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APOCALYPSE WHEN? Why Most End-Time Teaching Is Dead Wrong

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SYNOPSIS

The basic principles of language that we unconsciously absorb in early childhood and consciously internalize from grade school onward are foundational to the grammatical principle of biblical interpretation: we interpret the Bible in accordance with the basic rules of language.

According to the grammatical principle, when Jesus said to His disciples, "I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened" ([Matt. 24:34](#)), this means this. The first-century context for the fulfillment of Jesus' apocalyptic prophecy is further underscored by the use of such phrases as "what must soon take place" and "the time is near" in the parallel prophecy of Revelation.

When Jesus said, moreover, that the first-century nations "will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory" ([Matt. 24:30](#)), He was using language that anyone familiar with the Old Testament would readily grasp. Contrary to the misguided interpretations of skeptics who designate Christ a false prophet, Jesus employed the Old Testament metaphor of "coming on clouds" not to predict His second coming but to pronounce the then soon-coming judgment on Jerusalem and His vindication and exaltation as Israel's rightful king who sits upon God's throne.

Rather than allowing the grammatical principle to guide their responses to skeptics, however, popular prophecy pundits have projected Jesus and John's prophecies of first-century events onto the twenty-first century, suggesting that this means that, generation means race, soon means quickly, and near means far off. The result of such grammatical gyrations is that many who may otherwise be drawn to the claims of Christ become galvanized in unbelief. Those who love God and His Word must learn, therefore, to explain accurately the grammatical and scriptural context of Christ's words.

"We believe 'this generation' refers to those alive in 1948."

—Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, *Are We Living in the End Times?*

"I have not had sex with her as I defined it."

—William Jefferson Clinton, Former U. S. President

Asked under oath to verify his lawyer's declaration, "There is absolutely no sex of any kind" between the president of the United States of America and White House intern, Monica Lewinsky, William Jefferson

Clinton responded, "It depends on what the meaning of the word 'is' is." Asked if he had ever been alone with Lewinsky, Clinton responded, "It depends on how you define 'alone.'" Asked to justify his testimony that they had never had a sexual relationship, Clinton answered, "I have not had sex with her as I defined it."¹

As a Yale Law School graduate, Rhodes Scholar, and university professor, Clinton was uniquely qualified to understand the grammatical intent of the questions he was being asked. Thus, it is highly unlikely that he thought that the word *is* was intended to convey the notion that there might have been sex in the past but there is no sex in the present. Likewise, it is unlikely that Clinton misunderstood the definition of the word *alone*, as in his secretary, Betty Currie's, slick prevarication, "The President, for all intents and purposes, is never alone."² Equally unbelievable is the notion that Clinton was confused about the meaning of the word *sex* — or for that matter that anyone else was confused.

The moment Clinton commenced his grammatical gyrations, baloney detectors worldwide began blinking furiously. Anyone paying attention knew that Clinton was feigning an ignorance of context and abusing the plain meaning of words in order to avoid perjuring himself. Even someone with a grammar school education could have properly interpreted the intended meaning of the words *is*, *alone*, and *sex* by the context in which the words were used.

As the father of nine children, I can testify firsthand to what scientific research has only recently begun to validate — humans are hardwired for language from birth. From infancy onward, speech patterns are unconsciously absorbed and then modified in accord with unspoken rules of grammar. Even at age three, children display grammatical genius that enables them to master complex speech constructions and internalize sophisticated laws of language.³ Before children formally learn the laws of language in grade school, they are already able to apply them in their own speech and can readily recognize their abuse in the speech patterns of nonnative speakers — as in the sentence "Me wants on swing to play."

In time even complex grammatical constructions and multiple word meanings become second nature. It shouldn't surprise us, then, that the basic principles of language that we unconsciously absorb in early childhood and consciously internalize from grade school onward are foundational to the grammatical principle of biblical interpretation: we interpret the Bible in accordance with the basic rules of language. Suppose I told my children, "I don't want you to touch this gingerbread cake, because we are going to have dinner soon!" They wouldn't need an advanced degree in English from Yale to understand that by "this" I meant this gingerbread cake — not that gingerbread cake, as in a gingerbread cake that would be baked for their twenty-first birthday. Nor are they the least bit confused about the meaning of "you," which in context refers to them, not to children of a future generation. "Soon" is equally unambiguous. To say we are going to have dinner "soon" could not possibly mean dinner in the distant future.

When it comes to interpreting Scripture, we should not suppose that the rules of grammar mysteriously change. When Jesus says, "I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened,"⁴ *this* means *this*. As Dr. D. A. Carson has well said, "'This generation'... can only with the greatest difficulty be made to mean anything other than the generation living when Jesus spoke."⁵

The meaning of the pronoun *you* in the context of Christ's Olivet Discourse is just as clear. When Jesus says, "You will hear of wars and rumors of wars.... You will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me.... When you see standing in the holy place 'the abomination that causes desolation,'.... When you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door,"⁶ it should be obvious that He is referencing a first-century, not a twenty-first-century, generation.

Likewise, the meaning of the word *soon* in the context of the Revelation Jesus gave to the apostle John is equally self-evident. Tim LaHaye nonetheless intimates that when Jesus speaks of things that "must soon

take place," He is really speaking of things that will take place in a distant millennium; and when Jesus says that "the time is near," He is really intending to say that the time is far off.⁷ While this should immediately thrust our baloney detectors into overdrive, I suspect that the reason this often doesn't happen is that it is hard for us to imagine that a prophecy expert who is intimately acquainted with the grammatical principle of biblical interpretation could possibly be mistaken about something so basic. Just as we are reticent to question a president's ability to comprehend the grammatical intent of words such as is, alone, or sex, so too we are loath to question a prophecy expert's understanding of such words as this, you, and soon.

THIS GENERATION

Jesus began His famous Olivet Discourse by walking away from the very house that afforded the Jewish people their theological and sociological significance. He had pronounced seven woes on the Pharisees and then uttered the unthinkable: "Your house is left to you desolate" ([Matt. 23:38](#)). When Jesus drove the moneychangers out of the temple and overturned their tables, He designated it "my house" ([Matt. 21:13](#)). Now it was relegated to being "your house." What was once the dwelling of God was now a mere house of men.

God's warning regarding Solomon's temple echoed back ominously through the corridor of time: "I will cut off Israel from the land I have given them and will reject this temple I have consecrated for my Name. Israel will then become a byword and an object of ridicule among all peoples. And though this temple is now imposing, all who pass by will be appalled and will scoff and say, 'Why has the LORD done such a thing to this land and to this temple?'" ([1 Kings 9:7-8](#)). As Solomon's temple had been destroyed, so Herod's temple would become "a byword and an object of ridicule."

The Shekinah glory of God had departed the stone temple and resided in the temple not built by human hands. As Jesus declared, "One greater than the temple is here" ([Matt. 12:6](#)). The glory that once had tabernacled among the Israelites in the wilderness now physically made His abode among men ([John 1:1, 14, 18](#)). Christ, "the light of the world" ([John 8:12; 9:5](#)), caused even the gigantic candelabra in Herod's temple to pale by comparison. Christ, the Passover Lamb ([1 Cor. 5:7](#)), rendered temple sacrifices irrelevant. Indeed, He was the living Temple toward which their house and its sacrificial system pointed.

The teachers of the law nonetheless loved their traditions more than the Teacher in whom those traditions were realized. As Jesus made plain, the living Temple was now in their midst—thus, those who worshiped God in spirit and in truth must no longer worship in a Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim or a Jewish temple in Jerusalem ([John 4:21-24](#)). When the disciples called the Master's attention to the magnificence of the temple and its surroundings, He replied, "I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down" ([Matt. 24:2](#)). Filled with apocalyptic awe and anxiety, the disciples asked, "When will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" ([Matt. 24:3](#)). In sober response, Jesus predicted that first the "gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (v. 14). His prophetic pronouncements continue with such words as, "The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken" (v. 29). He even pointed out that the disciples themselves would "see standing in the holy place the abomination that causes desolation, spoken of through the prophet Daniel" (v. 15). "At that time" said Jesus, "the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory" (v. 30). So as to leave no doubt regarding the time of His coming, Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away" (vv. 34-35).

Skeptics have been quick to point out that by these very words, Jesus disqualified Himself as deity and demonstrated beyond peradventure of doubt that He was a false prophet. World-class philosopher and

leading intellectual Bertrand Russell summarizes such sentiments in an essay titled “Why I Am Not a Christian”:

[Jesus] certainly thought that His second coming would occur in clouds of glory before the death of all the people who were living at that time....It is quite clear that He believed that His second coming would happen during the lifetime of many then living. That was the belief of His earlier followers, and it was the basis of a good deal of His moral teaching. When He said, “Take no thought for the morrow,” and things of that sort, it was very largely because He thought that the second coming was going to be very soon, and that all ordinary mundane affairs did not count.⁸

Like Russell, the great missionary physician and New Testament scholar Albert Schweitzer believed that Jesus was a false prophet because He testified that His second coming would occur within the lifetime of His disciples. As Schweitzer explains in his autobiography, “The bare text compelled me to assume that Jesus really announced persecutions for the disciples and, as a sequel to them, the immediate appearance of the celestial Son of Man, and that His announcement was shown by subsequent events to be wrong.”⁹

Unbelieving Jews routinely discredit Christ and Christianity on precisely the same basis. On the Web site Jews for Judaism, Gerald Sigal writes:

There is no need to interpret the verse, “Truly I say to you this generation will not pass away until all these things take place” otherwise than that Jesus was speaking here of his contemporary generation. The expression “this generation” appears fourteen times in the Gospels and always applies to Jesus’ contemporaries. That generation passed away without Jesus returning. Therefore, we are confronted by another unfulfilled promise by Jesus.¹⁰

Sigal sums up this sentiment, saying, “No amount of Christian theological acrobatics will ever solve the problems engendered by the historical reality that a promised imminent fulfillment made two thousand years ago did not occur as expected by the New Testament. Simply stated, Jesus is never coming back, not then, not now, not ever.”¹¹

Although quite clever, Tim LaHaye’s rebuttal, “We believe ‘this generation’ refers to those alive in 1948” is about as believable to a discerning skeptic as Clinton’s quip, “It depends on what the meaning of the word ‘is’ is.” In fact, the moment dispensationalists such as LaHaye utter such statements, our baloney detectors must surely flash, “Warning! Grammatical gyrations ahead!” As the skeptic Gerald Sigal has well said, “This generation” appears fourteen times in the Gospels and always applies to Jesus’ contemporaries.”

Allow me to state the obvious. Our Lord is not grammatically challenged in the least! Had He wanted to draw the attention of His disciples to a generation nineteen hundred years hence, He would not have confused them with the adjective this.¹² As Dr. Kenneth Gentry has aptly noted, “this generation,” in the context of the Olivet Discourse, is “a nonapocalyptic, nonpoetic, unambiguous, didactic assertion.”¹³ Thus, there is no mysterious esoteric meaning locked up in the grammar. When Jesus said, “When you see standing in the holy place ‘the abomination that causes desolation’ spoken of through the prophet Daniel” ([Matt. 24:15](#)), His disciples did not for a moment think He was referencing a far future generation.

As noted, “this generation” appears with surprising regularity in the Gospels, and it always applies to Jesus’ contemporaries. In Matthew 11, Jesus asks, “To what can I compare this generation” (v. 16). Here as in every other usage of this phrase, the generation in view is the very generation that rejected the incarnate Christ who performed miracles in their midst. Jesus therefore denounced “the cities in which most of His miracles had been performed, because they did not repent” (v. 20). It was clearly the cities in which the miracles were performed, not future cities, that Jesus had in mind. So as to leave no doubt, Jesus said, “Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to You, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes” (v. 21).

And who can forget the seminal words of Christ recorded in Matthew 12? When the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Him for a miraculous sign, Jesus answered them, saying, “A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” ([Matt. 12:39–40](#)). Not even LaHaye has the temerity to suggest that Jesus here is alluding to anything other than His death, burial, and resurrection in the first century.

Jesus went on to declare, “The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here” ([Matt. 12:41](#)). It would be a grammatical blunder of gargantuan proportions to interpret Jesus here as referencing any generation other than the one to whom He was speaking. Jesus left no doubt that He was speaking of particularly those present as He continued His rebuke of the Pharisees and teachers of the law. “The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon’s wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here” ([Matt. 12:42](#)). Jesus concluded His condemnation, saying, “That is how it will be with this wicked generation” ([Matt. 12:45](#)).

Just as it is grammatically implausible for Jesus to have meant anything other than the generation to whom He was speaking in this context, so too it is grammatically impossible for Him to have been referencing anything other than the generation present during His delivery of the Olivet Discourse—as “this” means “this” and not “that” here, so “this” means “this” and not “that” there.

One final example should suffice. In the “seven woes” preceding the Olivet Discourse, Jesus warned the Pharisees and the teachers of the law of the judgment they would experience for rejecting the Messiah in their midst. While anti-Semites have delighted in assigning the judgments of Jesus to Jews in their contemporary generations, Jesus left no room for such misguided interpretations; instead, He directly and specifically addressed His contemporaries, saying, “I tell you the truth, all this will come upon this generation” ([Matt. 23:36](#)). Without exception, the phrase “this generation” refers to the then present generation, not to a generation that is “alive in 1948.”

In the interest of fairness, I should point out that the “this is that” argument is not the only argument in the dispensationalist arsenal. As former President Clinton offered an alternate meaning for the word sex (to those who would not buy the “It depends on what the meaning of the word ‘is’ is” rhetoric), so prophecy experts offer an alternate meaning for the word generation. Legendary dispensationalist Dr. C. I. Scofield suggested that generation did not mean “generation”—it meant “race.”¹⁴ Thus, in answer to the question, “When will this happen?” Jesus really meant to say, “I tell you the truth, this race will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.”

Scofield went so far as to say that, as “all lexicons” reflect, the Jewish “race...will be preserved...a promise wonderfully fulfilled to this day.”¹⁵ One might presume that because this premise is postulated in a popular reference Bible, it is true. In reality, however, it is not. As noted by author Gary DeMar, a perusal of popular lexicons reveals that the word “generation” in the context of Matthew’s gospel references an interval of time, not an ethnic race of people. For example, Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament defines the Greek word *genea* as “the whole multitude of men living at the same time. Mt. xxiv.34; Mk. Xiii. 30; Luke i.48.” Thayer cites [Matthew 24:34](#) and [Mark 13:30](#) in support of translating *genea* as ‘generation.’ Thayer does not apply the ‘race’ translation to [Matthew 24:34](#). A check of other lexicons and theological dictionaries will show that *genea* in [Matthew 24:34](#) is translated ‘generation’—‘those living at the same time’—not ‘race.’¹⁶

DeMar goes on to explain that “the Greek word *genos* rather than *genea* is best translated ‘race’ (see [Mark 7:26](#); [Acts 4:36](#); [7:19](#); [13:26](#); [17:28](#); [18:24](#); [2 Cor. 11:26](#); [Gal. 1:14](#); [Phil. 3:5](#); [1 Peter 2:9](#)).”¹⁷ This reality is

reflected in modern Bible translations such as the New King James Version, New American Standard Bible, and New International Version. Scofield's superstar status, however, has ensured that his equivocation on the word generation persists in the present as a pragmatic method of saving Jesus from the charge of making false prophecies.

This ploy, however, is seldom satisfying to those who doubt the credibility of the Gospels. Common sense dictates that in answering the question, "When will these things happen?" Jesus does not respond by saying, "I tell you the truth, this race of people will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away." Rather, our Lord is delineating the very signs that would precede the judgment of Jerusalem and the end of the age of sacrifice.

To contend that Jesus merely meant to say that the Jewish race would continue on into the twenty-first century is to suggest that His prediction was virtually meaningless. It would be like prophesying, "I tell you the truth, the Egyptian race will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away." Or, "I tell you the truth, there will still be Greeks running around on the planet when all these things come to pass." Like it or not, Jesus gave His disciples specific verifiable signs that would identify Him as either deity or deceiver (cf. [Matt. 16:28](#); [Mark 9:1](#); [Luke 9:26-27](#)).

THE PRONOUN YOU

Suppose I say to my children, "I tell you the truth, this day will certainly not pass away until I have taken you all to Disney World." Do you suppose they might scratch their heads and wonder whether I had a future generation of children in mind? Of course not! If I did not take them to Disney World that very day, I could not vindicate myself by explaining that I was really talking about my great-grandchildren.

In like fashion, Jesus' use of the pronoun you cannot possibly be taken to mean anything other than a reference to the generation that cried out, "Crucify him!...Crucify him!...Let his blood be on us and on our children!" ([Matt. 27:22-25](#)). They were the generation that had experienced the incarnate Christ in their midst yet had begged to have the notorious Barabbas released in his stead. Thus, said Jesus: "Upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar" ([Matt. 23:35](#)).

As context makes clear, Jesus is not addressing a past generation, for He denounces as hypocrites the present generation of teachers of the law and Pharisees who say about themselves, "If we had lived in the days of our forefathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets. So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of the sins of your forefathers!" ([Matt. 23:30-32](#)). Nor is Jesus referencing a future generation, for He specifically says, "I tell you the truth, all this will come upon this generation (v. 36)."¹⁸

In answer to the questions, "When will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" Jesus gave His disciples both the time of the signs and signs of the time. As Dr. Luke makes clear, the disciples essentially asked two questions "When will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are about to take place?" ([Luke 21:7](#)).

In response, Jesus prophesied both the time of His coming and predicted the signs that would signal the end of the age. Skeptics and infidels have seized upon Christ's words to designate Him a false prophet. Recall Bertrand Russell who said it was quite clear that Jesus believed His second coming would happen during the lifetime of His disciples. Or Albert Schweitzer who said that Christ's announcement regarding His second coming was shown by subsequent events to be wrong because the disciples of Christ died prior to His coming. As Jewish skeptic Gerald Sigal put it, "No amount of Christian theological acrobatics will ever solve the problems engendered by the historical reality that a promised imminent fulfillment made two thousand years ago did not occur as expected by the New Testament."

Had these men understood the language of the Bible, they may not have been as quick to wag their fingers at the Master. While they were correct in dismissing such grammatical gyrations as “this means that” they were incorrect in assuming that Jesus was predicting the time of His second coming. When Jesus said, “You will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory” ([Matt. 24:30](#)), He was using language that anyone familiar with the Old Testament would readily grasp.

Recall the familiar Old Testament passage in which Daniel sees a vision of “one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the ancient of Days and was led into his presence” ([Dan. 7:13](#)). Here Christ is clearly not descending to earth in His second coming but rather ascending to the throne of the Almighty in vindication and exaltation.

As the student of Scripture well knows, “clouds” are a common Old Testament symbol pointing to God as the sovereign Judge of the nations. In the words of Ezekiel, “The day of the LORD is near—a day of clouds, a time of doom for the nations” ([Ezek. 30:3](#)). Or as the prophet Joel put it, “The day of the LORD is coming. It is close at hand—a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness” ([Joel 2:1–2](#)).

No doubt at this very moment a host of similar passages are flooding through the minds of readers familiar with the Scriptures. Many can readily recall the epic language used regarding the judgment of Egypt: “See, the LORD rides on a swift cloud and is coming to Egypt. The idols of Egypt tremble before him, and the hearts of the Egyptians melt within them” ([Isa. 19:1](#)). Certainly no one is so benighted as to think that coming on clouds in this context is anything other than language that denotes judgment. Why then should anyone suggest that Christ’s coming on clouds in the context of the Olivet Discourse would refer to anything other than the judgment Jerusalem would experience within a generation just as Jesus had prophesied? As previously noted, we must inevitably ask ourselves whether it is indeed credible to suppose that Jesus, “the heir to the linguistic and theological riches of the prophets, and himself a greater theologian and master of imagery than them all, should ever have turned their symbols into flat and literal prose.”¹⁹

Like Daniel, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and a host of prophets before Him, Jesus employed the language of “clouds” to warn His disciples of judgment that would befall Jerusalem within a generation. Using final consummation language to characterize a near-future event, the Master prophesied, “At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory” ([Matt. 24:30](#)). Far from predicting His second coming, however, Jesus was telling His disciples that those who witnessed Jerusalem’s destruction would likewise see His vindication and exaltation as Israel’s rightful king.

Similarly, when the disciples asked Jesus about “the end of the age,” they were not asking Jesus about the end of the world (kosmos). They were rather asking Jesus about the end of the current corrupt age (aion) in the context of His chilling prediction of the destruction of the temple and its buildings. With the destruction of the temple would come the end of the old covenant age of sacrifices that pointed forward to the ultimate sacrificial Lamb in whom the symbols would be fully and completely satisfied.²⁰

This is precisely what John the Baptist had in mind when he called Jesus “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” ([John 1:29](#)). Jesus was “the guarantee of a better covenant” ([Heb. 7:22](#)). “Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself” (v. 27). “The ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one” ([Heb. 8:6](#)). “By calling this covenant ‘new,’ he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear” (v. 13). “Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him” ([Heb. 9:28](#)). Thus, the end of the age of sacrifice is found in a Temple not built by human hands.

Common sense alone should be sufficient to convince the unbiased that redefining “coming” to mean “second coming” and “end of the age” to mean “end of the world” is at best misguided. As N. T. Wright artfully explains, the disciples had come to Jerusalem expecting Jesus to be enthroned as the rightful king. This would necessarily involve Jesus taking over the authority which the Temple symbolized. They were now confronted with the startling news that this taking over of authority would mean the demolition, literal and metaphorical, of the Temple, whose demise Jesus had in fact constantly predicted, and which he had already symbolically overthrown in his dramatic (but apparently inconsequential) action in the Temple itself. The disciples now “heard” his prophetic announcement of the destruction of the Temple as the announcement, also, of his own vindication; in other words, of his own “coming” — not floating around on a cloud, of course, but of his “coming” to Jerusalem as the vindicated, rightful king.²¹

In the end it is safe to maintain that when Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened” His disciples did not for a moment think He was speaking of His second coming or of the end of the cosmos. As conflicted as they may have been about the character of Christ’s kingdom or the scope of His rule, they were not in the least confused about whom He was addressing.

Little wonder then that all who read Christ’s Olivet Discourse — whether skeptic or seeker — immediately presume that when Jesus uses the pronoun you, He is directly and obviously addressing a first-century audience. When someone attempts to convince them otherwise, their baloney detectors should immediately register full. The result of such grammatical gyrations is that many who may otherwise be drawn to the claims of Christ become galvanized in unbelief. Far better that those who love God and His Word learn to reach out to the lost by explaining the context in which such words as “coming” and “age” were used by Christ.

As Jesus was addressing a first-century audience when He spoke of the destruction of the temple, so too He was addressing His contemporaries when He said:

So when you see standing in the holy place ‘the abomination that causes desolation,’ spoken of by the prophet Daniel — let the reader understand — then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let no one on the roof of his house go down to take anything out of the house. Let no one in the field go back to get his cloak. How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! Pray that your flight will not take place in winter or on the Sabbath. For then there will be great distress unequaled from the beginning of the world until now — and never to be equaled again. ([Matt. 24:15–21](#))

“The abomination of desolation” spoken of by Jesus had been prophesied six centuries earlier by Daniel, who wrote: “His armed forces will rise up to desecrate the temple fortress and will abolish the daily sacrifice. Then they will set up the abomination that causes desolation. With flattery he will corrupt those who have violated the covenant, but the people who know their God will firmly resist him” ([Dan. 11:31–32](#)). In 167 BC Daniel’s prophecy became an unforgettable reality when Antiochus IV Epiphanes took Jerusalem by force, abolished temple sacrifices, erected an abominable altar to Zeus Olympus, and violated the Jewish covenant by outlawing Sabbath observance.

Therefore, when Jesus referenced the desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, everyone in His audience knew precisely what He was talking about. The annual Hanukkah celebration ensured that they would ever remember the Syrian antichrist who desecrated the temple fortress, the pig’s blood splattered on the altar, and the statue of a Greek god in the Holy of Holies. Had God not supernaturally intervened through the agency of Judas Maccabaeus, the epicenter of their theological and sociological identity would have been destroyed, not just desecrated.

In the Olivet Discourse, Jesus had taken the quintessential Jewish nightmare and extended it to cosmic proportions. In the fullness of time, what Jesus declared desolate was desolated by Roman infidels. They destroyed the temple fortress and ended the daily sacrifice. This time the blood that desolated the sacred altar did not flow from the carcasses of unclean pigs, but from the corpses of unbelieving Pharisees. This time the Holy of Holies was not merely desecrated by the defiling statue of a pagan god, but was manifestly destroyed by the pathetic greed of despoiling soldiers. This time no Judas Maccabaeus intervened.

Within a generation, the temple was not just desecrated, it was destroyed! "Not one stone here," said Jesus, "will be left on another; every one will be thrown down" ([Matt. 24:2](#)). A generation later, when the disciples saw "Jerusalem being surrounded by armies" they knew "its desolation" was near ([Luke 21:20](#)). Thus, as Jesus had instructed, they fled to the mountains ([Matt. 24:16](#); [Luke 21:21](#)).

The Jews who had failed to heed Christ's warning were savagely slaughtered. Some one million fell by the sword; myriad others were taken prisoner. When they saw Jerusalem "surrounded by armies," they should have known "that its desolation was near." However, though they knew the pronoun you specifically referenced their generation, they failed to heed the warning because of unbelief. So what Jesus had envisioned when He wept over Jerusalem became their worst nightmare: "The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you" ([Luke 19:43-44](#)).

One thing should be crystal clear to all those who read Christ's Olivet Discourse through biblical eyes. Our Lord's use of the pronoun you throughout, directly and specifically references a first-century, not a twenty-first-century, audience. Indeed, our Lord's words are directly in keeping with the Old Testament prophets. When He says, "The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken" ([Matt. 24:29](#); cf. [Mark 13:24-25](#); [Luke 21:25](#)), fiery images of the Old Testament prophets should flash before our eyes.

Recall, for example, the vivid images used by Isaiah with regard to the judgment of Babylon in 539 BC: "See, the day of the LORD is coming — a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger — to make the land desolate and destroy sinners within it. The stars of heaven and their constellations will not show their light. The rising sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light" ([Isa. 13:9-10](#); cf. [Ezek. 32:7](#); [Joel 2:10](#); [3:15](#)). Surely no one supposes that the stars went into supernova in the days of Isaiah.

Rather, as Isaiah used the sun, moon, and stars as judgment metaphors against Babylon, so our Lord used them as judgment images against Jerusalem. In the end, it does not depend on "what the meaning of the word 'is' is," but on whether "you 'is' or you 'isn't'" going to interpret Scripture in light of Scripture rather than Scripture in light of the Daily Star! No amount of grammatical gyrations should ever convince anyone otherwise.

THE ADVERB SOON

Ironically, the quintessential example of not reading the Bible literally (in the sense in which it is intended) is found in LaHaye's interpretation of the very first sentence of "the revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place" ([Revelation 1:1](#)). According to LaHaye, our Lord's "emphasis" here "is on future events."²² In other words, by using the word "soon," Jesus intends to emphasize that which will happen "to those alive in 1948."²³

Again, such grammatical gyrations should cause our baloney detectors to go into red alert. It is one thing to suppose that a former president is confused about the meaning of the word sex; it is quite another to imagine that a prophecy expert who has studied prophecy for more than fifty years is confused about the meaning of the adverb soon. Though LaHaye spiritualizes the meaning of "soon" in the first verse of Revelation, there is no reason for anyone else to take it any way other than in its plain and natural sense.

First, allow me to restate the obvious. Neither Jesus nor John is grammatically challenged in the least. Had Jesus and John merely intended to emphasize imminence with respect to a generation that would come into being in the far-distant future, they would have had no difficulty whatsoever in doing so.

Furthermore, while it is one thing to misunderstand grammatical constructions in apocalyptic or prophetic portions of the book of Revelation, it is quite another to misconstrue Jesus or John in the letter's introduction. The natural reading of such phrases as "what must soon take place" or "the time is near" is that the events that follow are fore future and not far future. To suppose that Jesus was actually intending to show His servants that which would take place "quickly" when it does take place, even if it is a very long way off, is a sure misunderstanding of the plain and literal sense of the language.²⁴

Finally, as the whole of Revelation makes clear, Jesus used the adverb soon to solemnly testify to that which was near. For example, Jesus was obviously speaking of a fore-future event when He encouraged the church in Smyrna with the words, "Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life" ([Rev. 2:10](#)). To suggest that our Lord's intent here is to address a "reformed church" in the pre-enlightenment era²⁵ is not only an affront to the faithful believers in the church of Smyrna, but is just plain silly. The faithful in Smyrna would not have taken our Lord to be addressing anyone other than themselves, and neither should we. Make no mistake: while our Lord's words apply to us, they were written to a first-century church about to face the mother of all tribulations. As with the church at Smyrna, Jesus says to the church of Philadelphia, "I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth" ([Rev. 3:10](#)). It is incredible to suppose that Jesus is telling this first-century church that He is going to protect them from an hour of trial that is going to take place sometime between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries. Yet this is precisely what LaHaye would have us believe.²⁶

Or who can forget the words of the angel who said to John, "Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, because the time is near" ([Rev. 22:10](#))? Are we really to suppose that the angel was referencing a time more than two thousand years hence? Of course not! When we read that the angel told Daniel to seal up his prophecy "until the time of the end" ([Dan. 12:4](#)), we do not suppose that the prophecy would be fulfilled in the fore future. Likewise, when we read that the angel told John not to seal up his prophecy, we do not suppose that the prophecy will be fulfilled in the far future.

Just as the angel in Daniel provides us with a perspective on time, so the angel in Revelation answers the question, "How long?" with phrases like, "There will be no more delay!" and words such as "soon" (see [Revelation 1:1, 3; 2:16; 3:11; 10:6; 11:14; 22:6, 7, 10, 12, 20](#)).²⁷ Says Richard Bauckham:

Just as [Daniel 12:7](#) answers the question, 'How long?' (12:6), so the angel in Revelation implicitly responds to the question 'How long?' which has been in the reader's mind since it was raised by the martyrs in 6:10. The answer is that there is now to be no more delay before the final period which will bring in the Kingdom, the Danielic "time, times and half a time" ...the final period is about to begin in the immediate future.²⁸

Of course, the fact that the book of Revelation is predominantly focused on fore-future events should not lead anyone to suppose that Revelation is exhausted in the holocaust of AD 70. As with the unfolding revelation in the whole of Scripture, the book of Revelation points forward to the restoration of all things—a time in which Jesus will appear a second time, the problem of sin will be fully and finally resolved, and Paradise lost will become Paradise restored. Jesus not only predicts that the Old Jerusalem will be destroyed; He promises that a new Jerusalem will descend. Thus, in Revelation 21 we read of a new heaven and a new earth.

The first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared

as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." (vv. 1–5)

In the end knowing the truth depends on whether we interpret Scripture in light of pet traditions or in keeping with the grammatical principle of biblical interpretation. To interpret Scripture Clintonian style is to turn Scripture into a wax nose capable of being twisted anyway the interpreter likes. When Jesus said "this generation," He did not mean that; when He used the pronoun you, His hearers knew precisely who He was talking about; and when He said "soon," His servants did not suppose He was referencing a time twenty-one centuries future in which two-thirds of the Jews in Palestine would perish for the sins of their forefathers.

NOTES

1. "Videotaped Testimony of William Jefferson Clinton, President of the United States, Before the Grand Jury Empanelled for Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr," August 17, 1998, transcript by the Office of the Independent Counsel released September 21, 1998, online at JURIST: The Law Professors' Network, <http://jurist.law.pitt.edu/transcr.htm> (accessed December 31, 2006).
2. Report of the Independent Counsel to Congress, September 9, 1998, online at <http://www.gooddocuments.com/icreport/jan171998.htm> (accessed December 31, 2006)
3. Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994), 276, see 39–45, 262–76
4. [Matt. 24:34](#), emphasis added. Throughout this article whenever emphasis occurs within Scripture quotations, as quoted by the present author, it has been added.
5. D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in Frank E. Gaebelein, gen. ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 507, emphasis in original.
6. [Matt. 24:6](#), [9](#), [15](#), [20](#), [26](#), [33](#).
7. The entire corpus of LaHaye's eschatological writings implies this conclusion, but for a virtually explicit acknowledgment, see Tim LaHaye, *Revelation Unveiled* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 25.
8. Bertrand Russell, in Paul Edwards, ed., *Why I Am Not a Christian: And Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1957), 16.
9. Albert Schweitzer, *Out of My Life and Thought: An Autobiography* (New York: Henry Holt, 1933), 7.
10. Gerald Sigal, "Question: What Does 'This Generation' Mean in the Verse, 'Truly I Say to You This Generation Will Not Pass Away until All These Things Take Place' ([Matt. 24:32](#), [Mark 13:30](#), [Luke 21:32](#))?" Jews for Judaism Web site, <http://www.jewsforjudaism.org/web/faq/faq114.html> (accessed December 31, 2006), emphasis added.
11. Gerald Sigal, "Question: How Does the Passage of Time Effect [sic] the Christian Claim of a 'Second Coming of Christ'?" Jews for Judaism Web site, <http://www.jewsforjudaism.org/web/faq/faq116.html> (accessed December 31, 2006), emphasis added.
12. A standard New Testament Greek lexicon defines the Greek word translated "this" in [Matthew 24:34](#) as follows: "[*houtos, haute, touto*] demonstrative pronoun, used as adjective and substantive: *this*, referring to something comparatively near at hand, just as *ekeinos* ["that"] refers to something comparatively far away; cf. [Luke 18:14](#); [James 4:15](#); Mandate 3:5." W. Bauer, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 600 (abbreviations expanded).
13. Thomas Ice and Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., *The Great Tribulation: Past or Future? Two Evangelicals Debate the Question* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), 28.

14. C. I. Scofield, ed., *The Scofield Study Bible*, readers ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996, originally published 1917), 1034, note on [Matthew 24:34](#).
15. Scofield, 1034, note on [Matthew 24:34](#).
16. Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness: Obsession of the Modern Church*, 4th rev. ed. (Atlanta: American Vision, 1999), 186.
17. Ibid.
18. In the original Greek, the second person and vocative (signifying address) are used throughout [Matthew 23:13–39](#).
19. George B. Caird, *Jesus and the Jewish Nation* (London: Athlone, 1965), 22, quoted in N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, vol. 2, *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 341
20. See DeMar, 69–71.
21. Wright, 342, emphasis in original.
22. LaHaye writes concerning [Revelation 1:1](#), “Further on in the verse we find that this is the revelation of Jesus Christ ‘to show his servants what must soon take place.’ Again we see that the emphasis of the book is on future events” (Tim LaHaye, *Revelation Unveiled*, 25).
23. Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Are We Living in the End Times?* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1999), 59.
24. Concerning [Revelation 22:7](#), “Behold, I am coming soon!” LaHaye writes, “Three times we find this expression in the last verses of this book. Some have been confused about the literal meaning of the expression because it was uttered almost two thousand years ago. It is more accurately translated, ‘Behold, I come suddenly.’ This saying does not refer to an appointed time soon to come but means that His coming will take place suddenly and without warning.” (LaHaye, *Revelation Unveiled*, 371. Cf. Tim LaHaye, ed., *Tim LaHaye Prophecy Study Bible* (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 2000), 1404, 1405, notes on [Revelation 22:7](#) and [22:20](#).) The reality, however, is that the plain reading of such words as “near,” “soon,” “the time is at hand,” as found in [Revelation 1:1](#), [3](#); [2:16](#); [3:11](#); [11:14](#); [22:6](#), [7](#), [10](#), [12](#), [20](#), is that the events prophesied were to occur within John’s near future. For further discussion, see DeMar, 379–95.
25. Tim LaHaye and Thomas Ice, *Charting the End Times* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2001), 45.
26. LaHaye believes that each of the seven churches in Revelation 2–3 represents a particular period within church history. The Philadelphia age of church history is said to cover the period from about 1750 to the time of the rapture. It is the church of Philadelphia Jesus promised to deliver from the coming tribulation, which LaHaye interprets as a promise to rapture the universal church prior to the trial that will overtake the whole world. See LaHaye, *Revelation Unveiled*, 78–83; and LaHaye and Ice, *Charting the End Times*, 107.
27. For further discussion, see DeMar, 379–95.
28. Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993), 263. It should be noted that Bauckham does not share my general view of Revelation.