

The Soon Return

Excerpts

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Introduction

The purpose of this study is to investigate Jesus' own teaching on the subject of His *return* or, as it is commonly designated, His *second coming*. I do not plan to study every reference in the New Testament that refers to His coming, only those statements that Jesus Himself made about His return and, more specifically, those statements that have an inherent element of *timing*. Everyone agrees that Jesus spoke of a *second coming*, but the issue of *when* that event takes place has caused a great deal of confusion and division and has produced a myriad of puzzling explanations as well as hundreds of predictions as to *when* He would return. Did Jesus teach that He would return within the lifetime of His contemporaries? There were occasions, of course, when Jesus spoke of His return without reference to its timing. But at other times, it seems that He clearly indicated a general time when it would occur, namely, within the lifetime of the generation of which He was a part. In particular, therefore, I would like to study this question: Did Jesus actually teach that He would return within the lifetime of His contemporaries?

Significantly, more than a few Christian as well as non-Christian scholars believe that is precisely what Jesus taught. By way of introduction, I will cite some of these leaders and in the process briefly summarize the main convictions that exist today with regards to Jesus' teaching on this fascinating subject.

Bertrand Russell [1872-1970], one of the most influential philosophers of the 20th century and the Nobel Prize winner for Literature in 1950, delivered a lecture in London on March 6, 1927, to the National Secular Society. The title of his lecture was "*Why I Am Not A Christian*." In that talk, later published in a pamphlet, he explained his reasons for his rejection of Christianity, one of which was the defects which he saw in Christ's teaching with regards to His second coming. Jesus made statements that involved the element of time, which, in Russell's opinion, simply did not transpire. Concerning Jesus, Russell said,

“...He certainly thought that His second coming would occur in clouds of glory before the death of all the people who were living at that time. There are a great many texts that prove that ...and there are a lot of places where it is quite clear that He believed that His second coming would happen during the lifetime of many then living” [Bertrand Russell in *Why I Am Not A Christian*].

Since, in Russell's view, Jesus failed to return within that existing generation, as He predicted, “He was not so wise as some other people have been, and He was certainly not superlatively wise.” Russell, therefore, considered Jesus as having no more knowledge about the future than the average person. So he makes the point that if Jesus spoke of things of which He had no more insight than anyone else, what value is there in trusting Him!

C.S. Lewis [1898-1963], a well-respected and popular Christian author who gained international renown for an impressive array of works both popular and scholarly, is in general agreement with

Russell, since he too believed that Jesus made statements that did not come true. When referring to Matthew 24:34 which records Jesus as saying, “I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened,” Lewis asserted, “It is certainly the most embarrassing verse in the Bible.” However, instead of rejecting Christ as did Russell, Lewis sought to reach a satisfying answer to this apparent dilemma by claiming that Jesus, just 14 words later, actually professed to be ignorant about the timing of His return: “But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father” [Matthew 24:36 KJV]. Lewis further explained that Jesus’ ignorance was due to His becoming a man which involved taking upon Himself the limitations of man.

“To believe in the incarnation, to believe that he is God, makes it hard to understand how he could be ignorant; but also makes it certain that, if he said he could be ignorant, then ignorant he could really be. For a God who can be ignorant is less baffling than a God who falsely professes ignorance. The answer of theologians is that the God-Man was omniscient as God, and ignorant as Man ... And if limitation, and therefore ignorance, was thus taken up, we ought to expect that the ignorance should at some time be actually displayed” [C. S. Lewis in *The World’s Last Night And Other Essays*].

His explanation was not only a satisfactory one for him personally but also is readily accepted by most believers today as a proper way to explain the seeming inconsistency between Jesus’ claim that He would return within that generation and His apparent failure to do so.

In addition to many others who agree with Russell and Lewis about Jesus’ failure to do what He said He would do, both Jewish and Muslim critics also belong to this category. They contend that Jesus’ failure to physically return within a generation, as they believe a literal reading of His statements indicates, annuls the claim espoused by New Testament writers that He was divine. If He failed to do what He said He would do, as the argument goes, then His divinity is surely questionable. It is for this reason that they relegate Him to human status, at most a mere prophet.

In opposition to the position of Russell and Lewis are those who believe that Christ did return within the lifetime of His contemporaries. This view is called *Preterism*. **Preterists** [pret’-er-ists] specifically believe that Jesus returned in or around A.D. 70. The primary focus of the return, according to preterists, was to bring judgment on the nation Israel for turning its back on God, for killing His Son, and to finalize the transition between the Old and New Covenants. Within this view, however, are two camps:

Partial Preterists

One group, known as partial preterists, states that Jesus’ return at that time, while fulfilling some of His own time-indicators, should not be classified as His *final* coming. The coming in A.D. 70 was a *kind* of coming while the physical, bodily return is still in the future.

An example of one who adheres to this view is **Kenneth Gentry**, a respected evangelical scholar whose writings are becoming more known and increasingly influential. When analyzing Matthew 24, he argues that Jesus refers to His coming in judgment on the Jews in verses 1-35, but speaks of a future coming from verse 36 on. He asserts,

“Contextual evidence suggests that Christ is distinguishing two different comings. One coming is his coming upon Jerusalem in temporal judgment to end the old covenant era; the other is his coming at the Second Advent in final judgment to end history (24:36ff). These two “comings” are theologically related while historically distinct” [Kenneth L. Gentry in *Perilous Times*, p.90].

Another scholar who has moved into this camp is **R.C. Sproul**, a well-known and highly regarded theologian whose recent book, *The Last Days According to Jesus*, is currently creating waves in conservative Protestantism. He writes,

“I am convinced that the substance of the Olivet Discourse was fulfilled in A.D. 70 and that the bulk of Revelation was likewise fulfilled in that time-frame. I share Gentry’s concerns about full preterism, particularly on such issues as the consummation of the kingdom and the resurrection of the dead ... While partial preterists acknowledge that in the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 there was a parousia or coming of Christ, they maintain that it was not the parousia” [R. C. Sproul in *The Last Days According to Jesus*, p.158].

Sproul, therefore, joins Gentry in acknowledging that there was a *kind* of coming of Jesus in A.D. 70 but insists that it was not the final or ultimate coming of Christ. A couple of paragraphs later, Sproul speaks of a fuller coming, one that “will be universal in its scope and significance... at the end of human history as we know it.”

Full Preterists

The other camp that comes under the umbrella of preterism is composed of those known as full preterists. These scholars frown upon Gentry and Sproul’s position since, in their reasoning, such a view promotes the notion of three different comings – one at His birth, the second in judgment upon the Jews in A.D. 70, and a third still in the future. They argue that the Bible speaks only of *two* comings, and if the second one occurred in A.D. 70, there can be no more. They, therefore, concur with Bertrand Russell and C.S. Lewis that Jesus claimed He *would* return within that existing generation but, unlike them, they believe that He was true to His word and actually *did* return, thus completely fulfilling the return prophecy.

John Noe, a conservative evangelical scholar and prolific writer, says in one of his many booklets:

“There is a major inconsistency in saying Jesus is with us today and then saying He has not returned. ... Make no mistake about it, 70 A.D. WAS THE LORD’S PROMISED AND PERSONAL RETURN! He returned as and when He said! He doesn’t need to return again from anywhere at the end of the Christian age or at the demise of the material universe, as is commonly asserted. He already has. He’s back. He’s here in our midst (Rev. 1:13,20)” [John Noe in *Demanding Evidences Why Christ Returned As And When He Said He Would*, p.18].

James Stuart Russell, who in 1878 composed a masterful and scholarly book and who is considered by most to be the *father* of modern day preterism, summarized his findings at the end of his massive book:

“We are compelled, therefore, by all these considerations, and chiefly by regard for the authority of Him whose word cannot be broken, to conclude that the Parousia, or second coming of Christ, with its connected and concomitant events, did take place, according to the Saviour’s own prediction, at the period when Jerusalem was destroyed, and before the passing away of ‘that generation’ [James Stuart Russell in *The Parousia*, p.549].

This position obviously redefines a number of key areas in eschatological thought including the oft used phrase “*the end of the age*,” the nature of the second coming, the timing of the resurrection and judgment, the character of Jesus’ kingdom on earth, and the establishment of the new heaven and the new earth. Although this view is in opposition to traditional teaching, it is rapidly gaining

followers as the writings of those who hold this belief proliferate. These writings are not normally found in bookstores but, for the most part, must be obtained from the authors themselves. Also, there are a few churches here and there within the United States that adhere to the full preterist view.

Futurists

The most popular opinion among believers today, which we will call the futurist view, is that the second coming of Christ is yet to occur. Those who hold to this view either do not believe that Jesus taught that He would return within the generation of which He was a part or, more commonly, that He did indicate He would return within that generation but later postponed His plans when the Jews rejected both Him and the kingdom He offered to establish. The upshot is that we are still waiting.

There is no need to cite, as has been done previously, examples of those who adhere to this view since it is so common. It is espoused in churches, books, theological schools, religious radio and television, not to mention several hundred Christian songs. The fact is that the futurist view is so dominant that any other view is generally considered to be outside the scope of true Biblical teaching.

Investigating Jesus' Claim

Now, let us investigate those statements that have a direct bearing upon the question: Did Jesus claim that He would return within the lifetime of His contemporaries? There are four references within the Gospels that pertain to this subject. Additionally, there are three passages within the book of Revelation in which are found other related statements made by Jesus. Each of these references is listed below and followed by appropriate comments.

Matthew 16:27-28

About halfway through His earthly ministry, while giving some instructions to His disciples regarding their commitment to Him, Jesus referred to the time of His coming in His kingdom. After challenging them to deny going their own way in life to follow Him instead, Jesus explained the reason they should do so:

“For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to his conduct. I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming [erchomai] in his kingdom” [Matthew 16:27-28 NIV].

There are three clear facts within this statement.

Fact 1

Jesus would come in God’s glory accompanied by His angels. Coming *in His Father’s glory* indicates that Jesus was to assume the role of the Father in His dealings with mankind. The particular aspect of that role which Jesus focused on in His statement is the realm of judgment.

This harmonizes quite well with a statement that Jesus made later to some obstinate Jews. To them He declared that the Father had “entrusted all judgment to the Son” [John 5:22 NIV], meaning that the process and the execution of all judgment had been transferred from the Father to Him, His Son. Thus, in this particular passage when Jesus said He was coming *in God’s glory*, He meant He was coming to execute judgment. “The Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory with his

angels, and then he will reward each person according to his conduct” [Matthew 16:27 NIV]. That is, each person would be evaluated.

On other occasions, however, Jesus spoke of coming in His own glory as well as in the glory of the Father. In those cases it is probable that such terminology is to be equated with coming in His kingdom. A comparison of two parallel passages, Matthew 20:21 and Mark 10:37, clearly shows the two thoughts to be interchangeable.

Matthew says Mrs. Zebedee requested that her two sons, James and John, might sit in places of authority with Jesus *in His kingdom*. Mark says the request was that they might sit with Him *in His glory*. Such an interchange of these two terms indicates the Jews in those days understood when Jesus spoke about coming *in His glory* that He was referring to coming *in His kingdom*. This is further confirmed by an earlier statement in which Jesus linked both words, *throne and glory*, in one phrase: “I tell you the truth at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his throne of glory [the Greek construction] “you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” [Matthew 19:29]. Here Jesus announced that His followers, in this passage referring specifically to the twelve apostles, would have a judicial role when He sat on His throne of glory.

Fact 2

Jesus would come to judge each person. This is the second clear piece of information found in Matthew 16:27-28 and is, in fact, the crux of the passage. Jesus had just told His disciples that it was a foolish mistake to achieve a great abundance of wealth at the expense of one’s own life. Such was not a good bargain. Instead, He challenged them to renounce that kind of *this-world-only* lifestyle and pursue His way of living. By doing so they would actually save their lives as opposed to losing them. In order to encourage them in that direction He informed them that *a time of assessment* would be held when He came in His kingdom and that they would be rewarded on the basis of what they had done. Note that in this passage Jesus links together His coming and the judgment. This linkage is also evident in other passages such as the following:

Included within the last comments of Jesus, recorded by the apostle John, are these words: “Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done” [Revelation 22:12 NIV].

Paul told Timothy in the late 60s that the judgment of both the living and the dead was pending: “I give you this charge in the presence of God and of Christ, who is about to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom” [2 Timothy 4:1].

Fact 3

Jesus would come before all the disciples died. This is the third clear statement found in Matthew 16:27-28 and is the one that relates directly to our study. Jesus’ assertion, that *some* of those listening to Him would see Him coming in his kingdom, denotes that the event would occur after a lapse of a reasonable period of time. He does not say *most* of them would still be alive when He comes, only *some* of them. The implication is clear that *most* of them will have died by that time, but He specifically predicts that a few of them will still be alive and will see Him coming in His kingdom. Therefore, the period of time that passes from the time He makes this statement to the time He comes in His kingdom must be long enough for the majority of them to have died but short enough for some to survive and witness that event. It seems reasonable, then, to conclude that some forty or fifty years were to pass before He would come in His kingdom. It does not seem reasonable

to try to find fulfillment in much closer-at-hand events as some scholars have suggested, such as the following:

Not a few commentators believe that the transfiguration [Matthew 17:1-9; Mark 9:2-10; Luke 9:28-36] was the event that fulfilled Jesus' claim that some of His disciples would still be alive when He came. That magnificent change that came upon Jesus on the mountain is looked upon as a preview of His coming in His kingdom. Many writers, then, hold the position that Jesus meant to say that some of His disciples would not die until they had seen *a preview* of His coming in His kingdom. But such cannot be true for several reasons:

- To claim that Jesus meant to say something other than what He said is to assume He had a lack of good communication skills. Not a wise assumption for anyone to make.
- The time of Jesus' transfiguration occurred within a week of His *coming-in-His-kingdom* [Matthew 17:1], and none of the disciples died during that week. If the transfiguration, only one week away, were to be the fulfillment of His prediction, it would have been a little odd for Jesus to say that some of them would still be alive a week later.
- Jesus clearly indicated that angels would accompany Him at His coming. But in the case of the transfiguration, His companions were Moses and Elijah. No mention is made of the presence of His holy angels.
- Jesus declared that His coming would involve an evaluation of each person, which obviously did not occur at His transfiguration. So, as glorious as the transfiguration was, it cannot be said that He was coming in His kingdom at that time.
- The purpose of the transfiguration was to clarify to Peter, James, and John the true identity of Jesus. God Himself audibly declared that Jesus was His beloved Son [Matthew 17:5]. This fact was enhanced by His divine nature breaking through His human nature. "Here a small part of that glory is allowed to shine through the cracks" [David & Jane Graves in a website article]. It was that knowledge, gained first-hand by those three men, which enabled Peter, some 35 years later, to write, "We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty" [2 Peter 1:16 NIV]. The transfiguration provided the basis for their conviction that Jesus was God's Son. They had personally seen Him in His glory, had heard God speak from heaven, and so were not merely spinning a yarn when proclaiming He would return in divine power and divine glory.

Other writers suggest that His coming in His kingdom was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost [Acts 2:1-4], an event that occurred about 1½ years later. Such a concept has the same flaws as noted above:

- All the disciples were still alive at that time, except for Judas Iscariot, who killed himself soon after betraying Jesus [Acts 2:14].
- Likewise, there is no indication that angels accompanied the coming of the Holy Spirit, only the sound of a mighty wind and fiery looking tongues [Acts 2:2-3].
- Neither was anyone judged by the Lord according to his deeds on that day. Later writings indicate that judgment day was still in the future.
- Also, the day of Pentecost witnessed the coming of the Holy Spirit, not the coming of the Son of Man, a term that applies only to Jesus.

Those who believe that Jesus' coming in His kingdom is still in the future are forced to modify this verse to fit their own eschatological time schedule. Their point of view requires them to read, "I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom more than 2000 years from now." Although Christians would repudiate such a misquote, the fact is that such is the implication of this stance. The common view today is

that Jesus was speaking prophetically of the final generation, but such is unconvincing since Jesus was specifically referring to the disciples standing in His immediate presence. He said, "...some *who are standing here* will not die." He did not say some in a *future* generation would be alive when He came. He was referring to those standing beside Him and listening to His remarks.

To summarize Matthew 16:27-28, Jesus said He would return with the angels during the lifetime of some of His disciples to review the deeds of every man. He could not have been referring to either His transfiguration or to Pentecost since no judgment was held at those times. Neither could He have been referring to a far off future day since He stated that some of His followers would still be alive.

"What is in view is the coming of Messiah, in that generation, in the full exercise of his Messianic kingdom authority to judge the living and the dead. This is the only interpretation of this text which honors inspiration, satisfies the demands of the text; and is in harmony with the rest of scripture" [Don K. Preston in a website article entitled "A Critical Text" (Matthew 16:27-28)].

"The plain teaching of the passage is that before some of those who heard him speak should die the Son of man would come in glory, and his kingdom would be established in power" [Milton Terry in *Biblical Apocalypics*, p.220].

Incidentally, the Mormon Church, which holds to the futurist's position and which endeavors to be consistent with Jesus' statement, becomes absurd by clinging to the idea that after 2000 years there are a few of the apostles who are still physically alive and living incognito. The argument is that they must still be alive since Jesus said some would not die before He returned.

Question: What would happen before all the original disciples died?

Answer: The Son of Man would come in His kingdom and judge each person.

Matthew 26:64

Another of Jesus' statements that relates directly to our study arose during His trial before the Sanhedrin, the supreme court of the Jews. While standing before and answering the questions of those men who made up that august body, Jesus affirmed that He was the Christ, the Son of God. Then without hesitation, He declared to that panel of judges, "In the future you will see the Son of Man *sitting at the right hand of power and coming* [erchomai] on the clouds of heaven " [Matthew 26:64 NIV].

Immediately, Jesus was charged with blasphemy, spit upon, and pummeled with fists by those leaders of Israel [Matthew 26:65-68]. Their violent and vicious reaction revealed they knew exactly the connotation inherent in His shocking, at least to them, declaration. In fact, every Jew raised in the synagogue had studied in detail what "*coming on the clouds of heaven*" meant and they all knew just as well the meaning of the figurative expression "*sitting at the right hand of power.*"

Sitting at the Right Hand of Power

This phrase is frequently used in the Old Testament to express a place of extraordinary honor, exceptional favor, and/or immense power. Note the following:

- Jacob placed his right hand on Joseph's son Ephraim to bestow a greater blessing on him rather than on Manasseh, the older brother. Being at Jacob's right hand was a more

honorable and superior position than being at his left hand [Genesis 48:8-20, especially vs. 19]

- As Rachel lay dying after childbirth, she called her child Ben-Oni [son of my sorrow], but Jacob called him Benjamin [son of my right hand] [Genesis 35:18]. He did not call him *son of my left hand*, an inferior position. Such a move by Jacob showed that he favored this child of Rachel more than any child of Leah.
- When Moses sang of God's deliverance of Israel out of Egypt, he emphasized His right hand: "Your right hand, O Lord, was majestic in power. Your right hand, O Lord, shattered the enemy ... You stretched out your right hand and the earth swallowed [the Egyptians]" [Exodus 15:6,12 NIV]. Clearly, Moses was thinking of God's mighty power when he employed the expression *your right hand*.
- When thinking of the afterlife, David said of God, "You will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at *your right hand*" [Psalm 16:11 NIV]. He viewed being at God's right hand as being in a position of great favor and special honor.

Although the above sampling of statements indicates the importance and meaning of that phrase, there is another one that appears to be more directly related to Jesus' claim before the Sanhedrin. It is found in a recognized Messianic psalm in which David speaks of the Messiah as being seated at the right hand of the Almighty One. "The Lord says to my Lord: 'Sit at *my right hand* until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet'" [Psalm 110:1 NIV]. This statement is often referred to by New Testament writers to support their contention that when Jesus ascended to heaven, He assumed that elevated position of honor and power. He became the supreme universal ruler. These writers asserted repeatedly that Psalm 110:1 was a reference to Jesus [Mark 16:19; Acts 2:34; I Corinthians 15:25; Ephesians 1:20-21; Hebrews 1:3, 13; 8:1; 10:12-13; 12:2; I Peter 3:22].

To Caiaphas, the high priest, and to the other judges, however, when Jesus admitted that He was that One, the Son of God, this was nothing but blasphemy. For Jesus even to suggest that He, *a mere man*, would be so honored and exalted to a position over all things, was to equate Himself with God which, to them, was totally unacceptable. But Jesus not only spoke of His sitting but also of His coming, which added more fuel to the fire.

Coming on the Clouds of Heaven

As the expression *sitting at God's right hand* has an Old Testament background so also does the phrase *coming on the clouds of heaven*.

A study of the Old Testament reveals that clouds were often employed by God to denote His presence among His people. Since He is invisible [I Timothy 1:17] and a spirit [John 4:24], He frequently made use of observable substances, such as clouds, smoke, and fire, as visible evidence that He was near. Here are just a few of the many examples that could be cited:

- "...the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud..." to the grumbling Israelites [Exodus 16:10 ESV].
- At Mt. Sinai the Lord told Moses, "I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, so that the people will hear me speaking with you..." [Exodus 19:9 NIV].
- Aaron was specifically informed that if he wanted to remain alive, he was not to go into the Most Holy Place at a time of his own choosing because God said, "... I will appear in a cloud over the mercy seat" [Leviticus 16:2 ESV]
- Of Moses, it is said, "The Lord came down in *a cloud* and spoke with him..." [Numbers 11:25 NIV].
- The Psalmist said, "[God] makes *the clouds* his chariot" [Psalm 104:3 NIV].

The only one who can descend in a cloud or ride on a cloud, of course, is God. When someone used the clouds in this manner, that someone was *always* the immortal God. It was never a mortal man. It was this implication within Jesus' statement that so utterly upset those Jewish leaders. They understood the insinuation within His assertion: He was declaring Himself to be God's equal.

In addition to depicting the presence of the invisible God, clouds are also found in the Old Testament within the context of apocalyptic language. Apocalyptic language is the figurative use of ordinary words and phrases generally within the context of an approaching time of judgment. Such words and phrases are not to be taken literally, a mistake often made to the detriment of a sound and proper understanding of what is being represented. Note these examples:

- In his lament for Egypt, Ezekiel said, "...the day of the Lord is near – a day of clouds, a time of doom for the nations" [Ezekiel 30:3 NIV].
- Joel called upon Israel in his day, "Let all who live in the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming. It is close at hand – a day of darkness and gloom, *a day of clouds* of strong blackness" [Joel 2:1-2 NIV].
- Nahum warned the people of Nineveh, "The Lord...will not leave the guilty unpunished. His way is in the whirlwind and the storm, and *the clouds* are the dust of his feet" [Nahum 1:3 NIV].
- When the Lord was about to execute judgment upon Egypt, Isaiah exclaimed, "See, the Lord rides on *a swift cloud* and is coming to Egypt" [Isaiah 19:1 NIV].

The importance of the connection in the Jewish mind between God's *coming in clouds* and His *coming in judgment* cannot be overemphasized. And for this reason, Jesus' assertion that His critics would see Him at the Father's right hand *coming on heaven's clouds* suggested not only His divinity but also His authority to judge.

"...the two things, the sitting on the right hand of power and the coming, are connected in such a way as to mean that he is to assume power in heaven and exercise it here in the world. The period beginning with the departure of Jesus from the world was to be marked by this assumption of heavenly power by the Christ and by repeated interferences in crises of the world's history of which the destruction of Jerusalem was the first" [Milton S. Terry in *Biblical Apocalypics*, p.223].

Jesus was stressing to those rulers the fact that in the future it would become evident that He was in the place of power, that the power to judge rested in Him. When He said He would *come on clouds*, He was making a similar statement to that which we have already noted in Matthew 16:27-28 where He said He would come *in the glory of His Father*. He declared then that He was assuming the role of the Father as the judge and that He would come in judgment in the same way that the Father had done in the past.

More specifically, however, when Jesus spoke of *coming on the clouds of heaven*, His judges would have immediately thought of Daniel's prophetic statement: "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, *coming with the clouds of heaven*. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed" [Daniel 7:13-14 NIV].

These words tie in well with Jesus' statement. Both refer to a *son of man*, both speak of a *coming in clouds*, and both refer to His receiving unsurpassed authority. For Jesus to equate Himself with the One of whom Daniel was speaking exasperated His judges beyond imagination.

Then to top it off, Jesus specifically said that His accusers would actually *see* Him in that exalted position of supreme power: “In the future you will see the Son of Man...” [Matthew 26:64 NIV]. It is especially important to note that such a statement would be out of place if He were speaking to *them* of an event that would occur long after they all had died.

“...the commentator who sees such a statement as initially meant to be fulfilled at a distant time cannot realistically reconcile this statement before the high priest with it because it expects an eye witness fulfillment” [Lee Smith in *The Gospel of Matthew*, a commentary found on the internet].

“We maintain that this language cannot be naturally interpreted as a reference to an event belonging to a far distant period of time. It is something ... which the high priests and his associates are to see” [Milton S. Terry in *Biblical Apocalypics*, p.222].

Before the Jewish Sanhedrin, Jesus spoke of an occurrence that would transpire during the lifetime of those who would condemn Him to death. *They* would live long enough to witness such a fulfillment. Otherwise, Jesus should have said, “In the future, *some 2000 years down the road, picture in your minds* the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power and coming on the clouds of heaven.” What other meaning is there to this statement if Jesus did not mean that those who composed the jury that was trying Him would be the same ones to experience His coming in judgment in their own lifetime? Would it not have been a meaningless threat?

“...there would be no meaning in such an assertion if it did not imply that they were to witness it ‘in the flesh’” [James Stuart Russell in *The Parousia*, p.117].

The clearest reading is that Jesus was speaking to - a specific group of men - at a specific place - about a specific time - about a specific event. It is a statement that cannot apply to any other period in history. Earlier He had said that some of His *disciples* would witness His coming; now He includes some of His *enemies* as being among the witnesses.

Question: What were Israel’s rulers going to see in their future?

Answer: The Son of Man possessing supreme power and coming on the clouds of heaven.

John 21:21-22

Near the end of his gospel, John records that Jesus gave Peter some insight into his future. Jesus said, “...when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted” [John 21:18a NIV]. In other words, in his youth Peter essentially did what he wanted to do. His early days were days full of freedom. “But,” Jesus continued, “when you are old you will stretch out your hands and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go” [John 21:18b NIV].

On the surface this verse seems to suggest that Peter would live to an old age but would experience a measure of frailty requiring someone else to take care of his basic needs. However, John puts a different slant on these words when he says, “Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God” [John 21:19 NIV].

The picture that comes to one’s mind by the expression “you will stretch out your hands” is that of someone hanging on a cross. Apparently, Peter would live to an old age. Then he would be bound by someone else and be led to a place he did not wish to go, to a place of execution. It appears that Peter accepted the Lord’s prediction since there is no record of any objection.

Instead, Peter desired to find out the fate of his friend John who was standing nearby. Would he also suffer the same fate? So he asked, “Lord, what about John?” [John 21:21 NIV]. Jesus answered, “If I want him to remain alive until I return [erchomai], what is that to you?” [John 21:22 NIV]. This is an extremely interesting statement by Jesus because it indicates that the length of John’s life was in His hands. He said, “If I want him to remain alive....” Since Peter did not question Jesus’ remark, it can be assumed that by the time of this conversation, he had developed a strong belief in the divinity of Jesus.

Also, when Jesus said to Peter “what is that to you,” the implication was that he should not be concerned about when and where and how anyone else was to die. The implication for John, though, was that he was to be alive when Jesus returned. This conversation strongly intimates that at the coming of Christ, Peter would be dead but John would be alive “...for it is impossible that Jesus would suggest this idea only to mislead” [Ernest Hampden-Cook in *The Christ Has Come*, p.82].

Earlier Jesus, without mentioning any names, had said that some of His disciples would be alive to see Him coming in His kingdom [Matthew 16:27-28]. Here He strongly implies that John would very well be one of them.

There is no suggestion that those who heard Jesus make this statement, or those who later heard what He had said, thought it was absurd or preposterous. But it would have been a ludicrous comment if Jesus had not intended to return for several hundred years. If this were to be the case, He should have said, “*If I want* John to remain alive for 2000 years until I return, what is that to you?”

The fact is there are numerous indications in the New Testament that other believers living in that generation would not die before Jesus returned.

- Paul undoubtedly believed Christ’s coming would take place during the lifetime of Timothy since he charged him to keep the commandment that he had just given him “until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ” [I Timothy 6:14 NIV]. He does not say keep this commandment until you die but until Jesus comes. The second coming and not his death was the event that would release Timothy from that particular command.
- Paul told the Corinthians “Listen, I tell *you* a mystery: *we* will not all sleep [Paul’s normal euphemism for physical death] but *we* will all be changed ...” [I Corinthians 15:51 NIV]. Paul included some of the Corinthians along with himself as being among those who would not die before Christ returned.
- Likewise, while discussing the destiny of those Thessalonian believers who had died and the relationship of living believers to them, Paul said, “...we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep...we who are alive, who are left, will be caught together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air” [I Thessalonians 4:15, 17 ESV].
- By using the pronoun *we*, Paul evidently felt that he himself would be alive along with many of the Thessalonians when Jesus returned, although later he altered that conviction concerning himself since circumstances indicated that he might possibly be put to death before that time [2 Timothy 4:6-8].
- Interestingly, Paul’s prayer for the Thessalonians was that their “...whole spirit and soul and *body* be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” [I Thessalonians 5:23 KJV]. The fact that he prayed that their *bodies*, along with their spirits and souls, might be preserved indicates that he was praying that they would not experience physical death before the return of Christ.
- “He actually prays that not just the believer’s spirit and soul be kept blameless, but that the believer’s **BODY** be ‘preserved’ until the parousia of the Lord. How could Paul pray a

prayer like that if the coming of the Lord was not to be within the first century? How could Paul ask God to preserve someone's body if the coming of the Lord was thousands of years away. ... The point being is that Paul's request for the preservation of THEIR bodies (the bodies of the first century Thessalonians) points the reader toward the understanding that the Lord Jesus was to return in His parousia while the generation of the Thessalonians were alive. No other answer satisfies" [Dr. Kelly Nelson Birks in an internet article entitled "The Potency of a Proper Placing of the Parousia"].

- James obviously expected his readers to be alive when the Lord returned for he exhorted them, "Be patient...until the coming of the Lord" which would not be long since "...the Lord's coming is at hand" ... in fact, He "is standing at the door" [James 5:7-9 ESV]. If the Lord's coming is still in the future, how it is possible for his original readers to still maintain an attitude of perseverance?
- Jesus implied that His disciples, or at least some of them, would be alive at His return when He told them that He was going to His Father's house to prepare a place for them to live: "And if I go and prepare a place for *you*, I will come back and take *you* to be with me that *you* also may be where I am" [John 14:3 NIV].
- Then, as discussed earlier, there is the unambiguous statement made by Jesus in which He specifically declared that some of His disciples would not die before He returned: "I tell you the truth, *some who are standing here* will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom" [Matthew 16:28 NIV].

It is enlightening to notice that when first generation believers heard statements to the effect that some of them would be alive at the return of Jesus, they did not treat them with skepticism but considered them to be easily within the realm of possibility. This is so because they were taught and they believed that Jesus would return before their generation passed away. It was no surprise, then, to the disciples to hear Jesus say that John would be one of these.

Question: What event would John in all probability live long enough to see?

Answer: The return of Jesus

Matthew 23:36,39 and 24:30,34

Another passage that must be studied and which contains even clearer time indicators regarding the Second Coming is found in Matthew 23 and 24. Chapter 23 records that in the temple area before an assembled crowd including His disciples, Jesus spoke very disapprovingly about the lifestyles of the temple leaders. In very strong language, He blasted that group of influential people for their hypocrisy and arrogance. He characterized them as being hypocrites, blind fools, sons of hell, blind guides, white-washed tombs, full of wickedness, snakes, a brood of vipers, and murderers. Their sinister qualities earned from Him the alarming prediction that they would be held responsible for and charged with all the murders of God's people from the beginning of creation to the very day in which they lived:

"That is why **you** will be held guilty for the murder of every good person, beginning with the good man Abel. This also includes Barachiah's son Zechariah, the man you murdered between the temple and the altar. I can promise that you people living today will be punished for all these things" [Matthew 23:35-36 CEV].

The reason Jesus said *from Abel to Zechariah* is due to the way the books of the Hebrew Bible are arranged. Genesis, being first, records the first murder, that of Abel [Genesis 4:8]. Chronicles, being the last book in the Hebrew Bible, records the last murder, that of Zechariah [2 Chronicles 24:20-22].

Jesus' remarks meant that the present generation would suffer the punishment for every murdered righteous person recorded in the Old Testament, from the first one to the last one. This is made clear not only by His saying "upon **you**" the punishment will come [Matthew 23:33 NIV] but also by His saying, "...all this will come upon *this generation*" [Matthew 23:36 NIV]. The Living Bible renders His message most bluntly and clearly: "Yes, all the accumulated judgment of the centuries shall break upon the heads of this very generation."

"Jesus' charge is that the history of Israel is the history of the murder of the men of God...From beginning to end, the history of Israel is the rejection, and often the slaughter, of the men of God" [William Barclay in *The Gospel of Matthew*, p.329].

Jerusalem: Killer of Prophets

The indictment that Jerusalem was the home of murderers is consistent with the history of that nation. Jesus had just said to the scribes and Pharisees: "... you say, 'If we had lived in the days of our forefathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets'." Their endeavor to justify themselves was met with Jesus' skillful retort: "So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets" [Matthew 23:30-31 NIV]. Jesus said in effect, "You are your fathers' sons alright, and as such you share the characteristics of your murdering fathers." The fact is, even at that moment, they were making plans to kill Jesus Himself, a dastardly act they had been arranging for some time. Note the following references:

- "For this reason [for making himself equal with God] the Jews tried all the harder to kill him [John 5:18 NIV].
- "At that point some of the people of Jerusalem began to ask, 'Isn't this the man they are trying *to kill*'?" [John 7:25 NIV]
- "As it is, you are determined *to kill* me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God" [John 8:40 NIV].
- "The Pharisees went out and plotted how they might *kill Jesus*" [Matthew 12:14 NIV].
- "...the chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, and they plotted to arrest Jesus in some sly way and *kill him*" [Matthew 26:3-4 NIV].

After declaring that the present generation would suffer the consequences for their murderous history, Jesus reflected on Israel's history as also one of rejected love. He lamented over the many times He had wanted those people to turn to Him, but they were unwilling to do so. "How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!" [Matthew 23:37b NIV]. Sadly, His lament began with this designation: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those sent to it" [Matthew 23:37a].

Jerusalem once had the name of being the place where God dwelt, but its leaders consistently rejected His messengers. Furthermore, they were not content to simply ignore His emissaries; they had to kill them, including His Son.

Earlier Jesus pointed this out when He told a story about a landowner who leased his vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey [Matthew 21:33-39]. When he sent a servant back to collect the money due him, the farmers killed that servant. This occurred several times. Then the owner sent his son expecting they would honor him. But his hope was crushed; they killed his son also.

“When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus’ parables, they knew he was talking about them” [Matthew 21:45 NIV].

The Jewish leaders were just like their fathers who killed the prophets and their true nature was later revealed when they killed God’s Son.

In John’s vision of the destruction of Jerusalem, he said, “I saw the woman [Jerusalem] drunk with the blood of the saints and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus...In her was found the blood of prophets and of the saints and of all who have been killed on the earth” [Revelation 17:6; 18:24 NKJV]. One of the most shocking statements Jesus made about Jerusalem is this: “... no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!” [Luke 13:33 NIV]. The evidence is clear: *Jerusalem was the home of murderers.*

As Jesus turned to walk away, He further shocked His audience by declaring: “See, your house will now be left to you desolate” [Matthew 23:38 WEY], that is, your house of worship, the temple. He says, “Now I am abandoning you to the consequences of your sins.” The temple will no longer be recognized as God’s house. It is now your house, deserted by God.

By making that pronouncement, Jesus included the destruction of the temple in the judgment of which He had just spoken. The punishment upon *this generation* would include the devastation of the temple. Its implied destruction is explicit; it is to be left desolate ... deserted ... abandoned ... forsaken; in fact, it would be destroyed.

The Timing of Jesus’ Return

Following this declaration of judgment was one further public statement that Jesus uttered before leaving the temple; in fact, it is His last recorded words to Israel. To the temple leaders, who were listening, it was an irksome statement, an exasperating remark, an irritating comment. He warned,

“For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord’ ” [Matthew 23:39 ESV].

The expression “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord” is a quote from Psalm 118:26 and was part of a song, known as the Hallel Hymn, which was sung by the Jews as they entered Jerusalem and maneuvered their way through the streets to the temple to observe one of the three major annual feasts. Three times a year those who were able trekked to Jerusalem from all over Israel to participate in those God-ordained festival celebrations. They were times of rejoicing and thankfulness as well as sacred and solemn occasions.

- **The Feast of Unleavened Bread**, which began the day following the Passover observance, was celebrated in the Spring near the beginning of the Jewish New Year and lasted for seven days.
- **The Feast of [Seven] Weeks** or Pentecost was also observed in the Spring but on the fiftieth day after Passover and lasted a single day.
- **The Feast of Tabernacles** or Ingathering was celebrated in the Fall in the seventh month of each year and lasted eight days.

So, on those three different occasions during the year, the Hallel Hymn of Psalm 118 was heard echoing throughout the streets of Jerusalem.

It is of immense importance to note that the pronoun *he* within the song they sang, “Blessed is *HE* who comes in the name of the Lord”, is not a reference to Jesus or the Messiah as is commonly

believed. It is a reference to the worshipper himself, the one who is coming to the temple to worship God. The phrase means that the one who comes to worship in the name of the Lord is the one who is blessed. This is what the Jews believed as they sang the hymn on their way to the temple. They were on their way to worship in the name of the Lord who would bless them for it. “Blessed is the one who is coming to the temple to worship in the name of the Lord.

Before Jesus quoted this part of the hymn, however, he said, “you will not see me again until....” If He had only said, “You will not see me *again*”, the temple leaders would have said, “Good riddance!” But He added one more word, the word *until*. “You will not see me again *until*....” By saying *until* He implied that He would definitely return at a future time. Jesus said He was leaving, but He also said, “I’ll be back!” Particularly be aware that He did not say that it would be another generation who would see Him, but “*you*”, those leaders to whom He was speaking. *They* would see Him again, and it would be at a time the Hallel Hymn was being sung, that is, at one of the annual feasts.

By way of summary, He had said to the crowd that He was leaving the temple which would become desolated. He added that He Himself would not be involved with the temple again until some future time when they would traditionally be singing the Hallel Hymn. In other words, He would return and be seen during one of the three feast times of Israel. So Jesus linked the occasion of one of the yearly feasts with His return *and* with the judgment upon Jerusalem. Now did this really happen? Is there any historical evidence that Jesus returned within that generation during one of the annual feasts to bring judgment upon Jerusalem?

Flavius Josephus, who was not only the thorough and dependable personal historian of the Roman general Titus but also an eyewitness of the destruction of Jerusalem by the armies under the command of Titus, states clearly that when the armies of Rome began their siege of Jerusalem, the people trapped inside were there to celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Writing soon after that event, in A.D. 75, he said,

“...they [the Jews] were come up from all the country to *the feast of unleavened bread*, and were on a sudden shut up by an army” [Josephus in *Wars*, Book 6, Chapter 9, Section 3].

This “*shutting up*” was accomplished by the Roman soldiers who, under the direct supervision of Titus himself, built a five mile wall around Jerusalem, a feat that would ordinarily have taken several months but completed in three days [Josephus in *Wars*, Book 5, Chapter 12, Section 2]. Josephus, therefore, confirms Jesus’ words that His return would occur at the time the Jews traveled to Jerusalem to worship the Lord, that is, at one of the three yearly feasts, at a time they would be singing, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.”

“Someone might object that such a prediction by Jesus isolating his coming to one of the feast days was tantamount to predicting ‘the day and the hour’ of his coming. But such is not the case at all. In Matthew 24 Jesus predicted his coming in that generation, vs. 29-34. He even gave some signs, (v. 24-25), whereby, ‘when you see all these things then know that he is near even at the doors.’ (ASV) They could know by these signs that his coming was near, ‘but of that day and hour knoweth no man’ (v. 36). Knowing something is near, that it is even to be in your generation, does not tell you the day or the hour of its occurrence!” [Don Preston in a website article entitled “Matthew 23:39 The Song of Ascent”].

In this regard, the assertion Jesus made concerning Himself, that He did not know the day or the hour of His coming [Matthew 24:36], is rather bothersome to most people. How could One who claims to be God not know the future? The majority of scholars find the answer in the distinction between the human and divine natures of Jesus.

This seems to find support in Luke's comment concerning the young Jesus: "And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man" [Luke 2:52 ESV]. The phrase "*increased in wisdom*" would imply that He was not omniscient, at least as a 12 year old. Such may also be true, to a lesser measure, of course, as a man. And apparently this is so since He said He did not know exactly the day or hour He would return. That information was in the mind of His Father. Later, when some of His disciples inquired of Him concerning the time the kingdom would be restored to Israel, He replied, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority" [Acts 1:7 ESV]. Evidently, in some mysterious way, the Father kept some things to Himself and shared them with His Son at the proper time.

The Disciples Questions

Shortly following His alarming remarks in the temple about the coming judgment, four of His disciples, Peter, James, John, and Andrew, inquired for more information about the timing of such a catastrophe. "'Tell us,' they said, 'when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming [parousia] and of the end of the age?'" [Matthew 24:3 NIV].

This three-pronged question reveals there was no doubt in the minds of those disciples what Jesus was talking about. It was clear to them that the destruction of Jerusalem, including their world-renowned, magnificent temple, would bring about the end of the Jewish age and this would occur at His coming. Their question was designed to obtain more information on *when* that event would transpire. The phrasing of their question, however, has caused a great deal of disagreement among students of this passage. It is important, therefore, to be aware of what they were not asking about.

The disciples were not asking about two or three different events separated by many, many years. Some commentators like to treat this three-pronged question as if the disciples were asking three different questions. But they had only one thing in their minds at the time and that was Jesus' stunning declaration. To hear Jesus announce that the city and the temple were soon to be destroyed was mind-blowing, unbelievable, and even terrifying. Jerusalem was the center of their nation, the focus of their homeland. The temple was the center of their religion, the focus of their spiritual lives. When the disciples asked for further clarification, it was the issue of the *soon coming judgment* that initiated the conversation, not questions about *the distant future*.

Cross-referencing a parallel passage in Luke clarifies this even further. "Some of his disciples were remarking about how the temple was adorned with beautiful stones and with gifts dedicated to God. But Jesus said, 'As for what you see here, the time will come when not one stone will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down' [Luke 21:5-6 NIV]. It was at this point, when Jesus spoke of the temple becoming a heap of rubble, that they asked, "...when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are about to take place?" [Luke 21:7 NIV]. Clearly, it was the issue of the soon coming judgment that initiated their question. Their interest was not in some distant future event but in an event that would transpire within their own lifetime.

The disciples were not asking about events leading up to the end of the world. For some 350 years, the King James Version promoted this erroneous idea by its inclusion of the phrase "the end of the world" in the disciples question, "Tell us, when shall these things be? And what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of *the end of the world*?" [Matthew 24:3 KJV]. Using the word *world* to translate the Greek word *aion* as the King James' scholars did, is considered by Greek students today to be an awful, even an erroneous choice.

Such a rendering back in A.D. 1611 of the disciples' question, however, means some 350 years passed before the error was corrected. During that long period of time, the impression that the disciples were asking about the *end of the world* became ingrained in Christian thinking.

It has only been within the last 50 years or so with the proliferation of modern versions that *aion* has been translated properly. To the credit of its translators, the **New King James Version** has also corrected the error by replacing it with the word *age*. Today, most all the newer translations affirm that the disciples were asking about the *end of the Jewish age*, not the *end of the world*, a correction that certainly fits the context much better. Nevertheless, the old translation coupled with its long-standing popularity has done a lot of damage to a proper understanding of this chapter, Matthew 24.

“Nothing can be more misleading to the English reader than the rendering, ‘the end of the world,’ which inevitably suggests the close of human history, the end of time, and the destruction of the earth, – a meaning which the words will not bear” [James Stuart Russell in *The Parousia*, p.121].

Even though the word *age* is found in most all the newer translations, many who read Matthew 24 still think in terms of the end of the world. For example, it is not uncommon for commentators to claim that the disciples were confused when they asked Jesus about the events that would lead up to the end of the Jewish age. Instead, they say, the disciples *should* have asked about the *end of the world's age*. In other words they asked the wrong question because the answer Jesus gave, in the opinion of the interpreters, was one that is more consistent with the end of history. But were the disciples confused? Should they have linked the overthrow of Jerusalem with the *end of the world*? Or did they know what they were talking about when they associated it with the *end of the Jewish age*? Did they, in fact, ask the right question?

Earlier, after Jesus had taught about the *end of the age* in His kingdom parables [Matthew 13:39-40,49], He asked the disciples, “Have you understood all these things?” Their answer was an unqualified, “Yes!” [Matthew 13:51 NIV]. Such an affirmation indicated they understood His teaching about the kingdom and the *end of the age*. So when they later asked, in Matthew 24:3, about the events that would lead up to the *end of the age* [same phrase as that used by Jesus in the parables], are we to believe that they had become confused and no longer understood Jesus’ earlier teachings?

It is totally unwarranted and unfair to allege that their minds had become befuddled. In Matthew 13 Jesus had taught about the *end of the age*; in Matthew 24 the disciples asked Him to explain the signs leading up to the *end of the age*. I tend to think that it is the many modern scholars who are confused about this subject and not the disciples of Jesus.

Furthermore, to claim that the disciples believed that the destruction of Jerusalem would result in *the world coming to its end* is to ignore their knowledge of history. All Jews were aware that the complete destruction of Jerusalem back in 586 B.C. by the Babylonians [II Chronicles 36:15-21] did not mean the end of the world. Life continued to go on after that time of judgment, though the world they knew was drastically altered from what it had been. So when Jesus predicted yet another destruction of Jerusalem, it is very unlikely that they thought of His remarks as referring to the end of the world. In all probability they understood them in the context that life would go on, though many things would change.

Furthermore, evidence that they were not asking about *the end of the world* is seen in their thinking even after Jesus’ discussion. The fact is that they believed Jesus was the Messiah, and they expected Him to erect a temporal kingdom in the world. After the resurrection, they asked Jesus, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” [Acts 1:6 ESV].

There should be little, if any, doubt that when the disciples asked Jesus about the *end of the age*, they were only thinking of the end of the Jewish age, not the end of the world’s age, much less the end of the Christian age about which, at that time, they knew little to nothing. In their minds the

destruction of Jerusalem was paramount to the end of the Jewish way of life. And such an event proved true in A.D. 70. During the last 3½ years of the Jewish Age, A.D. 67-70, Roman armies destroyed their cities, their nation, their homes, their people, their families, their temple, their sacrificial system, their genealogies – their whole way of life. Their world came crashing down.

The disciples were not asking about a future coming of Jesus as understood by futurists today. This must certainly be true for at that time they were not even convinced that He was going to die! When Jesus had previously spoken of His death, the disciples always had a hard time comprehending exactly what He was talking about. So why would they be asking about a second coming when His first coming was not even over yet? How could they be thinking of a second coming when they were not convinced that He was ever going to leave them, which He would have to do in order to come again? How could they possibly be thinking of a *second* coming when their Jewish minds were still concerned with the kingdom the Messiah was supposed to set up when He came? Belief in a second coming presupposes an understanding they obviously did not have. It would only be *after* He left them that the concept of a *return* would take on full significance. Up until then their mental focus was a *coming in His kingdom*, which they hoped, would occur soon.

The only clear reading of this three-pronged question is to view it as a complete thought. They were asking a *when* type question that arose from Jesus' statement concerning the approaching judgment. They were not asking about two or three different events separated by many years, they certainly were not asking about events leading up to the end of the world, and they were not asking about His coming as understood by futurists. Their focus was totally upon Jesus' words that judgment was pending upon their generation.

Jesus' Response

In reply to their question, Jesus proceeded to give a fairly lengthy answer. He spoke of various signs leading up to that time of judgment [Matthew 24:4-15] and instructed them to escape to the hills when it became evident that the city's destruction was imminent [Matthew 24:16-20]. He pointed out how dreadful those days would be and that they should not be deceived by self-proclaimed saviors and prophets who promised deliverance [Matthew 24:21-28]. He then depicted the destruction of Jerusalem in figurative or in, what is called, apocalyptic language:

“Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken” [Matthew 24:29 ESV]. In other words, it would be lights out for Jerusalem.

It is important to emphasize what Jesus told His inquiring disciples. He specifically equated His coming with the destruction of Jerusalem. He would come “on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory ... at that time,” that is, when the sun and the moon darkened, when the stars fell from their orbits, when the planets shuddered. In other words, it would be when Jerusalem was being destroyed that “They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory” [Matthew 24:30 NIV]. That coming would not be a happy occasion for most of the Jews. Grief and anguish would overcome them when they realized Jesus had returned to judge them. He had announced to the Jewish leaders,

“...**this generation** will be held responsible for the blood of all the prophets that has been shed since the beginning of the world, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah ... Yes, I tell you, **this generation** will be held responsible for it all” [Luke 11:50-51 NIV]. It is no wonder that Jesus said, “...all the tribes of the land will mourn” [Matthew 24:30 NIV].

The awful and devastating judgment that fell upon Jerusalem and the Jews took place about 40 years after those words were spoken. It was their Day of Judgment. Jewish leaders had said, “We don’t want this man to be our king” [Luke 19:14 NIV]. Jesus said, “... those enemies of mine who did not want me to be king over them – bring them here and kill them in front of me” [Luke 19:27 NIV]. In another of His parables Jesus accurately predicted their fate as well as that of Jerusalem: “The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city” [Matthew 22:5 NIV]. According to the historical record, the destruction of Jerusalem occurred in A.D. 70. According to Jesus, His return would coincide with the overthrow of Jerusalem. The conclusion seems inescapable: Jesus returned in A.D. 70.

After sharing the information with His disciples about Jerusalem’s coming destruction, Jesus pointed out again that it would occur within that existing generation: “I tell you the truth, **this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened**” [Matthew 24:34 NIV].

He went on to say that He Himself did not know the exact day or the precise hour when those things would come to pass [only the Father knew that], so He encouraged His disciples to be prepared for the unexpected. “The Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him” [Matthew 24:44 NIV]. Some comments by an old writer are appropriate at this point:

“In the entire discourse he has uttered no word to inform them that the time is long after their day, and the sign of it something they shall not live to see. ... to assume, as some do, that the day and hour intended may be centuries after that generation passed away, would seem to be virtually implicating Jesus in a kind of preposterous trifling. For how would it differ from saying in substance: ‘All these things shall assuredly come to pass in your day, before some of you taste death; but the day and the hour may be several thousands of years in the future! Watch, therefore, and be ready!’ ” [Milton S. Terry in *Biblical Apocalypics*, p.244-245]

In addition to those pointed comments, it should also be noted that Jesus did not say he was going to return in that generation *if* certain things did or did not happen. His pledge to return while some of those people were still living was not based upon certain conditions. He said, “The Son of Man will come...” [Matthew 24:44 NIV]. There would be no postponement. It would occur within the lifetime of some of His audience.

Word Studies

Because this takes up quite a bit of space, I’ve made the relevant word studies a separate page. [Go here](#) to examine in detail the words used to describe Jesus’ return, the Greek words used to indicate time and the usage of “*this generation*” in the New Testament.

[**Note:** The preceding are portions of a 270 page book titled *The Soon Return* written by my friend Harold Watkins.]