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# THE STRUCTURE AND SEQUENCE OF MATTHEW 24:1-41: INTERACTION WITH EVANGELICAL TREATMENTS

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*Evangelical studies of Matthew 24 tend to emphasize either the A.D. 70 destruction of Jerusalem (preterist view), the eschatological return of Christ (futurist view), or some combination of the two (preterist-futurist views). This study evaluates evangelical approaches, stressing recent treatments. It is concluded that a substantial portion of the chapter describes the present age. The A.D. 70 destruction of Jerusalem and the eschatological tribulation are theologically linked, with the former event serving as a token or earnest which anticipates the latter. "This generation" (24:34) describes Jesus' contemporaries who lived to see the destruction of Jerusalem. "All these things" (24:34) is limited by the contextual fig tree analogy to the events marking the course of the age, particularly the events of A.D. 70.*

\* \* \*

## INTRODUCTION

“WHEN will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” Matt 24:3 (*NIV*) thus states the disciples' question occasioned by Jesus' solemn words that their beloved temple would be torn down (24:2). His answer to their question has come to be known as the Olivet or Eschatological discourse. The interpretation of this discourse revolves around the two events spoken of by the disciples, the destruction of the temple (A.D. 70) and the coming of Christ at the end of the age. The degree of emphasis given to either of these events determines one's interpretation of the discourse, since neither Matthew nor the other synoptists supply an explicit outline of Jesus' answer with the two events neatly divided. Rather, both events are evidently so intricately interwoven that no consensus has been reached in the attempt to sort them out from each other.

This study of evangelical treatments of the structure and sequence of Matt 24:1-42 has isolated four basic views of the passage. The first

view, which will be called the futurist view, stresses the age-ending return of Christ and finds little if anything in these verses which addresses the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 or the current age.<sup>1</sup> Another view, which will be called the preterist view, is to a great extent the opposite of the first view. It sees relatively little of the passage (only 24:36-41) in terms of the end times. Rather the current age is in view, with the emphasis on the destruction of Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup> Two other views amount to mediating positions between the first two. The first of these mediating positions, which will be called the traditional preterist-futurist view, sees a portion of the passage (usually 24:4-14) as a general description of the course of the present age, and another portion as a "double reference" prophecy of Jerusalem's destruction and the end of the age.<sup>3</sup> A second mediating position, which will be called the revised preterist-futurist view, sees alternating reference in these verses to the course of the age, the destruction of Jerusalem, and the coming of Christ.<sup>4</sup>

All four of these approaches generally unite in their analysis of the main sections of the discourse. It is usually agreed that verses 4-14, 15-28, 29-31, and 32-41 comprise four major movements in Christ's answer to the disciples. Verses 32-41 tend to form a transition

<sup>1</sup>Among evangelicals, this view is usually held by dispensationalists. See, e.g., Louis A. Barbieri, Jr., "Matthew," *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, NT ed., ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton: Victor, 1983) 76ff.; John F. Hart, "A Chronology of Matthew 24:1-44," Th.D. dissertation, Grace Theological Seminary, 1986; Walter K. Price, *Jesus' Prophetic Sermon* (Chicago: Moody, 1972); James F. Rand, "The Eschatology of the Olivet Discourse," Th.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1954, and "A Survey of the Eschatology of the Olivet Discourse," *BSac* 113 (1956) 162-73, 200-213; Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold the King: A Study of Matthew* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1980) 266ff.; and John F. Walvoord, *Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come* (Chicago: Moody, 1974) 179ff. For a comprehensive survey of various views, see George C. Fuller, "The Structure of the Olivet Discourse," Th.D. Dissertation, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1964, pp. 11-52.

<sup>2</sup>See, e.g., Harold Fowler, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 4 vols. (Joplin, MO: College, 1985) 4.389ff.; R. T. France, *The Gospel According to Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale NT Commentaries (Leicester/Grand Rapids: Inter-Varsity/Eerdmans, 1985) 333ff.; J. Marcellus Kik, *Matthew Twenty-four: An Exposition* (Swengel, PA: Bible Truth Depot, 1948); and R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, Tyndale NT Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961) 223ff.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 474ff.; William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973) 846ff.; Anthony T. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 114ff.; and George Eldon Ladd, *The Presence of the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 309ff.

<sup>4</sup>This seemingly novel approach is found in D. A. Carson, "Matthew," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 495ff. and David Wenham, "This Generation Will Not Pass . . . : A Study of Jesus' Future Expectation in Mark 13" in *Christ the Lord*, ed. H. H. Rowdon (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1982) 127-50.

toward the emphasis upon alertness. The rest of the discourse, 24:42-25:46, seems to turn from the didactic to the parenetic in its repeated stress upon alertness, faithfulness, and service in view of the unknown hour of Christ's return. With this in mind, this study will present the salient features of each of the four major views on each of the four main sections of the passage. Each view will be evaluated in terms of strengths and weaknesses. The limited scope of the study precludes the inclusion of source critical issues relating to the synoptic problem (Mark 13; Luke 21). Also, there will be no treatment of the *vaticinia ex eventu* issue.<sup>5</sup> It is assumed that Matthew records a reliable account of the teachings of the historical Jesus.

It is concluded here that the traditional preterist-futurist view is preferable. Matt 24:4-14 describes the course of the present age, during which "enduring to the end" and "preaching the gospel of the kingdom" are the Church's duties. In 24:15-28 the "abomination of desolation" is understood to refer both to the A.D. 70 destruction of Jerusalem and to the ultimate abomination against God's people committed by the eschatological antichrist. Christ's return to earth is described in 24:29-31. Finally, 24:32-41 underlines the certainty of the prophecy's fulfillment with the assertion that Jesus' contemporaries will not die before they see his prophecy fulfilled.

#### MATTHEW 24:4-14

##### *Futurist View*

This view is generally held by dispensationalists, who understand this section as a reference to eschatological times just before<sup>6</sup> or during<sup>7</sup> the "great tribulation" period. Some go so far as to state that Matthew does not record Jesus' answer to the first part of the disciples' question about the destruction of the temple.<sup>8</sup> Since the pretribulation rapture of the Church has already occurred by the time of the temple's destruction, the passage is viewed as having only a secondary application to the Church. Instead, the disciples to whom Jesus is

<sup>5</sup>The question of "prophecy after the event" is raised by some who doubt that Matthew faithfully reports Jesus' actual teaching here. Instead it is posited that the "prophecy" originated after the A.D. 70 destruction of Jerusalem. For evaluative discussions of this question and the related "little apocalypse" theory see G. R. Beasley-Murray, *A Commentary on Mark 13* (London: Macmillan, 1957) and *Jesus and the Future* (London: Macmillan, 1954); Bo Reicke, "Synoptic Prophecies on the Destruction of Jerusalem" in *Studies in the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. D. W. Aune, NovTSupp 33 (Leiden: Brill, 1972) 121-34; and J. A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976) 13-30.

<sup>6</sup>Toussaint, *Matthew*, 271.

<sup>7</sup>Barbieri, "Matthew," 76.

<sup>8</sup>Barbieri, "Matthew," 76; Rand, "Survey," 166; and Walvoord, *Matthew*, 182.

speaking represent Jewish believers during the eschatological tribulation. In fairness it should be noted that some have taken a portion<sup>9</sup> or all<sup>10</sup> of this section in reference to the Church age. However, these expositors tend to be exceptions to the trend and even they are not consistent in their approach.

Such an understanding of 24:4-14 is doubtful on several grounds. First, the disciples will soon become the nucleus of the Church, so it is difficult to understand why Jesus would speak to them as representatives of an eschatological Jewish remnant. Matthew cannot be consistently understood as a gospel for such a remnant. It is the only gospel to use the word ἐκκλησία (16:18; 18:17). Its topical arrangement of Jesus' teachings into discourse blocks (chapters 5-7; 10; 13; 18; 23-25) is especially appropriate for the use of the Church. Most dispensationalists grant that at least some of these discourses are directly intended for the Church. Also, most would agree that the stirring mandate for discipleship with which Matthew concludes is incumbent upon the Church today. Thus this interpretation does not fit Matthew's characteristic emphasis.<sup>11</sup>

Neither does this view fit the immediate occasion of the discourse, the disciples' question of 24:3. Their immediate concern was the destruction of the beautiful temple precinct which they viewed with great pride (24:1; cf. Mark 13:1; Luke 21:5). To assume that Matthew passes over this aspect of their question is unwarranted. Indeed, this was the main burden of their question. They seem to view the end of the age and the coming of Christ<sup>12</sup> as the outcome of the temple's destruction. Therefore it is very doubtful that Matthew expected his readers to consult Mark or Luke in order to find an answer to the first part of their question.<sup>13</sup>

This view also has problems with the content of 24:4-14, which belabors a warning against undue eschatological speculation. False

<sup>9</sup>H. A. Ironside, *Expository Notes on the Gospel of Matthew* (New York: Loizeaux, 1948) 313-18; Price, *Jesus' Prophetic Sermon*, 47-60; and Rand, "Survey," 164. Commonly 24:4-8 is viewed as describing the present age, but even these verses describe Israel's experience, not the Church's.

<sup>10</sup>E. Schuyler English, ed., *The New Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford, 1967) 1033. Here verses 4-14 are viewed as having a double interpretation describing the general course of the age with intensified unrest during the tribulation. For a similar view see Walvoord, *Matthew*, 183.

<sup>11</sup>Basic to this discussion is the relationship between the Kingdom, the Church and the millennium. The view taken here is that the Kingdom is a much broader entity than the millennium. The Church is the agency of the Kingdom during this age. Thus there is no antithesis between the Kingdom and the Church.

<sup>12</sup>Matthew brackets the nouns σημεῖον and συντελείας with one article, indicating that they are two aspects of a unified whole. See note 20 for support.

<sup>13</sup>As in Walvoord, *Matthew*, 182.

messiahs and wars should not alarm the disciples. These things are included in God's program but are not harbingers of the end (οὐπω ἐστὶν τὸ τέλος, 24:6). Wars, famines, and earthquakes seem to be nearly routine events which signal but the beginning of Messianic woes (ἀρχὴ ὠδίνων, 24:8). Treachery, persecution, and apostasy will mark the age, but the disciples must persevere in obedience (24:13) and gospel proclamation to all nations (24:14). Only then will the end come. It is evident that all the events spoken of in this section have been frequently observed throughout the history of the Church. To suggest that 24:13 describes physical deliverance at the end of the tribulation<sup>14</sup> does not fit either the immediate context or Matthew's repeated stress upon perseverance as a mark of genuine discipleship. The attempt to distinguish an eschatological "gospel of the kingdom" (24:14) from the Church's message today<sup>15</sup> is disturbing in view of the finality of our Lord's redemptive work.

The manner in which dispensationalism has traditionally handled this section is thus weak on several fronts. However, this approach to Matthew 24 is not mandatory for dispensationalism. Contemporary dispensationalists should rethink this area of NT exegesis.

### *Preterist View*

Those who stress the A.D. 70 destruction of the temple tend to view 24:4-14 as a warning against premature eschatological speculation.<sup>16</sup> In this view there is nothing here about the eschatological tribulation period. Just the opposite emphasis is found. Jesus is attempting to discourage his disciples from assuming that the type of events mentioned here presage the end. Thus it is evident that advocates of this view would echo the concerns expressed above about the standard dispensational view of the passage. According to France, the destruction of the temple signals the end of any special status for Israel but does not indicate the end of all things.<sup>17</sup> France seems to indicate that the events of 24:4-14 refer to Church history in general, but Fowler takes this section as describing only the days up to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.<sup>18</sup> Accordingly, he believes that the worldwide preaching of 24:14 had occurred before the temple was destroyed.

<sup>14</sup>Walvoord, *Matthew*, 184.

<sup>15</sup>Barbieri, "Matthew," 77. Paul Lee Tan is one futurist who argues for an essential identity of the gospel of the kingdom with the Church's present message. See Tan's *The Interpretation of Prophecy* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 1974) 261, n. 2.

<sup>16</sup>France, *Matthew*, 337.

<sup>17</sup>France, *Matthew*, 339.

<sup>18</sup>Fowler, *Matthew*, 4.427-28.

The strength of this view is clear—Jesus does emphasize that these events are not signs of the end. Also, the Church's responsibility to persevere and to evangelize is stressed. However, two problems can be mentioned. First, France emphasizes that Jesus to some extent attempted to correct the disciples' close connection between the fall of Jerusalem and the end of all things.<sup>19</sup> This may be true to a limited degree. However, France uses a weak syntactical argument to buttress his understanding. Alluding to the second part of the disciples' question of 24:3 (καὶ τί τὸ σημεῖον τῆς σῆς παρουσίας καὶ συντελείας τοῦ αἰῶνος), he comments that the disciples equated the coming of Christ and the end of the age as the same event. While no one would argue that these two events were widely separated in the disciples' minds, France overstates the syntactical evidence for his view. The fact that one article governs both nouns indicates a close connection or unity between them, but does not necessarily mean that both words describe the same event.<sup>20</sup> In itself this is a small thing, but France uses it to argue that the disciples were wrong in viewing the A.D. 70 fall of the temple as the beginning of the end. So this syntactically weak argument is also suspect from the standpoint of a widely recognized phenomenon of biblical prophecy, the "foreshortening" of perspective in which "near" and "far" events are viewed together. This point will be developed later in this study.

Another difficulty concerns Fowler's insistence that 24:14 was fulfilled by A.D. 70.<sup>21</sup> To support this contention he adduces Acts 2:5; Rom 1:8; 10:18; and Col 1:6, 23. However, it is doubtful whether these texts are analogous to Matt 24:14, which doubly stresses the universality of gospel preaching—ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ οἰκουμένῃ . . . πᾶσιν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν. Acts 2:5 merely mentions that Jews and proselytes from all nations were in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. Rom 1:8 concerns the reputation of the Roman church which had evidently spread (among other Christians?) throughout the whole world (κόσμος). Even Rom 10:18 (Isa 65:2) and Col 1:23, admittedly strong texts for Fowler's view, should be read in view of Rom 15:19; 16:23ff. which indicate that Paul still wished to take the gospel to previously unreached regions (Spain). Such texts do not approximate the breadth

<sup>19</sup>France, *Matthew*, 337.

<sup>20</sup>See the discussion of this construction, sometimes called the "Granville Sharp construction/rule" in H. E. Dana and J. R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek NT* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1955) 147; A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek NT in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman, 1934) 785–89; Herbert W. Smyth, *Greek Grammar* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1956) 291; Nigel Turner, *Syntax*, vol. 3 of *A Grammar of NT Greek* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1963) 181–82; and Maximilian Zerwick, *Biblical Greek*, trans. J. Smith (Rome: Scripta Pontificii Institutii Biblici, 1963) 59–60.

<sup>21</sup>Fowler, *Matthew*, 4.433–34.

of Matt 24:14. Another problem with this approach is hinted at by France, who indicates that setting a definite time or situation for the fulfillment of 24:14 would also allow the calculation of a date for the final consummation at Christ's return (*contra* 24:36).<sup>22</sup>

#### *Traditional Preterist-Futurist View*

This approach sees a double reference beginning at 24:15, but understands 24:4-14 as a general description of the Church's life in the world. It is probably correct to say that this general approach is held by a majority of conservative sources. Also, sources holding this view represent widely diverging eschatological positions. Gundry, for one, takes this section's events as "noneschatological characteristics of the Church age."<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Hendriksen notes that 24:4-14 serves to correct the mistaken notion that such events as are detailed here indicate the nearness of the end.<sup>24</sup> However, he does believe that worldwide gospel proclamation (24:14) is a "preliminary sign" of Christ's return.

Since this approach to 24:4-14 is similar to that of the previous view and antithetical to the common dispensational view, its merits and demerits have already been cited. Little needs to be added here. Hendriksen may have a point that the worldwide preaching of the gospel is the most definite "sign" mentioned in this section,<sup>25</sup> but even this is sufficiently vague so as to discourage undue speculation. How can anyone know with precision when this point of worldwide evangelism has been reached? Additionally, the words "and then" (καὶ τότε) do not necessarily mean that the end will come "immediately after" (cf. 24:29) worldwide evangelism.

#### *Revised Preterist-Futurist View*

This view entails an approach to 24:4-14 which does not differ appreciably from the previous view. This section of Jesus' discourse is taken to describe the current age of the Church. Carson takes the "birth pains" of 24:8 as the trials which "stretch over the period between the two advents" of Christ. Such trials must occur due to the fact that the age of the Kingdom's inauguration involves conflict and tension. Only with the consummation of the Kingdom at the second advent will trials be removed and messianic glories attained.<sup>26</sup> In the

<sup>22</sup>France, *Matthew*, 339.

<sup>23</sup>Gundry, *Matthew*, 475.

<sup>24</sup>Hendriksen, *Matthew*, 852.

<sup>25</sup>Hendriksen, *Matthew*, 856.

<sup>26</sup>Carson, "Matthew," 498.

meantime, the Church should realistically expect to experience these trials as it carries out its mission to the world.

There is no need to belabor the evaluation of this view since it is similar to the last view in its approach to 24:4–14. The crucial issues have already been noted.

### *Conclusion*

The evaluation of the four approaches to Matt 24:4–14 reveals two basic approaches. The futurist view takes at least 24:9–14 as a description of the eschatological tribulation period. The other three views occupy common ground in understanding this section as a description of the Church's experience during the current age. It must be concluded that the futurist view, held by traditional dispensationalists, is unconvincing. It does not satisfactorily handle the contextual emphasis on the fall of Jerusalem and the need for perseverance in evangelism. On the other hand, the rather extreme version of the A.D. 70 view held by Fowler is also unsatisfactory in its limitation of these events to the period before the destruction of Jerusalem. It rather appears that the experiences mentioned by Jesus span the past, present, and future history of the Church.

#### MATTHEW 24:15–28

### *Futurist View*

The futurist view of 24:15–28, commonly held by dispensationalists, is tied directly to a futurist view of the abomination of desolation in Daniel 9:27; 11:31; 12:11. These texts are taken to be predictive of the eschatological enemy of God's people, the antichrist.<sup>27</sup> 2 Thess 2:3–4 and Rev 13:11–18 are adduced as parallels and interpreted in a strictly futuristic manner. Dan 9:27 in particular looms large as a precise indicator of the time of the fulfillment of Matt 24:15, the middle of the seven year eschatological tribulation period. The unequalled distress of the period (24:21) is emphasized. Thus Matt 24:15–28 is locked tightly into the second half of Daniel's seventieth week, with little or no reference to the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70.

While it may be granted that the ultimate outcome of this prophecy involves the eschatological tribulation and antichrist, it is doubtful that this is the sole concern of the prophecy. The futurist view may be challenged on two fronts. First, as was alleged in the evaluation of the futurist view of 24:4–14, the immediate concern of the disciples regarding the destruction of the temple is totally neglected in this approach. The disciples become representatives of an eschatological

<sup>27</sup>Toussaint, *Matthew*, 273–74.

Jewish remnant, not the Church. All of this is wrapped up in the mistaken notion that Matthew's presentation of Jesus as King involves a Jewish, not a Church focus.

A second problem with this approach is its simplistic approach to Daniel's prophecy of the abomination of desolation. While it may be granted that Dan 9:27 and 12:11 refer to the ultimate eschatological tribulation, such is not the case for 11:31, which refers to Antiochus Epiphanes, as is noted even by recent dispensational commentaries on Daniel.<sup>28</sup> Who is to say that Jesus' reference to Daniel is strictly eschatological? Might he be alluding also to Antiochus Epiphanes' intertestamental desolation of the temple as an example of the coming Roman destruction and of the ultimate eschatological destruction? An affirmative answer is probable, given other implications in Daniel.

Daniel begins with a providentially ordained "desolation" of the temple by Nebuchadnezzar (1:1-2). Later, Belshazzar arrogantly furthers the sacrilege (5:2-4, 22-23) and forfeits his kingdom. Daniel demonstrates remarkable faith under trial in praying toward a "desolate" Jerusalem (6:10; cf. 1 Kgs 8:46-51; 2 Chron 8:36-39). Daniel's vision of the four kingdoms describes the fourth kingdom (generally taken by conservatives to be Rome) in a manner which implies the desolation of Jerusalem (7:8, 11, 19-21, 25). The following vision of the ram and the goat includes an explicit description of the desolation of temple worship (8:11-14, 23-25). Of course, it is a matter of considerable debate whether the little horns of Daniel 7 and 8 represent the same kingdom. Since the goat of Daniel 8 is clearly Greece (8:21), it is probable that the "desolation" prophecies of Daniel 7 and 8 describe both the third and fourth kingdoms, Greece and Rome. In the next chapter Jerusalem's "desolation" as fulfillment of covenant curse and prophetic oracle plays a prominent role in Daniel's moving confession and petition for restoration (9:7, 12, 16, 19-20). As is well known, the prophecy of the 70 weeks features the rebuilding of Jerusalem and its subsequent destruction (9:24-27), and even dispensational commentators agree that the A.D. 70 destruction is in view in 9:26.<sup>29</sup>

The upshot of all this is that Jesus' reference to the abomination of desolation in Daniel calls up a complex typology of prophecy and fulfillment stretching all the way from Nebuchadnezzar to the eschatological antichrist. There is no warrant for supposing that the abomination of desolation is a narrow prediction which is fulfilled solely by the eschatological antichrist. There is good reason to believe that the

<sup>28</sup>John F. Walvoord, *Daniel: The Key to Prophetic Revelation* (Chicago: Moody, 1971) 268; John C. Whitcomb, *Daniel* (Chicago: Moody, 1985) 150-52; and Leon Wood, *A Commentary on Daniel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973) 301-2.

<sup>29</sup>Walvoord, *Daniel*, 230-31; Whitcomb, *Daniel*, 133; and Wood, *Daniel*, 256.

various historical desolations of Jerusalem and the temple, including those of Nebuchadnezzar, Antiochus Epiphanes, the Roman conquest (63 B.C.), Gaius Caligula (which was planned but not accomplished in A.D. 40-41), the zealots (A.D. 68), the Romans in A.D. 70 and 135, all provide anticipatory fulfillments which lead up to the ultimate desolation of the eschatological antichrist. The futurist approach correctly stresses the consummation of the prophecy but does not recognize the anticipatory background. All this argues for some sort of "double reference," "near-far" approach<sup>30</sup> if the prophecy is to be handled holistically.

### *Preterist View*

In contrast to the view which sees Matt 24:15-28 as exclusively future, this approach interprets it as exclusively past. Just as many dispensationalists take the passage as an answer to only the second part of the disciples' question, so advocates of this view take it as an answer only to the first part. It is noticed that generalities give way to specifics in this section. References to Judean geography (24:16, 26) are stressed as limiting the prophecy to A.D. 70.<sup>31</sup> The cryptic words "Let the reader understand" (24:15) are viewed as encouraging Matthew's readers to apply the prophecy to their own situation.<sup>32</sup> The false prophets and messiahs mentioned here (24:23-26) are viewed as those who led Israel into the Jewish War. In short, this approach takes the passage at face value when it describes the abomination as something which the disciples themselves will experience.

No doubt there is much which is attractive in this position. The observation that 24:15-28 contains more precise information than 24:4-14 is correct. The stress upon the disciples' own lifetime in the first century does justice to the natural meaning of the text. However, it is doubtful if this section can be totally "deeschatologized." The relationship between "then the end shall come" in 24:14 and "so when you see . . . the abomination . . ." in 24:15 seems to indicate the end of the age and Christ's coming in the second part of the disciples' original question. The stress on the unparalleled nature of this judgment (24:21-22) does not seem to be exhausted by the A.D. 70 destruction, as severe as it was. In fact, such unparalleled judgment is placed in Dan 12:1-2 in the context of the final resurrection. As noted in the previous section, Daniel's abomination of desolation leads up to the ultimate eschatological antichrist, the final resurrection, and the reign of the saints with the Son of Man. Therefore the

<sup>30</sup>As in Ladd, *The Presence of the Future*, 310ff.

<sup>31</sup>France, *Matthew*, 340.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

preterist view is inadequate as an explanation of all the details of the passage. It is argued next that the traditional preterist-futurist view more adequately handles all these details.

### *Traditional Preterist-Futurist View*

Advocates of this approach argue that a common feature of biblical prediction is the complexity of its fulfillment. Several terms, such as "prophetic foreshortening,"<sup>33</sup> "prophetic outlook/perspective,"<sup>34</sup> "double fulfillment,"<sup>35</sup> "comprehensive character,"<sup>36</sup> and "generic fulfillment"<sup>37</sup> have been coined to describe this difficult phenomenon. Applied to this passage, the idea is that the A.D. 70 destruction of Jerusalem betokens and anticipates the ultimate eschatological time of the end. The prophet necessarily uses the particularistic language of his own time to describe both the anticipatory and consummatory aspects of his prediction.<sup>38</sup> The prophet does not perceive the historic gap between the two aspects of his prophecy. Indeed, to speak of two aspects is possible only from the perspective of hindsight, a luxury available only to the modern scholar. Rather the prophet, in this case Jesus, sees the events as a unity. In this case that unity centers in the abomination of desolation, which has already been demonstrated to involve a complex series of events in the book of Daniel. Jesus' prophecy builds on this Danielic background.

Support for this understanding of 24:15–28 can be drawn generally from 1 Pet 1:10–12, where prophetic perspective is described as involving the prophets' desire to grasp more fully the relationship between the sufferings and glory of the Messiah. In some fashion they realized that their prophecies would find full significance in the future

<sup>33</sup>Hendriksen, *Matthew*, 846.

<sup>34</sup>Ladd, *The Presence of the Future*, 315. See also Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Chicago: Moody, 1959) 136–39. McClain's warning that a "hard and fast chronological scheme" should not be read into the Olivet Discourse (p. 365) has not been heeded by many dispensationalists.

<sup>35</sup>Gundry, *Matthew*, 491.

<sup>36</sup>H. N. Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, trans. H. deJongste, ed. R. O. Zorn (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1962) 497.

<sup>37</sup>Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "The Promise of the Arrival of Elijah in Malachi and in the Gospels," *GTJ* 3 (1982) 221–33, following W. J. Beecher, *The Prophets and the Promise* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1963 reprint), especially pp. 127–32. Elsewhere Kaiser takes pains to distinguish between "double reference" and "dual sense." He is also correct that the "double reference" concept tends to mislead if it is taken to imply that *only* two foci are involved in the fulfillment of the prophecy. See his "Legitimate Hermeneutics" in *A Guide to Contemporary Hermeneutics*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 130–32. The essay originally appeared in *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979) 117–47.

<sup>38</sup>Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, 496–97, 525.

Messianic age (1:12). Since the first coming of Christ, additional revelation and hindsight enable interpreters to understand that this Messianic age involves two comings of Christ. As Briggs pointed out long ago,<sup>39</sup> just as the first coming of Christ provided the key to our present partial understanding of OT prophecy, so also the second coming of Christ will provide the ultimate solution to the problem of the chronological unfolding of events yet future today. Thus it is not surprising that there is difficulty in handling the precise chronology of Matt 24:15-28. Christian interpreters today may grasp the overall chronological vista of prophecy better than the OT prophets themselves did. However, those living "between the times" will need to exercise humility and patience as they wait for the ultimate clarification. In the meantime, it is appropriate to recognize the theological unity of predicted events both past and present. This is what the preterist-futurist view of Matt 24:15-28 attempts to do.

Beyond this general basis, numerous specific examples of this type of prophetic fulfillment can be adduced. In the passage at hand, "false Christs" and "false prophets" (ψευδόχριστοι καὶ ψευδοπροφήται, 24:24; cf. 24:5) are prominent. In view of other NT passages, such language should be understood from an anticipation/consummation perspective (2 Thess 2:7-8; 2 Pet 2:1; 1 John 2:18, 22; 4:1-3; 2 John 7; Rev 2:20; 13; 17; 19:20). Further afield, in the OT prophecy of the Day of the Lord (יהוה יום), current events which signal eschatological catastrophe are difficult to separate from that catastrophe.<sup>40</sup> Malachi's prophecy of the return of Elijah (Mal 4:5-6) is fulfilled to a degree in John the Baptist (Luke 1:16-17; Matt 11:14; 17:12-13), but many would argue that the prophecy is not yet consummated (John 1:21; Matt 17:10-11; Rev 11:3ff.).<sup>41</sup> Jesus' reference to Isaiah in the synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4:16-21; Isa 61:1-2) also implies the fulfillment of only part of Isaiah's prophecy at the first coming, leaving the rest for the end times. Peter's understanding of OT prophecy in Acts 2-3 also seems to demand an anticipatory fulfillment in the Church which arguably leads up to the eschatological turning of Israel to its Messiah.<sup>42</sup> James' understanding of Amos

<sup>39</sup>Charles A. Briggs, *Messianic Prophecy* (New York: Scribner's, 1886) 55.

<sup>40</sup>E.g., the locust plague of Joel 1 is the basis for the prophecy of the day of the Lord in chapter 2. A perusal of commentaries on Joel will indicate that it is not easy to distinguish where the description of the locust plague ends and where the prophecy of the day of the Lord begins.

<sup>41</sup>See Kaiser, "The Promise," 221-33 for a discussion of the various views.

<sup>42</sup>This is argued by Darrell Bock, "The Reign of the Lord Christ," paper presented to the dispensationalism study group prior to the national ETS meeting in December 1987. Copies of this paper and responses to it are available from Prof. Gerry Breshears at Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, Portland, OR.

(Acts 15:13-18; Amos 9:11-12) should probably be understood in this manner, along with NT texts which find fulfillment of the OT New Covenant in the Church. In terms of NT theology, it would seem that "inaugurated" eschatology, as an alternative to the tunnel vision and selective use of data which characterize the "consistent" and "realized" schools, is based upon this understanding of the theological continuity of the two comings of Christ. Finally, many specific details of salvation history may be understood to flow from the "mother promise" or *protevangeli-um* of Gen 3:15. While the immediate context of this passage as judgment and its stress upon struggle have often been neglected or understated in Messianic exegesis, there can be little doubt that it should be understood as a seminal though cryptic announcement of a struggle which culminates in the ultimate victory of the Messiah over Satan (Matt 12:28-29; John 12:31-32; Gal 3:19; 4:4; Rom 16:20; Heb 2:14-15; Rev 12:9; 20:2, 10). In short, those who take Matt 24:15-28 as a double reference prophecy can appeal to a wide range of passages which have been understood similarly by a wide range of scholars.

Though he grants that this approach is "possible," Carson finds two faults with it. First, it has difficulties with such time references as "immediately after . . . those days" (εὐθέως δὲ μετὰ . . . ; 24:29) and "this generation" (ἡ γενεὰ αὕτη; 24:34), and second, it has been held by some who have attributed error to Jesus in his perspective of the timing of the parousia.<sup>43</sup> On further examination, these two problems are both due to the chronological complexity of the events which fulfill the prophecy. Those who demand chronological precision have occasionally concluded that Jesus' timing was in error. However, this is unwarranted due to the theological continuity between anticipatory and consummatory aspects of the prophecy. Those who seek chronological precision also confuse the nature of biblical prophecy with modern historiography, implying modern notions of precision that would have been foreign to the times of the prophet and the genre of his revelation.

#### *Revised Preterist-Futurist View*

The revised preterist-futurist view comes into its own in its unique handling of this section of Matthew 24. Verses 15-21 are taken to refer strictly to the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, but verses 22-28 are viewed as a return to the subject of verses 4-14, the age of the Church as a time of general distress for believers.<sup>44</sup> Thus 24:15-28 alternately describes in 15-21 a special time of tribulation during the

<sup>43</sup>Carson, "Matthew," 492.

<sup>44</sup>Carson, "Matthew," 502.

course of the Church's history and in 22–28 the general course of the age. Verses 15–21 are limited to A.D. 70 due to the geographical and cultural details which fit first century Judea.<sup>45</sup> Verses 22–28 are expanded to the general course of the age due to terminology (“the elect,” “all flesh”), themes, and synoptic considerations which tie these verses back to verses 4–14.<sup>46</sup> If one is impressed with the difficulties of the views already cited, this view becomes an attractive alternative, though it is not without problems of its own.

A major difficulty is the sharp break posited between verses 21 and 22. Verse 22 begins with *καὶ*, giving the impression of continuity with what precedes. The natural and near antecedent to *αἱ ἡμέραι ἐκείναι* is *θλίψις μεγάλη* in verse 21, and this in turn goes back to *ἐν ἐκείναις ταῖς ἡμέραις* in verse 19. To break the smooth flow of the paragraph which comprises verses 15–28 and to seek a remote antecedent involving an entirely different referent seems to be unjustified if not unjustifiable. It is doubtful whether Jesus' original listeners or Matthew's later audience would have been able to make such a shift in perspective given such little warning. To be sure, 15–21 does use geographically and culturally limited terms. But how else could Jesus speak meaningfully to his audience? It is commonly recognized that prophecy involves such limited terms in description of the distant future.<sup>47</sup> If this is so, it is doubtful if verse 21's description of unparalleled tribulation can legitimately be limited to the severe though localized destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, especially when this language in Dan 12:1–2 occurs in the context of the final resurrection and judgment. It may be granted that 22–28 uses broader terms and themes which cohere with 4–14, but these factors may be satisfactorily explained from the double reference view without the hypothesis of a sharp change of subject matter. Finally, there is the admitted novelty of the view.<sup>48</sup> While novelty does not necessarily invalidate an interpretation, it does place upon it the burden of proof. This is Carson's cogent argument against the common dispensational view, yet it tells just as well against his own view.

### *Conclusion*

The discussion of interpretations of Matt 24:15–28 reveals that the determining factor is the abomination of desolation in 24:15. Interpreters relate the term to the A.D. 70 destruction of Jerusalem and to the eschatological antichrist. It is concluded here that those views which disjunctively interpret the section in terms of either A.D.

<sup>45</sup>Carson, “Matthew,” 499.

<sup>46</sup>Carson, “Matthew,” 502.

<sup>47</sup>Briggs, *Messianic Prophecy*, 45, 55–56.

<sup>48</sup>Carson, “Matthew,” 495.

70 or an eschatological situation are inadequate. Rather both events are in view here. The standard preterist-futurist view, termed "double reference," is preferable to the revised approach which sees alternating reference between the specific event of A.D. 70 and the general course of the age.

#### MATTHEW 24:29-31

##### *Futurist View*

In keeping with their general approach, dispensational advocates of this view understand this section to be a description of Christ's second coming to the earth. The "tribulation of those days" (24:29) is viewed strictly as the eschatological seventieth week of Daniel. Thus the posttribulational coming of Christ to judge the nations (cf. 25:31-46), not the pretribulational rapture of the Church, is in view in 24:29-31. Much is made of the differences between these two phases of Christ's return, sometimes in terms of a strong distinction between Israel and the Church.<sup>49</sup>

While there are general doubts about dispensationalism's strict futurism and its rigid Israel/Church distinction, most interpreters would agree with dispensationalists that Christ's second coming to earth is described here. However, it is doubtful that the tribulation language in the discourse is strictly eschatological. For Matthew, persecution in this life is to be expected by believers (2:13; 5:10-12, 39-48; 10:16-33; 12:14; 13:21; 16:18, 21; 17:12; 20:18-19; 21:33-41; 22:6; 23:29-37; 26:4, 45; 27:12, 39-44). Thus θλίψις (24:9), θλίψις μεγάλη (24:21), and τὴν θλίψιν τῶν ἡμερῶν ἐκείνων (24:29) should not be assumed to refer only to the time of eschatological trouble. Rather the tribulation which is the general experience of believers in this age will be intensified to an unparalleled extent in eschatological days. It may be granted that the eschatological intensification is stressed in 24:21, 29, but it is against the background of the general tribulation, including that pertaining to the A.D. 70 destruction of Jerusalem, which anticipates it.

Since the real issue in the interpretation of 24:29-31 is raised by the advocates of the preterist view, the discussion now turns to that position.

##### *Preterist View*

In contrast to the strict futurism of the preceding view, proponents of this view continue to stress the A.D. 70 destruction of Jerusalem as the event described in 24:29-31. France in advocating this

<sup>49</sup>Toussaint, *Matthew*, 277; Walvoord, *Matthew*, 190.

view grants that this language “to modern ears sounds like a description of the ‘parousia and the close of the age’ (i.e., the second part of the question in v. 3).”<sup>50</sup> However, there are several factors which lead France and others away from this widespread approach. It is first recognized that the genre of the OT language alluded to here is apocalyptic. Thus one should not press the details in a woodenly literal fashion. There are also contextual factors which influence the view, chiefly the “immediately after” phrase which introduces 24:29. Obviously the second coming of Christ did not occur immediately after the destruction of Jerusalem, but there is a sense in which the heavenly vindication of Jesus did. Also it is noted that 24:30 does not use *παρουσία* but instead *ἐρχόμενον* to describe Christ’s “coming,” and that there is no mention of the “earth” as Christ’s destination. Therefore these verses describe the heavenly glory of the ascended Messiah (29–30), along with his worldwide program for evangelization (31). The passage should be understood “as a highly symbolic description of the theological significance of the coming destruction of the temple and its consequences.”<sup>51</sup>

Since the other three views discussed in this study tend to agree that 24:29–31 describes the second coming of Christ to the earth, it is necessary to analyze this disparate approach carefully. Some of its arguments are plausible and deserve attention. Perhaps the foundation of the view is its understanding that Daniel 7, alluded to in 24:30, describes a scene of heavenly vindication with no connection to the return of Christ to the earth. However, the vision of Daniel 7 shows how the Kingdom of the Son of Man forever supplants the reign of earthly kings (7:17). The Son of Man is vindicated in order to exercise universal and everlasting rule over all the human dominions under heaven (7:14, 27). Thus it is difficult to see Christ’s ascension to heavenly glory as the ultimate fulfillment of Daniel 7. Though it is true that the earth is not mentioned explicitly as Christ’s destination in either Daniel 7 or Matt 24:29–31, it is clear in both passages that the sphere of his rule is the earth. For that matter, the earth is not even mentioned in 24:37, 39, 42, 44! Thus this line of argumentation is weak in that it depends upon silence. Though the apocalyptic genre of Daniel 7 and the other OT passages alluded to must be noted, one need not handle these texts in a literalistic fashion to demonstrate that the earth is the sphere of the Messiah’s reign.

The preterist view is also suspect in its handling of Matthew’s context and theology. Since Jesus has just mentioned the nature of his parousia in 24:27, it is natural to assume that the events of 24:29–31 continue to describe the parousia. If “the tribulation of those days”

<sup>50</sup>France, *Matthew*, 343.

<sup>51</sup>France, *Matthew*, 345–46.

in 24:29 cannot be limited to the A.D. 70 events, as argued earlier, then there is no reason to understand 24:30 merely as a heavenly coming. Besides, Christ's heavenly session began 35-40 years before the destruction of the temple. The Gentile mission also began long before the destruction of the temple, so it is difficult to substantiate the theological connection asserted in this view. Further, to view Christ's coming with glory and angels as a reference to the Church's mission would be foreign to Matthew's use of these ideas elsewhere in his gospel. Three other passages (16:27, 19:28, and 25:31) connect a glorious coming with angels to the return of Christ to judge and rule the earth. The fact that these passages all use forms of ἔρχομαι, not παρουσία, to describe this coming carries no weight at all, since the latter term occurs only in Matt 24:3, 27. On the other hand, forms of ἔρχομαι regularly describe both the first and second coming of Christ to the earth (11:3; 21:9, 40; 22:11; 23:39; 24:44, 46, 50; 25:19; 26:64). Therefore this approach to 24:29-31 cannot be sustained.

#### *Traditional Preterist-Futurist View*

There is nothing particularly unique about this position's handling of this section. In agreement with all the positions except the preterist view just discussed, this approach views 24:29-31 as a prediction of Christ's glorious return to the earth for judgment. Premillennialists holding the view will speak of the beginning of the millennial reign at this juncture. Others will speak of the general resurrection and the last judgment.

The evaluation of this approach will be determined by one's appraisal of the argumentation of the last section on the preterist view. Those who hold that position make much of the heavenly vindication of the Son of Man in Daniel 7. It would appear, however, that the traditional preterist-futurist view is well able to handle Daniel 7 as implying both the heavenly inauguration and earthly consummation of God's Kingdom. The inauguration stage began at the ascension, as other texts in Matthew may imply (10:23, 16:18-19, 28; cf. Acts 2:29-36; 1 Cor 15:20-28; Rev 5:9-10). The consummation stage will begin at the second coming. In the meantime, the ascended, glorified, authoritative Messiah sends his Church forth with his commission (28:18-20). This truth is sometimes neglected in strict futuristic approaches. It appears that only an inaugurated eschatology can handle the legitimate insights of both the preterists and the futurists, and that the preterist-futurist or double reference view best fits this sort of eschatology.

The preterist-futurist view is also able to handle the problem occasioned by the "immediately after" of 24:29. In deference to an orthodox Christology, traditional dispensationalism handles 24:15-28

as strictly futuristic. Thus the return of Christ to earth immediately follows the eschatological tribulation. The same doctrinal compunctions underlie the preterist view, which handles 24:29–31 in a fashion which matches its handling of 24:15–28: Christ's heavenly vindication immediately follows the destruction of Jerusalem. In contrast to both of these approaches, the preterist-futurist view holds that the anticipatory A.D. 70 destruction was not clearly distinguished from the consummating eschatological judgment in the prophetic perspective. Thus the A.D. 70 destruction of Jerusalem, the eschatological judgment of the world, and the return of Christ, are seen as one great unified whole. Ridderbos' comments to this effect are provocative:

Instead of applying such a historicizing exegesis, we must try to gain an insight into the character of the prophetic way of foretelling the future. And it should not be forgotten that this is something different than a diary of future events. Prophecies are not based on a partial transference of the divine omniscience to man. Jesus explicitly states that even the Son does not share in the divine omniscience with respect to the time of the end. The function of prophecy is consequently not that of a detailed projection of the future, but is the urgent insistence on the certainty of the things to come. This explains why, at the end of the vista, the perspective is lacking. The prophet sees all kinds of events that will come and he sees in all of them the coming of God. But he cannot fix a date for the events, he cannot distinguish all the phases in God's coming. To him it is one great reality.<sup>52</sup>

#### *Revised Preterist-Futurist View*

This approach to 24:29–31 does not differ appreciably from any of the main views except the preterist view. These verses are taken to describe the return of Christ to the earth. The problem of "immediately after" in 24:29 is relieved since this approach takes 24:22–28 as a description of general events throughout the age of the Church. Thus "the tribulation of those days" refers all the way back to the generic tribulation of 24:9, not to the "great tribulation" of 24:21. In other words, the entire interadvent period is in view,<sup>53</sup> and the second coming immediately follows this indeterminate period of time.

This approach handles 24:29–31 more successfully than does the preterist view. However, its manner of alleviating the problem of "immediately after" in 24:29 depends upon its identification of "the tribulation of those days" as the entire interadvent period. And this identification depends upon the alternating reference given to 24:15–28, with 15–21 describing the A.D. 70 destruction and 22–28 describing

<sup>52</sup>Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, 524–25.

<sup>53</sup>Carson, "Matthew," 504–5.

the Church age. The difficulties of splitting the reference of 15-28 at verse 22 have already been discussed in that section of this study. Suffice it to say here that such an interpretation of "those days" in 24:22 seems to go against the flow of the immediate context and chooses a remote antecedent for the expression. Therefore, this approach to 24:29-31 is dubious in this respect.

### *Conclusion*

The most obvious distinction between the four views of 24:29-31 is that the preterist view is alone in denying that these verses refer to the second coming of Christ. It is concluded here that the other views are correct; the arguments for taking 24:29-31 as a symbolic description of the theological significance of the destruction of the temple are not convincing. Beyond this basic matter, the preterist-futurist view best handles the relationship of 24:29-31 to 24:15-28.

#### MATTHEW 24:32-41

### *Futurist View*

Though some futurists have succumbed to the allure of date-setting,<sup>54</sup> most take the implications of 24:36 seriously and speak of the imminent, "any moment," return of Christ. Most of the discussion among dispensationalists seems to be concerned with whether 24:40-41 speaks of those believers "taken" in pretribulational rapture or of those unbelievers "taken" in judgment. Those who look to the near context for analogy point out that those "taken" in the flood were judged (24:39). However, this analogy may be disputed since "took" in 24:39 is ἔρεν and "taken" in 24:40-41 is παραλαμβάνεται. Those with a broader approach to the analogy note that the angels will gather the elect and leave the non-elect (24:31). The former judgment view is generally held today,<sup>55</sup> and it better fits the perspective of traditional dispensationalism that the entire discourse has only a secondary application to the Church. Thus the emphasis upon alertness is intended for the people of God living during the tribulation, though it can have secondary application to the Church.

Problems with traditional dispensationalism's view that this discourse concerns Israel, not the Church, were addressed in the first

<sup>54</sup>The furor surrounding Edgar Whisenant's *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Could be in 1988* is the most recent example of the dangers of datesetting. Though Hal Lindsey's approach was mild in comparison to Whisenant's, it is profitable to consult Samuele Bacchiocchi, *Hal Lindsey's Prophetic Jigsaw Puzzle* (Berrien Springs, MI: Biblical Perspectives, 1985). Reviewed by David L. Turner in *GTJ* 7 (1986) 252-54.

<sup>55</sup>For the view that the rapture is not taught here see Barbieri, "Matthew," 79; Toussaint, *Matthew*, 281; and Walvoord, *Matthew*, 193-94.

major section of this study. The need for alertness is the Church's primary duty, not merely a secondary application. The preoccupation of some dispensationalists with the intricacies of who is taken and who is left seems to miss the urgent appeal of the passage for alertness. As Carson says, who is taken and who is left "is neither clear nor particularly important,"<sup>56</sup> since the crucial point is alertness in view of the unexpected separation which Christ's return will swiftly bring. One tends to wonder whether traditional dispensationalism's strict futurism has muffled the urgent ethical appeal of the passage.

The most pressing problem in this section for all of the views is the meaning of "this generation" (ἡ γενεὰ αὐτή), which "will not pass away until all these things are fulfilled" (24:34). Generally futurists take "this generation" as either the Jewish nation<sup>57</sup> or as the eschatological generation alive at the time of the fulfillment of this prophecy.<sup>58</sup> Therefore the verse is taken either as a promise that the nation of Israel will be preserved to the end or as a warning that those who see the fulfillment begin will live to see its consummation.

These approaches to "this generation" must be scrutinized carefully. Ridderbos is correct that the verse is turned into a truism if "this generation" refers merely to Israel as a nation or even to those alive at the end.<sup>59</sup> What is more, Jesus' use of γενεά in Matthew does not support such an idea. Thirteen of the forty NT uses of γενεά occur in Matthew. It is doubtful if any of them mean anything other than "the sum total of those born at the same time, . . . contemporaries."<sup>60</sup> Matt 24:34 is one of six texts in Matthew which couple γενεά with the demonstrative pronoun (11:16; 12:41, 42, 45; 23:36; 24:34). It is virtually certain that in all these Matthean uses the meaning is simply Jesus' contemporaries. Though at times a qualitative nuance is attached implicitly or explicitly (12:39, 45; 16:4; 17:17), the word never loses its quantitative or temporal force. Therefore, lexical support for the idea that the word means "nation" or "kind of people" is marginal or not nonexistent, in spite of assertions to the contrary sometimes found in the commentaries. Of course, traditional dispensationalism's view of γενεά is constrained by other factors. If γενεά refers to Jesus' contemporaries, and Jesus pronounces that they

<sup>56</sup>Carson, "Matthew," 509.

<sup>57</sup>E. Schuyler English, *Studies in the Gospel According to Matthew* (New York: Revell, 1935) 179; William Kelly, *Lectures on the Gospel of Matthew* (New York: Loizeaux, 1911) 451-53; and Rand, "Survey," 205-6.

<sup>58</sup>Barbieri, "Matthew," 78; and Toussaint, *Matthew*, 279-80.

<sup>59</sup>H. N. Ridderbos, *Commentary on Matthew*, trans. R. Togtman (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987) 450.

<sup>60</sup>BAGD, 153-54. Cf. Matt 1:17 (4x); 11:16; 12:39, 41, 42, 45; 16:4; 17:17; 23:36; 24:34.

will not die before the great tribulation, then Jesus was wrong, and that is unthinkable. So to remove the tension it is convenient to redefine γενεά. However, the better part of wisdom is to rethink the strict futuristic grid which dispensationalists have traditionally placed upon 24:1-34.

### *Preterist View*

In this view Jesus announces that his contemporaries will live to see the destruction of Jerusalem. Since the second coming to earth, the topic of the second part of the disciples' question of 24:3, has not yet been mentioned, all that is involved here is the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in A.D. 70. Jesus' listeners will still be alive when that event occurs. Thus the preterist view has a simple answer to the problem of "this generation" in 24:34. In fact, it may not be an overstatement to say that this view is chiefly motivated by the desire to avoid this problem. The normal meaning of the word is accepted with great gusto, and sometimes other views are accused of basing their exegesis upon a preconceived theological bias: "Were it not for prior commitments to a particular eschatological [*sic*] view, the common reader would understand Jesus to mean that His own contemporaries would live to witness the great events He predicted."<sup>61</sup>

While the above stricture is not lacking in force, in reality every view of this discourse is unavoidably influenced by theological presuppositions. The preterist view commendably takes γενεά in its normal sense, but in order to maintain a high Christology it handles 24:29-31 in a highly questionable fashion, as already indicated. There is a better option, one which attempts to read 24:29-31 and γενεά in 24:34 naturally, all the while preserving a high Christology.

### *Traditional Preterist-Futurist View*

The traditional preterist-futurist approach to this section generally stresses the urgency of Christ's warning about alertness. Since it takes 24:29-31 as a reference to Christ's second coming, it is faced with tension when it comes to "this generation" in 24:34. Proponents of the view handle this tension differently. Hendriksen supplies six reasons why he takes γενεά as a reference to the nation of Israel.<sup>62</sup> Gundry first seems to favor the normal view of γενεά as "contemporaries" but then shifts to a qualitative emphasis on γενεά as a "kind" of people who will experience the tribulation Christ predicts.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>61</sup>Fowler, *Matthew*, 4.509.

<sup>62</sup>Hendriksen, *Matthew*, 868-69.

<sup>63</sup>Gundry, *Matthew*, 491.

This leaves the temporal extent of the word open. Ridderbos flirts with γενεά as "contemporaries" and seems to accept this temporal view in the recent English translation of his Matthew commentary. However, in *The Coming of the Kingdom* he leans to the qualitative view after a long discussion.<sup>64</sup> In his understanding γενεά refers to an objectionable mentality which rejects the very prophetic word which it will ironically experience in its own lifetime.<sup>65</sup> Thus he interprets γενεά much like Gundry.

The problem with this exegesis is its lexical base. While it is granted that γενεά may take on qualitative force from its context and modifiers, it cannot be demonstrated that a temporal force is ever absent in its NT usage. Carson does not overstate the case when he speaks of "highly artificial" attempts to overthrow the normal temporal meaning of the word, a word which "can only with the greatest difficulty be made to mean anything other than the generation living when Jesus spoke."<sup>66</sup> But is it possible to maintain the normal temporal meaning of γενεά while interpreting 24:29-31 as a reference to the second coming of Christ? Some have attempted to do this by limiting πάντα ταῦτα in 24:34 to only the signs which came before the second coming of Christ. A case can be made for this based upon the use of πάντα ταῦτα in 24:33 as a reference to the budding of the fig tree which signals the nearness of the summer in 24:32. After all, seeing the buds (preliminary signs) is not the same as seeing summer (Christ's return). This case can be strengthened by once again stressing that prophecy is not merely history written before it occurs. Prophetic perspective involves the union of individual events in a coalesced whole. By additional revelation and hindsight believers today can differentiate many of the individual events. Ridderbos expresses this well:

Here again we are confronted with the condensed and undifferentiated character of Jesus' portrayal of the future. . . . The starting point for His whole speech was the coming destruction of the temple. Since from the perspective of prophecy this event was telescoped with the Lord's great future, Jesus could say that the generation that witnessed the destruction of the temple "certainly would not pass away until all these things have happened." He thus regarded the future in an undifferentiated manner. Later, in the light of fulfillment, it became evident that "all these things" would not come at once, and that they therefore would be seen only in part by the generation of Jesus' day. On a factual level, there is no difference between this interpretation and the view

<sup>64</sup>Ridderbos, *Matthew*, 450-51; *The Coming of the Kingdom*, 500-502.

<sup>65</sup>Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, 502.

<sup>66</sup>Carson, "Matthew," 507.

that the phrase "all these things" referred only to the signs. The two views are not identical, however, for in my interpretation Jesus did not use the phrase with that restriction in mind. Exegesis has to assume a historical viewpoint in places like this and base its conclusions on the prophetic nature of eschatology. . . .<sup>67</sup>

It is concluded here that the traditional preterist-futurist view best serves three important considerations in this text: (1) its genre as biblical prophecy, (2) the more natural understanding of 24:29-31, and (3) the lexical meaning of γενεά. Jesus' contemporaries will see "all these things," at least in their anticipatory fulfillment at the A.D. 70 destruction of Jerusalem. In Jesus' perspective (24:36) his second coming to earth *could* have occurred immediately after the A.D. 70 conflagration. From a modern perspective these events are best related in a theologically unified anticipation/consummation framework. The passage is Hebrew prophecy, not modern historiography.

#### *Revised Preterist-Futurist View*

Carson's articulation of this approach to 24:32-42 differs little from the above articulation of the traditional preterist-futurist view. The word γενεά in 24:34 is taken to refer to Jesus' contemporaries, who are repeatedly and pointedly warned about their need to be prepared for his return. "All these things" in 24:33-34 is interpreted to mean the preliminary signs of 24:4-28 which characterize the general course of the age. This is based upon the distinction between budding and summer which is observed in 24:32. Thus the signs during the course of the age demonstrate the certainty and nearness of the return of Christ but do not permit one to pinpoint its date (24:36).<sup>68</sup>

The strengths of this position center in its exegesis of "this generation" and "all these things." Both are handled with due deference to lexicography and immediate context. Only two quibbles need be mentioned. First, as argued earlier, Carson's semi-preterist approach to 24:4-28 is problematic in its handling of 24:15-21 as referring only to the A.D. 70 events, and in its hypothesis of a remote antecedent for "those days" in 24:22, which results in 24:22-28 referring to the entire interadvent age, not to A.D. 70 and the eschatological tribulation. This leads to a second concern related to the question of prophetic genre. It seems that Carson's approach to 24:32-42 would

<sup>67</sup>Ridderbos, *Matthew*, 451.

<sup>68</sup>Carson, "Matthew," 507. Agreeing that "all these things" in 24:33-34 refers to the signs, not the return of Christ, is C. A. Briggs, *The Messiah of the Gospels* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1894) 159-60.

only be strengthened by acknowledging some sort of double reference scheme, as this study has advocated. While a double reference perspective is incompatible with his exegesis of 24:4–28, it fits nicely into his exegesis of this section.

### *Conclusion*

The examination of the various views of 24:29–31 reveals a common thread of Christological concern. The point of departure is a high Christology requiring the absolute veracity of his every word. The tension is due to the “this generation” saying in 24:34. Futurists have traditionally resolved the tension with an extremely doubtful definition of “generation.” Preterists have resolved the tension with an extremely doubtful interpretation of 24:29–31. Both the traditional and revised preterist-futurist views take the generally accepted understandings of 24:29–31 and “generation” in 24:34. The tension is resolved by relying upon the genre of biblical prophecy and/or by limiting the antecedent of “all these things” in 24:33–34. These last two approaches involve considerable overlap and are generally much more successful in handling the tensions of the passage.

### CONCLUSION

Since conclusions have been inserted into each of the main sections of this study, there is no need to repeat them here. It has been suggested that the traditional preterist-futurist view is the most promising solution to the exegetical difficulties of this passage. It is believed that such a perspective is true to the genre of OT prophecy, and that Jesus' discourse is in generic and theological continuity with the OT prophets. However, two concerns arise. First, the term “double reference” is problematic, and current alternatives are not much of an improvement. Second, and more crucial, the genre of biblical prophecy is not grasped sufficiently. It is good news that Hendrickson (Peabody, MA) plans to reprint Briggs' *Messianic Prophecy*. However, fresh studies are needed from a current evangelical perspective.<sup>69</sup>

A point which calls for reflection concerns the relationship between exegesis and systematic theology. It is interesting to note how a particular exegesis of an individual passage comes to be linked with a certain theological system as if the exegesis is required by the system. No doubt this is the case at times, but not as often as is commonly assumed. John Martin has recently shown that “there is no single

<sup>69</sup>Perhaps Walter Kaiser's recent work, *Back Toward the Future: Hints for Interpreting Biblical Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989) will make a positive contribution to this area of study.

dispensational approach to the Sermon on the Mount."<sup>70</sup> With this I would concur, and I would add that there is no compelling reason for dispensationalists to take the futurist view of the Olivet Discourse. It appears that dispensationalists must come to terms with Matthew as a Gospel for the Church of all ages, not merely for an eschatological Jewish remnant. And since the similarity between Matthew 24 and Revelation 6 is often noted, it may be that dispensationalists should rethink their standard approach to this passage also.

The eschatological discourse of Christ in Matthew 24-25 stretches the interpreter to the limits of human understanding and Christian obedience. One must come to terms with two genres of biblical literature, narrative and prophecy. One must permit one's eschatological notions to be scrutinized and hopefully refined in the inevitable hermeneutical circle/spiral. One is confronted by the authoritative words of Jesus the Messiah to be alert and ready for the end, but these words tend to lose their force when read by affluent American Christians who have imbibed not a little of today's yuppie mentality. Why be so concerned about the end when things are going so well in the present?

A quick reading of Christ's eschatological discourse reveals that only about one third of it (perhaps as little as 24:1-31) is expressly didactic in nature. The rest (24:32-25:46) is parabolic and parenetic. The disciples on the Mount of Olives legitimately wanted to know about God's plan for the future, and so do we today. However, Jesus spent only half as much time on the bare facts of the future as he did on the implications of those facts. Those who emphasize theoretical reflection should be reminded to reflect upon duty as well. We have only begun when we have mastered the "what?" of the text. We complete our duty when we have served the "so what?"

"Therefore keep watch,  
because you do not know on what day your Lord will come."

"Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine,  
you did for me."

<sup>70</sup>John Martin, "Dispensational Approaches to the Sermon on the Mount," in *Essays in Honor of J. Dwight Pentecost*, ed. S. D. Toussaint and C. H. Dyer (Chicago: Moody, 1985) 35.