

AN INTERPRETATION OF MATTHEW 24—25

Part XXXI

by Thomas Ice

“Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.”

—Matthew 24:34

Preterism teaches that most, if not all, of the Book of Revelation and the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24—25; Mark 13; Luke 21) were fulfilled in conjunction with the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in A.D. 70. If this notion is granted, then almost all of Bible prophecy is not to be anticipated in the future, but is past history. Their false scheme springs forth from a misinterpretation of Matthew 24:34 (see also Mark 13:30; Luke 21:32), by which they launch an upside-down view of eschatology, which does not look to the future but instead gazes at the past.

PRETERIST VIEW

Preterist Gary DeMar says, “the generation that was in existence when Jesus addressed His disciples would not pass away until all the events that preceded verse 34 came to pass.”¹ In contrast with fellow preterist, Kenneth Gentry, DeMar believes that this passage requires that all of Matthew 24 and 25 must have been fulfilled in some way by A.D. 70 through the Roman invasion and destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple.² DeMar says, “Every time ‘this generation’ is used in the New Testament, it means, without exception, the generation to whom Jesus was speaking.”³ DeMar’s assertion is simply not true! “This generation” in Hebrews 3:10 clearly refers to the generation of Israelites that wandered in the wilderness for 40 years during the Exodus.

Newly revealed preterist, Hank Hanegraaff takes a similar position in his recent novel, when his character Caleb says, “I want it remembered that we have all agreed that the truth of the prophecies of Jesus on the Mount of Olives is meaningless unless *all* the events He predicted occur, not just some.”⁴ The narrative in the novel subsequently supports a first century fulfillment of Christ’s prophetic discourse in a manner commonly espoused by preterists.⁵ “When Jesus says ‘this generation,’ He doesn’t mean ‘that generation,’ . . .” declared Hanegraaff in a recent interview. “This was the archetypal tribulation and it took place in the first century.”⁶

HOW TO FIND THE CORRECT VIEW

But how do we know that almost all of the other New Testament uses of “this generation” refer to Christ’s contemporaries? We learn this by going and examining how each is used in their context. For example, Mark 8:12 says, “And sighing deeply in His spirit [Jesus is speaking], He said, ‘Why does this generation seek for a sign? Truly I say to you, no sign shall be given to this generation.’” Why do we conclude that “this generation,” in this passage refers to Christ’s contemporaries? We know this because the referent in this passage is to Christ’s contemporaries, who were seeking for a sign from Jesus. Thus, it refers to Christ’s contemporaries, because of the controlling factor of the immediate context.

When interpreting the Bible you cannot just say, as DeMar and many preterists do, that because something means X . . . Y . . . Z in other passages that it has to mean that in a given verse.⁷ NO! You must make your determination from the passage under discussion and how it is used in that particular context. Context is the most important

factor in determining the exact meaning or referent under discussion.⁸ That is how one is able to realize that most the other uses of “this generation” refer to Christ’s contemporaries.

Matthew 23:36 says, “Truly I say to you, all these things shall come upon this generation.” To whom does “this generation” refer? In this context, “this generation” refers to Christ’s contemporaries because of contextual support. “This generation” is governed or controlled grammatically by the phrase “all these things.” All these things refer to the judgments that Christ pronounces in Matthew 22—23. We should now realize that in each instance of “this generation,” the use is determined by what it modifies in its immediate context. The scope of use of every occurrence of this generation is determined in the same way.

The same is true for Hebrews 3:10, which says, “Therefore I was angry with this generation.” “This generation” is governed or controlled grammatically by the contextual reference to those who wandered in the wilderness for forty years during the Exodus.

THE CORRECT VIEW

Now why does “this generation” in Matthew 24:34 (see also Mark 13:30; Luke 21:32), not refer to Christ’s contemporaries? Because the governing referent to “this generation” is “all these things.” Since Jesus is giving an extended prophetic discourse of future events, one must first determine the nature of “all these things” prophesied in verses 4 through 31 to know what generation Christ is referencing. Since “all these things” did not take place in the first century then the generation that Christ speaks of must be future. Christ is saying that the generation that sees “all these things” occur will not cease to exist until all the events of the future tribulation are fulfilled. Frankly, this is both a literal interpretation and one that was not fulfilled in the first century. Christ is not ultimately speaking to His contemporaries, but to the generation to whom the signs of Matthew 24 will become evident. Dr. Darrell Bock concurs:

What Jesus is saying is that the generation that sees the beginning of the end, also sees its end. When the signs come, they will proceed quickly; they will not drag on for many generations. It will happen within a generation. . . . The tradition reflected in Revelation shows that the consummation comes very quickly once it comes. . . . Nonetheless, in the discourse’s prophetic context, the remark comes after making comments about the nearness of the end *to certain signs*. As such it is the issue of the signs that controls the passage’s force, making this view likely. If this view is correct, Jesus says that when the signs of the beginning of the end come, then the end will come relatively quickly, within a generation.⁹

Preterists have *reversed* the interpretative process by declaring first that “this generation” *has* to refer to Christ’s contemporaries, thus all these things had to be fulfilled in the first century. When one points out that various events in Matthew 24 were not fulfilled, preterists merely repeat their mantra of “this generation,” saying that all these things had to be fulfilled in the first century. In fact, when one compares the use of “this generation” at the beginning of the Olivet Discourse in Matthew 23:36 (which is an undisputed reference to A.D. 70) with the prophetic use in Matthew 24:34, a contrast seems obvious. Jesus is contrasting the *deliverance* for Israel in Matthew 24:34 with the predicted *judgment* of Matthew 23:36.

I do not think that any of the events in Matthew 24:4-31 occurred in the first century. I have shown in earlier commentary on Matthew 24:4-31 that none of these events took place in the past, thus, this is still a future time to which our Lord envisions.

PROPHETIC PERSPECTIVE

It is common for preterists to speak of what they call “audience relevance.” By this, preterists believe that since the New Testament was written in the first century then it has to relate directly to the original audience. “The original audience factor cannot be overlooked; the message of Revelation must be relevant to them,”¹⁰ proclaims Dr. Kenneth Gentry. “With the particularity of the audience emphasized in conjunction with his message of the imminent expectation of occurrence of the events,” continues Dr. Gentry, “I do not see how preterism of some sort can be escaped.”¹¹ The same logic is often applied to the Olivet Discourse. E. B Elliott rightly notes, “Not a vestige of testimony exists to the fact of such an understanding.”¹² Such a notion is pure assumption and if actually true would render it impossible for Scripture to provide a prophetic statement beyond the generation (40 years) that received the prediction.

I believe that Jesus uses the phrase “this generation” in Matthew 24:34 as a tool of literary emphasis. As noted earlier, Jesus is contrasting the *deliverance* for Israel in Matthew 24:34 with the predicted *judgment* of Matthew 23:36, based upon the varied responses of two different generations of Israelites. This provides the basis for Christ’s contrast of the two generations—the first generation unbelieving while the final one is trusting.

The future sense of “this generation” in a judgment context sets a precedence for its interpretation in contexts that are both judicial and eschatological. If the desolation experienced by “this generation” in Matthew 23:36 can be understood as a future fulfillment that came some 40 years later, it should not be a problem to understand the Tribulation judgment as a future fulfillment that will come on the generation that will experience it at the end of the age. However, the difference is not simply a span of time, but the nature of that time as eschatological. For the “this generation” of Matthew 24:34, Mark 13:30, and Luke 21:32, “all these things” (Matthew 24:34; Mark 13:30; Luke 21:28) must refer contextually to the events of the “Great Tribulation,” the conclusion of “the times of the Gentiles,” the coming of Christ in glory, and the regathering and redemption of Israel, all of which are not only declared to be future by Jesus at the time of speaking (Mark 13:23), but also cast in typical eschatological language (for example, “end of the age,” “such as not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, *nor ever shall,*” “powers of the heavens will be shaken”).¹³

Instead of audience relevance, it important to know the prophetic relevance from which a prophecy is given. This means that sometimes a prophetic revelation is spoken from the timeframe of when a prophecy will take place. Such is often the case in Revelation (for example 21:9-10). John is often shown a vision of the future and thus he speaks from the perspective as if those future events were taking place at the time in which he is observing them and writing them down. Jesus is speaking in His Olivet Discourse in verse 34 of Matthew from the timeframe of a still future time and is saying “this generation.”

We see the same kind of thing going on in Psalm 2:7, where the Father says of the Son, “Thou art my Son; *this day* have I begotten thee.” This passage speaks of the Father’s incarnation of the Son, which interpreters believe occurred at Christ’s first coming. Yet David wrote this Psalm a thousand years earlier. An audience relevance assumption would surely lead to a gross misinterpretation of this prophetic Psalm. Looking at the Psalm as one that is speaking from a timeframe of the distant future is the only way that it makes contextual sense. The same is true of Christ’s statement about “this generation” in His Olivet Discourse. He is speaking from the timeframe of the distant future. Maranatha!

(To Be Continued . . .)

ENDNOTES

¹ Gary DeMar, *End Times Fiction: A Biblical Consideration of the Left Behind Theology* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001), pp. 67-68.

² Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness: Obsession of the Modern Church* (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 1999), pp. 198-201.

³ DeMar, *End Times Fiction*, p. 68.

⁴ Hank Hanegraaff and Sigmund Brouwer, *The Last Disciple* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004), p. 93.

⁵ Hanegraaff and Brouwer, *Disciple*, pp. 92–96. Matthew 24:34 is featured in a two-page layout just following the acknowledgments connoting a preterist interpretation. Preterism is also clearly communicated in the “Afterword” on page 395.

⁶ Hank Hanegraaff on the preterist radio program “Voice of Reason,” (November 21, 2004) on the Internet at www.lighthouseproductionsllc.com/broadcast.htm.

⁷ See D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), p. 65.

⁸ See Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1991), pp. 106-09.

⁹ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), pp. 1691–92.

¹⁰ Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *He Shall Have Dominion: A Postmillennial Eschatology* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1992), p. 396.

¹¹ Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion*, p. 397.

¹² E. B. Elliott, *Horae Apocalypticæ*, revised edition, 4 vols. (London: Seeleys, 1851), vol. iv, p. 535.

¹³ J. Randall Price, “Historical Problems with a First-Century Fulfillment of the Olivet Discourse,” in LaHaye and Ice, editors, *End Times Controversy*, pp. 379-80.