

“THIS GENERATION” IN THE TRILOGY OF MATTHEW 24:34–35

Kenneth E. Guenter

ABSTRACT

Rather than three puzzling promises, the disciples heard in Jesus's predictions a coherent trilogy, consoling them that, despite the tragedies awaiting Jerusalem, the Jews would survive as Yahweh's people. A chorus of echoes earlier in Jesus's discourse prompted his disciples to understand from Moses and the Prophets that "this generation" was their nation, "heaven and earth" were the witnesses to their covenant with Yahweh, and though these witnesses will pass away, Jesus's promise "will never pass away." Echoing Moses and the Prophets, Jesus reaffirmed Yahweh's pledge to his people throughout their generations.

AS HIS DISCIPLES ADMIRING HEROD'S TEMPLE, Jesus described its destruction and how "after the distress of those days . . . All the peoples of the earth will mourn when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory" (Matt 24:29–30).¹ To his predictions Jesus added three promises that continue to puzzle scholars: "This generation will certainly not pass away. . . . Heaven and earth will pass away. . . . My words will never pass away" (vv. 34–35). Were the disciples also puzzled by this trilogy? Earlier in this discourse Jesus echoed a chorus of texts from Moses and the Prophets.² This article exam-

Kenneth E. Guenter is Associate Professor of Old Testament and Ancient Near Eastern History at Briercrest College and Seminary, Caronport, Saskatchewan, Canada.

¹ Quotations of Scripture are from the New International Version unless otherwise noted.

² The term "desolation," borrowed from Daniel, describes the devastation that will come before the Messiah appears (Matt 24:15–30; Dan 12:11). "The coming of the Son of Man" (Matt 24:27) echoes Daniel 7:13. The abomination that causes desolation, "spoken of through the prophet Daniel" (Matt 24:14; Dan 12:11), provides the clearest link to Daniel 12. References to the sun being darkened, the moon not giving light, the stars falling, and heavenly bodies being shaken (Matt 24:29) echo the

ines the echoes in Matthew 24:30–35 and suggests how they could have informed the disciples' appreciation of Jesus's three promises.

Despite widespread interest in the use of the Old Testament when it is cited by New Testament authors, echoes and allusions are less often noticed and studied. This is especially true in Matthew 24:34–35.³ Scholars have not routinely turned to Israel's Scriptures to understand Jesus's trilogy in Matthew⁴ or in the parallel accounts of Mark⁵ or Luke.⁶ Even scholars who view "this

Prophets as well (Isa 13:10; 14:12; 24:21; 34:4; Ezek 32:7; Joel 2:3, 1; Hag 2:7, 21).

³ For example, Craig Blomberg, "Matthew," and Rikk E. Watts, "Mark," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), do not discuss this trilogy. David W. Pao and Eckhard J. Schnabel, "Luke," 379, do comment on the fig tree and the heavens and the earth passing away but not on "this generation."

⁴ In identifying "this generation" (24:34), none of the following refers to any text from Israel's Scriptures: William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1957), 346–49. John F. Walvoord, "Christ's Olivet Discourse on the End of the Age," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 128 (1971): 109–16. David Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew* (London: Marshall Morgan & Scott, 1972), 323. Francis W. Beare, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 1981), 472–73. Joseph Kidder, "This Generation" in Matthew 24:34," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 21 (1983): 203–9. D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, Expositor's Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 507. Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 342. Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 363–64. Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1995), 715. Larry Chouinard, *The College Press NIV Commentary* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1997), 431. Paul J. Ray Jr., "Exegesis of Matthew 24:21–35: 'This Generation' and the Structure of Matthew 23–25," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 8 (1997): 206–17. Fredrick Dale Bruner, *Matthew 13–28* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 876–77. John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 988–89. Stanley D. Toussaint, "A Critique of the Preterist View of the Olivet Discourse," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 161 (2004): 486–90. Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 786–87. R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 929–30. Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, Hermeneia, trans. James E. Crouch, ed. Helmut Koester (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 208–10. David L. Turner, *Matthew*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 586. Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 897–900. Craig A. Evans, *Matthew*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 412.

⁵ William L. Lane, *The Gospel according to Mark*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 480. C. S. Man, *Mark* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1986). David E. Garland, *Mark* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 502–3. Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20* (Nashville: Nelson, 2001), 334–35. James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 405–6. R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 538–40. Adela Y. Collins, *Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 615–17. Ronald J. Kernaghan, *Mark* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007), 271. Robert H. Stein, *Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 619–20. Joel Marcus, *Mark*, vol. 2 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 917–18.

generation” as Israel appeal most often to definitions of “generation” in Greek or English, rather than to echoes from the disciples’ Bible.⁷ Only a few exegetes look to the Old Testament.⁸ Their evidence is too scattered to support a consensus, and so recent scholarship has found Jesus’s trilogy unnecessarily difficult.

However, from Gabriel’s announcement to Zechariah, to the road to Emmaus, and on to John’s Revelation, New Testament texts routinely return to the disciples’ Bible. This article illustrates how echoes from the Bible that Jesus and the disciples loved offer a fresh perspective from which to appreciate what the disciples heard in Jesus’s trilogy.⁹ It proposes that the disciples heard Jesus’s

⁶ E. Earle Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1966), 246–47. I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 779–80. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke*, vol. 2 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981–85), 1353–54. Norval Geldenhuys, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 538. David L. Tiede, *Luke* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988), 369. John Nolland, *Luke*, vol. 3 (Dallas: Word, 1990–93), 1009–10. Robert H. Stein, *Luke* (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 528. Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 538–39. Arthur A. Just Jr. *Luke 9:51–24:53* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1997), 804–6. Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 742–43. John T. Carroll, *Luke: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 421.

⁷ A. C. Gaebelien, *The Gospel of Matthew* (New York: Gospel Publishing House, 1903–07), 214–15, appeals to meanings that “generation” has had in English, referring to persons living at the same time and to “family or a race or a certain class of people.” See also Kenneth S. Wuest, *Mark in the Greek New Testament*, Word Studies 10 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 252. Ed Glasscock, *Matthew* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1997), 475, also understands “this generation” as “the race sprung from Abraham, God’s chosen earthly people,” based on semantic flexibilities.

⁸ Lyman Abbot, *An Illustrated Commentary on the Gospel according to Matthew* (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1875), 264, connects “this evil nation/generation” with the survivors from Judah about to go into exile in Jeremiah 8:3. Lawrence A. DeBruyn writes that “it may be better to understand ‘this generation’ as a pejorative designation of the Jewish resistance against Jesus as Messiah, a concerted rebellion that will be consummated when the end arrives; a ‘disobedient and obstinate people’ (Dan 9:24)” (“Preterism and ‘This Generation’” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 167 [2010]: 190–98). Rather than regarding heaven and earth as witnesses to Yahweh’s covenant with Israel, he sees their transience as analogous to that of Israel. Neil D. Nelson Jr., “‘This Generation’ in Matt 24:34: A Literary Critical Perspective,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 38 (1996): 369–85, sees a deliberate connection with the two most notorious generations in the Old Testament: the generation of the flood and the generation of the wilderness wanderings. Though he correctly notes how adjectives like “evil,” “perverse,” “adulterous,” and “faithless” (Matt 11:39, 45; 16:4; 17:17) come from the Song of Moses (Deut 32:5, 20), Nelson fails to consider their context, a speech given after the wilderness generation had been replaced by a new believing generation that would follow Joshua into the land. Instead, Nelson appeals to Genesis 7:1 and Psalm 12:8 to understand “this generation” as wicked Jews and Gentiles who oppose the godly; it is “those who reject Jesus and his messengers and the salvific message they preach” (374–75).

⁹ Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale

promises in Matthew 24:34–35 as a coherent unit using terms understood from Moses and the Prophets.

ALLUSIONS AND ECHOES IN THE
IMMEDIATE CONTEXT (MATT 24:30–33)

Immediately before promising that "this generation will certainly not pass," Jesus alluded to predictions from Moses and the Prophets that suggested Israel would survive. The first of these was Daniel's reference to the Son of Man's appearance (Matt 24:30–31). In this event Daniel predicted an oppressive king would arise, and the holy people would be delivered into his hands, but when his power was taken away, all the kingdoms under heaven would be handed over to the holy people of the Most High, whose kingdom will last forever (Dan 7:13–27).

This picture of ultimate triumph was followed by a reference to mourning, described by Zechariah, at the coming of the Son of Man (Zech 12:10–14; Matt 24:30). The translation "all the peoples of the earth" who will mourn has been improved as "all tribes of the land," reflecting more closely Zechariah's "families" of the "land."¹⁰ Zechariah said of this event, "When all the nations of the earth are gathered against her . . . the LORD will shield those who live in Jerusalem, so that the feeblest among them will be like David, and the house of David will be like God" (Zech 12:3, 8). This assured the disciples that some Jews would survive Jerusalem's destruction and witness Messiah's return; Israel would not pass away.

Zechariah's prediction would also have drawn the disciples to understand Israel's mourning in the light of Yahweh's promise that, on that day, a fountain would be opened to cleanse the inhabitants of Jerusalem (Zech 13:1). Their regathering would be both geographical and spiritual. Moses had predicted that they would be gathered to the land of their fathers and that Yahweh would circumcise their hearts (Deut 30:4–6; cf. Ezek 20:43–44). Their restoration would begin "when their uncircumcised hearts are humbled" (Lev 26:41). Furthermore, Hosea promised that the Israelites would "come trembling to the Lord and to his blessings in the last days" (Hos 3:5). On the Mount of Olives, the disciples would have heard Jesus allude to Zechariah with Moses's assurance that, de-

University Press, 1989), has provided the criteria followed in this article for identifying and interpreting intertextual echoes.

¹⁰ See Matthew 23:30 in the English Standard Version and comments by France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 925, and Wilkins, *Matthew*, 784, who suggest the Greek more faithfully follows Zechariah than previously noticed.

spite the nation's unfaithfulness and hostility, Yahweh had promised, "I will not reject them or abhor them so as to destroy them completely, breaking my covenant with them. . . . I will remember the covenant with their ancestors whom I brought out of Egypt in the sight of the nations to be their God" (Lev 26:44–45). Therefore, rather than a mourning of despair, "too late to avert the consequences of having rejected him,"¹¹ the disciples had ample reason to anticipate a mourning of repentance and cleansing when Israel recognized the Messiah she had pierced.¹²

The loud trumpet call that would accompany the appearing of the Son of Man and the gathering of the elect fits within the roles assigned for trumpets in Numbers 10. Their signals summoned the whole community to assemble and to set out (vv. 2–7), and in the face of oppressors, their signal called on Yahweh to save Israel from their enemies (v. 9). These functions are echoed by Isaiah in his description of the day Yahweh would deliver his exiled people: "And in that day a great trumpet will sound. Those who were perishing in Assyria and those who were exiled in Egypt will come and worship the LORD on the holy mountain in Jerusalem" (Isa 27:13). Likewise, Zechariah 9:14 and 16 picture a day when "the Sovereign LORD will sound the trumpet. . . . The LORD their God will save his people on that day." Mention of these trumpets prepared the disciples to anticipate the return of Israel's exiles when the angels were sent to gather the elect (Matt 24:31).¹³

This promise of gathering the "elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other" is deeply rooted in Moses and the Prophets. Moses promised Israel, "From all the nations where he scattered you . . . the LORD your God will gather you and bring you back" (Deut 30:3–4). Like the prophets, who preferred rich and varied expressions to an exact quotation of the Torah, Jesus repeated key words and parallel phrases without quoting Moses.¹⁴ His prediction of the elect being gathered "from one end of the

¹¹ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 925.

¹² So Wilkins, *Matthew*, 783–84, and Gundry, *Matthew*, 491.

¹³ Echoes of Isaiah 27:13 or Zechariah 9:14 are noted by Blomberg, *Matthew*, 361–64; Davies, *Matthew*, 363–64; Evans, *Matthew*, 411; France, *Matthew*, 927–29; Hagner, *Matthew*, 714–15; Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 202; and Osborne, *Matthew*, 895.

¹⁴ Sometimes the locations of "the most distant lands" are specified by the prophets as "from Assyria, from Lower Egypt, from Upper Egypt, from Cush, from Elam, from Babylonia, from Hamath and from the islands of the sea" (Isa 11:11; see also Hos 11:11 and Mic 7:12). Sometimes the prophets simply indicate the directions from which Israel will be gathered: "from the countries of the east and the west" (Zech 8:7; see also Isa 49:10–12; 60:4; Hos 11:10; Jer 3:18; 16:15; 23:8; Ezek 37:21).

heavens to the other" parallels being regathered from "the four winds of heaven" (Zech 2:6) and "from afar . . . from the ends of the earth" (Isa 43:6).¹⁵ The Prophets repeated this covenant promise more than thirty times.¹⁶ To this day, a daily prayer in traditional Judaism remains: "Raise a banner to gather our dispersed, and gather us from the ends of the earth."¹⁷

Just as Israel had been scattered geographically, the disciples would have expected them to be so gathered.¹⁸ Rather than a reference to the day when Gentiles would "come from the East and the West and recline at table with Abraham" (Matt 8:11),¹⁹ Moses's prediction of *gathering*, and all of its echoes in the Prophets, prepared the disciples to hear in Jesus's words a prediction of the Jews' survival and geographical return.

Even without these allusions and echoes, there were other covenant promises, established by Moses and echoed often by the Prophets, that the disciples would have associated with Jesus's comments about regathering Israel. Moses predicted that Israel would return to Yahweh (Deut 4:30; 30:2, 8),²⁰ who would have compassion on them (4:31; 30:3),²¹ gather them to their land (30:3–

¹⁵ See also Isa 11:12; 41:9; 43:6; and Jer 31:8.

¹⁶ Isa 11:12; 27:12; 43:5; 49:5, 18; 56:8; Jer 23:3; 29:14; 31:8, 10; 32:37; Ezek 11:17; 20:34, 41; 28:25; 34:12–13; 36:24; 37:21; 38:8; 39:27–28; Joel 3:2; Mic 2:12; 4:6; Zeph 3:10, 19–20; Zech 2:6; 10:8, 10.

¹⁷ Michael L. Brown, "The People and the Land in Jewish Tradition," in *The People, the Land and the Future of Israel: Israel and the Jewish People in the Plan of God*, ed. Darrell L. Bock and Mitch Glaser (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2014), 79.

¹⁸ This is evident in Deuteronomy, which speaks of a physical scattering among the nations (Deut 4:27; 28:63–64; cf. Lev 26:33–36), and from the more than fifty geographical comments in the Prophets about gathering from the nations (Isa 11:12; 27:12; 43:5–6; 45:20; 49:5, 10–12, 18; 56:8; Jer 31:10; 23:3; 29:14; 31:8; 32:37; Ezek 11:17; 20:34, 41; 28:25; 34:12–13; 36:24; 37:21; 38:8; 39:27–28; Joel 3:2; Mic 2:12; 4:6; 7:12; Zeph 3:10, 19–20; Zech 2:6; 10:8, 10). Gathering to the land of their fathers, their geographical inheritance, is also indicated (Isa 14:1; 44:26; 49:8; 61:7; 65:9; Jer 2:15; 3:18; 16:15; 23:8; 24:6; 30:3, 20; 31:17, 28; 32:22; 50:19; Ezek 11:17; 16:55; 20:42; 28:25; 34:13–14, 27; 36:8, 12, 24, 28, 33; 37:21, 25; 39:26, 28; 45:8; 48:29; Hos 11:11; 14:7; Amos 9:15; Obad 1:17; Mic 4:7; Zeph 2:7; 3:20; Zech 9:16).

¹⁹ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 927.

²⁰ For statements in the Prophets on Israel's return to Yahweh, see Isa 10:20–21; 30:15; 44:22; 55:6–7; Jer 3:12, 14, 22; 4:1; 15:19; 24:7; 29:12–13; 50:4–5; Hos 3:5; 6:1; Zech 8:21–23.

²¹ For statements in the Prophets on Yahweh's compassion/mercy, see Isa 14:1; 30:18; 49:10, 13; 51:3; 54:8, 10; 60:10; 63:7; Jer 12:15; 30:18; 31:20; 33:26; 42:12; Lam 3:22, 32; Ezek 39:25; Hos 2:19; 11:8; 14:3; Joel 2:13; Mic 7:19; Zech 10:6.

5a),²² make them more prosperous and numerous than their forefathers (v. 5b),²³ circumcise their hearts (v. 6),²⁴ and make atonement for his land and people (32:43).²⁵ Though they would be punished (Lev 26:41),²⁶ Israel would never be rejected completely (v. 44).²⁷ Yahweh would remember his covenants with their forefathers (vv. 42–45).²⁸ He would be with them and dwell among them again (vv. 11–12).²⁹ They would be his people, and he would be their God,³⁰ and they would know that Yahweh was their God.³¹ These promis-

²² For statements in the Prophets using key words from these verses, see “gather”: Isa 11:12; 27:12; 43:5; 45:20; 49:5, 18; 56:8; Jer 23:3; 29:14; 31:8–10; 32:37; Ezek 11:17; 20:34, 41; 28:25; 34:12–13; 36:24; 37:21; 38:8; 39:27–28; Mic 2:12; 4:6; Zeph 3:19–20; Zech 10:8–10; “scattered”: Jer 50:17; Lam 4:16; Ezek 6:8; 11:16; 34:5–6, 12; 36:19; Dan 9:7; Zeph 3:10, 19; Zech 1:19, 21; 2:6; 7:14; “banished”: Jer 16:15; 23:8, 12; 29:14; 32:37; “distant/far land”: Jer 30:10; 46:27; 51:50; Zech 10:9; “bring you back”: Isa 49:5–6; Jer 28:3–4; Ezek 11:17; 34:16; 36:24; 37:12; 39:27; Zech 8:8; 10:10; “to the land of their fathers”: Jer 16:15; 30:3; 32:22; Ezek 20:42; 37:25; “their inheritance”: Isa 49:8; Jer 3:18–19; 12:14–15; Ezek 36:12; Obad 1:17.

²³ For statements in the Prophets related to “prosperous,” see Jer 29:11; 31:23; 32:42; 33:9; Ezek 36:11; Zech 1:17. On being “more numerous,” see Isa 49:18–20; 54:1–3; 60:22; 66:22; Jer 3:16; 23:3; 30:19–20; 31:27–28; 33:22; Ezek 36:10, 11, 37, 38; 37:26; Hos 1:10; Mic 2:12; Zech 2:4; 8:4–5; 10:8, 10.

²⁴ For statements in the Prophets on “circumcised hearts,” see parallels in Jer 3:17; 24:7; 31:33; 32:39; Ezek 11:19; 14:5; 18:31; 36:26–27; 37:14; Joel 2:28; Mal 4:6.

²⁵ For statements in the Prophets on Israel’s atonement or cleansing, see Isa 4:4; Jer 33:8; Ezek 16:63; 36:25; 37:23; Dan 9:24. For parallel terms, see Isa 45:17, 24–25; 53:6; Jer 31:34; 50:20; Joel 2:32; Mic 7:18–19; Zech 3:9; 5:5–11; 13:1.

²⁶ For statements in the Prophets about punishment for Israel’s sins, see Isa 40:2; 65:6–7; Jer 2:19; 4:18; 5:9, 29; 6:6, 15; 8:12; 9:9; 14:10; 16:18; 25:14; 30:14; 32:18; 36:31; Lam 4:6, 22; 5:7; Ezek 5:8–10, 15; 7:3–4, 8–9; 11:9; 16:38, 41; 21:25, 29; 23:10, 24–25, 49; 33:12; 39:21, 23; 44:10, 12; Hos 4:9; 8:13; 9:7, 9; 10:2, 10; 12:2, 14; Amos 3:2, 14; Mic 6:13; Zeph 1:8–9, 12.

²⁷ This again is a promise from the covenant at Sinai (Lev 26:44) reaffirmed in Isa 41:8–10; Jer 5:10; 31:35–37; 33:23–26; Zech 10:6.

²⁸ The promise to remember his covenant with their ancestors is reflected in Exod 2:24–25; 6:3–5; Ps 105:8–11; Jer 33:24–26; Mic 7:19–20; cf. Luke 1:54–55, 72–73.

²⁹ The prophets spoke of God dwelling with Israel in Isa 43:5; Jer 42:11; 46:28; Ezek 37:25–26; 43:7, 9; Joel 3:16–17, 20; Zech 2:10–12; 8:3. More generally, God was predicted to be with them in Isa 41:10; 43:5–7; Jer 3:17–18; 30:10, 11; 42:10–12; 50:4–5; Ezek 34:15, 30–31; 46:3, 9–10; 48:35; Hos 6:1; Mic 2:13; 4:7; Zeph 3:15, 17; Hag 1:13; Zech 2:5; 8:21–23.

³⁰ He would be their God and they would be his people: Isa 41:8–10; 43:3, 10–13, 15; 18; Jer 24:6–7; 30:22; 31:1, 31–34; 32:38; Ezek 11:19–20; 14:11; 20:7; 34:24, 30–31; 36:27–28; 37:23, 27; Hos 2:23; Joel 2:27; Zech 8:8; 13:9. They would be his people: Isa 51:16, 22; 52:6; 53:8; 62:11–12; 63:7–8; 64:8; Jer 31:7; Ezek 34:30–31; Dan 12:1–3; Hos 1:10–2:1; 2:23; Joel 3:2; Amos 9:14; Hab 3:13.

³¹ For predictions that they would know that he is their God, see Isa 45:3–8; 49:23; 60:16; Jer 31:31–34; Ezek 16:58–63; 20:5–7, 9, 39–44; 26:6; 28:25; 30:19, 25–26;

es of survival from Moses were the foundation of the disciples' hopes. They are too firmly rooted in Israel's covenant and too prominent within the Prophets to be reduced to metaphors or misguided expectations of Second Temple Jews.

As Jesus concluded his discourse, these allusions, echoes, and presuppositions from the foundations of Israel's relationship with Yahweh would have renewed his disciples' hope and courage in the face of Jerusalem's impending destruction. From their covenant documents the disciples could hear "this generation" as a reference to Israel.

THIS GENERATION WILL CERTAINLY NOT PASS AWAY (MATT 24:34)

Within Moses and the Prophets $\gamma\eta\rho$, "generation," usually refers to people living at the same time. The same is true of $\gamma\epsilon\nu\epsilon\acute{\alpha}$, "generation" in Greek. Those who hear in "generation" a reference to Israel most often draw their evidence from rare and older uses of the terms in Greek and English. In Greek, $\gamma\epsilon\nu\epsilon\acute{\alpha}$ appears as a reference to an ethnic group as early as Homer and Herodotus and as late as Plutarch.³² Older English dictionaries retained definitions of "generation" as that which was generated from; in other words, a race, kind, family, breed, or stock.³³ The same is true of Greek–English lexicons and some commentaries.³⁴ This seems to have been Jerome's view when he commented, "By 'generation' here [Matt 24:34] He means the whole human race, and the Jews in particular."³⁵ While the New International Version, in a footnote, suggests

34:27; 36:11, 22, 38; 37:5, 12, 25; 39:22, 27; Joel 2:26–27.

³² Gleason L. Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 338–39, cites H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek–English Lexicon*, 9th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1940), 342.

³³ Jean L. McKechnie, *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 763, includes as definition 8 "a family, a race, a class, any allied group of persons." *The Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. 4 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), G 107, similarly includes within the range of definitions for "generation" the meanings "offspring," "progeny," "descendants," "posterity."

³⁴ William F. Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, and Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 191–92: "Those descended from a common ancestor, a 'clan.' Those exhibiting common characteristics or interests, race, or kind." Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 612, argues that $\gamma\epsilon\nu\epsilon\acute{\alpha}$ in Matthew 23:35–36 "implies the solidarity of the race through the years." Similarly, Susan M. Rieske, "What Is the Meaning of 'This Generation' in Matthew 23:36?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 165 (2008): 225, concludes that lexically and contextually generation could be "an evil spiritual family."

³⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea*, trans. John Henry Parker, vol. 1 (London: Riv-

that “generation” in Matthew 24:34 could be understood as “race,” most exegetes have not found the evidence for this compelling.³⁶

In his Song of Witness, however, Moses used the term דור to characterize Israel across her entire relationship with Yahweh as a “warped and crooked generation” (Deut 32:5) and “a perverse generation” (v. 20). This use of דור is supported by several studies,³⁷ though it has only rarely been discussed by proponents or opponents of the view that “this generation” meant Israel.

“THIS GENERATION” IN MOSES’S SONG OF WITNESS

Moses’s Song (Deut 32:1–43) was established as a witness against Israel throughout her generations. Yahweh instructed Moses to “write down this song and teach it to the Israelites . . . so that it may be a witness for me against them. When I have brought them into the land . . . they will turn to other gods and worship them, rejecting me and breaking my covenant. . . . This song will testify against them” (31:19–21). The song then previews Israel’s entire existence from her birth in the wilderness to her exile and spiritual restoration in the land: “In a desert land he found him. . . . He made him ride on the heights of the land. They abandoned the God who made them. . . . The LORD saw this and rejected them. . . . I said I would scatter them. . . . The LORD will vindicate his people . . . when he sees their strength is gone . . . for he will avenge the blood of his servants . . . and make atonement for his land and people” (32:10, 13, 15, 19, 23, 26, 36, 43). In this broad historical survey Israel is referred to as a דור, a “generation.” They are “a warped and crooked generation” (v. 5) and “a perverse generation, children who are unfaithful” (v. 20).

Within Moses’s Song a variety of parallel terms characterize

ington, 1842), chapter 23, Lectio 10.

³⁶ Carson, *Matthew*, 507, says, “This generation can only with the greatest difficulty be made to mean anything other than the generation living when Jesus spoke.” France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 930, concludes that “if it had not been for the embarrassment caused by supposing that Jesus was here talking about his parousia, no one would have thought of suggesting any other meaning for ‘this generation,’ such as ‘the Jewish race’ or ‘human beings in general’ or ‘all the generations of Judaism that reject him’ or even ‘this kind’ (meaning scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees).”

³⁷ Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 410–11, finds in Deuteronomy 32:5 a reference to “Israel’s past action and future doubts.” Walter Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 277–78, observes that “the poem has on its horizon the entire history to follow in the corpus of Joshua to Kings,” and “provides a sweeping characterization of Israel’s life with Yahweh.”

Israel as the people Yahweh “made, formed, and created” (vv. 5, 6), rather than a single generation. The nation is called God’s “sons” (vv. 5, 20), “his sons and daughters” (v. 19), “his portion, his allotted inheritance” (v. 9), “his people” (v. 36), and “his servants” (v. 43), reflecting their ongoing status as the nation Yahweh generated.³⁸ In these ways, the singular בְּנֵי refers to the nation Yahweh generated in its temporal entirety.³⁹

Further evidence that the Song of Witness intended a holistic view of the nation, rather than a single generation, comes from the paradox that the generation receiving this song was the one given the land of Canaan. “The people served the LORD throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him” (Judg 2:7). Although their forefathers were characterized as an “evil generation” (Num 32:13; Deut 1:35), they, of all generations, were among the most faithful. So the characterization of Israel as a warped, crooked, and perverse generation applies not to the single generation that received the song but to the nation historically.

That the Song of Witness applied to Israel across the length of her history is also evident from the way the prophets and apostles continued to echo and apply it in future generations. Though few commentators hear them, there are hundreds of echoes or allusions to this song in the Prophets.⁴⁰ The disciples would already have

³⁸ Edward Woods, *Deuteronomy*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2011), 210–13, holds that “sons and daughters” in verse 19 refers to corporate Israel, but he surprisingly maintains that the parallel ideas in verses 5 and 20 refer to that present generation.

³⁹ The one exception is verse 7, which uses the plural of בְּנֵי with reference to past generations rather than the future nation.

⁴⁰ For echoes of Deut 32:1 see Isa 1:2; 44:23; Jer 2:12; Mic 1:2; 6:1, 2. For echoes of Deut 32:2 see Isa 55:10, 11a; Hos 5:7. For echoes of Deut 32:3 see Isa 26:4; 30:29; 44:8; Zeph 3:5. For echoes of Deut 32:5 see Isa 1:2, 4; 45:10; Jer 31:9; Hos 1:10; Zeph 3:5. For echoes of Deut 32:6 see Isa 27:11; 43:7, 15, 21; 44:1, 2, 21, 24; 45:9, 10, 11; 51:13; 54:5; 63:16; 64:8; Jer 2:27; 3:19; 31:9. For echoes of Deut 32:7 see Isa 46:9; 63:11. For echoes of Deut 32:8–9 see Isa 19:25; 43:21; 63:17; Jer 3:19; 12:8, 9, 14; 16:18; 51:19; Ezek 5:5; Mic 7:14, 18; Zech 2:12. For echoes of Deut 32:10 see Jer 2:3, 6; 12:8; Hos 9:10; 13:4, 5; Zech 2:8. For echoes of Deut 32:11 see Jer 12:9; Hos 13:4. For echoes of Deut 32:13 see Isa 58:14; Jer 2:7; Ezek 36:2; 39:18; Mic 7:14. For echoes of Deut 32:15 see Isa 1:4; 17:10; 26:4; 44:2; 51:13; Jer 2:13; 5:8, 28; 19:4; Hos 2:8; 4:7; 10:1; 13:6; Amos 6:1. For echoes of Deut 32:16–17 see Jer 11:17; 19:4; 43:3; 44:3, 5, 8; Ezek 8:3; 11:3; 33:25; Hos 2:8; 4:7; 10:1. For echoes of Deut 32:18 see Isa 26:4; 44:8; 63:16; Jer 2:27, 32; 3:21; 5:28; 31:9; Hos 1:10; 8:14. For echoes of Deut 32:19 see Isa 45:11; 54:7; Jer 6:30; 7:29; Hos 1:10; Mic 1:5. For echoes of Deut 32:20 see Isa 1:2, 15; 8:17; 30:1; 45:11; 54:8; 57:17; 59:2; 64:7; Jer 4:22; 6:8; 11:14; 18:17; 21:10; 33:5; Ezek 7:22; 39:23, 24, 29. For echoes of Deut 32:21 see Isa 5:25; Jer 7:18, 19; 8:19; 10:15; 11:17; 32:37; Ezek 8:3; 23:25; Hos 9:12; Mic 1:5; 3:4; Zeph 1:15, 18; 3:8, 9; Mal 1:11. For echoes of Deut 32:22 see Isa 1:31; 5:24, 25; 9:19; 13:9; 26:11; 42:25; Jer 4:4, 23–26; 5:14, 25; 7:20; 10:10; 11:16; 15:14; 17:4, 27; 21:12; 32:37; 43:6; Lam 2:3, 4; 4:11; Ezek

been sensitized to echoes from Deuteronomy 32 by Jesus's references to "an evil and adulterous generation," "this evil generation," and a "faithless and twisted generation" (Matt 12:39; 16:4; 17:17; 12:45), phrases that correspond to ethnic Israel as "a warped and crooked generation . . . a perverse generation, children who are unfaithful" (Deut 32:5, 20).

The likelihood that the disciples would have picked up echoes from Deuteronomy 32 is increased by its significance. The song functioned as the final piece of Israel's covenant renewal ceremony on the Plains of Moab, the very sort of passage Jews would be expected to recall. Indeed, Yahweh predicted it would not be forgotten: "And when many disasters and calamities come on them, this song will testify against them, because it will not be forgotten by their descendants" (v. 21).⁴¹ Furthermore, by quoting from it or alluding to it a dozen times, the New Testament writers confirm its value as a recurrent and memorable precursor text.⁴²

19:14; 38:19, 20; Hos 8:14; Joel 3:16; Amos 2:5; 7:4; Mic 1:4; 7:14; Nah 1:6; Zeph 1:3, 15, 18; 3:8; Hag 2:21. For echoes of Deut 32:23 see Isa 63:11; Jer 4:20; 6:19; 36:31; 42:17; 44:23, 27. For echoes of Deut 32:24 see Lam 3:12; Mic 2:3; Hab 3:9; Jer 5:6; 8:17; 11:22; 12:9; 14:16, 18; 15:2; 32:24; 34:17; 42:16, 17; 44:12, 13, 18, 26, 27; Ezek 33:27; Hos 2:12. For echoes of Deut 32:25 see Isa 1:20; 5:25; Jer 6:11, 25; 11:22; 12:12; 14:16; 15:2, 8; 16:6; 18:21; 32:24; 34:17; 38:2; 42:17; 44:12, 13, 18, 27; Lam 1:20; Ezek 33:27; Hos 10:14; 13:16; Zeph 3:6. For echoes of Deut 32:26 see Isa 10:5, 11, 13, 25; Ezek 36:15; Mic 4:11; 7:8. For echoes of Deut 32:28 see Isa 1:3; Jer 4:22; 5:21; 10:8, 14; 51:17. For echoes of Deut 32:32 see Jer 23:15; Hos 13:12; Amos 5:7. For echoes of Deut 32:34 see Isa 10:25; 26:11; 54:17; 59:18; 63:4. For echoes of Deut 32:35 see Jer 5:9; 5:29; 9:9; 11:11, 20, 23; 23:12; 50:31; Ezek 5:13; 21:29; Hos 13:12; Hab 2:7. For echoes of Deut 32:36 see Isa 54:7, 8, 17; 59:18; Jer 11:12, 13; 31:13; Mic 7:19. For echoes of Deut 32:37 see Isa 31:6, 7; 59:16; Jer 2:28; 10:15; 11:12, 13; 30:13; Joel 2:17. For echoes of Deut 32:39 see Isa 43:13; 53:5; 57:18; Jer 6:14; 8:11, 15, 22; 10:6, 7, 10, 19; 30:12, 13, 15, 17; Amos 2:13; Ezek 5:13, 37:12; Hos 6:1; 7:1; 14:4; Joel 2:27; Mic 1:9. For echoes of Deut 32:40 see Isa 43:13. For echoes of Deut 32:41 see Isa 10:25; 34:8; 59:17; 63:4; Jer 10:25; 30:23; 47:6; 50:24; 51:6; Ezek 21:3–5, 8, 11, 15, 28. For echoes of Deut 32:42 see Isa 34:5, 6; Jer 30:23; Ezek 21:3–5, 8, 29; Mic 5:15; Hab 3:13. For echoes of Deut 32:43 see Isa 4:3, 4; 10:25; 26:11; 27:9; 35:4; 40:2; 43:25; 44:22; 45:25; 63:4; Jer 10:25; 30:16, 17; 33:8, 9; 50:15, 20, 28; 51:6, 11, 36; Ezek 16:63; 21:31; Dan 9:24; Joel 3:2, 21; Mic 5:15; 7:8; Zeph 3:14, 15.

⁴¹ Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*, 30, comments on the significance of memorable texts for recognizing echoes.

⁴² Hays's third criterion for identifying echoes is the recurrent use of the passage elsewhere in the context (*Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*, 29). The following echoes from the New Testament indicate the Song of Moses was widely remembered by the apostles. For Deut 32:5 see Phil 2:15; for Deut 32:6 see 2 Cor 6:18; for Deut 32:8 see Acts 17:26; for Deut 32:19 see 2 Cor 6:18; for Deut 32:19 see Rom 11:1 (a rhetorical question asked with both Deut 32:19 and Lev 26:44–45 in mind); for Deut 32:21 see Rom 11:19, cf. 11:13–14; for Deut 32:29 some hear an echo in Luke 19:42 and John 12:40; for Deut 32:35–36 see the quotation in Rom 12:19 and Heb 10:30; for Deut 32:43 see Rom 15:10 and Heb 1:6, which quotes the Septuagint.

ISRAEL AS "THIS GENERATION" IN PSALM 78,
JEREMIAH 2, AND JEREMIAH 7

Three passages in Israel's Scriptures reflect Moses's designation of Israel as a generation. In a sweeping characterization of their ancestors from the days of the judges to the reign of Saul, Asaph described Israel as "a stubborn and rebellious generation" (Ps 78:8), which parallels Moses's description of a "corrupt," "warped," "crooked," and "perverse" generation in Deuteronomy 32:5, 20. Like Moses, the psalmist treated the nation from its earliest history in the land as a singular generation.

At first glance Jeremiah seems to refer to his own generation when he says, "You of this generation, consider the word of the Lord" (Jer 2:31). However, a closer reading reveals a cluster of eleven echoes from Deuteronomy 32 within Jeremiah's speech. These suggest that, like Moses and the psalmist, Jeremiah addressed both his nation's past and present.

Deuteronomy 32

Jeremiah 2

¹ Listen, O heavens, and I will speak

¹² Be appalled at this, O heavens

⁵ they are a warped and crooked *generation*

³¹ "You of this *generation*, consider the word of the Lord

⁶ Is he not your Father

²⁷ They say to wood, 'You are my father'

¹⁰ In a desert land he found him,

² you loved me and followed me through the desert

in a barren and howling waste

⁶ and led us through the barren wilderness

¹² The Lord alone led him

¹⁷ he led you in the way

¹³⁻¹⁴ He . . . fed him with the fruit of the fields

⁷ I brought you into a fertile land to eat its fruit and rich produce

¹⁷ They sacrificed to demons, which are not God

¹¹ Has a nation ever changed its gods? (Yet they are not gods at all)

²¹ They . . . angered me with their worthless idols

⁵ They followed worthless idols
⁸ following worthless idols

³² Their vine comes from the vine of Sodom and from the fields of Gomor-

²¹ How then did you turn against me into a corrupt, wild vine?

rah. Their grapes are filled with poison, and their clusters with bitterness

¹⁸ You deserted the Rock, who fathered you; the God who gave you birth

¹⁸ you forgot the God

^{37–38} He will say: “Now where are their gods, the rock they took refuge in. . . . Let them rise up to help you!”

²⁷ They say to wood, ‘You are my father,’ and to stone, ‘You gave me birth’

³² my people have forgotten me

²⁸ Where then are the gods you made for yourselves? Let them come if they can save you when you are in trouble

Through this chorus of echoes, Jeremiah situated Judah’s final generation within the survey of Deuteronomy 32:1–43, and, like Jerusalem in Jesus’s lament, the punishment for the accumulated sins of the nation was about to fall on them.

In a similar way Jeremiah’s temple message (Jer 7:1–29) addressed the nation as “this generation” within a context that extended back to Moses and the Exodus. “From the time your ancestors left Egypt until now, day after day, again and again I sent you my servants the prophets. But they did not listen to me or pay attention. They were stiff-necked and did more evil than their ancestors. . . . Therefore say to them, ‘This is the nation that has not obeyed the Lord its God or responded to correction. . . . Take up a lament on the barren heights, for the Lord has rejected and abandoned *this generation* that is under his wrath” (vv. 25–29).

Both the context and the explicit reference to the nation in verse 28 indicate that the prophet was thinking more broadly than the last generation in Judah when he lamented over “this generation that is under his wrath.” Furthermore, that this was intended as an echo from Moses’s Song in Deuteronomy 32 is supported by the cluster of echoes that precede it:

Deuteronomy 32:17–22

¹⁷ They sacrificed to false gods, which are not God—gods they had not known

¹⁹ The LORD saw this and rejected them because he was angered by his sons and daughters

²⁰ “I will hide my face from them,” he

Jeremiah 7:9–29

⁹ and follow other gods you have not known

²⁹ for the Lord has rejected and abandoned this generation that is under his wrath

¹⁵ I will thrust you from my pres-

said

ence

they are a perverse *generation*,

²⁹ this *generation* that is under his wrath

²¹ They made me jealous by what is no god

¹⁹ am I the one they are provoking?

and angered me with their worthless idols

¹⁸ offerings to other gods to arouse my anger

²² For a fire will be kindled by my wrath, one that burns down to the realm of the dead below. It will devour the earth and its harvests and set afire the foundations of the mountains

²⁰ My anger and my wrath will be poured out on this place . . . on the trees of the field and on the crops of your land; and it will burn and not be quenched

These echoes come from the six verses in Moses's Song (Deut 32:17–22) that surround his designation of Israel as a perverse generation. As with Psalm 78 and his earlier speech against Jerusalem, in this temple message Jeremiah appears to have adopted Moses's designation of Israel as "this generation" from Deuteronomy 32:20.

JESUS AND "THIS GENERATION"

While Jesus most often used γενεά, "generation," to refer to his contemporaries, in some places it can and probably should be understood in the sense Moses gave it in his song.⁴³ When Jesus mourned the approaching desolation of Jerusalem, it was not only because his contemporaries had rejected him, but also because of oppressors still to come and murderers from the distant past: "Therefore, I am sending you prophets and sages and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. Truly I tell you, all this will come on *this generation*. Jerusalem, Jerusalem,

⁴³ Statements in the Gospels that may echo the "corrupt generation" of Deuteronomy 32:5, 20 and may refer to more than a single generation of Israelites include Mark 8:38 and Acts 2:40. In the Psalms and Isaiah, verses that may also refer to more than a single generation of Israelites include Pss 24:6; 112:2; and Isa 53:8–10.

you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord' " (Matt 23:34–39; cf. Luke 11:34–39).

With its panoramic perspective, from Abel to Israel's eventual recognition of Jesus as their Messiah, this lament seems to reference all of Israel's unfaithful generations when it speaks of "this generation." The disciples could reasonably have assumed that Jesus's lament for his own Jerusalem included past, present, and even future generations.⁴⁴

The parallels between this lament and Jeremiah's Temple Message (Jer 7:29) are too pertinent to overlook. Both Jeremiah and Jesus were prophets, and both were distressed by Jerusalem's history of persecuting prophets. Both concluded their sorrow in a lament. Both looked across their nation's history, and both addressed their audience as "this generation" (Jer 7:29; Matt 23:35).

If all the echoes and parallels mentioned above are dismissed, then Jesus could rightly be understood to predict his own generation's destruction, not only for rejecting him, but also for the times their forefathers had rejected the prophets. The echoes and parallels more reasonably suggest, however, that the cumulative rejection of the prophets and Jesus himself was leading to the nation's destruction. Within forty years, the generation that Jesus addressed would be replaced by their children and grandchildren, who would suffer the destruction he predicted. Rather than his contemporaries suffering for their sins and the sins of the past and future, the nation as an entity would then be destroyed. Like the fall of Jerusalem in Jeremiah's day, this national calamity was the culmination of the nation's sins. Jesus characterized Jerusalem as a "perverse generation" because of the nation's persistent rejection of Yahweh's prophets.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ The disciples might have considered the echo of "this evil generation" from Numbers 32:13 and Deuteronomy 1:35, but they would have dismissed both as references to the unbelieving generation that died in the wilderness.

⁴⁵ This is similar to the definition proposed by Nelson, "'This Generation' in Matt 24:34," 369–85. Nelson's study demonstrates that "this generation" refers to "a kind of people characterized as unbelieving." The present view would restrict these people to Jews, excluding the Gentiles suggested by Nelson. He does not account for the use of the term in Deuteronomy 32. The present study would also temper the idea that they are "headed to eschatological judgment." Though Israel will be judged, there remains a future for them.

Though "this generation" usually refers to a single generation (Deut 1:35), and though it may be an uncommon use of the term γενεά, neither of these prevent it from referring holistically to the people of Israel across the entire sweep of their existence. It is a suitable expression for ears and minds nurtured in Israel's Scriptures. If Jesus was speaking in Hebrew or Aramaic and his words have been passed on in Greek, or if his words were spoken and recorded in Greek by minds whose theological language was Hebrew, there were ample reasons for the disciples to hear them in their original Mosaic usage, predicting that, despite Israel's perversity and destruction, she would never pass away.

THIS GENERATION WILL NOT PASS

The hope that this generation/nation would never pass away or be completely rejected was born when Yahweh established with Abraham "an everlasting covenant" to be his God and the God of his descendants after him (Gen 17:7). This lasting relationship was reaffirmed at Sinai, even when Yahweh anticipated the dispersion that Jesus foresaw. Yahweh had promised, "When they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them or abhor them so as to destroy them completely, breaking my covenant with them. I am the LORD their God. . . . I will remember the covenant with their ancestors whom I brought out of Egypt in the sight of the nations to be their God. I am the LORD" (Lev 26:42–45).⁴⁶

Indeed, it was in Israel's darkest hours that Yahweh's faithfulness was revealed most clearly. When Judah was destroyed by the Chaldeans, he affirmed his people's survival in the new covenant: "Only if the heavens above can be measured and the foundations of the earth below be searched out will I reject all the descendants of Israel because of all they have done" (Jer 31:37).⁴⁷ Despite their most grievous sins and consequent curses, the covenant was maintained by God. Nurtured in these Scriptures, the disciples would have heard Jesus reaffirming these promises from Moses and the Prophets. Despite the terrors to come, the people Yahweh had fathered, his "generation," would never pass away.

In discussions of the difficult phrase "this generation will certainly not pass," few commentators have referred to any Scriptures

⁴⁶ See also Deut 4:31; Jer 5:10a, 18; 14:21; 33:6–12, 14; Mic 7:20; Luke 1:54–55, 72–74.

⁴⁷ See also Jer 33:23–26; 50:5; Ezek 20:39, 41–42, 44.

available to the disciples.⁴⁸ Those few were usually earlier commentators, and later works tended to drop their links to the Hebrew Scriptures, focusing instead on the New Testament. Nevertheless, understanding “this generation” as Israel leads to a coherent and climactic reading of the clauses that follow: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.”

HEAVEN AND EARTH WILL PASS AWAY (MATT 24:35A)

From Moses and the Prophets, the disciples inherited an understanding of the heavens and the earth as witnesses to the covenant between Yahweh and their forefathers. On the Plains of Moab heaven and earth were formally established as the witnesses to the blessings and curses that would overtake Israel when they obeyed or disobeyed Yahweh’s commands. They were also witnesses to his promises to restore them (Deut 4:25–26, 29–31; 30:6–10, 19). Yahweh consistently summoned elements from the heavens or the earth to witness his promises to Noah, Abraham, the house of David, and Israel. The rainbow, the cycles of day and night, and the seasons guaranteed Yahweh’s promises to Noah (Gen 8:22; 9:16–17). The promise to Abram of a nation was affirmed with references to the dust of the earth, the stars of the heavens, and the sands of the seashores (13:16; 15; 22:17). David was promised an eternal throne and house (2 Sam 7:13, 16). It would endure as long as the heavens, the sun, and the moon (Pss 89:2–4, 28–29; 72:5, 17).

So it was when Moses introduced the Song of Witness (Deut 32:1–43). He brought Israel’s elders and officials before Yahweh to hear the song and to “call the heavens and the earth to testify against them” (31:28). His song opens with an appeal to these very witnesses: “Listen, you heavens, and I will speak; hear, you earth, the words of my mouth” (Deut 32:1).

Heaven and earth were summoned as legal witnesses in the following psalm attributed to Asaph, and by Isaiah and Micah in their indictments of Israel:

He summons the *heavens* above, and the *earth*, that he may *judge* his people: ‘Gather to me this consecrated people, who made a covenant with me by sacrifice.’ And the *heavens* proclaim *his righteousness*, for he is a *God of justice* (Ps 50:4–6).

⁴⁸ William Hendriksen, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), 868, understood this broader definition of “generation” from Deuteronomy 32:5, 20; Psalm 12:7; and 78:8. Morris also saw a broader use of generation in Psalm 12:7; 14:5; 24:6, and Jeremiah 7:29 (*The Gospel according to Matthew*, 612–13).

Hear, *O heavens*, and give ear, *O earth*; for *the Lord has spoken* (Isa 1:2a, ESV).

Hear, you peoples, all of you, listen, *earth* and all who live in it, that the Sovereign Lord may bear witness against you, the Lord from his holy temple (Mic 1:2).

Listen to what *the Lord says*: 'Stand up, plead my case before *the mountains*; let *the hills* hear what you have to say. 'Hear, you mountains, the Lord's accusation; listen, you everlasting foundations of the earth. For the Lord has a case against his people; he is lodging a charge against Israel (Mic 6:1–2).

Second Temple sources also contain appeals to heaven and earth as legal witnesses. In the *Book of Judith*, the people of Bethulia appealed to their leaders: "We call to witness against you heaven and earth and our God, the Lord of our fathers, who punishes us according to our sins and the sins of our fathers" (Judith 7:28, RSVA). Similarly, when the Maccabees were slaughtered on the Sabbath, they reasoned, "Let us all die in our innocence; heaven and earth testify for us that you are killing us unjustly" (1 Mac 2:37, RSVA). A third appeal to these witnesses occurs in the *Assumption of Moses*, which echoes Deuteronomy 30:16, 19 when it explains the exile as "that which Moses did then declare unto us in prophecies . . . and assuredly called heaven and earth to witness against us, that we should not transgress His commandments."⁴⁹

As covenant witnesses, the heavens and the earth were invoked not only to call Israel to account, but also to express the permanence of Yahweh's commitment to Israel. When Judah was being driven from their land and Jerusalem's devastation was at hand, Jeremiah reminded them, "If *the heavens* above can be measured, and the foundations of *the earth* below can be explored, then I will cast off all the offspring of Israel for all that they have done, declares the LORD" (Jer 31:37).

Jeremiah attached Yahweh's covenant witnesses of day and night (Gen 8:22) and the heavens and earth with his covenant promises to Abraham (22:17), Phinehas (Num 25:10–13), David (2 Sam 7:13, 16), and Israel (Deut 30:3), asserting that, as long as the earth endured, Yahweh would not reject the son of David, the Levites, or the two kingdoms that descended from Jacob: "This is what the Lord says: 'If you can break my covenant with the *day*

⁴⁹ Translation adapted from R. H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* (Oxford: University Press, 1913), 2:407–24, chapter 3.

and my covenant with the *night*, so that *day* and *night* no longer come at their appointed time, then my covenant with David my servant—and my covenant with the Levites who are priests ministering before me—can be broken and David will no longer have a descendant to reign on his throne. . . . ‘If I have not made my covenant with *day and night* and established the laws of *heaven and earth*, then I will reject the descendants of Jacob and David my servant and will not choose one of his sons to rule over the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. For I will restore their fortunes and have compassion on them’⁵⁰ (Jer 33:20–26).

Furthermore, Isaiah predicted the heavens and the earth would ultimately be invoked as witnesses to celebrate the redemption of the nation: “Sing for joy, you *heavens*, for the LORD has done this; shout aloud, you *earth* beneath. Burst into song, you *mountains*, you *forests* and all your *trees*, for the LORD has redeemed Jacob, he displays his glory in Israel” (Isa 44:23). “Shout for joy, you *heavens*; rejoice, you *earth*; burst into song, you *mountains*! For the LORD comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted ones” (49:13; cf. 45:12–13, 17–18, 22–25).

If heaven and earth were to pass away, what then would become of Yahweh’s promises? Centuries before Jesus invoked the heavens and the earth, Isaiah predicted their passing would not annul Yahweh’s commitment to Israel: “Lift up your eyes to the *heavens*, look at the *earth* beneath; the *heavens* will vanish like smoke, the *earth* will wear out like a garment and its inhabitants die like flies. But my salvation will last forever, my righteousness will never fail” (51:6; cf. 54:10). “For behold, I create *new heavens and a new earth*, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind” (65:17). “‘For *as the new heavens and the new earth* that I make shall remain before me,’ says the LORD, ‘*so shall your offspring and your name remain*,’ declares the LORD” (66:21).

Even though the original witnesses would vanish and be forgotten, Yahweh would not forget Israel. It is to this promise in Isaiah 66 that Jesus is most directly alluding when he mentions, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away” (Matt 24:35).

Given the extent and clarity of these echoes from Moses and the Prophets, it is improbable that Jesus would have invoked the heavens and the earth without his disciples thinking of them as witnesses to Yahweh’s covenant promises. Building on the chorus of echoes in Matthew 24:30–31, heaven and earth provide Yah-

⁵⁰ Verse 26 quotes from Deuteronomy 30:3.

weh's final legal commitment to preserve his nation.

Recent studies of Matthew 24:35 rarely appeal to Israel's Scriptures. Among their scattered references, only rarely have any suggested that the passing of the heavens and the earth has anything to do with their function as witnesses.⁵¹ Yet the disciples may well have heard in Jesus's prediction of heaven and earth passing away a reassuring echo of Isaiah's logic, that Israel's offspring and name would remain forever (Isa 66:20–22).

BUT MY WORDS WILL NEVER PASS AWAY (MATT 24:35B)

This final line from Jesus's trilogy has received even less notice, although parallels in the Old Testament have been drawn from Isaiah 40:8; 51:6 and Psalm 102:25–27 by William Davies, John Nolland, and Craig Evans. However, Davies and Evans simply see a contrast between "God's eternal word and the temporal created order,"⁵² and Nolland anticipates that "as predictions, the material of Matthew 24 will have lost currency by the time the creation has undergone its eschatological renewal."⁵³ None of these connects this promise with the heavens and earth as witnesses.

Within the context of the witnesses and the many echoes related to Israel's regathering, the disciples would naturally have heard this assurance as a reference to the pair of promises that preceded it in the trilogy. Hearing Jesus's prediction that this generation will not pass as a reference to Israel's endurance, and heaven and earth as covenant witnesses, the disciples would logically have taken Jesus's third promise as a confirmation of his first two.⁵⁴ Rather than three puzzling predictions, the promises can be appreciated as a coherent trilogy.

⁵¹ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1943), 952–53, did appeal to Deuteronomy 32:5, 20; Psalms 12:7; 14:5; 24:6; 73:15; 78:8; 112:2; Proverbs 30:11–14; and Jeremiah 7:29. William D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *Matthew 18–28*, vol. 3 of *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 930, cited Isaiah 40:8; 51:5; 54:10 and Jeremiah 33:20–21, 25–26 to observe that "such language is used to affirm the permanence of God's covenant faithfulness."

⁵² Davies and Allison, *Matthew 19–28*, 368; Evans, *Matthew*, 412.

⁵³ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 989–90.

⁵⁴ Hays focuses on the degree to which the alleged echoes fit into the line of argument (*Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*, 31). The ideas proposed in this article illuminate Jesus's discourse by moving beyond the identification of echoes to their interpretation.

CONCLUSION

Though the present reading has received infrequent support⁵⁵ within the history of interpretation, Hays cautions:

While this test [of other readers having heard the same echoes] is a possible restraint against arbitrariness, it is also one of the least reliable guides for interpretation, because Gentile Christian readers at a very early date . . . began reading . . . within the interpretive matrix of the New Testament canon. A historically sensitive exegesis can recover echoes previously dampened or drowned out An investigation of the history of interpretation can extend the range of possible readings . . . but it also can lead us to a narrowing of the hermeneutical potential. . . . Thus, this criterion should rarely be used as a negative test to exclude proposed echoes that commend themselves on other grounds.⁵⁶

The present reading emerges from a method that reflects carefully on the Scriptures Jesus and his disciples cherished. By first listening for precursor texts and echoes from texts that were available to the disciples, instead of immediately turning to Gospels and Epistles that were yet to be written, a coherence emerges in Jesus's three predictions, a coherence that his disciples would have found satisfying and consoling. As his disciples today, our attention to Moses and the Prophets allows us to hear in Jesus's words the same echoes and assurance that, despite the tragedies awaiting Jerusalem, Yahweh will gather his nation to himself at the end of the age. Summer will come!

⁵⁵ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel of Matthew*, 867–69; Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News according to Matthew* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1975), 458; and Nelson, “‘This Generation’ in Matt 24:34.” They all interpret “this generation” as the Jews throughout their generations. Hendriksen includes Gentiles among them. They all foresaw Israel's judgment in contrast to the present view.

⁵⁶ Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*, 31.