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CRACKING "THE CODE" OF PRETERISM

A Review of Hank Hanegraaff's "The Apocalypse Code" and a Refutation of Preterism

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Hank Hanegraaff, radio's "Bible Answer Man," includes the following statement in the introduction to his new book, *The Apocalypse Code*: "Make no mistake: this is not the stuff of ivory-tower debates. The stakes for Christianity and the culture in the controversy surrounding eschatology are enormous!"[1] With the stakes so high, he's entered the fray—writing on the subject of the end times. In this work, Hanegraaff establishes then defends what he calls "Exegetical Eschatology." In so doing, he aspires to give a lesson in how to interpret what the Bible says while teaching his view of apocalyptic texts. As the reader progresses through *The Apocalypse Code*, Hanegraaff's view becomes clear: it is *partial preterism*.[2] This particular brand of eschatology has experienced a recent resurgence in evangelicalism, possibly fueled in part by a reaction to the popular *Left Behind* series,[3] but, popularity and theological trends do not determine truth. To engage this system of theology we must define *preterism*, determine whether it is Biblical, and declare the implications of this system of eschatology. When this is done, we will then discern some of the practical problems of preterism.

To accomplish these objectives, I will interact with several of Hanegraaff's prime arguments, but this article will not be a "classical" book review. Rather, since how he argues his position is standard for this system, I will use these arguments as a springboard to demonstrate why preterism fails the biblical test. What follows is best viewed as *a primer* that highlights the foundational arguments of preterism and then offers biblical reasons why these do not accurately reflect a proper understanding of the biblical texts relating to the end of the age.

Futurism vs. Preterism: Understanding the Debate

Until recently one's position on eschatology was, by and large, defined by their millennial position. Now, rather than asking whether one holds to premillennialism, amillennialism, or postmillennialism, the more common question is, Are you a *preterist* or a *futurist*?[4] And the debate between these two camps focuses on *when* the prophecies of the Olivet Discourse in the Gospels (Matthew 24-25, Mark 13, and Luke 21[5]) and the book of Revelation are fulfilled.

The term *preterism* is drawn from the Latin (*praeter*) meaning "past." Preterists postulate that these noted eschatological texts primarily prophesy the events of the destruction of the temple and the city of Jerusalem. According to this view, these prophecies were fulfilled in the Roman siege and destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.[6] It is important here to note the distinction between *partial* and *full* preterism. Full (or hyper) preterists believe that all of the prophecies regarding the second coming of Christ, most significantly the "resurrection" of believers, were fulfilled in the first century. Partial preterists hold that the majority of what is declared in the book of Revelation (and the Olivet Discourse) was fulfilled in the first century, yet there remains a future judgment, a resurrection of the dead, and a bodily return of Christ. Hanegraaff, as well as the other preterists I will interact with in this critique (unless otherwise noted) are firmly in the *partial* preterist camp. For the most part, both partial preterists and futurists see full preterism as outside the realm of "the faith" in accordance with Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 15.[7]

Futurism holds that the primary eschatological texts of the New Testament prophesy about the events surrounding the return of Christ to consummate history. While a broad spectrum of eschatological positions lay claim to futurism, their common thread is that all hold that the Olivet Discourse and book of Revelation will primarily be fulfilled in the future.

So to summarize: **Preterism** is the system of interpretation that understands the Olivet Discourse and the book of Revelation to primarily prophesy the events surrounding the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, which has *past*. **Futurism** is the system of interpretation that understands the Olivet Discourse and the book of Revelation to primarily prophesy the events surrounding and including the second coming of Christ, which is *yet future*.

"The Coming of the Son of Man" – When?

Before proceeding, we must discuss "the coming of the Son of Man." When the Lord proclaims this event in His teaching, is He speaking of the destruction of Jerusalem or His second coming? In Matthew's account of the Olivet Discourse, Jesus' teaching culminates with this passage:

> And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory. And He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other. **(Matthew 24:30-31)**

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According to preterism, this discussion of Jesus "coming" does not describe a literal, visible return, but rather a figurative coming in which Jerusalem is destroyed by the Roman armies.[8] Hanegraaff rhetorically asks:

> Certainly no one is so benighted as to think that coming on the clouds in this context is anything other than language that denotes judgment. Why then should anyone suggest that Christ's coming on the clouds in the context of the Olivet Discourse would refer to anything other than the judgment Jerusalem would experience within a generation just as Jesus prophesied?[9]

So, the preterist considers Christ's coming in the Olivet Discourse to be figurative language describing the destruction of Jerusalem. Later in this article I will point out that there are strong biblical reasons for us to believe this is *not* speaking of the destruction of Jerusalem.[10]

Preterists likewise see the book of Revelation as a figurative description of the events surrounding the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 and argue vociferously that John's apocalypse was written prior to this date.[11] Commenting on the futurist position Hanegraaff notes that, "it is foolhardy to suggest that Revelation is principally a book describing what will take place in the 21st century,"[12] and then proceeds to note that the imagery of Revelation, although primarily about the destruction of Jerusalem, has typological implications for the consummation.[13] These interpretations may appear strained to many—I include myself among that group—but the *central* argument of the preterist system is the "time texts."

The Time Texts: The Heart of Preterism

R.C. Sproul, in his book, *The Last Days According to Jesus*, states that "the central thesis . . . of all preterists is that the New Testament's time frame references with respect to the parousia point to a fulfillment within the lifetime of at least some of Jesus' disciples."[14] Most of the books that advocate this view devote many pages arguing that these "time texts" make it necessary for what was prophesied in the primary N.T. eschatological texts to have a first century fulfillment. If we can show that these texts are better understood within the futurist framework, preterism as a system will have lost much of its support. To begin the challenge I will address the two prominent "time frame" references, and why preterists fail to properly interpret these texts.

Time Text 1: "This Generation"

After declaring the birth pangs, the hard labor of tribulation, and the coming of the Son of Man, Jesus declares in **Matthew 24:34, "Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place."** Perhaps no other text is offered as frequently by preterists as proof for their position. Now hear popular preterist proponent Gary Demar's reasoning on "this generation":

> The texts that govern the timing of the Olivet Discourse prophecy – Matthew 23:36 and Matthew 24:34 – make it clear that Jesus was speaking of the events leading up to and including the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 . . . If people fail to recognize the timing of these events set by Scripture and the historical context of Jesus' words, they will always be led astray by those who keep insisting that it's our generation that is living in the end times.[15]

Preterists present their interpretation of "this generation" in the Olivet Discourse as an unassailable apex of their system. However, is their interpretation the most compelling given the usage and context of the term in Matthew's Gospel? I don't think so. The typical futurist interpretation is that this verse refers to a future generation, or time frame. The typical preterist interpretation is that this verse refers to a past generation, or time frame. A problem presents itself in that both of these interpretations fail to adequately account for several important interpretive factors.

In the Gospel of Matthew, the phrase "this generation" is primary used in the *pejorative* sense towards a *people* group; Israelites who *rejected* Him. To view this as a "time frame" reference (i.e., 40 or 80 years) goes against the usage of the term in Matthew. This term isn't used in a *quantitative* manner (years on the earth); rather, it is used in a *qualitative* manner (describing people with certain spiritual qualities). If we view this term as *descriptive* of those in ethnic Israel who reject Messiah (which has continued since the first century) not only are we within the bounds of the usage of "this generation" in Matthew, but this interpretation also fits best with both the immediate context and the whole of Scripture. (See Bob DeWaay's excellent study in the second portion of this issue which further establishes the usage and meaning of this term in the Gospels).

The expectation for the salvation and restoration of ethnic Israel runs through Bible. It was prevalent in the Old Testament (Ezekiel 36:22-38), in the immediate wake of the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 1:6-8), and in Paul's teachings. The Apostle writes, "For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery—so that you will not be wise in your own estimation—that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in" (Romans 11:25). The issue of the restoration of Israel is pertinent to the Olivet Discourse. Just prior to the Discourse in Matthew, Jesus announces to "this generation": "For I say to you, from now on you will not see Me *until* you say, Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!'" (Matthew 23:39 *emphasis added*).

"This generation" *will* pass away, but this has yet to transpire—there remain unbelieving Israelites. But a time will come when there are no more unbelieving Israelites who reject Messiah. Those Israelites who remain will see their Messiah when they declare, by His sovereign grace, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord." The Lord will "come from Zion, He will remove ungodliness from Jacob" (Romans 11:26). But all the events Jesus outlined in the Olivet Discourse must be fulfilled before this occurs.[16]

This interpretation of "this generation" fits much better with Matthew's usage, with the immediate context of the Olivet Discourse, and the whole counsel of God. So ironically, preterism's chief text turns into solid support for both

futurism and the coming restoration of ethnic Israel when Christ returns.

Time Text 2: "I am coming quickly"

Like "this generation" in the Olivet Discourse, preterists stress that the "time texts" in the book of Revelation such as, "The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must soon take place" (Revelation 1:1), and "Behold, I am coming quickly" (Revelation 22:12a), demand that we view the prophecy to have a first century fulfillment, namely the events of the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Hanegraaff notes regarding these texts: "The natural reading of such phrases as 'what must soon take place' or 'the time is near' is that the events that follow are *fore* future and not *far* future."[17] Demar agrees on this point, adding: "Thus, the events of Revelation were near – close, at hand, impending, right around the corner – for those who first read the prophecy. If literalism is the standard, there is no other way to interpret these time words."[18] Preterists see "no other way" to interpret these terms except as pointing to a first century fulfillment. What preterists fail to incorporate is the entrenched "near expectancy/far fulfillment" dynamic that is found throughout the prophetic Scriptures.[19] The proclamations of "near expectancy" in the book of Revelation are the last in a line of similar passages found in the progressive revelation of the Bible. When interpreting the dynamics of New Testament prophecy we must be aware of the pattern of "prophecy and fulfillment" throughout the Bible. "Near expectant" exhortations frequently have far reaching fulfillment.

First, consider a text from the book of Zephaniah: "Near is the great day of the LORD, near and coming very quickly" (Zephaniah 1:14). The day was announced as "near" and coming "quickly," yet this day includes a terrifying end to the "all the earth" in judgment (1:2-3, 17-18), judgment of unbelieving Israel (3:1-7), and the Lord giving honor and praise to Israel as He defeats all her enemies and restores her fortunes (3:14-20). While the exile was looming (this being the near application), the great day of the Lord (far fulfillment) was announced to call Israel to faithfulness (2:1-3) and give comfort to the remnant (3:14-15) in light of this coming day. Declaring this all to be "figurative language" describing the events of the exile does not do justice to the text; much of what was prophesied simply does not refer to the near events of the exile. Likewise, in Joel 2 we read that the "day of the Lord" is "near," (2:1), yet the New Testament authors find the application of Joel's prophecies as having far-reaching fulfillment (see Acts 2:16-21, Revelation 6:12).[20]

It is important that we recognize the "near/far" and "telescoping" nature of many prophecies. The "near expectancy/far fulfillment" dynamic recognizes that many prophecies have a near application but ultimately have a far reaching fulfillment (cf. Haggai 2:6-7, Hebrews 12:26). The "telescoping" dynamic recognizes many prophecies may appear to be speaking of one continuous event, wherein reality the prophecy is fulfilled in successive periods (cf. Daniel 11:29-45, Malachi 3:1-2).

The above passages are just a sampling. These extensive proclamations of the promised near "day of the Lord," in both the Old and New Testaments caused many to respond negatively, thinking this entails "slowness." But we are admonished to not view these prophecies in such a manner. Rather, the patience of the Lord, and the delay of His wrath, is for *repentance*:

> But by His word the present heavens and earth are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men. But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day. The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance. (2 Peter 3:7-9)

Walter Kaiser's comments are insightful regarding the nearness of the "day of the Lord":

> [T]his day always had an impending nature to it. Though it found partial fulfillment in such events as Joel's locust plagues, the destruction of Jerusalem and the threat of national invasions, its final climactic fulfillment always remained in Christ's future return.[21]

What then *do* the statements "I am coming quickly," and other similar proclamations in Revelation, intend to convey? My answer is this: These proclamations call those who read and heed the message of Revelation to be comforted and remain faithful in light of Christ's sure coming to judge humanity and reward the righteous.[22] The preterist's interpretation of these texts lessens their intended function—in fact their interpretation strips them of their power. Throughout church history believers have looked to the impending return of Jesus Christ with urgency, an anticipation that parallels the "near expectation" texts in the OT that called Israel to be ready for their impending visitation (see Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 56:1). This function is highlighted in the last chapter of Revelation: "Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, *to render to every man according to what he has done*" (Revelation 22:12, emphasis added). Jesus' declaration "I am coming quickly," and the other similar texts in Revelation, calls every person to be faithful in light of the sure coming that He has promised. George Eldon Ladd notes regarding the Revelation "time texts":

> There is in biblical prophecy a tension between the immediate and the distant future; the distant is viewed through the transparency of the immediate. It is true that the early church lived in expectancy of the return of the Lord, and it is the nature of biblical prophecy to make it possible for every generation to live in expectancy of the end. To relax and say "where is the promise of his coming?" is to become a scoffer of divine truth. The "biblical" attitude is "take heed, watch, for you do not know when the time will come" (Mark 13:33).[23]

Jesus "coming" to destroy Jerusalem was *not* the church's motivation or expectation in the first century and nor is it ours.

Jesus coming to judge all that do not gather under His Gospel *is*. Again, 2 Peter speaks to this issue:

> But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up. *Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God*, because of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat! But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells. (2 Peter 3:10-13 *Emphasis Added*)

In my estimation, preterism is a system of "interpretive convenience." Even this passage in 2 Peter is interpreted by Hanegraaff to be primarily about the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.[24] Their interpretation of "near expectancy" passages is stressed to prove a first century fulfillment, while other passages (such as the above) are then forced into their paradigm. When preterists take consummation language and figuratively apply it to the events of A.D. 70, we must ask what language could the Biblical authors *possibly* have used to communicate the events of the second coming.[25]

In order to come to a well balanced view of biblical eschatology, one must recognize the "near expectation" texts, such as noted above, *and* the numerous texts that reveal "far fulfillment," the call for continual faithfulness until Christ comes, and the consummating language evident in these texts. When this is accomplished, we *then* can see the intended function of these near expectancy texts: to comfort the faithful with the future coming of Christ and call them to continued obedience in light of this impending event. Preterism fails repeatedly in this essential area of eschatological interpretation. Given these considerations (as well as several others), it is more compelling to interpret the "time texts" in Revelation as an exhortation to faithfulness and expectancy than to interpret these texts as a rigid time frame references that require a first century fulfillment.

The Interpretive Importance of the Thessalonian Epistles

Throughout *The Apocalypse Code,* Hanegraaff stresses a principle which he states that, if understood, "cracks the code" of the Biblical teaching on the Apocalypse.[26] He calls it "Scriptural synergy":

> [S]criptural synergy demands that individual Bible passages may never be interpreted in such a way as to conflict with the whole of Scripture. Nor may we assign arbitrary meanings to words or phrases that have their referent in biblical history. The biblical interpreter must keep in mind that all Scripture, though communicated through various human instruments, has one single Author. And that Author does not contradict himself nor does he confuse his servants.[27]

While I agree with this principle of Biblical interpretation cited by Hanegraaff, his *application* of this principle is sorely lacking. The root of many of the eschatological errors in his biblical interpretation is the ignoring or mishandling of pertinent texts. We see this most clearly in his (lack of) interaction with the Thessalonian epistles—throughout his whole work there are only a handful of references to the Thessalonian epistles. And when these texts are explored, the exposition is both superficial and deficient.[28]

However, the Thessalonian epistles are essential to our understanding of both the Olivet Discourse and the book of Revelation. The church in Thessalonica had both practical and doctrinal confusion regarding certain points of eschatology. To remedy these, Paul penned two epistles, teaching the church important precepts of Christ's second coming and the events associated. Because of these letters we received indispensable insight into the nature of Jesus' eschatological teaching.

Paul establishes several significant points of eschatology in correcting doctrinal confusion in the Thessalonian church. Paul declares that believers, both dead and alive, are resurrected when Christ comes (1 Thess. 4:13-18). The coming of Christ, or the "day of the Lord," will come at an unknown time (1 Thess. 5:1-2). Believers will experience relief from affliction when He appears (2 Thess. 1:7). Unbelievers will experience the eternal wrath of God when He appears (2 Thess. 1:9-10). The "man of lawlessness" will be revealed and then destroyed by Christ's coming at the day of the Lord. (2 Thess. 2:1-10).

Through exploring the linguistic links and the flow of arguments in both epistles, it is well established that Paul places all these events within the same time frame.[29] And these events *must* occur within the context of the second coming because Paul unambiguously affirms that the resurrection of believers happens at this time (1 Thess. 4:16-17). So how does this point speak to the subject of preterism?

The two Thessalonian epistles contain at least 24 allusions or references to the Olivet Discourse.[30] Most of the time, a handful of allusions will firmly establish that a Biblical author is drawing on a particular previous portion of Scripture. Yet, the Thessalonian epistles are *replete* with not only linguistic allusions but chronological ones as well.[31]

Renowned New Testament scholar, D.A. Carson states that "the discourse itself is undoubtedly a source for the Thessalonian epistles."[32] Paul draws upon Jesus' teaching in the Olivet Discourse to encourage and exhort the church in Thessalonica regarding the second coming of Christ and the events associated. These are not cryptic, apocalyptic writings, but straight-forward prose to a suffering church regarding "the blessed hope."[33] If Paul viewed and utilized the teachings of Jesus in the Olivet Discourse to declare the events surrounding the second coming, then we are on solid, "inspired" ground to affirm the Olivet Discourse is a prophecy primarily yet to be fulfilled.[34]

Using the principle of "Scriptural synergy," as Hanegraaff defines it, we do see the "apocalypse code" cracked, just not in the manner he suggests. As has been demonstrated, Paul draws on the teach-

ings of Christ in the Olivet Discourse to teach on the translation and resurrection of believers, the arrival of the man of lawlessness, and the wrath of God upon the ungodly. The inspired Apostle places these events in the context of the second coming of Christ which *has yet to transpire*. This provides compelling evidence that Paul understood and taught that the Olivet Discourse was *not* a teaching about the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, but rather the events surrounding the bodily return of Christ to resurrect His elect and repay the wicked. Only the most strained and dissuasive interpretations of the Thessalonian epistles will fail to recognize these dynamics.[35]

What Difference Does it Make?

Several other biblical considerations refute the preterist paradigm. And there are myriad other issues related to the realm of eschatology that need to be individually addressed: issues of apologetics, justice, hermeneutics, the perspicuity of the Scriptures, and the list goes on. My primary *practical* concerns regarding the preterist view of eschatology are twofold: It minimizes our future hope and removes a prime source of motivation for godly living. Christians throughout history have fled to the book of Revelation and the Olivet Discourse for comfort, encouragement, and motivation to live in light of the return of our King. By interpreting these texts as being already primarily fulfilled, the function of the Olivet Discourse, and the book of Revelation, is undermined. No matter how hard preterists may argue against this point, the function of these texts, to comfort and motivate the faithful, is grossly minimized by this paradigm. Although much still remains outside the realm of our knowledge, the Scriptures consistently proclaim the sure reality to come. The second coming of Jesus Christ, including the events surrounding it, is history that is yet to transpire. He is coming again and we need to heed his words calling us to preparation and faithfulness:

> Be on guard, so that your hearts will not be weighted down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of life, and that day will not come on you suddenly like a trap; for it will come upon all those who dwell on the face of all the earth. But keep on the alert at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are about to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man. (Luke 21:34-36)

May we continue to flee to the word of God for comfort, encouragement, and preparation for what is "yet to come." For the "coming of Christ" does not consist of Rome destroying Jerusalem, but rather the return of the risen King to consummate human history and set up His eternal Kingdom. Since our King is returning to repay the wicked and rescue His people, we are called to be both prepared and faithful in light of this reality. We must cling to the blessed hope of being resurrected to be with the risen King forever. Until this "great and terrible" Day arrives, may we live as ambassadors for the Gospel, pleading with the world to "Be reconciled to God" for, indeed, "the end of all things is near" (1 Peter 4:7).

End Notes

1. Hank Hanegraaff, *The Apocalypse Code*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007) xviii
2. Hanegraaff has been reluctant to call himself a preterist, yet his central arguments and exposition are standard for those in the partial preterist camp.
3. Given that many recent books espousing preterism (including *The Apocalypse Code*) address the "Left Behind" series, a reaction to the theology of this popular fictional series is a prime possible reason for the resurgence.
4. There are other eschatological paradigms such as historicism and idealism, but futurism and preterism are the most prevalent systems in evangelical theology.
5. Luke's eschatological discourse has so many distinctions from Matthew and Mark that many see this as a distinct teaching altogether. While I see this as having some merit, for the purposes of this article I will be grouping all three eschatological discourses in the synoptic Gospels together.
6. Preterists would be quick to point out that much of what they declare to have been fulfilled was not just in A.D. 70, but also the years surrounding. For the purposes of this article, I will be using the date A.D. 70 to correspond to all the events associated with the fall of Jerusalem at that time.
7. Kenneth L. Gentry, "The Historical Problem with Hyper-Preterism" in Keith A. Mathison, ed., *When Shall These Things Be? A Reformed Response to Hyper-Preterism*, (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing Company, 2004) 10, 28-33. This work is a collection of Reformed writers (both partial preterists and futurists) who critique hyper-preterism.
8. A popular modification of preterism was articulated by Beasley-Murray that is held by several evangelical scholars. Recognizing that the "coming of Christ" in the Olivet Discourse is best viewed as the consummation, Beasley-Murray limits the events that he sees taking place within the context of the first century to what Jesus listed before the announcement, thus excluding of the "coming of Christ." See, George Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Last Days*, (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1993) 448-449.
9. Hanegraaff, 84.
10. This does not mean that the destruction of Jerusalem was an insignificant historical event. In fact, in Luke's eschatological discourse there is a prophecy that is best viewed as specifically describing the destruction of the Jerusalem and dispersion of Israel in A.D. 70 (Luke 21:20-24).
11. The traditional dating of the book of Revelation is around A.D. 95.
12. Hanegraaff, 110. We must note that well grounded futurists do not insist that Revelation must take place in the 21st century, for we do not know the "times and the seasons" (1 Thessalonians 5:1, Acts 1:6-8)
13. Being a partial preterist and recognizing the need to preserve the truth of a future judgment, Hanegraaff sees the judgment of A.D. 70 as "typological" of the judgment to come (Hanegraaff, 134-36).
14. R.C. Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998) 25.
15. Gary DeMar, *End Times Fiction*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001) 114.
16. Many preterists see the need to defend Jesus from the skeptics by showing that these prophecies had a first century fulfillment. The benefit of this interpretation is that it preserves the prophecy of Christ without straining the consummating language of the Olivet Discourse.
17. Hanegraaff, 91.
18. Demar, 56-57.
19. To Hanegraaff's credit, he does recognize the need, on the basis of many of the Old Testament prophecies, to incorporate some mode of near/far fulfillment (Hanegraaff, 262-263 n. 23). Yet, his exposition still is inadequate because of his insistence to view the prophecies of the consummation to be seen through the "typology" of what is declared about the destruction of Jerusalem.
20. Another example of this is Ezekiel 36:22,

24-25 "Therefore say to the house of Israel, 'Thus says the Lord GOD, "It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for My holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you went . . . For I will take you from the nations, gather you from all the lands and bring you into your own land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols.'"

21. Walter Kaiser, *Hard Sayings of the Old Testament*, (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1988) 225.
22. Holman notes: "The dominate theme of the Apocalypse is clearly one of eschatological anticipation which seeks to encourage a lively expectation of the soon coming of Christ among those who must endure in an unfriendly world until that time." Charles L. Holman, *Till Jesus Comes: Origins of Christian Apocalyptic Tradition*, (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996) 142. Continuing on this point, the vivid descriptions of future judgment and cosmic renewal serve as the source of encouragement for all to endure and thus be vindicated by the coming of Christ and to participate in the new heavens and new earth.
23. George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 22-23.
24. Hanegraaff, 135.
25. See John MacArthur, *The Second Coming*, (Wheaton: Crossway 1999) 121-128 for helpful thoughts on the consummating language in the Olivet Discourse and the interpretive "slippery slope" partial preterists find themselves on by interpreting these metaphorically.
26. Hanegraaff, 227, 237.
27. Hanegraaff, 228-229.
28. See Hanegraaff, 212-213.
29. See Tracy L. Howard, "The Literary Unity of 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11," *Grace Theological Journal* 9.2 (1988), 163-190 for some helpful notes on the unity of this section. It is also germane to note that strict "telescoping" is not a suitable application to the Thessalonian epistles given the literary unity in both letters, and the intertwined relationship of the events described.
30. See G. Henry Waterman, "The Sources of Paul's Teaching on the 2nd Coming of Christ in 1st and 2nd Thessalonians" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 18 (1975), 105-13, for detailed exposition on this point.
31. See Howard, 180-190.
32. D.A. Carson "Matthew" in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 8:489.
33. This does not mean there are no interpretive difficulties with these epistles. Yet, the didactic nature of the epistles is easier to access than the apocalyptic and therefore leads us to the maxim of biblical interpretation that we should allow clearer passages of the Bible to cast light on the more obscure.
34. Many futurist, premillenial commentators see "near/far" fulfillment regarding the destruction of Jerusalem in the Olivet Discourse. The destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 was a "near" fulfillment with a greater "far" fulfillment yet to transpire in the context of the Second Coming. This is a compelling possibility given that this is a familiar pattern of prophecy and that the eschatological discourse in Luke, although distinct from the discourses in Mark and Matthew, has a vivid description of the "near" destruction and dispersion of Israel in A.D. 70 (Luke 21:21-24) which has language that is echoed in the other discourses (Matt. 24:15-19, Mark 13:14-18).
35. Partial preterists are caught between the proverbial "rock and a hard place" with the Thessalonian epistles. While the source of Paul's teaching is well established as the Olivet Discourse, they are hesitant to interpret 1 Thess. 4:13-18 (as well as other portions of these epistles) as being fulfilled in the first century because it is a central text that establishes the future resurrection of believers (see Hanegraaff, 57-58). The doctrinal point of the second coming and the future resurrection of believers is the primary point that distinguishes them from their heretical counterparts. For *full* preterists have no problem stating that this text is both referencing the Olivet Discourse and is prophesying a "spiritual resurrection" which was fulfilled in A.D. 70. See www.preterist.org/articles/matt.24_and_1_thess.4_compared.asp , www.preterist.org/articles/divito_letter.asp , www.preteristarchive.com/Preterism/preston-don_p_21.html for examples. Yet if partial preterists give way to the point that Paul is using the Olivet Discourse to teach on the future second coming their position is dealt a devastating blow. Therefore, the most compelling and biblical alternative is to see the Olivet Discourse, the Thessalonian epistles, and the book of Revelation as primarily prophesying the future time of consummation.

"This Generation" and its Preterist Exegetical Misuse
by Bob DeWaay

Several years ago I published an article about **Matthew 24:34** where I claimed that "this generation" was a pejorative term about rebellious Jewish leadership.[1] In today's article I will support that claim by providing a range of meaning study of the term "generation" (Greek *genea*) as used in the New Testament. I will show that the term "generation" is most often used in the New Testament in a qualitative (people of the same kind) not quantitative (people of the same time) sense.

The Greek word for generation is found 37 times in the New Testament. Only five of these are outside of the gospels and Acts. As with most words, it has a range of meaning depending on its context. When used in the plural, it denotes "succeeding generations of people" whether past or future and is used that way 8 times in the NT.[2] Of the 29 other instances of its use, the term clearly means during someone's lifetime or era—twice (**Acts 8:33** about Messiah and **Acts 13:36** about David's generation). It is the other 27 instances that will be important to help us understand how Matthew used the term in **Matthew 24:34**.

This passage is identical in the synoptics: "*Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place*" (**Matthew 24:34**; **Luke 21:32**; **Mark 13:30**), all from the Olivet discourse. The passage in Matthew is most commonly cited by preterists as proof that the prophecies Jesus gave had to have been fulfilled within forty years or a generation of people then living (70 A.D. they say). Taken that way, the term "generation" is a quantitative time modifier only. I will provide evidence that this interpretation is wrong. Besides these three cases under dispute, there remain 24 other times that *genea* is used in the New Testament. These will be the key to understanding **Matthew 24:34** and the synoptic parallels.

The term *genea* is used most often in the New Testament in a pejorative sense. In those cases when "generation" is used pejoratively (often with modifiers like "evil, unbelieving, perverse," etc.) it functions as a qualitative statement about a group of people. Though often, but not always, addressed to people then living, the key idea is the spiritual condition of the people, not the number of their years or the time of their living. The meaning

in these cases is "an ethnic group exhibiting cultural similarities—'people of the same kind.'" When used this way in the New Testament, the similarities are always bad characteristics. There are some cases where the ideas of "people of the same time" and "people of the same kind" are combined. For example, in **Luke 11:29-32** we see a negative characterization of those who demanded a sign:

> *And as the crowds were increasing, He began to say, "This generation is a wicked generation; it seeks for a sign, and yet no sign shall be given to it but the sign of Jonah. For just as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so shall the Son of Man be to this generation. The Queen of the South shall rise up with the men of this generation at the judgment and condemn them, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and behold, something greater than Solomon is here. The men of Nineveh shall stand up with this generation at the judgment and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here."*

Though clearly referring to those who witnessed Jesus yet did not believe Him, the key idea is their wickedness—not just when they were alive. I say that because "this generation" does not apply to all Jews or all people then living. Some believed; those will not be condemned at the final judgment.

Amazingly, all 24 of the cases of the use of "generation" in the New Testament that do not refer to succeeding generations or obviously to someone's lifetime, are qualitative or have a strong qualitative component.[3] In none of these usages does "generation" mean "all people without exception alive at the same time" nor do they mean "all Jews without exception." The qualitative idea is seen, for example, in this passage: "*And his master praised the unrighteous steward because he had acted shrewdly; for the sons of this age are more shrewd in relation to their own kind than the sons of light*" (**Luke 16:8**). The NASB translated "*genea* – generation" as "kind." Paul used the term the same way here: "*that you may prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world*" (**Philippians 2:15**). He is discussing a type of person, not a period of history. This passage applies to all Christians throughout church history.

When conducting a range of meaning study, as we are here, it is of foremost importance to know how the same author used a term, particularly in the same piece of writing and in similar contexts. Therefore, how Matthew used *genea* in passages previous to **Matthew 24:34** is the strongest evidence for his meaning there. The first four usages (excluding 1:17 where the plural is used referring to a geneaology) are in **Matthew 12:39-45**:

> *But He answered and said to them, "**An evil and adulterous generation** craves for a sign; and yet no sign shall be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet; for just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh shall stand up with **this generation at the judgment, and shall condemn it** because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. The Queen of the South shall rise up with **this generation at the judgment and shall condemn it**, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and behold, something greater than Solomon is here. Now when the unclean spirit goes out of a man, it passes through waterless places, seeking rest, and does not find it. Then it says, 'I will return to my house from which I came'; and when it comes, it finds it unoccupied, swept, and put in order. Then it goes, and takes along with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there; and the last state of that man becomes worse than the first. That is the way it will also be with **this evil generation**."*

The qualitative dimension to these usages is undeniable. It was spoken in response to the Pharisees demanding a sign. Its application is not limiting "generation" to people alive whoever they may be or for however long they may live, but applies to those (like the parallel passage in Luke previously discussed) who refused to believe Christ and remained therefore under God's judgment.

The next usage in Matthew is in **16:4**: "'*An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign; and a sign will not be given it, except the sign of Jonah.' And He left them, and went away*." This is a repetition of the previous condemnation in chapter 12 and also characterizes people by their spiritual qualities not merely when they lived in history (people of the same kind is the more prominent idea, not people of the same time). The sign of Jonah is a reference to the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. That event is the sign that He is the Messiah. This sign applies to every generation, not just to those of the first century. Paul said, "Jews seek for signs" but Paul preached Christ crucified (**1Corinthians 1:22, 23**). The cross of Christ became the definitive sign and those who reject that sign (anytime in church history) come under condemnation.

In **Matthew 17:17** we read: "*And Jesus answered and said, 'O unbelieving and perverted generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring him here to Me*.'" This was not spoken directly to the disciples alone, but to the general unbelief He found in Israel. Some scholars think "unbelieving and perverted" are allusions to **Deuteronomy 32:5, 20**.[4] The same Greek word for "perverted" is found in both Matthew and the LXX of Deuteronomy. The allusion to Deuteronomy shows the idea of corporate solidarity. Their unbelief when Jesus was present doing mighty deeds echoes the unbelief of those who were delivered from Egypt by God's mighty deeds and then grumbled in the wilderness. Moses wrote, "*They have acted corruptly toward Him, They are not His children, because of their defect; But are **a perverse and crooked generation***" (**Deuteronomy 32:5** – "generation" is *genea* in the LXX). Since this was part of Moses' song it was not just for people then alive but future generations: "*For I know that after my death you will act corruptly and turn from the way which I have commanded you; and evil will befall you in the latter days, for you will do that which is evil in the sight of the Lord, provoking Him to*

anger with the work of your hands" (**Deuteronomy 31:9**). The people in Jesus' day had the same characteristics as those in Moses' day and those carried on after Jesus' ascension just as they did after Moses' death.

The next usage of *genea* in Matthew is also in a passage that links current negative qualities to people with similar qualities from other times in Israel's history:

> "*Therefore, behold, I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes; some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city, that upon you may fall the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. Truly I say to you, all these things shall come upon* ***this generation***." (**Matthew 23:34-36**)

This passage is clearly cross generational. It goes from the distant past (Cain's treatment of Abel) to the future (I am sending . . . you will kill). What characterizes "this generation" in **Matthew 23:36** (the closest parallel usage of *genea* to that in **Matthew 24:34**) is not how many years certain people were alive, but their spiritual qualities. Those who rejected Jesus and had Him killed are of the same **kind** as those who killed the righteous throughout Old Testament history and those who would kill Jesus' representatives in the future. What all these people have in common is not the era of history they live in, but their negative, spiritual characteristics. This is a vivid example of the qualitative use of "generation" in Matthew and elsewhere in the New Testament and in the Old as well.

Having seen that throughout Matthew *genea* is used qualitatively, often in connection with pejorative adjectives, we have established how Matthew used the term within its range of meanings. Let us therefore examine **Matthew 24:34** and see if there is reason to believe Matthew suddenly changed his usage. The passage says "*Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place*." Which generation? – Those who happened to be alive whoever they might be? The only other time we find that usage of *genea* in the New Testament is in **Acts 8:33** and **13:36** when it is attached to the lives of specifically mentioned persons (Messiah and David). Everywhere else the term "generation" is used in the singular it has qualitative connotations. Preterists who take this incident in **Matthew 24:34** to be ONLY quantitative do so against the contextual evidence in Matthew. When Jesus wanted to make a time constraint, He said "*some of you standing here will not taste death until . . .*" (**Matthew 16:28** referring probably to the Mount of Transfiguration). Eight previous usages in Matthew ALL had qualitative connotations as we have shown. Why would this suddenly change without notice? The answer? It has not.

If we take "this generation" in **Matthew 24:34** to mean the same thing it does in **Matthew 23:36** and elsewhere—rebellious and unbelieving Jews as epitomized by their leadership, then we can make sense of it in the context of Bible prophecy. Jesus is predicting that the Jewish leadership and most of their followers would remain on the scene of history and remain in their unbelieving condition **until** the prophecies in **Matthew 24:1-33** have come to pass. They will then pass away. How and why? Because Messiah will return and bring judgment on the unbelieving, banishing them from His Kingdom and will gather together the believing remnant and "all Israel will be saved."

Paul made this important statement: "*For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery, lest you be wise in your own estimation, that* ***a partial hardening has happened to Israel until*** *the fulness of the Gentiles has come in; and thus all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, 'The Deliverer will come from Zion,* ***He will remove ungodliness from Jacob***'" (**Romans 11:25-26**). The hardening of national Israel, which is what makes them a crooked and unbelieving generation, is partial and temporary. There always has been a believing remnant. Those are not included in "the generation of His wrath" (**Jeremiah 7:29**). Here is what Jesus predicts:

> *The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.* (**Matthew 13:41-43**)

The same "Israel" that is partially hardened now will be "saved" – national, ethnic Israel. When Messiah bodily reigns on the earth it will be over a righteous Israel, not a wicked and perverse generation.

Our range of meaning study has concluded that *genea* is used more often in the New Testament as a qualitative term than a chronologically quantitative one. Our study in particular of the gospel of Matthew shows that Matthew uses it in that way. We have also shown that taking the usage in **Matthew 24:34** to be within that same range of meaning makes perfect sense in that context and fits with what we know about Bible prophecy from other passages. Therefore, the typical preterist interpretation is contrived and fails to consider the preponderance of evidence in the New Testament for the meaning of *genea* in such contexts.

End Notes

1. CIC issue 77; July/August
2. Matt. 1:17; Luke 1:48, 50; Acts 14:16; 15:21; Eph. 3:5, 21; Col. 1:26. Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996, c1989). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament : Based on semantic domains* (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition.) (1:111). United Bible societies.
3. Mat 11:16; 12:39, 41, 42, 45; 16:4; 17:17; 23:36; Mark 8:12, 38; 9:19; Luke 7:31; 9:41; 11:29, 30, 31, 32, 50, 51; 16:8; 17:25; Acts 2:40; Philippians 2:15; Heb. 3:10.
4. "The adjectives "unbelieving" and "perverse" echo Deut 32:5, 20 and suggest both faithlessness and immorality." Blomberg, C. (2001, c1992). *Vol. 22: Matthew* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; The New American Commentary (267). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

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