesus has returned (Matt. 24:29–31; 2 Pet. 3:3–4); the judgment of the end has not come (Matt. 25:31–46); and God has not yet become "all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28).

If Jesus returned in the first century, history has no record or evidence of the event. The preterist view that Jesus returned in judgment in A.D. 70 contradicts the Lord's testimony that on His return "all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory" (Matt. 24:30; cf. Rev. 1:7).

CONCLUSION

The atheist Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) stumbled over Jesus' "this generation" prediction. Russell viewed Jesus as a failed

⁶⁵ D. A. Carson, *God with Us* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1985), 141 (italics his).

⁶⁶ France, *Matthew*, 349. France's criticism is applicable to preterists as well as some futurists.

prophet because He did not return during the life span of His Jewish contemporaries.⁶⁷

Attempting to vindicate Jesus' words in the face of skepticism like that of Russell's, preterism offers the view that everything or almost everything predicted by Jesus was fulfilled when Jerusalem was desolated.⁶⁸ But as seen, the lexical, grammatical, and contextual factors do not indicate that "this generation" specifies a fulfillment in A.D. 70.

J. C. Ryle (1816–1900) stated that he found the subject of the Second Coming to be "an entirely different subject" from that of Jerusalem's destruction.⁶⁹ And so it is.

Jesus set no timetable for His return. He plainly stated that "of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone" (Matt. 24:36). "You do not know which day your Lord is coming" (v. 42). "Be on the alert then, for you do not know the day nor the hour" (25:13). When Jesus' disciples later pressed Him about when He would restore the kingdom to Israel, He said, "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority" (Acts 1:7).

Although some preterists (and also some futurists), claim to know the time of Jesus' return, this is knowledge that even the Lord denied He possessed. As to the establishment of His earthly kingdom Jesus left the timing of it indefinite and unknown. Preterism's error is that it closes what Jesus and the Synoptic writers left open. Consistent futurism does not need to configure a time for Jesus' return. As the New Testament often affirms, Jesus may come anytime (e.g., Matt. 16:27; 24:44, 47; Luke 12:40; John 14:3; Acts 1:11; Phil. 3:20; 1 Thess. 4:16; 5:2; Titus 2:13; 2 Pet. 3:10; Rev. 1:7; 16:15).

⁶⁷ Bertrand Russell wrote that some of Jesus' statements "do not seem to be very wise. For one thing, He certainly thought that His Second Coming would occur in clouds of glory before the death of all the people who were living at that time" (*Why I Am Not a Christian* [New York: Simon & Schuster, 1957], 16).

⁶⁸ Sproul, *The Last Days according to Jesus*, 12–13; and Hanegraaff, *Apocalypse Code*, 75–76.

⁶⁹ J. C. Ryle, *The True Christian* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 203.