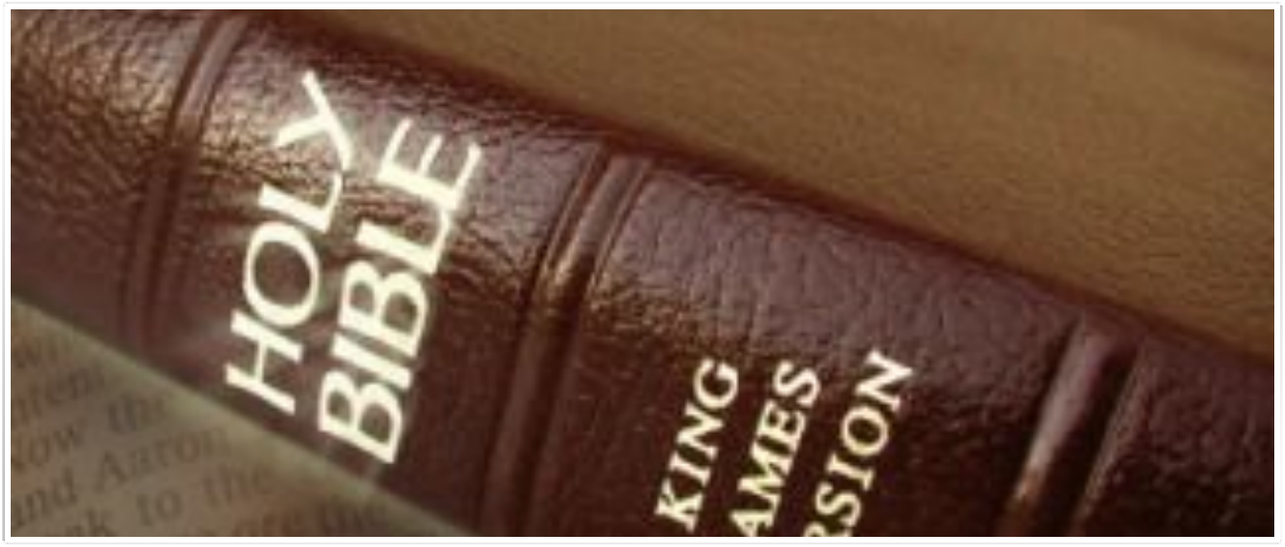

Matthew 24:35 And The KJV (Part I)

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[Note - This is part one of a two-part exegetical examination of Matthew 24:32-35. The second part can be found here. A fuller form, with citations, footnotes, and references, can be found here.]

Matthew 24:32-35 and its Relation to The Doctrine of Preservation

Introduction

Matt. 24:35 (as well as its parallels in Mark 13:31 and Luke 21:33) are often used as major support for the doctrine of preservation by those holding a "TR and MT= Inspired originals" position. The parable of the fig tree ends in each of the Synoptics with this statement by Jesus about His words not passing away. The context of the parable itself, or of the Olivet Discourse as a whole, is rarely, if ever, noted when preservation is being taught from these texts.[1] So, what exactly is the intent of the inspired author behind this text? What contribution does it have for a doctrine of preservation? To answer these questions, we will examine the different ways the discourse has been approached, briefly survey the interpretations of the individual parts of the discourse (as least up to Matt. 24:25), and then examine in much more detail the Parable of the Fig Tree in which the pertinent phrase is found. We will then be in a position to responsibly investigate what contribution the text makes to a doctrine of preservation.

The Olivet Discourse

In many ways, the Olivet discourse is the most controversial section of Jesus teaching in any of the gospels, and the phrase "This generation shall not pass away" in our passage may be one of the most controversial and most discussed phrases in all of the gospels. We will not get into all this controversy, or the specific details of the discourse as a whole, and certainly not into a biblical theology of the end times. Rather, we will only briefly note this surrounding context in order to be exegetically responsible in our understanding of the particular verse which is often applied to preservation.

Approaches to the Discourse

There are a rather large variety of overall interpretations of the Matthean version of the discourse, especially marked out by the relationship of the discourse to the questions of the disciples and to the destruction of the temple in AD 70. The passage builds as Jesus own answer to the questions of the disciples. Some find little or no reference to the destruction of the temple, and take most or all of the discourse as a still-future prophecy (Walvoord, Pentecost, Hitchcock). This means that Mathew presents Jesus as essentially ignoring the disciple's first question. Some, conversely, take most or all of the discourse to refer to the destruction of the temple, and thus see little if any future fulfillment in the discourse (France, Tasker, Wright). This means that Matthew presents Jesus as essentially ignoring the disciple's second question. I take both of these views to be unnecessary extremes. If it had been Matthew's intent to only have Jesus answer one question or the other, there would be no reason for him to include both questions. It is much more likely that both the destruction of the temple and the parousia are being referred to in the discourse, even if there is often legitimate disagreement about exactly where Jesus discusses one as opposed to the other. Matthew presents Jesus as answering both of the disciple's questions. This is the position of the vast majority of commentators (Blomberg, Carson, Hagner, Keener, Morris, etc.). This is the natural reading, and is strengthened when we realize that there is wide consensus that Jesus deals with both in the parallels of Mark and Luke – it is primarily in Matthew that some have seen exclusively one or the other.

Futurists love to focus on Matthew's version of the discourse, since it has what seems to be a greater emphasis on the future.[2] Preterists love to focus on the Lukan version of the discourse, with its much stronger emphasis on the destruction of Jerusalem. We would be wise to interpret each of the Evangelist's presentations of the discourse in their own settings and contexts, seeking their unique intentions in sharing the discourse with their different audiences, while not neglecting to read their accounts in parallel with each other, both to appreciate the fullest version of the discourse as it was likely spoken by Jesus originally, and more importantly to the exegetical task, to reveal how and why they shaped the discourse to meet the concerns of their unique readers and their unique purposes. Thus, we will eventually pursue a separate essay for each version of the discourse.

General approaches

The basic approaches to the discourse are similar to those commonly taken to each of the major eschatological texts in Scripture. David Tuner divides the approaches into three basic kinds, and I have found his division exceptionally helpful.

- Preterists typically hold that most of the predictions of the Matthean version of the discourse were fulfilled in 70 AD (France, NICNT; Tasker, TNTC). Some occasionally hold to full preterism. This position believes that all of the events of prophecy have already been fulfilled, including the second coming of Christ (N.T. Wright seems to me to border on this view, at least in the gospels). Full preterism is an unorthodox view which I will not interact with here.
- Futurists typically take most or (usually) all of Matthew's version of the discourse as referring to the still future events just prior to Christ's coming (Walvoord, Hitchcock, Pentecost).
- A combined Preterist-Futurist position sees the discourse as touching on both the destruction of the temple, and the future events surrounding Christ's coming. (Blomberg, NAC; Carson, EBC; Hagner, WBC; Bock, JAS; most especially Turner, BECNT, from whom I borrow the term; and most other evangelical commentators).

While I personally incline to some form of combined preterist-futurist approach (I am probably most comfortable with Bock's handling of the text from the viewpoint of progressive dispensationalism), I will seek to fairly represent each of the views in this essay.

Jesus's Intent in Speaking the Discourse as a Whole

Jesus' purpose for the discourse is directly related to the disciples' questions that prompted it. He intends to say something about the temple's destruction, and even more importantly, he intends to say something about his own coming. It is also possible that he speaks exclusively to one or the other. Under any interpretation, the disciples harbor some serious misconceptions. Jesus clears these away, and sets the stage for their future. The function of the discourse for Jesus is to address these questions (or question) of the disciples.

Matthew's Intent in Shaping and Sharing the Discourse as a whole

Why exactly does Matthew include this discourse of Jesus, and what function does he intend it to serve in his gospel as a whole? Matthew builds on the Marcan material substantially, thus making his presentation of the Olivet Discourse the longest in the Gospels. Matthew certainly has a more eschatological focus than the other evangelist, and is prone to expand the eschatological material in a variety of places (For example, Matthew 24:45-25:46 has no parallel in Mark's or Luke's presentation of the Discourse).

Some of Matthew's intent behind the discourse is dependent on the dating of the gospel (date issues come into play in the Olivet discourse more than anywhere else in the gospels). If Mathew is writing after AD 70, then he intends his readers to see that Jesus's prediction of the temple's destruction was accurate, which would assure them that his words about His future coming are likewise trustworthy. If the audience is reading this post AD 70, they are no doubt wrestling with why Jesus has not come already.
From either perspective, it is obvious from the disciples' questions in each gospel that they saw some kind of connection between the temple's destruction and the eschatological judgment, and there is simply no way that when they asked about His coming they could have envisioned a crucifixion + resurrection + 2000 year gap between the events. In their minds, his "coming" meant his coming to Jerusalem to establish Himself as the perfect King and political ruler. This they expected to happen rather soon. Matthew of course writes after the events of the Cross and Resurrection in either case. Thus, at some level, with either date, Matthew is at least wrestling with the distance between these events. But we can make more than just this general statement.

Post-AD 70 Date

If Matthew is writing post AD 70, then the expectation that Christ would set up His kingdom has created some understandable tension. The major event of prophesied temple destruction has taken place – why is Jesus not here again? Thus, the section about the temple destruction prediction is meant to essentially say "Jesus said this would happen, and it did. Jesus said he would come again, and he will. No delay in his coming impugns on the character of what He has promised." Keener notes, "Jesus' prophecy about the temple's destruction had been fulfilled, yet he had not returned; this situation (the oft heralded "delay of the parousia") undoubtedly fueled both disillusionment (probably making Christians more susceptible to false prophetic reinterpretations of the parousia, as in 24:23-25) and eschatological speculation"[3] This also would explain why Matthew is so careful in distinguishing the two events. He is trying to set right a common and natural eschatological misunderstanding that did not account for a great delay in the Parousia.

Pre-AD 70 Date

If Matthew writes pre-70 AD, then the intent is slightly different. In this case, the temple destruction material serves a function much more similar to his denunciation of the Pharisees in chapter 23. Matthew is reminding his readers of Jesus attitude towards the temple as the center of the Jewish establishment, and pointing out that the temple was soon to be destroyed altogether. It is no longer the center of worship in God's plan – Jesus is now this center of worship. This audience would be wrestling in a more acute way with the precise relationship of Jesus to Judaism. Especially in light of the proximity of Matthew's audience to a formal break with the synagogue, a reminder of Jesus' words about the destruction of the temple would help them accept that break more easily.

Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, if Matthew writes pre-70, then there is more direct significance in Jesus's words about preparation, since the events of temple destruction which Jesus predicts are still future for the readers of Matthew. Obviously, taking an earlier date inclines one to see more of the discourse as relating to the near temple destruction. Whichever parts of the first section of the discourse are taken as referring to the temple's destruction thus have a very similar (and a much more pointed) force for Matthew's readers, as they did for Jesus's audience. Get ready for disaster. Don't be confused by events that don't relate to the end. Be prepared for the incredible persecution that is soon to come. These things only mean that "the end is not yet."

The Structure of the Discourse

Futurist Structures

Hitchcock

24:1-2 – The Disciples' Questions
24:4-28 – The Tribulation Period
24:4-14 – The Beginning of Birth Pangs (The first 3 ½ years of the 7 year Tribulation)
24:15-20 – The Abomination of Desolation (The Middle of the 7 year Tribulation)
24:21-28 – The Great Tribulation (The Last 3 ½ years of the 7 year Tribulation)
24:29-31 – The Second Coming (Jesus' Return after the Tribulation)
24:32-35 – The Parable of the Fig Tree

Pentecost

24:1-2 – The Overthrow of Jerusalem
24:4-26 – The Tribulation Period
24:4-8 – The First half of the Tribulation
24:9-26 – The Last half of the Tribulation
24:27-31 – The Second Advent of the Messiah
24:32-36 – The Parable of the Fig Tree (Certainty of Jesus' Coming)
24:37-51 – Exhortations to Watchfulness
25:1-46 – The Judgment of Israel and the Nations

Walvoord

24:1-2 – Prediction of the Destruction of the Temple
24:3 – Questions of the Disciples
24:4-14 – The Course of the Present Age
24:15-25 – Sign of the Great Tribulation
24:26-31 – Second Coming of Christ
24:32-33 – Parable of the Fig Tree

Preterist Structures

France

24:3 – The Disciples' Double Question
24:4-35 – Jesus answers the Question about the destruction of the Temple

24:4-8 – The End is not Yet
24:9-14 – Standing Firm in Difficult Times
24:15-28 – The Beginning of the End for Jerusalem
24:29-31 – The End of the Temple and the Triumph of the Son of Man
24:32-35 – Summary of the Answer to the Disciples' First Question
24:36-25:46 – Jesus answers the Question about the Parousia and the end of the Age
24:36-44 – The Unknown Time of the Parousia
24:45-51 – The Parable of the Slave Left in Charge
25:1-13 – The Parable of the Girls Waiting for the Bridegroom
25:14-30 – The Parable of the Slaves Entrusted with a Lot of Money
25:31-46 – The Final Judgment by the Son of Man

Combined Approach Structures

Blomberg

24:1-3 – Introduction
24:4-14 – Signs that do not yet herald the end
24:15-20 – The destruction of the Temple
24:21-28 – The Great Tribulation (seen in light of historic premillenialism as the entire time until the Second Coming)
24:29-31 – Christ's Second Coming
24:32-35 – Concluding Implications
24:36-25:46 – Commands to Perpetual Vigilance

Turner

24:1-3 – Narrative Introduction: A Question while leaving the temple
24:4-25:46 – The Discourse Proper
24:4-35 – Exposition: What will Happen
i.24:4-14 – The Beginning of Birth Pains
ii.24:15-28 – The Abomination of Desolation
iii.24:29-31 – The Coming of the Son of Man
iv.24:32-35 – The Parable of the Fig Tree
24:36-25:46 – Exhortation to Alertness
i.24:36-42 – Comparison to the Days of Noah
ii.24:43-44 – Parable of the Thief
iii.24:45-51 – The Faithful and the Evil Slave
iv.25:1-13 – The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins
v.25:14-30 – Parable of the Talents
vi.25:31-46 – The Final Judgment
26:1-2 – Narrative Conclusion and the fourth passion prediction

The first section of the Discourse

24:1-2 - Jesus Predicts the Destruction of the Temple

In 24:1-2, Matthew sets the stage for what is in his arrangement presented as the 5th major discourse of Jesus to His disciples, namely, the Olivet Discourse. Jesus has just spoken the scathing denunciation of the Scribes and Pharisees occurring in the temple. Then, as Jesus and his disciples are leaving the temple, and beginning the brief trek across the Kidron valley towards the mount of Olives, the disciples remark on the grandeur of the temple and its associated architecture. Jesus responds to them by predicting the destruction of the temple, stating, "See ye not all these things? Verily I say unto you, There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down." When they reach the Mount of Olives, the disciples[4] ask him in this more private venue, "Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?" These two (or for Walvoord, three) questions are what prompt the teaching of the Olivet Discourse.

24:3-8 - Jesus Predicts Signs which Do Not Indicate the End

In 24:3-8, The disciples naturally ask when these events will take place. Matthew also presents them as asking for the sign of his "coming" and the end of the age. They apparently saw a connection between the destruction of the temple and eschatological developments. Jesus presents his answer to their questions by sharing his discourse.

He first warns them to beware of the signs that will come before the end starts. First, he warns them that there will be many false Messiahs (24:5). The phrase "in my name" essentially means, "claiming to be the Christ." Second, he warns them that there will be a period of international chaos and political turmoil. There will be wars and rumors of wars (24:6). He then explains that this does not mean that the end is here. These are signs which do not herald the end.

Finally, he warns them that there will be not only national and political turmoil, but also widespread famines and earthquakes (24:7). These three signs do not herald the end. In fact, contrary to much modern "prophetic hysteria," which points to every natural disaster as a "sign" that the second coming is close, their presence is actually presented by Jesus as evidence that "the end is not yet." Jesus likens them to the early contractions which a pregnant woman feels. They remind here that she is pregnant, and that delivery is coming, but they could also lead her to falsely think she is in labor when she is not. These signs tell the disciples that the end program has started, but it is not yet fully here.

24:9-14 - Jesus Predicts Signs that precede the starting signs

In 24:9-14, Jesus predicts a variety of persecutions which will come upon the disciples. Like the previous "contractions," these could falsely lead them to think that the end is here, when it is not. Matthew introduces these signs with a simple "then." However, Luke is typically much more concerned in his presentation with the exact chronology of events, and has added quite a few more time markers than the other synoptics. He clarifies that this series of persecutions come "before all this" (Luke 21:12). In other words, the signs of Matthew 24:3-8 will be preceded by a series of separate signs. While someone may try to make a case that the signs of 24:3-8 are still future, there seems no way to take these signs as such unless one ignores Luke and his comments. The events Jesus mentions here are;

- First, Jesus predicts that the disciples will be delivered up "to tribulation" and martyred and hated (24:9), and that, probably as a result of the persecutions, there will be a "great apostasy" of many (24:10a) who will depart from the faith. These apostates will even betray the other believers (24:10b).
- Second, Jesus predicts that there will be many false prophets who lead many astray (24:11). Wickedness increases, and since many believers are no longer under Jesus' discipleship, the love which he teaches will grow cold in them (24:12).
- Third, while many will apostatize, some will persevere (24:13), thus proving their salvation.
- Fourth, there will be a worldwide proclamation of the Gospel, just prior to the end (24:14).

24:15-20 - Jesus Predicts The Abomination of Desolation

Futurist

Futurist of course will see Jesus reference to the Abomination of Desolation as his integrating the entire eschatological scheme of Daniel 9:27:33 (which they will likewise presume to be interpreted according to a futurist scheme) into this discourse. Thus they will see Daniel as prophesying that the abomination of desolation represents the time when the Antichrist will desecrate the future rebuilt Temple, with this desecration marking the middle point of the seven-year tribulation. They will then typically assume that Jesus is importing this same eschatological scheme here. Thus, it makes sense to assume that Jesus' reference to the abomination of desolation here is a reference to that same future event of a future antichrist desecrating a future temple at the mid-point of a future seven year tribulation. In fact, this reference seems to me to be the primary reason why they take the entire discourse as future, since, if this is what Jesus is doing here, it makes sense to say that this reference by Jesus likewise marks the midpoint of the tribulation, meaning that verses 4-14 must then refer to the first half of a seven year tribulation.

Preterist

Preterist will take the opposite course, seeing Daniel as prophetically referring only to the destruction of the temple under Antiochus Epiphanies. They see Jesus as using the text because of its connection to temple destruction. Thus, Jesus is simply predicting the destruction of the temple, with no reference whatsoever to the future.

Combined

A combined approach will again leave more options. And it is in this section that I think the combined approach has its greatest strengths. The version that I think makes most sense (especially laid out by Bock) will understand Daniel to have been primarily prophesying about the destruction of the temple under Antiochus Epiphanies, but they will likewise see Daniel as seeing this event as a prophetic foreshadowing of a future tribulation and a future eschatological figure yet to come. Jesus uses the passage because of its reference to temple destruction, and because he is doing exactly the same kind of thing in this discourse. He is directly prophesying the soon destruction of the temple, but in a way that foreshadows a future destruction of a future temple by a future eschatological figure. This combines the best of both approaches.

This understanding is further emphasized as we consider the wide divergence between the synoptics at this point in the discourse. Mark is relatively ambiguous. He refers only to "the abomination of desolation standing where he ought not" without a specific reference to the Daniel text, although clearly alluding to it, and without specific mention of where this abomination will take place. Interestingly, Mark has made an editorial note at this point that calls attention to what he is doing. Right after he shares what Jesus says about the abomination of desolation he exhorts his readers to pay close attention by noting, "let the reader understand." Note carefully that these words don't go back to Jesus himself. If they did, he would have said, "let the one who hears understand" a common statement on Jesus own lips. The reference to a reader instead of a hearer makes it clear that this is rather an editorial comment by Mark.

Matthew has copied this editorial note exhorting his readers. Luke, on the other hand, rather than reproduce the editorial comment, has decided to (literally) help "the reader understand" what he sees as going on here. Thus instead of repeating the note, he has done several things to help the gentile Theophilus understand what he would have missed as a gentile unfamiliar with the Hebrew text of Daniel. Instead of a reference to the abomination of desolation that would require familiarity with the OT text that Theophilus doesn't have, he simply explains what he sees this as meaning. "When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies." And speaks only of "its desolation," intending a reference to the destruction of the city as a whole. He specifies an attacking army that will fight with the sword, and lead away captives, as they trample the city underfoot. Thus, he doesn't mention the Daniel text as Matthew does. And when he speaks of the tribulation, he removes Mark's reference to it as the worst that will ever come. Luke is clearly seeing Jesus' reference to Daniel as primarily about the temple destruction, and has shaped his account so that the destruction of the temple and the city in AD 70 is all that Jesus refers to. He leaves no room for a future fulfillment. Matthew, on the other hand, has strengthened the connection to the entire passage in Daniel, and while maintaining the emphasis on the temple has retained the elements of Mark that seem to point also to a future fulfillment. Matthew, who is steeped in OT prophetic allusion, and is very familiar with prophetic foreshadowing, intends then to show Jesus as dealing with both. This also makes the most sense of the way he has presented the questions which open the discourse, in contrast to the questions as they appear in the other Synoptics. Matthew sees Jesus as dealing with both the temple destruction in AD 70, and a future tribulation and future temple destruction.

24:21-28 - Jesus Predicts the Great Tribulation

Futurist

A futurist will see typically see this section as a description of the latter half of the future seven-year tribulation period. (This seems more consistent with the "abomination of desolation" marking the mid-point of such a tribulation.) Some will occasionally see the entire 7-year tribulation being described in this section.

Preterist

A preterist will see this section as a description of the time just prior to the destruction of the temple. The description of tribulation that will never be matched again may seem difficult to square with this understanding, (especially in light of later events like world war, and the Holocaust) but a preterist will emphasize that it is no less difficult for a futurist. For what point is there in saying "there will never again be tribulation like this" in reference to a future tribulation, if that tribulation terminates in a thousand year millennium kingdom which guarantees that there will never be any kind of suffering ever again? The phrase, a preterist would say, becomes completely redundant at that point.

Combined

A combined approach again resolves most of the difficulties with the futurists and preterist approaches mentioned above. Yet it is here that we must most clearly distinguish between two different versions of the "combined" approach. On the one hand, historical premillinialists will take this description of tribulation as a description of the entire period of the "church age" extending from the cross to the second coming. The "tribulation" is the same tribulation that is promised to be the lot of all believers until Christ comes again. It is thus preterist in the sense that the disciples faced all these things prior to the temples destruction, but preterist in the sense that these same tribulations will continue to occur until Christ returns.

On the other hand, progressive dispensationalist will suggests that while it is true that this tribulation is the promised lot of believers, and certainly in that sense occurred in the disciples lives prior to the destruction of the temple, it was intended also (and perhaps primarily) to point forward to a still-future, literal seven year tribulation that will truly be the worst tribulation the world has ever seen. In this "foreshadowing" interpretation which I think makes the most sense, most of the prediction is about the temple destruction, which is intended to point forward to the future tribulation to occur just before the millennial kingdom.

24:29-31 - Jesus Predicts the Second Coming

Futurist

A futurist will of course see this section as a literal description of the second coming of Jesus. They will see the cosmic language as a literal description, and will see the "coming" and cloud language as a literal depiction of the event of the Parousia, which will occur at the end of the literal 7-year tribulation just described.

Preterist

It is here that the distinction between preterism and any of the other positions is most clearly felt. A preterist will see the event predicted here as in some way still relating to the destruction of the temple. They will typically emphasize the way that this "coming" language is used in the Hebrew Bible, and especially in the second temple literature. Language of coming in clouds, and even of cosmic disturbance seems to have clearly been a common way of speaking about national and political turmoil and overthrow. This language they will see as likewise metaphorically describing the destruction of Jerusalem. They will see the "second coming" described here as a reference to Jesus "coming" in judgment on the temple.

Combined

A combined approach here typically merges completely with the futurist position, taking the language as a literal description of the still future second coming of Jesus, whether there will be a literal 7-year tribulation prior to it or not.

The Parable of the Fig Tree – Matt. 24:32-36 (See also Mark 13:28-32; Luke 21:29-33)

The parable of the fig tree on any understanding of the Discourse concludes the first section of the discourse, and functions as Jesus' assurance to his disciples about what he has just taught in verses 4-31. Regardless of the approach taken to the discourse as a whole, the Parable of the Fig Tree serves this basic function. There is no debate or contention about this, and it is accepted by all commentators, from all ages. The Parable highlights the certainty of Jesus' predictions about his coming in verses 29-31, whether that be seen as identical to, related to, or entirely distinct from the destruction of the Temple. The intent of the parable is without doubt to give assurance that Jesus will do what He has promised. Because the phrase we are examining in this essay occurs in the context of this parable, we will look at the parable in

more detail than we have the earlier parts. We will consider the differences of Matthew from his Markan source, note the minor textual issues that occur in the parable, and then proceed with an interpretation of the parable proper.

Synoptic Issues

Matthean Redaction is exceptionally minor in His version of the Parable of the Fig Tree. In fact, there may be more similarity between the Matthean version of the parable of the fig tree and the Markan version than in almost any other section of the discourse. There is more editorial activity in the Lukan version, which will be dealt with in a separate essay on Luke's passage. The comparison below shows the remarkably identical nature of Mark and Matthew's version of the Parable.

Matthew 24:32-35 (TR)	Mark 13:28-31 (TR)
Ἀπὸ δὲ τῆς συκῆς μάθετε τὴν παραβολήν· ὅταν ἤδη ὁ κλάδος αὐτῆς γένηται ἁπαλός, καὶ τὰ φύλλα ἐκφύῃ, γινώσκετε ὅτι ἐγγὺς τὸ θέρος· οὕτω καὶ ὑμεῖς, ὅταν ἴδητε πάντα ταῦτα, γινώσκετε ὅτι ἐγγύς ἐστιν ἐπὶ θύραις. ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, οὐ μὴ παρέλθῃ ἡ γενεὰ αὕτη, ἕως ἂν πάντα ταῦτα γένηται. ὁ οὐρανὸς καὶ ἡ γῆ παρελεύσονται, οἱ δὲ λόγοι μου οὐ μὴ παρέλθωσι	Ἀπὸ δὲ τῆς συκῆς μάθετε τὴν παραβολήν· ὅταν αὐτῆς ἤδη ὁ κλάδος ἁπαλὸς γένηται καὶ ἐκφύῃ τὰ φύλλα, γινώσκετε ὅτι ἐγγὺς τὸ θέρος ἐστίν· οὕτω καὶ ὑμεῖς, ὅταν ταῦτα ἴδητε γινόμενα, γινώσκετε ὅτι ἐγγύς ἐστιν ἐπὶ θύραις. ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι οὐ μὴ παρέλθῃ ἡ γενεὰ αὕτη, μέχρις οὗ πάντα ταῦτα γένηται. ὁ οὐρανὸς καὶ ἡ γῆ παρελεύσονται· οἱ δὲ λόγοι μου οὐ μὴ παρέλθωσι.

- Blue Indicates that Matthew has changed the order of wording in Mark
- Red Indicates that Matthew has added to Mark, omitted from Mark, or both.

We can note three rather minor changes that may have some slight significance:

- Matthew is less emphatic that "summer is near" (verb omitted in Matthew).
- Matthew has changed Mark's "when you see these things taking place" to "when you see all these things."
- Matthew has changed Mark's "Before all these things are fulfilled" to "Until all these things be fulfilled."[5]

Textual Issues

Metzger's Textual Commentary notes no significant variants in the text.[6] The UBS4 likewise notes no significant textual issues in the parable.[7] The more thorough NA28 does note a few very minor textual variants. They do not affect the interpretation in any major way, but it would still be instructive to examine them.

- In verse 33, some manuscripts omit "all these things" from the phrase, "when you see all these things." The verse would then read, "so likewise ye, when you see this, know that it is near."
- In verse 34, the phrase "this generation shall not pass until" is omitted from some manuscripts. The verse would then read, "Verily I say unto you, all these things will be fulfilled."
- In verse 34, some manuscripts have omitted the "these things." The text then would read, "this generation shall not pass away, until all is fulfilled."
- In verse 34, Some manuscripts have reversed the order of "all" and "these things." This variant doesn't affect translation into English at all.
- One manuscript omits the entirety of verse 35 (in its original hand, a later corrector has added the verse in a different hand.)
- In verse 35, some manuscripts have changed the form of the verb "shall pass away." Some manuscripts have it as παρελευσεται (singular). Some manuscripts have it as παρελευσονται (plural). In terms of meaning, the variant is insignificant.

Interpretation of the Parable of the Fig Tree (24:32-35)

> *"Now learn a parable of the fig tree; When his branch is yet tender, and putteth forth leaves, ye know that summer is nigh: So likewise ye, when ye shall see all these things, know that it is near, even at the doors. Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled. Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away."*

"Now learn a parable of the fig tree; When his branch is yet tender, and putteth forth leaves, ye know that summer is nigh"

While many trees in the Middle East keep their leaves throughout the year, the fig tree is categorically different, losing its leaves seasonally, and this is why it becomes the object of Jesus's parable here. The Fig tree sheds its leaves in winter. Then, in spring, the "branch becomes tender." That is, the sap rises through the branches, filling their hardened exterior with life giving fluid. Thus, the branches begin to "put forth leaves." When an orchardist sees these leaves, he knows that things are progressing, and that summer is now here. Morris notes, "The fig tree does not bring the summer, but the appearance of its new leaves is a sure and certain indication that summer is now at hand."[8]

"So likewise ye, when ye shall see all these things, know that it is near, even at the doors"

Jesus now applies the parable to his current teachings. Just as the budding leaves of a fig tree make the coming summer certain, the fulfillment of "these things" which Jesus has predicted will ensure the disciples that "it" (His kingdom in its full consummation) is certain. That is, when the disciples see the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, and the signs which He has presented, they can be assured that the end-time program of Jesus has been set in motion, and that events will proceed exactly as He has promised.

"all these things"

Futurists

Usually, futurist will understand the 7-year tribulation to be the general referent of "all these things." "All these things" then will likely refer to all the signs indicated in 24:4-28, perhaps with the strongest emphasis on the cosmic signs after the tribulation seen to occur directly prior to the second coming.[9] The believer living during the tribulation period who sees these signs will know that the second coming is near.

Preterists

For a preterists of course, "all these things" will be a reference to the process which will end with the destruction of the temple and the events which surrounded it.[10] When the disciples see the events foretold by Jesus, they will know that the temple will soon be destroyed, and that God's program is continuing ahead.

Combined

Accepting a combined approach leaves a larger variety of options available for the meaning of the phrase. Major options would include:

- The destruction of the temple and or the events leading up to it [11]
- The tribulation period, seen as a literal 7 year event equated with Daniel's 70th week[12]
- The tribulation as the entire age from the temples destruction to the second coming[13]
- The final cosmic signs which will immediately precede the second coming
- The events which lead up to the second coming, but not including the final cosmic signs[14]

Any combined approach will likely hold that the phrase does not in any way include the parousia of verses 29-31, but rather refers to events prior to it. It would at most only include the signs from 24:4-28, which are seen to be future from the time of Matthews' writing. Any of those signs which are taken as referring to the disciple's times would then not be included in the phrase.

Blomberg concludes that "all these things" will refer "to everything described in 24:1-26 but will not include the Parousia itself (described in vs. 27-31)."[15] Turner voices his agreement, noting that "the crucial expression 'all these things' refers to the signs about which the disciples asked and of which Jesus has spoken in Matt. 24:4-28."[16] Keener more specifically notes that "these things" in Matthew 24:32 "apply to the desolation of the temple to occur within that generation." Thus, the signs which Jesus has detailed, which should probably be seen as culminating in the destruction of the Temple, point to the certainty of His future coming. This writer is inclined to think that the reference to "these things" refers at least to the signs of verses 1-14. It is also quite possible that it includes all of verses 1-26. Either way, it is most likely that the primary reference is to the temple's destruction.

"It is near"

Futurists
Dispensational premillinarians will usually see "it" as a reference to either the second coming as an event, or perhaps to the millennial kingdom which it will usher in. It is near because those who see the events of the tribulation, especially its latter part, will soon see the end of the tribulation and the second coming, with the millennial kingdom which it will usher in.

Preterists
Preterists will see "it" as a reference to the "end" of verses 6 and 14, which they see as culminating in the destruction of the temple.[17] It is near in the sense that when the disciples see the signs which portend the temples destruction, they know that this destruction is soon to come.

Combined
A combined approach will usually see "It" as referring to His coming, or "the kingdom" in its full consummation as Luke has it. Describing it as near seems difficult on the surface, but less so when it is realized that it is "near" only in the sense that it is immanent, and is the next event on the Divine Calendar.

It could be a reference to the second coming (usually translated as "he" to refer personally to Christ himself rather than impersonally as an event) it is thus near "in the sense that nothing more in God's plan of redemption must occur before the end can come."[18]
It could be a reference to the kingdom itself in its full consummation.[19] It is said to be near in the sense that "it is the next thing on the divine calendar."[20]

"Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled."

This generation

There is a huge diversity of views with regard to this phrase. It is perhaps the most debated phrase in all the gospels. Typically, how one interprets this phrase will determine the general approach one takes to the discourse as a whole (futurists, preterists, or combined) or, vice versa, how one takes the discourse will demand seeing the phrase a certain way. There are several different positions in regard to the phrase.

1. The generation of the disciple's lifetimes. In other words, the end must come within the lifetime of the 12. This means either that Jesus was mistaken (most liberal interpreters) or that the end is a reference to the destruction of the temple in AD 70 (so most preterists).
2. Luke's generation, as the writer. This slightly more nuanced position is still left suggesting that Luke was wrong, or that the temples destruction alone is in view.
3. Generation means a given race, specifically the Jewish nation. The Jewish race will not pass away before the end, and there will be a future for Israel. This of course leaves open the door for the discourse to be entirely still future. Some dispensationalists see the phrase this way.
4. Generation means a given race, meaning the human race. Humanity will not end before the end comes. This leaves the possibility of a futurist position.
5. Generation is an ethical term instead of a temporal one, like "this evil generation." It thus underscores the certainty of judgment. Those who do evil will not get away unpunished.
6. A prophetic foreshadowing interpretation sees it as linking the destruction of the temple and the end, which means that the end begins with the fall of Jerusalem. The beginning of the end will happen in the generation of the disciples.
7. The generation which sees the events that lead to the end. In other words, those who see the end's beginning will also see its finish.[21] The end will happen quickly. Bock used to take this view,[22] but has since decided that position #5 makes more sense,[23] and he seems to incorporate elements of #6 as well.

The difficulties are many. BAGD notes the history of the word and its general flavor as "a term relating to the product of the act of generating and with special reference to kinship, frequently used of familial connections and ancestry." They list 4 basic semantic meanings within its range of meaning;

1. Those exhibiting common characterizes or interests, Race or Kind. They lists only Luke 16:8, and it is highly debated among commentators whether the word can carry this meaning even in that text. While 3, 4, and 5 are essentially dependent on some flavor of this meaning, it is a difficult lexical stretch.
2. The sum total of those born at the same time, expanded to include those living at a given time and frequently defined in terms of specific characteristics, Generation, contemporaries. BAGD lists its meaning in this passage here, although this is a much debated classification. This is without doubt the most common use of the word. Further, the words meaning as a reference to the contemporaries of Jesus is the common (almost without exception) use of the word by Mathew himself, and by Jesus.
3. The time of a generation, age. This can be either in a period of time defined in terms of a generation, or in an undefined period of time.
4. Family history (only acts 8:33 and a few extra biblical examples.)

The most natural way to read the text would be position #1 (BAGD's second meaning), and some have almost demanded that it be taken this way. This would of course force either some form of a preterist interpretation of the passage, or would suggest that Jesus was an eschatological false prophet. Those rejecting (rightly I think) both of these options have had to make an admittedly more difficult case for one of the other options. Position #6 seems like the best way to integrate the data to me. The generation which saw the destruction of the temple saw the inauguration of the end times program which will culminate in the second coming of Christ. This is certainly not without its difficulties (most notably that it means taking the clause "till all these things be fulfilled" to essentially mean its opposite "till all these things start to be fulfilled"), but it is I think the best way forward.

"all these things"

Bock explains "this means that 'all these things' refers to those events described before the coming of the cosmic signs. They are 'all the events' that make up the leaf before the fruit. Thus, Jesus predicts the signs pointing to the end taking place within a generation, but he is not including the end itself in that assessment. In other words, the picture tied to the destruction of Jerusalem is a sign itself that the end will come. In addition, it means that the end is immanent in the sense that it is the next thing on the Divine calendar. In another sense, it means that the end is as good as fulfilled, since the sign of the end has come. The fulfillment of part is guarantee that the rest will be fulfilled."[24] I am inclined to follow Bock here. His suggestion of "prophetic foreshadowing" is to me convincing, is demonstrably true in other prophetic texts, and explains a lot of the confusion caused when interpreters demand an either–or approach.

"Be fulfilled"

It is important to note that Jesus is addressing the issue of the fulfillment of his promise here. At issue is not whether his words will be preserved, but whether his promise to return will be fulfilled. It is precisely in this "fulfillment" context that the phrase comes which is the purpose of this study. To this phrase we now come.

[Note - The second post, which resumes and concludes the exegetical treatment of Matthew 24:35, is found here.]

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