

drulogion

thursday theological thoughts

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 07, 2007

"This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled" (Bible Brain Busters)



In each of the synoptic Gospels, we find Jesus preaching a "little apocalypse" upon his arrival in Jerusalem. After describing in graphic detail wars, weather, and wild things in the sky, Jesus states, "Truly truly I say to you, this generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled" (Matt 24:34; Mark 13:30; Luke 21:32). What?! Did Jesus' generation really live to see these things? Did the

world end and we missed it? Or was Jesus wrong? This a real Bible brain buster: biblical texts that become puzzling in light of central Christian affirmations. What should we do with this one?

This problem was thrust upon me for the first time in college. I have since then encounter a number of alternative solutions, none of which is entirely satisfying but each of which is helpful in thinking through the implications of interpreting these Jesus-logion. As is my custom, I'll lay out these basic alternatives for the purpose of further discussion.

(1) **Jesus was wrong.** The first and most straightforward response is to just admit that these words are wrong. Jesus predicted apocalyptic events that he thought would happen during the lifetime of his disciples, but they did not happen. Perhaps he was only wrong about the timing, and these things will still happen later. Perhaps these things will not happen at all. Jesus may still be a teacher or

About Me



Name:
JohnLDrury
Location:
Doylestown,
Pennsylvania, US

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example worth following, but on this matter he dropped the ball. The benefit of this answer is its honest approach to the text (it does not require the kind of exegetical somersaults performed by many other options). The cost of this answer is that it undermines Jesus' credibility, which is not a very satisfying solution to a Bible brain buster, especially given that the "central Christian affirmation" that renders this text puzzling is Jesus' credibility as a prophet.

(2) **The Evangelists were wrong.** This response is really a variation on the first view, but differs enough in motive and results that it should be treated independently. Instead of impugning Jesus with false prophecy, one blames the apostles for getting the words wrong. Maybe they misheard Jesus. Maybe they misunderstood him. Maybe they assembled the texts in a misleading order. Maybe they let their apocalyptic agenda obscure the simple teachings of Jesus. However construed, this approach protects Jesus by getting behind the apostolic witness to him. The benefit of this option is that one can retain the intellectual integrity of the first option without having to discredit Jesus. The cost of this option is that it is strategically shaky: how does one determine which apostolic words are really from Jesus, given that what we know of Jesus is through the apostles? Surely there are some good historical claims that could be made regarding the difference between Jesus and the nascent Christian community, but one must be careful how far one goes with this strategy, because the temptation will always be to attribute to Jesus what we like and attribute to the early Church what we don't like. Such a distinction between Jesus and the church is true in principle and can be applied tactically in some cases (perhaps this one), but is a dangerous overall hermeneutical strategy.

(3) **These words refer to spiritual, not historical, matters.** This and the following responses attempt to close the credibility gap by tinkering with the referent these words. The first option is to "spiritualize" these predictions. These words are about the spiritual battle within or above, not on the historical plane. The benefit of this approach is that Jesus and the disciples are respected as credible prophets of God. Furthermore, these words have potential to be spiritually useful to readers in many contexts. The cost of this approach is the same as any spiritualistic interpretive maneuver: one is left wondering how to evaluate competing spiritual readings. Such a response "solves" the puzzle by creating a smoke-screen behind which to hide rather than trying hard to settle the matter.

(4) **"This generation" refers to something later.** Another way to close the credibility gap is to fix the referent of "this generation." There are a number of ways to do this. The term "this generation" could itself be taken as prophetic, speaking directly to the final generation of earthly time. Or the term "generation" could refer to the human race as a whole, which is a possible (though unlikely)

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meaning of the original Greek term. Either way, the phrase shifts in referent so that these events are still coming in the future. The benefit of this approach is that the rest of Jesus' words in this apocalyptic discourse can remain literal (wars, storms, etc.) and thus the plain sense of most of the text is affirmed. Also, this strategy of delay is a quite common Christian response with a respectable pedigree and should therefore be taken seriously. The cost of this approach is sacrificing any sensible meaning of this particular phrase. If "this generation" doesn't mean the generation addressed by Jesus and/or the Evangelists, it has no rhetorical force. Why put a time-line on your predictions if it is not really a time-line at all? It would have been better to just say nothing. A good interpretive rule of thumb is to avoid readings that render portions of texts superfluous and irrelevant to their first hearers. Mysterious, maybe; meaningless, never!

(5) **"These things" refers to something earlier.** Instead of pushing these events into the future by shifting the referent of "this generation," one could place these events in the past by shifting the referent of "these things" to events which did in fact occur during the lifetime of Jesus' contemporaries. The benefit of this approach is the avoidance of hermeneutical somersaults that explain away the striking seriousness with which these words are spoken. It also establishes Jesus' actual credibility by attributing to him fulfilled prophecy, rather than just protecting his potential credibility by attributing to him not-yet-fulfilled prophecy. The difficulty of this approach is that one must acknowledge the use of apocalyptic metaphor in describing real life events. This is tricky, but not uncontrollably slippery, since Jesus uses traditional apocalyptic language for which there is extant comparative literature.

To what events could these words refer? What happened soon after Jesus spoke these words that could be aptly described in these apocalyptic terms?

(5a) *The Jewish War and the Destruction of the Temple (66-72 C.E.).* This seems historically plausible. Some of Jesus' words bear uncanny resemblance to specific incidents surrounding the Jewish War (e.g., fleeing to the hills). The destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem was *the* big event for first century Jews, and Jesus' prediction of it would be a major point of emphasis for nascent Christianity. The benefit of this approach is its ability to sufficiently explain most of Jesus' apocalyptic discourse. The cost of this approach is that it has difficulty stretching to accommodate all of the apocalyptic teaching of Jesus, let alone the rest of the New Testament. Once again, good tactic for this text, but not necessarily a good general strategy.

(5b) *The Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ (30 C.E.).* An alternative approach identifies these events as the apocalyptic

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passion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. A number of apocalyptic events are narrated as part of the passion story (e.g., darkening of the sky, the veil torn in two, seeing dead people walking about, the earth shaking, etc.). The New Testament certainly sees the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the most important apocalyptic event by which all other apocalyptic events should be understood, including the destruction of the Temple. The benefit of this approach is its focus on Jesus, thus carrying with it weighty theological overtones (that'll preach!). It also has a wider explanatory power for New Testament apocalyptic. The cost is that the metaphors of this particular passage may not fit well as descriptions of Jesus' passion. This may be a good interpretative strategy, but might not be tactically application to this case.

Any thoughts?

Do these cover the basic options? What's missing?

Which option do you lean towards? Why?

Does this typology of approach have a wider application to question of eschatology?

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Labels: [Bible Brain Busters](#), [eschatology](#), [hermeneutics](#)

posted by JohnLDrury @ [8:51 AM](#)

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10 Comments:

At [6:26 PM, February 07, 2007](#), [WTM](#) said...

I would go with a combination of 5a and 5b, depending on the synoptic in question (they each have their peculiarities). But, we shouldn't rule out the possibility that, although this is the case, these things might be played out on a larger scale at the end of time. Biblical prophecy, if the OT is any example, tend to have multiple layers of meaning and historical execution. I don't see a need to tied them down to stridently.

At [6:54 PM, February 07, 2007](#), [JohnLDrury](#) said...

wtm - Good call on combining. This is a case where combining approaches is not a cop out. Prophecy need not have only one fulfillment, although I would suggest that, at least theologically, the unity of the mutiple fulfillments should be ordered in some way.

At [10:21 PM, February 08, 2007](#), [Ken Schenck](#) said...

This was very troubling to me once on a time. Most of the Matthew/Mark chapters seem to be about the destruction of Jerusalem, so that's no problem. It's the parousia stuff that's the problem.

Did Jesus talk to his disciples about his return? That's a problem in

its own right. They hardly seemed to expect his death, let alone his resurrection, let alone his return from heaven. Before bringing in faith concerns, I think the most likely "scientific" conclusion is that these Christians initially thought Christ would return in the throes of a Jerusalem crisis. But it didn't happen and even Luke significantly tones down the immanence and intensity of the prophecy.

What of this thought faith concerns require to change, I don't know.

At [3:40 PM, February 09, 2007](#), [matthew](#) said...

Mostly 5a. I think the preterist approach to Matthew 24:1-34 is vastly superior.

At [11:53 PM, February 09, 2007](#), Little Brother said...

One possibility is that until every member of the generation has passed, the generation, technically, has not passed. Take this to the Mount of the Transfiguration: "Verily I say unto you, There be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom." Was He only talking about what was happening the next week? That was surely only a type of what was to come, or the fulfillment didn't quite fit the prediction, did it? Not the place for a full study, and surely not necessary for our salvation, but sure there is a lot more in God's Book than we ever can give Him credit for..!

At [11:53 PM, February 09, 2007](#), Anonymous said...

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At [2:49 PM, February 11, 2007](#), [Ken Schenck](#) said...

The Mark 9:1 passage is very difficult too. The verse previous leads us to see the comment as a reference to when the Son of Man "comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels" and thus that some of the disciples would still be alive at the parousia. Wright has the most attractive solution, although it smells of a cop-out--a reference to Jesus coming/leaving in judgment through the Romans in 70.

Perhaps Mark wants us to hear the Transfiguration as the fulfillment, as is sometimes suggested, although the one week doesn't make

great sense does it? But since that is the "final form" of the Scriptural text, is that what we are to take as authoritative?

I don't know what faith requires us to believe/not to believe here, but it is hard not to conclude that pre-Markan tradition had a false expectation here (assuming that whatever Jesus might have said, it didn't look exactly like 9:1 does now).

At [12:01 AM, February 12, 2007](#), [Tim](#) said...

To formalize my response previously stated in email...I resolve this "Bible Brain Buster" thusly: The statement of "This generation shall not pass" can be interpreted to mean - the generation surrounding Jesus will not pass on TO HEAVEN until "these things be fulfilled."

This resolves the problem in my mind without having to resort to any "exegetical somersaults." I understand that this is very "Theology Lite" but, hey, I'm no theologian.

Now that I read that statement again...I wonder, does this mean these souls are in limbo? Does that make me a Catholic (not that there's anything wrong with that)? I guess I'm not sure the implications of this resolution. Answer one question and you get two more...

At [12:24 AM, February 13, 2007](#), [Bill Barnwell](#) said...

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At [12:30 AM, February 13, 2007](#), [Bill Barnwell](#) said...

I'd say the context of this passage is clear enough--especially in Matthew. In Matthew we see tensions escalating between Jesus and the religious establishment. In chapter 23 we have the "woe" chapter and at the end Jesus is mourning over Jerusalem. Chapter 24 begins with Jesus drawing attention to the Temple and all its buildings and basically saying it's all going to come down. His disciples ask two questions (1) When will these things happen? and (2) What will be the sign of your coming and the end of the age?

Modern prophecy watchers want to pretend that Jesus just skipped over the first question. That is, he ignored the immediate ("When will Jerusalem fall?) and got right into the "meat and potatoes" of things about the end of the world (equated with the "end of the age). Hence, all of the Olivet Discourse is a check list of doom and gloom leading up to the end.

But where exactly did Jesus just skip over the first question? The context perfectly fits the judgement coming upon Jerusalem, including the "abomination of desolations" language. No, this is not a picture of a future antichrist exalting himself in a "rebuilt temple."

This is a picture of the defamation and destruction of the Temple. Luke almost certainly is pointing to this when he talks of Jerusalem being surrounded by armies. Hyper-futurists are forced to say that Luke was talking about the destruction of the Temple, but that Mark and Matthew are talking about the desecration of the "rebuild third temple" and then equate this verse with Dan. 9:27 and 2 Thess. 2:4--even though the Synoptic Discourse sayings all likely come from similar sources and/or draw off one another.

Two big objections to seeing first century fulfillment in at least the first 36 verses. One is that Jesus says that these events will bring tribulation on the world that it has never seen or never will see again. But the word for "world" here is only used a couple other times in the NT and in those other circumstances the context renders it "inhabited land" or "known world" depending on the translation. I'd suggest that this may be a better translation in this case too. It's rendered here "world" because I'm assuming the translators are assuming total world-wide tribulation at the future end of history. But what I think we have here is part hyperbole and part description of first century Israel's great tribulation, which theologically at least has never been repeated and was the final nail in the coffin of anything resembling Mosaic Judaism.

The last and biggest objection is the parousia language. We have the son of man coming in the clouds surrounded by cosmic language. Surely anything less than the Second Coming must be weasel words, correct? Well, not so fast. First of all the Son of Man language is certainly an allusion to Daniel 7. Is the son of man in that passage descending or ascending to the Father? Much ink has been spilt on this, but at least for me it sure looks like he's ascending to the Father, not descending to earth. Could this language here not be talking about the Second Coming (which contra "full preterism" is most certainly taken up at least several other places), but instead be a picture of Christ being exalted and vindicated with the fall of Jerusalem?

How about the cosmic language? A number of outstanding Biblical interpreters I respect claim this MUST be referring to literal disruptions in the cosmos at the end of history. But again, we have allusions here of the same type of language used in the OT prophets, were cosmic imagery of the sun darkening and stars falling indicated national judgement. Nobody looks at the cognate passages in the OT and says that these were literal cosmic disruptions. But they insist the Olivet Discourse language--which is virtually the same--must be interpreted strictly literally. If it's judgement imagery, then again we have a good fit with the judgement of Jerusalem theme of chapters 23-24.

Then the kicker, all of this was to happen in the lives of "this

generation." I challenge anyone to find me one reference in the gospels where the phrase "this generation" means anything other than Jesus' contemporaries. It never does. It would be a word study fallacy, of course, to insist that since it means one thing in those 8 or so other references that it must mean the same thing here. Context is the final judge. But context suggests, as I've been arguing, that Jesus' contemporaries are indeed in view. Notice he continually says, "When YOU see this," "When YOU see these things" etc etc. This also makes much more sense of the instruction for the faithful remnant to flee to the mountains rather than trying to project this into the 21st century. If Jesus had a future generation in mind He could have easily said, "I tell you the truth, all these things must occur before THAT generation passes away." A different Greek word could have been used. But he says "this generation," which everywhere else means exactly what it says. So why are we arguing for strict literalism with apocalyptic judgement imagery regarding cosmic signs but then jumping through hoops remove the Discourse from its temporal context and its temporal time texts?

As to the "multiple fulfillment" thing, I am open to it but am cautious. Where we have layers of fulfillment from the immediate in the OT to the distant in the NT, we have the NT telling us how the Scripture in question is being worked. We don't have that here. There's no further divine revelation telling me that fulfilled prophecy from the NT must have another layer. Certainly the Olivet Discourse has great contemporary application, but as far as the particulars repeating themselves, that's a different proposition entirely. I've also noticed that it's only the very contentious debatable prophecies that people want to say have multiple fulfillment. One friend admitted to me that he saw Daniel 9:24-27 most likely was exhausted in 70AD, but that he was still open to future fulfillment. Why not then apply the same standards to all sorts of other fulfilled prophecies in Daniel in the less debatable sections? This is trying to have it both ways.

In sum of this way too long comment, I don't think this section has to be a brain buster at all. I vote for seeing the events played out up to verses 34 by 70AD. Note that Jesus is very specific with his signs in this passage (and sums it up by saying that it will all happen with "this generation) but once we get to verse 36 he starts professing ignorance regarding the timing of his coming. Could he be collapsing 70AD and the final Second Coming? It's very possible, especially given the teachings of chapter 25. Likewise, I agree with those who have historically understood the disciples' thinking to believe that history would end at the fall of Jerusalem.

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