

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

¹ For authorship, occasion, purpose, setting, and the structure of the Gospel of Matthew, see the previous essay on Matt. 5:17-20. That information will be presumed here.

² I am not aware of a futurist who treats the discourse in any detail in Marcan or Lucan versions. They often write commentaries on Matthew (Walvoord), or an exegesis of the Matthean version (Pentecost and Hitchcock), and strangely neglect Mark and Luke. This is likely because their interpretation of the discourse could never work in the Lukan version in particular.

(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).

² I am not aware of a futurist who treats the discourse in any detail in Marcan or Lukan versions. They often write commentaries on Matthew (Walvoord), or an exegesis of the Matthean version (Pentecost and Hitchcock), and strangely neglect Mark and Luke. This is likely because their interpretation of the discourse could never work in the Lukan version in particular.

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 Matthew 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

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

Pentecost

1. 24:1-2 – The Overthrow of Jerusalem
2. 24:4-26 – The Tribulation Period
 - a. 24:4-8 – The First half of the Tribulation
 - b. 24:9-26 – The Last half of the Tribulation
3. 24:27-31 – The Second Advent of the Messiah
4. 24:32-36 – The Parable of the Fig Tree (Certainty of Jesus’ Coming)

³ Keener, pg. 564.

5. 24:37-51 – Exhortations to Watchfulness
6. 25:1-46 – The Judgment of Israel and the Nations

Walvoord

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

Preterist Structures

France

1. 24:3 – The Disciples’ Double Question
2. 24:4-35 – Jesus answers the Question about the destruction of the Temple
 - a. 24:4-8 – The End is not Yet
 - b. 24:9-14 – Standing Firm in Difficult Times
 - c. 24:15-28 – The Beginning of the End for Jerusalem
 - d. 24:29-31 – The End of the Temple and the Triumph of the Son of Man
 - e. 24:32-35 – Summary of the Answer to the Disciples’ First Question
3. 24:36-25:46 – Jesus answers the Question about the *Parousia* and the end of the Age
 - a. 24:36-44 – The Unknown Time of the Parousia
 - b. 24:45-51 – The Parable of the Slave Left in Charge
 - c. 25:1-13 – The Parable of the Girls Waiting for the Bridegroom
 - d. 25:14-30 – The Parable of the Slaves Entrusted with a Lot of Money
 - e. 25:31-46 – The Final Judgment by the Son of Man

Combined Approach Structures

Blomberg

1. 24:1-3 – Introduction
2. 24:4-14 – Signs that do not yet herald the end
3. 24:15-20 – The destruction of the Temple
4. 24:21-28 – The Great Tribulation (seen in light of historic premillennialism as the entire time until the Second Coming)
5. 24:29-31 – Christ’s Second Coming
6. 24:32-35 – Concluding Implications
7. 24:36-25:46 – Commands to Perpetual Vigilance

Turner

1. 24:1-3 – Narrative Introduction: A Question while leaving the temple
2. 24:4-25:46 – The Discourse Proper
 - a. 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
 - b. 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
3. 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 disciples⁴ 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.

⁴ Mark mentions that it was Peter, James, John and Andrew that sought this more private explanation. Matthew seems to be content to leave the reference general.

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;

1. 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).
2. 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).
3. Third, while many will apostatize, some will persevere (24:13), thus proving their salvation.
4. 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 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 premillennialists 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 temple's destruction, but preterist in the sense that these same tribulations will continue to occur until Christ returns.

On the other hand, progressive dispensationalist will suggest 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)
<p>Ἀπὸ δὲ τῆς συκῆς μάθετε τὴν παραβολὴν· ὅταν ἤδη ὁ κλάδος αὐτῆς γένηται ἀπαλός, καὶ τὰ φύλλα ἐκφύη, γινώσκετε ὅτι ἐγγὺς τὸ θέρος· οὕτω καὶ ὑμεῖς, ὅταν ἴδητε πάντα ταῦτα, γινώσκετε ὅτι ἐγγὺς ἐστὶν ἐπὶ θύραις. ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, οὐ μὴ παρέλθῃ ἡ γενεὰ αὕτη, ἕως ἄν πάντα ταῦτα γένηται. ὁ οὐρανὸς καὶ ἡ γῆ παρελεύσονται, οἱ δὲ λόγοι μου οὐ μὴ παρέλθωσι</p>	<p>Ἀπὸ δὲ τῆς συκῆς μάθετε τὴν παραβολὴν· ὅταν αὐτῆς ἤδη ὁ κλάδος ἀπαλὸς γένηται καὶ ἐκφύη τὰ φύλλα, γινώσκετε ὅτι ἐγγὺς τὸ θέρος ἐστίν· οὕτω καὶ ὑμεῖς, ὅταν ταῦτα ἴδητε γινόμενα, γινώσκετε ὅτι ἐγγὺς ἐστὶν ἐπὶ θύραις. ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι οὐ μὴ παρέλθῃ ἡ γενεὰ αὕτη, μέχρις οὔ πάντα ταῦτα γένηται. ὁ οὐρανὸς καὶ ἡ γῆ παρελεύσονται· οἱ δὲ λόγοι μου οὐ μὴ παρέλθωσι.</p>

- 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:

1. Matthew is less emphatic that “summer is near” (verb omitted in Matthew).
2. Matthew has changed Mark’s “when you see *these things taking place*” to “when you see *all these things*.”
3. 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.

⁵ Bock, JAS, pg. 346.

⁶ Metzger, TCGNT, pg. 62.

⁷ UBS4 pg. 94-95.

- 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.

⁸ Morris, PNTC, pg. 611.

⁹ Hitchcok, pg. 74.

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 it¹¹
- The tribulation period, seen as a literal 7 year event equated with Daniel’s 70th week¹²
- 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 signs¹⁴

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

¹⁰ France, NICNT, pg. 929.

¹¹ Keener, SRC, 589.

¹² Walvoord and Dyer, pg. 330.

¹³ Blomberg, NAC, pg. 364.

¹⁴ Bock, JAS, pg. 347

¹⁵ Blomberg, NAC, 364.

¹⁶ Turner, BECNT, pg. 585.

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 temple's 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 temple's 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

¹⁷ France, NICNT, pg. 929.

¹⁸ Blomberg, NAC, pg. 363.

¹⁹ Bock, BECNT Luke pg. 1688.

²⁰ Bock, JAS, pg. 347.

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

²¹ Walvoord and Dyer, pg. 331.

²² Bock BECNT Luke, pg. 1692.

²³ Bock, JAS, pg. 346.

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.

Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.

ὁ οὐρανὸς καὶ ἡ γῆ παρελεύσονται,
οἱ δὲ λόγοι μου οὐ μὴ παρέλθωσι.

We come now to the phrase which is the particular focus of our study. Those who use the phrase to support the doctrine of preservation have almost without fail ignored the context in which it is found. This context is never even mentioned in their proof-texting, let alone wrestled with in their interpretation of the phrase. We will take the higher road of bringing our contextual study of the passage as a whole to bear on the interpretation of the phrase in an exegetically sensitive way. The Bible is itself immanently worthy of this kind of careful exegesis (to say nothing of the words of our Lord).

Heaven and earth shall pass away

Jesus’ clear intention is to make the statement, “My words shall not pass away” in order to affirm the certainty of his prior prediction. He does this by way of a rhetorical contrast with the certainty of the impermanence of the cosmos, and he introduces this statement with a statement that “this generation shall not pass.” If we were to read only these three phrases, entirely apart from their context in the discourse, apart from the intention of Jesus, and apart from the intention of Matthew, the parallelism might seem exact. The suggestion might then be made that while this generation, heaven, and earth are all impermanent, Jesus’s words are rather permanent, making the text seem *prima face* a promise of preservation. This suggestion is the very foundation of the preservation

²⁴ Bock, JAS, pg. 347.

interpretation. But this is possible only when the surrounding contexts and intentions are blatantly ignored (or deceitfully hidden). Further, it works only in English, where the parallelism seems more exact. It doesn't work in the Greek text of Matthew, where there are some important distinctions in the verbal forms used, and in the level of negation used. There is indeed an intentional three-fold use of the same word for rhetorical effect. But to blindly assume exactly the same shade of meaning for each use quite misses what Jesus is doing.

In the phrase "this generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled" Matthew uses the aorist tense, the active voice, and the subjunctive mood of the verb.

In the phrase "heaven and earth shall pass away" Matthew uses the future tense, middle voice, and indicative mood of the verb. While the future tense might emphasize the eschatological thrust of the statement, the middle voice with its reflexive force might perhaps suggest that heaven and earth will cause *themselves* to cease. The indicative mood is Jesus' way of stating this prediction as a matter of fact. This *will* happen.

In the phrase "my words shall not pass away" he again uses the aorist tense, active voice, subjunctive mood of the verb. The aorist tense still retains the future force, but without quite the same level of specificity. The active voice might be seen to suggest that the force of the certainty of prediction comes from the fact that these are *Jesus'* words. The fulfillment is not brought about by an outside force (which would be suggested by the passive voice), but by the force of Jesus' own words (see below). The subjunctive mood seems to have been used in order to allow for the emphatic negation of the οὐ μὴ + subjunctive construction. Jesus states as a matter of fact that the cosmos will cease to exist. In contrast, and with a much greater degree of emphasis, he states that his prediction will *most certainly not* ever fail to be fulfilled. BDF notes that this is "the most definite form of negation regarding the future."²⁵ Wallace likewise notes, "This is the strongest way to negate something in Greek."²⁶ This increase in emphasis is of course obscured in English translation.

Missing these grammatical-syntactical, contextual, and semantic distinctions could cause one to miss the point. BDAG has placed these uses of the verb in this text in separate subsets of meaning (thus one will find "Matt. 24:35a" in one subset of meaning, and "Matt. 24:35b" in a separate subset). Louw and Nida, who arrange their lexical entries by semantic domain, have placed these three uses under two *separate* semantic domains. They are making clear that one must pay attention to the lexical and grammatical distinctions that are being made here.

my words

What exactly is Jesus referring to when he speaks of "my words" and what does Matthew intend? It is clear from the immediate context that he is referring most especially to the promise of his coming in 24:29-31. It is his intention here to reinforce the certainty of that prediction primarily, so it is most likely that the reference is to that saying alone. It is also possible, though less likely, that he is referring to the entire collection of events in verses 4-31. One could perhaps even stretch the meaning to include the entirety of the eschatological discourse, with all its predictions, but this is a much greater stretch, that

²⁵ BDF, Part 356. pg. 184.

²⁶ Wallace, *ExSyn*, pg. 468.

ignores the point of the parable of the fig tree in general, which is to assure them of his coming.

Of course, none of this goes far enough to suggest a preservation interpretation. For a preservation interpretation to work, one must take the phrase as referring, not to this discourse alone, but to the entire New Testament. To do this, one must ignore the historical fact that Jesus is speaking these words orally in the context of an oral sermon. Further, one must posit that Jesus is somehow anachronistically speaking of an added canon to the written Hebrew Scriptures, even though there is no way that the disciples could possibly have understood yet the concept of a “New Testament.” They had as yet no conception whatsoever of an expansion of the Hebrew Bible. One must further act as though Jesus were the Divine agent of canonical inspiration, in the stead of the Holy Spirit, when there is not a single text in the Bible that speaks this way. It seems dangerously close to a heretical “modalistic” view of inspiration, which confuses the distinct work of the persons of the trinity, or subsumes them all into one. Like patripassianism, which subsumes the persons of the trinity and thus suggests that the Father died on the cross, this would be subsuming the persons of the trinity and suggesting that Jesus inspired the Biblical writers instead of the Holy Spirit. Further, taking the phrase this way mitigates against the entire force of the parable as a whole, as well as demanding that we read it as though it were not a part of the present discourse. All of this is of course untenable to say the least.

Intertextuality with Matthew 5:18

Perhaps the most striking feature of the verses we are considering would be easy to gloss over if we didn't recognize exactly what Jesus and the Evangelists are doing here. Jesus has previously affirmed the eternal validity and authority of every jot and tittle of the Torah. In what Matthew has shared as the first major Discourse, Jesus has affirmed, “For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled” (Matt. 5:18). Jesus now picks up this exact same language, which would make his previous statement come to the minds of the disciples. Only, instead of affirming again the fulfillment of the Torah, he affirms with exactly the same certainty the fulfillment of his own prediction of his coming. This is the most incredible aspect of the text, and must not be missed. The Christological significance is exceptional. Jesus is placing his own words on the same level as the law of God. “My words” is the phrase that would most have astounded the disciples who heard Jesus statement, as well as the readers who read Matthew's gospel. Luke has done exactly the same thing with his use of the material, causing Luke 21:33 to intentionally mirror Luke 16:17, with the important difference that the authority that was previously claimed for the Torah is now claimed for the predictions of Jesus. However, since the earlier statement does not occur in Mark, one must assume that the “Q materials” in Q 16:17 and Q 21:33 (or whatever form of the pre-synoptic discourse may have existed) have made the same intertextual echo. Historically then, the echo most surely goes back to Jesus himself, and is not merely a redactional move on the part of the Evangelists.²⁷

²⁷ Or at least, if it was a redactional rearrangement, it was done in the source material prior to the inspired Evangelists penning their own accounts, and they both choose to follow that arrangement.

This makes perfect sense historically. While Jesus amazed his disciples when he declared himself the authoritative interpreter of the Torah in his Sermon on the Mount, he has allowed their understanding of His identity to progressively grow throughout his ministry. Now, a few days before his death, they are ready to hear what they could not have heard earlier – He in fact speaks with exactly the same authority as the Torah. He thus speaks in fact with the same authority that God himself has. The Christology is incredibly high, and the multiple attestation across the strata, as well as the historical placement, makes it very difficult for the liberal scholar to deny that this high Christology goes back to Jesus himself. “Jesus’ own word is given the same validity as the Mosaic Law.”²⁸

This intertextual echo of course places a certain restriction on the meaning of the phrase here. Before one can make the text in Matthew 24:35 a reference to preservation, one must first make the text in Matt. 5:18 a reference to preservation. This must be done before a preservation interpretation for our present text could even be allowed on the table, let alone proven. We have already shown that a preservation interpretation of the text in Matthew 5:18 is fraught with difficulty, and neigh impossible. The intertextuality between the texts means that we must now compound impossibility and improbability in order to make a case for a preservation interpretation in our present text. For either one to be about verbal preservation of a written text, they must both be. At what point does this become misguided and irrational pleading?

shall not pass away

We can repeat some of the same lexical work here that we have already done in the passage on Matthew 5:18. The verb has the preposition *παρά* attached to it here, thus literally it would be “to pass by” or “to pass beside.” The compound nature of this verb is significant.²⁹ It is being used here in a clearly metaphorical sense. It thus has the idea of “to fail of fulfillment” here. Jesus is saying that his words, (especially his promise of return) will not “fail of fulfillment.” The major lexicons agree in this basic metaphorical understanding of the word here.

In lexical study today there is no more authoritative voice than the standard “BAGD,” now in its 3rd edition known affectionately as “BDAG.” The reason this lexicon has become such a standard is its comprehensive ability to locate the language of the NT in the common usage of its day by comparison with other early Greek literature of the same *Koine* period. Of course, the novice lexical student might assume that they can find in a lexicon all the shades of meaning for a various word, and pick whichever meaning they want to apply to the passage at hand. Preachers make this mistake all the time. D. A Carson, Moises Silva, Gordon Fee, Mark Strauss, and Dan Wallace have all written about the abuses this approach commits. The careful student will do his lexical work more responsibly.

Since the meaning of words is determined by their common usage (not by their etymology, as some older lexical works presumed) there is little that is more important for understanding the meaning of a word than to note the common uses of that word with the same shade of meaning in the literature of the same period. This is what BDAG does, classifying the various usages of a word with different meanings, and then listing the

²⁸ Nolland, John. *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. NIGTC Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2005. – pg 988.

²⁹ Robertson, pg. 558-560.

parallels of that usage. This classification is based on lexical, syntactical, and contextual features which help identify which shade of meaning is in view in a particular passage. This standard Greek Lexicon notes that the word “pass” here (“παρελθῆ”) is being used in its figurative sense and means in this passage “To *pass away* in the sense of *lose force* or *become invalid*.”³⁰ Under the usage of the verb with the same subset of meaning found in this text, BDAG notes only seven instances of parallels elsewhere. They list Psalm 148:6 in the LXX, Esther 10:3b in the LXX, Matt. 5:18; our text in Matt. 24:35; Mrk. 13:31b; Luke 21:33b; and I Clement 27:5. It would be instructive to examine these uses in some detail. Several of these same parallels are noted by another standard lexicon, the TDNT, which notes, “In relation to Matt. 5:18; and 24:35 we may think not only of Psalms 148:6 (LXX) but also the addition to Est. F. 2.”³¹

Psalm 148:6 in the LXX

“Praise him, ye heavens of heavens, and the water that is above the heavens. Let them praise the name of the Lord: for he spoke, and they were made; he commanded and they were created. He has established them for ever, even for ever and ever: he has made an ordinance, and it shall not pass away.”
(Psalms 148:0–7 LXX-Brenton Translation)

Note the usage here. The psalmist refers to the decree (or “ordinance”) by which God created heaven and earth. He spoke and they came into existence. This decree that they would exist has established them forever. This ordinance “shall not pass away.” The word used here is the same as that in our text. What is being asserted is that God’s ordinance will always be fulfilled. That is, his command that the heaven and earth be created and exist (which is why we now have the physical law that matter cannot be created or destroyed) has not failed of its fulfillment. Note that this utterance itself, which occurred at the beginning of creation, was not written down until Moses’ recounting of the primeval period in Genesis 1-11, probably several thousand years after the fact. Thus, for thousands of years the decree wasn’t “preserved in a manuscript.” Humanity was without it. But the psalmist wasn’t saying that the decree would always be preserved in a particular (or in any) manuscript – he was saying that it would surely be *fulfilled*, and will never fail of being fulfilled. That is the clear use of the word. The KJV translation of the Hebrew text makes the same point with the language that “he hath made a decree which shall not pass.” The word clearly refers not to *preservation*, but to *fulfillment*.

Esther 10:3b in the LXX

“And Mardocheus said, These things have been done of God. For I remember the dream which I had concerning these matters: for not one particular of them has failed.”

(Esther 10:3b LXX – Brenton Translation)

In this section of the apocryphal addition to Esther, note that the dream referred to here no longer existed in the manuscript record, even for the author of the apocryphal

³⁰ BDAG, Pg. 776.

³¹ TDNT – volume II pg. 681.

material. His usage of the word doesn't mean that the material will be preserved in written form. In fact it probably *never was put into written form*. His point is rather that what was promised has come to pass. "Not one particular of them has failed." This is made clear in a common LXX lexicon, which defines the word here as; "To fail to come to pass" (Es. F. 2.).³² The word clearly speaks not to *preservation*, but to *fulfillment*.

I Clement 27:5 in the Apostolic Fathers

*"By His majestic word he established the universe, and by a word he can destroy it. Who will say to him, 'What have you done? Or who will resist the might of his strength?' He will do all things when he wills and as he wills, and none of those things decreed by him will fail."
(I Clement 27:4-5)³³*

Clement makes a point similar to the psalmist above, noting the (technically not always preserved, but always fulfilled) word by which God created the universe in order to give praise to the strength of God's word. When God decrees to do something, He will do it. It will come to pass, and will not fail. Again, the word clearly refers not to *preservation*, but to *fulfillment*.

Thus, according to the standard lexicon, which traces the parallel uses of the verb with this sense, and in keeping with basic lexical methodology, the referent of the word is clearly not *preservation* but *fulfillment*. Jesus is making clear that his prediction about his coming will most certainly come to pass. It is clearly *not* a reference to whether textual variation can occur in manuscript transmission, but to whether or not Jesus will keep his promise to return.

Jesus' Intent in Telling the Parable

It is without doubt that Jesus' intent in telling the parable is to reassure the disciples about his coming. While there are many things about the parable that are open to a variety of interpretation, the general intent of the parable is agreed on by all interpreters of any persuasion. This intent is made clear by several things He does here;

- First, He shares the parable itself followed by a general application. Seeing the leaves on a fig tree make one certain of the coming summer. Likewise, seeing the signs He has shared make will make His disciples certain of His coming. The very nature of the parable itself demands that Jesus intent here is to assure the disciples of his coming.
- Second, He more explicitly states that those who see the destruction of the temple will know that God's plan is on track, and that Jesus is coming as promised (this is assuming the interpretation above of "this generation" is correct. If it is not, the basic point still remains the same, the particulars are all that changes.)
- Third, the language of "fulfillment" in the statement about "this generation" make it clear that this is His intent here.

³² Muraoka, T. A Greek-English lexicon of the Septuagint. Peeters, Louvain, Paris. Walpole. 2009.

³³ Translation by Holmes, Michael, pg. 81. Holmes also notes Clement's source here.

- Fourth, he draws a comparison / contrast to the certainty of the cosmos. As certain as they may be of continuing, his coming is in fact all the more certain.
- Fifth, he builds on and refers to the certainty of the fulfillment that he has already taught about the Torah. As certain as the disciples are of the Torah, they must be just that certain of his promise of return.

Matthew's Intent in Sharing the Parable

The issue of Matthew's intent in sharing the parable is complicated a little bit more by the issue of the dating of Matthew's gospel. On either date, it serves the same basic function of assuring the disciples that the Return of Jesus is certain. However, since Matthew writes after the cross and resurrection, there is now an understanding that this "coming" is not an immediate one that will occur in Jesus' life on earth. Rather, it is a post-resurrection event. If Matthew writes pre-70 AD, he intends those who see the temple destroyed to see in that event further confirmation that Jesus is coming back, and that his plan has been set in motion. If he writes post-70 AD, he intends to remind his readers that Jesus predicted the temple's destruction before it happened, and just as he was right about that event he is certainly right about his certain coming. Even if the entire discourse is future, the basic intent is the same. Only the audience and the specifics are different. In the case of a fully futurist reading, the intent is to assure the generation going through the tribulation period that the signs which they are seeing are further assurances that Jesus will soon return, just as he promised. On any level, the intent of the parable is to give assurance of *fulfillment*. There is no conceivable way to integrate the idea of textual preservation into this context. Such an idea is wholly foreign to the intent of the parable.

The witness of commentators

What of other interpreters? How have scholars and commentators taken the phrase? Have they consistently seen a preservation interpretation? Or a reference to fulfillment? Listen for yourself;

- Carson sums up the meaning and intent of the verse as ""The authority and eternal validity of Jesus' words are nothing less than the authority and eternal validity of God's words."³⁴
- Walvoord sums up its meaning (without any detailed comment) as "prophecy is absolutely certain of fulfillment"³⁵
- Bock notes the intent of the statement is "to underscore the certainty of what he tells them. Heaven and earth will pass away, but this teaching will not pass away. Rhetorically, Jesus says that this teaching is more secure than creation, which is itself very secure. In other words, these things *will* happen."³⁶
- Turner states that it is a statement made to "affirm that Jesus' parabolic promise of his coming is reliable."³⁷

³⁴ Carson, REBC, Pg. 569.

³⁵ Walvoord, Matthew, pg.

³⁶ Bock, JAS, pg. 347. Emphasis original.

³⁷ Turner, BECNT, pg. 585.

- France (whose interpretation of the discourse as a whole I find many problems with) comments that Matthew uses this phrase to conclude this section of the discourse “with a ringing formula of assurance, reminiscent of OT language about the reliability of the Word of God.”³⁸ He notes the rhetorical effect of the three-fold repetition of the verb “pass” and then notes how that rhetorical move emphasizes the intent of the phrase to underline “the total reliability of what Jesus has just said about the destruction of the temple.”³⁹
- Morris states of the verse, “What He [Jesus] says will in the end have its fulfillment.”⁴⁰
- Blomberg notes, “Verse 35 concludes the first half of Jesus’ teaching on the Mount of Olives by stressing the certainty of everything that Christ has outlined.”⁴¹

Voices from history

Chrysostom comments, “But not for this intent only did He put forward this about the fig tree, in order to declare the interval; for it was possible to have set this before them in other ways as well; but that he might hereby also *confirm His saying, as assuredly thus to come to pass*. For as this “*of the fig tree*” is of necessity, so that too. For thus, wherever He is minded to speak of that which *will assuredly come to pass*.” Spurgeon summarizes the phrase “Christ’s promises of pardon are as *sure of fulfillment* as his prophecies of punishment; no word of his shall ever ‘pass away.’” We could add to this list the nearly identical statements throughout history of Origen, Clement of Alexandria, Calvin, Luther, and others. I in fact know of no commentators throughout history who have not understood the phrase as a reference to fulfillment.

Relation of Matt. 24:35 to Preservation

There are a host of different approaches to the Olivet Discourse as a whole. There is wide disagreement among conservative interpreters about many of the specific details. In the Parable of the Fig Tree itself, several of the important terms have become seedbeds of intense debate. The meaning of “this generation” and “these things” will likely continue to be hotly debated until Jesus actually does come, and our questions are rendered gloriously moot. However, as with each of the passages we have written about so far, none of the interpretive difficulties involve the question of whether the verse in question relates to a doctrine of preservation or not. No one is discussing this as even a possible interpretation. Such an interpretation is simply not even on the table for discussion. As we have seen, in

³⁸ France, NICNT, pg. 930.

³⁹ France, pg. 931.

⁴⁰ Morris, PNTC, pg. 613.

⁴¹ Blomberg, Craig, NAC, pg. 364. I’ve spoken with Craig about his interpretation of both this passage and our previous text in 5:18. His commentary is usually regarded as one of the top English language commentaries on the book. I asked him because some of the wording in his commentary might have allowed a “preservation” interpretation. He stated that there is no way that either text is making a promise of the verbal preservation in a particular text, or teaching that transmission will be supernaturally protected from scribal error.

the host of interpreters that ranges from Chrysostom in the 4th century to today, no serious commentator on the passage has ever suggested that the text teaches a doctrine of preservation. To even suggest a “preservation” interpretation when such is never evidenced in the history of the church is to demand that all Christians read the text incorrectly until us. This is not impossible, but should not be claimed without sufficiently strong evidence. The text has always historically been understood to refer to *fulfillment*, not *preservation*.

Add to this the second fact of the language of fulfillment in the statement “this generation shall not pass, till all these things *be fulfilled*.” Our statement occurs in the context of this fulfillment language, and only the most strange hermeneutical gymnastics could make the text a reference to anything but fulfillment, even if that was all that we knew. One must ignore this language to make the text refer to preservation.

Third, the fact that Matthew intends his readers to hear the echo of the previous words of Jesus about the Torah (Matt. 5:18) places a certain limit on what can be meant here. This mirrored phrase of Jesus must be interpreted in light of that earlier one. We have already shown fairly conclusively that that text is about fulfillment, not preservation. This statement must then be taken in the same way. One must ignore this intertextual echo to make the text about preservation.

Fourth, the text must be taken in its context of the parable as a whole, which we have shown intends to assure the disciples of the certainty of Jesus’ prediction about his coming. In every single interpretation of the Discourse as a whole, and on any interpretation of the particulars of the fig tree parable, the intent of this phrase is the same. It is a clear assurance that the promise Jesus has made in this discourse will come to pass. Jesus’ words will most certainly be fulfilled. As before, the parable as a whole is indubitably about *fulfillment*, not *preservation*. No other interpretation will make sense of the statement’s place in the context of the fig tree parable intending to lend credence to Jesus’ predictions. To take the text as a reference to preservation ignores the surrounding context of the parable. This interpretation only works if we rip the phrase from its context in the parable.

Fifth, taking the phrase as a reference to preservation ignores the context of the Olivet Discourse as a whole. One must act as though Jesus didn’t make this statement at this time in history, tied to this historical setting. A preservation interpretation only works if we remove this context of Jesus predictions about the temple and his coming.

Finally, a preservation interpretation is unable to reckon with the difference between Jesus’s *oral* words of prediction about the future, and a later *written* “NT canon” that was not even remotely in the mind of the disciples yet. Jesus is indubitably referring to his *spoken* prediction. A preservation interpretation at this juncture has severely dangerous Christological implications.

Consider, hypothetically, what the implications would be if this passage *was* a promise of preservation. Apart from the fact that it is almost impossible to stretch the phrase “my words” to include any more than the Olivet Discourse, consider what the implications would be even if it referred only to the promise of his second coming in verses 29-31. Regardless of how much else the phrase includes, it must include at least that section. That is, even if one wants to include by extension the entire discourse (or further, the entire NT canon), it must at least include at minimum this promise. In its context, it most likely refers only to this promise, but on any interpretation it must at least *include* it.

Jesus makes an oral promise of his coming in verses 29-31. He then makes a statement (let us suppose) that these words he has just spoken will always be verbally preserved. First, we are confronted with the difficult fact that he spoke in Aramaic. Where have these Aramaic words been preserved? Where can I find the exact Aramaic words which Jesus historically uttered in this promise? Nowhere of course, since we only have available the Greek translations of those words. But maybe someone would suggest that this promise of preservation is so powerful that it includes a promise to preserve his words, even across linguistic boundaries. Thus, his words can be exactly and perfectly translated into Greek, and his saying thus perfectly verbally preserved in *Greek*. Of course, anyone who has ever translated any decent sized section of text from one language into another knows that “perfect translation” of this kind is impossible, but we will pass over that impossibility for a moment. Historically, evangelical thinking has instead typically maintained that the Evangelists present the *ipsissima vox*, not the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus.

Nonetheless, let’s say hypothetically that Jesus promises here that his statement about his second coming will be perfectly verbally preserved, albeit in Greek and not in its original Aramaic. Where is this perfectly verbally preserved statement of Jesus (translated into Greek) to be found? Let’s bypass for the moment all of the textual and transmissional impossibilities that come from making this a reference to manuscript transmission. Let’s go back in time and pretend that we have in our hand the original autographs of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In which text do we find “His words” exactly verbally preserved? They each record a very *different* version of this promise of Jesus. Just read Matt. 24:29-31, Mark 13:24-27, and Luke 21:25-28 in a parallel synopsis. Even if you read in English translation, you will be struck by the vast *verbal differences* between the accounts. His words are not the same (and thus not “verbally preserved”) in any one of the accounts which we theologically trust to be inspired.

If Jesus is making a promise of verbal preservation, before we could ever even think about the difficulties involved in extending the scope of his promise to the wider context of the discourse as a whole (let alone the impossibilities involved in making it a reference to the entire New Testament), realize what we have just done. If Jesus is making a promise of perfect verbal preservation here, he is proven to be a liar and a false prophet before the original autographs are ever even copied one time. There is simply no way around this dilemma – If Jesus here promises perfect verbal preservation, even in the most restricted interpretation of his statement which would make it a reference to the promise in verses 29-31, then when the Holy spirit inspired verbally different accounts of Jesus’ statements, Jesus was proven a liar and a false prophet!

Those who are so desperate to use this text to support their particular view of the doctrine of preservation don’t realize what they are sacrificing in the process. They are willing to sacrifice Jesus’ own prophetic accuracy (not to mention the staggering implications this may have for His Deity) in order to twist this passage in such a violent way that they can use it to support their doctrine of textual preservation. Defending the KJV has then become important enough that Jesus own credibility has been sacrificed in order to defend the use of one particular Greek text. I for one am willing to make no such sacrifice.

Perhaps one might object that the exact words of Jesus are exactly preserved, and can be reconstructed by comparing the Synoptics and piecing together the longest form of the discourse. (I actually think this would be the way to get closest to the exact words of

Jesus, which is only a preliminary step in the exegetical task.) Think what this would mean. If one could force a preservation interpretation of the text, despite all common sense and every tinge of the exegetical conscience, what implications would this have for our doctrine of preservation? It would say that the words of Jesus have been preserved, but not in any one manuscript. One could conceivably hold in his hand the original autographs of Mark, Matthew, and Luke, prior to the rise of any textual variants, and say that he has all the words Jesus spoke on this occasion. But to get those words he would have to reconstruct the original form of them from the three different texts which he had at hand. Obviously synoptic redaction criticism is a very different beast than New Testament textual criticism, but the analogy says volumes. For it is somewhat analogous to what every evangelical textual critic has always said about the words of the NT. We have all of these words in the manuscripts at hand, but since those manuscripts all differ, we must reconstruct the original from which these manuscripts came. In other words, if one demands against all sense that the text refers to preservation, then what it would be teaching is teaching is the necessity of continuing textual criticism in order to reconstruct the original text!

Conclusion

To summarize, we have done an exegetical examination of the phrase “my words shall not pass away” in Matthew 24:35. We have placed the phrase in the context of the gospel as a whole, the Olivet Discourse in particular, and the Parable of the Fig Tree specifically. We have further examined the lexical, textual, and syntactical details of the phrase. We have examined the intent of Jesus in speaking it in his original historical context, as well as the intent of Matthew in recording it for his readers. We have briefly surveyed the history of the interpretation of the phrase throughout the history of the church. What we have discovered is that to take the phrase as a reference to preservation one must ignore every single one of these elements. The text is clearly about *fulfillment*, not *preservation*. Any one of these areas of study alone would be enough to show that the preservation interpretation doesn’t work. Combined together, they make it all but impossible. To interpret the phrase as a reference to verbal preservation, one must rip the passage from its context in the parable of the Fig Tree. He must ignore its place in the Olivet Discourse. He must ignore the grammar, syntax, lexical details, and literary context. He must dismiss the historical context of Jesus in preaching this discourse, Matthew’s intent in recording it, and the clear meaning of the phrase. Perhaps most importantly, a preservation interpretation essentially makes Jesus out to be a liar in order to have one more proof text to support one’s pet Greek text or English translation.

I for one will do none of these things. I will be more careful than that with the Bible I love. If we love the Bible as we claim, and if we love the Jesus who it presents, who is Truth Incarnate, then we must discontinue these misuses of this passage and its parallels. This passage (as well as its parallels in Mark 13:31 and Luke 21:33) can no longer be a part of our doctrinal statements on preservation. They can no longer be part of our presentation of this doctrine. In order to continue to use the passages this way, one would have to make a convincing, exegetically sensitive case that a preservation interpretation could even be possible. Further, one would have to refute each of the points made in this paper. This would require extensive exegetical work which has to my knowledge never been done. To continue to use these passages in such a way before this work is done, and such an interpretation could be shown plausible, is simply mishandling the text. Those who would

so knowingly mishandle the Word of God dare not claim from the other side of their mouths that they love the Bible more than those of use who refuse to so abuse Scripture.

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