

DID THE SIGN OF THE LAST DAYS BEGIN IN 1914?

WAS WORLD WAR I THE BEGINNING OF THE LAST DAYS?

The Watchtower Bible and Tract Society (WBTS), otherwise known as Jehovah's Witnesses, claims that mankind entered "the last days" when World War I began in 1914. This claim is based on Matthew 24:7. The following wars, famines, pestilences and earthquakes are pointed to as being the **composite sign** of Jesus having become invisibly present and that the "*last days*" had begun. All these features are said to be much worse than in any previous century. However, an examination of history shows that, in overall terms, the 14th century was a much worse century for most people to have lived in, and other centuries have been worse than the 20th in respect of the individual aspects. There are four significant aspects that Jesus noted in his Olivet discourse of Matthew 24/Luke 21:

WARS — Although there were more deaths caused by **World War II** than any other war, the supposed key time marker i.e. World War I, did not result in more deaths than all previous wars put together, as is sometimes misquoted from certain sources. As examples, in 1644 the **Manchu-Chinese war** claimed an estimated 25 million lives and from 1850 to 1864 the **Taiping Rebellion** claimed between 20-30 million lives. Wars earlier than 1914 were also considered by historians to be total or world wars e.g. the Napoleonic wars from 1793.

Although the WBTS quotes sources which state that 33 nations were involved in 'the Great war' yet only 14 nations were significantly involved and the death toll was *8.5 million mobilized men and a total of 15 million which included deaths from epidemic diseases and malnutrition*. This means that some wars prior to 1914 were worse in terms of the number of deaths.

FAMINES — The resulting famine from the China flood of **1877-78** caused an estimated 9 to 13 million deaths. By contrast deaths from the famines of the 20th century range from 3 to 5 million. When providing statistics today the definition of 'starvation' concerns the lack of one or more essential nutrients. According to the older definition less than 1% (40 million) of mankind is actually now starving. This is not the extreme and contradictory figures of 12.5%, 25%, and 80% often quoted. So at least one famine prior to 1914 was worse than anything since 1914.

PESTILENCES — The black death of **1330-1350**, perhaps the worst disaster of all time, killed ¼ or more of the world's population. So by percentage of population this was worse than any pestilence since 1914.

EARTHQUAKES — Perhaps the worst of all time (as of 1993) was on 1 November **1875**, centred in Lisbon, the shock of which was felt over much of the world. However, it is impossible to be certain regarding earthquakes because there were no true seismologists before the mid-1800s and therefore only few and poor records.

WHAT THIS ALL MEANS

None of the above statements is meant to diminish the fact that the situation in a many places of the world is not dire. It clearly is, and will perhaps grow worse as the economic stability of the world falters. Nevertheless, none of the above features on their own are part of the sign of Jesus' return or that the "*last days*" began in 1914 or even have begun up to now. More importantly the claim by the WBTS that it is the combining of all these types of events of the 20th century that make it the worst century of all history and therefore is **a composite sign** of the last days is simply not true. The details of these types of events shown compositely for the 14th century indicate it to have been worse.

Furthermore, as will be shown in later studies, it is not specifically the world wars, famines, pestilences, or earthquakes that are “the sign” of “the conclusion of the system of things.”

However, because the paradise conditions prophesied for the earth have not yet arrived some may be tempted to promote the idea of the ‘last days’ as being a very long period of time running from (although wrongly) 1914. One possible way to do this is to use the events prior to and leading up to the Genesis flood. Could this be a biblical pattern for the last days?

COULD THE “LAST DAYS” BE SET AT ONE HUNDRED AND TWENTY YEARS?

In fact, the idea that the 120 years mentioned in Genesis 6:3 could indicate that “the last days” would run for a very long period cannot be sustained. This is because the 120 years do not refer to a period of historical time i.e. the amount of time between God’s statement that he planned to destroy mankind and that actual destruction in the Flood. Such a view does not fit the context or the context of the various genealogies in Genesis which all concern the longevity and vitality of humans at different periods. Genesis 6:3 simply shows that the longevity of mankind was to be drastically reduced after the Flood. The *Word Biblical Commentary* on Genesis 6:3 says:

“His days shall be one hundred and twenty years.” In the immediate context of Gen 6:1–4 the meaning of this remark appears quite obvious: **from now on nobody shall live to more than 120 years of age.** However, within the wider setting of Genesis this interpretation is problematic, for Noah and many of his descendants live hundreds of years (Gen 11). Even Abraham lived to 175; Isaac, to 180; and Jacob, to 147 years. On the other hand, according to 5:32, Noah was 500 years old when he fathered Ham, Shem, and Japhet, and 600 years old when the flood began (7:6), so some commentators (e.g., Keil, König, Kidner) have suggested that 120 years represents a period of grace before the flood. It may be, however, that the author thought of the 120 years as a maximum life-span that was **only gradually implemented**; cf. the slow-acting curses of Eden 3:16–19. In the post-flood period, the recorded ages steadily decline (chap. 11), and **later figures very rarely exceed 120.** After the time of Jacob, the longest-lived include Joseph (110, Gen 50:26), Moses (120, Deut 34:7), and Joshua (110, Josh 24:29). Only Aaron (123, Num 33:39) exceeds 120.

Furthermore, this statement of 120 years is not connected to the unstated period of time for Noah to preach to the world (2 Pet. 2:5). The fact that the first of Noah’s sons was born when he was 500 years old (Gen. 5:32) and that the time of the flood was when he was 600 years old (Gen. 7:6) is not stated as being the period of Noah’s preaching to warn the world. So for the above reasons there is no basis for imagining that “the last days” will be 120 years long or any other very long period. Rather “the last days” seem to be closely associated with the Great Tribulation Jesus spoke of and which will be a relatively short burst of Satan’s anger on God’s people (please see below).

An important point in considering this subject of “the last days” is what sort of terminology did Jesus use in relation to them? Did Jesus even speak directly of “the last days”?

JESUS SPOKE ONLY OF A SIGN OF HIS RETURN AND “THE END OF THE AGE” AND NOT OF “LAST DAYS”

❖ “Tell us when will these things be, and what will be the **sign of your presence** (Gk *parousia* = *coming*) and of the conclusion of the system of things (*end of the age*)” (Matt. 24:3).

Please search through all of Matthew 10, 24, and 25; Mark 13; and Luke 1, 19, and 21. In none of the passages concerning Jesus’ great prophecy given on the Mount of Olives or his earlier statements related to it, does Jesus use the phrase “the last days” or any synonym for it. However, what Jesus did speak of concerned his return at “the end of the age”

NOTE: The NWT rendering of “system of things” loses the correct Jewish understanding of “this age” and “the age to come.”

SEEING "ALL THESE THINGS"

Jesus' answer to the disciples question in Matthew 24:3 concerned the sign that would indicate his soon return:

❖ "...when YOU see all these things, know that **he is near** at the doors" (*Matt. 24:33*).

Yet the phrase "**he is near** at the doors" does not refer to geographical proximity but near in time. Jesus' answer was also about "**the end**" (Gk *telos* verses 13, 14) and the end of the age would be synchronous with Jesus' return. He did not speak of any long *period of the last days as marked by a sign*. Although Jesus' mention of wars, famines and pestilences is significant, such things were not the actual sign for his return. So the 1st World War along with the Spanish influenza was not a sign that Jesus had returned or that "the last days" had begun. But can Jesus' words in Matthew 24:34 be used to prove that people living since 1914 must be those who see "the end of this system of things"?

For a further discussion of "the last days" and "the sign" please see Volume 5, STUDIES 12 and 13.

JESUS' RETURN - IS IT "PRESENCE" OR "COMING"?

The following Greek terms **parousia** and **epiphania** describe the same event on the day Jesus returns. Please see STUDY 4. JESUS CANNOT HAVE RETURNED IN 1914.

The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament states concerning **Parousia**:

someone's coming in order to be present. Technically the noun was used for the arrival of a king, emperor or ruler. (The corresponding Latin term is *adventus*)... With Jesus' death and resurrection, the idea of the parousia becomes bound up with the church's expectation of Christ's appearing at the end of the age... Note that other words are used to describe the *parousia* of Christ (e.g. Gk. *hemera*, day 2465; epiphania, appearance, 2211).

Bauer's Greek-English Lexicon notes concerning *parousia*: "of Christ, and nearly always of his Messianic Advent in glory to judge the world at the end of this age: Mt 24:3." Hence it was translated as **adventus** in the old Latin Bibles and as **coming** in all modern Bibles.

Epiphania (noun) = **an appearing**, a manifestation; this term strictly concerns visibility. So Jesus' parousia cannot be an **invisible** coming to be present.

IS IT "THIS GENERATION" SINCE 1914 THAT WILL SEE ARMAGEDDON?

❖ "...**this generation** (*genea*) will not pass away until all these things take place" (*Matt. 24: 34, 35*).

Until the late 1990s the WBTS taught that Jesus' words concerning "this generation" covered a period of approximately 70 years which began in 1914, and so leading many Jehovah's Witnesses to believe that Armageddon would occur in the mid-1980s or even the mid-1990s. But in the late 1990s the WBTS re-evaluated its understanding of Jesus' words and decided that they applied to people during an undetermined period of time but still beginning in 1914 and stretching on to whenever Armageddon occurs. However, even this definition is incorrect according to the following biblical statements:

A SECTION OF MANKIND WITH CERTAIN CHARACTERISTICS IN COMMON

Indeed the Greek term *genea* does not refer to any approximate period such as 70 years or even an undetermined human period of time, but rather it refers to any group of people with a common characteristic – whether good or bad. This can be seen from the way Jesus used the word when he said that:

❖ "...the sons of this **age** are more shrewd in relation to their own **kind** (Gk *genea*) than the sons of light" (*Luke 16: 8*).

This indicates that *genea* refers to a class of people as with the description of the whole people of Israel of whom God said:

- ❖ “They are not his children because of their defect; but are a **perverse and crooked** generation”
(Deut. 32:5).

The following examination of the term ‘generation’ throughout the Scriptures reveals the meaning as those with particular characteristics in common:

THE RIGHTEOUS AND THE WICKED GENERATIONS

- ❖ “For God is with **the righteous** generation” (Ps. 14: 5).
- ❖ “There is a **kind** of man who curses his father...there is a kind who is **pure in his own eyes**”
(Prov. 30:11, 12).
- ❖ “An **evil and adulterous** generation seeks a sign” (Matt. 16: 4).
*Because they seek a sign in spite of all of Jesus’ proof, this generation is therefore **unbelieving.***
- ❖ “For whoever is ashamed of me and my words in this **adulterous and sinful** generation...”
(Mark 8:38).
- ❖ “And with many other words he [Peter] bore thorough witness and kept exhorting them, saying: “Get saved from this **crooked generation.**”” (Acts 2:40).

So any one ‘kind’ or ‘generation’ of people is not bounded by human time periods – such a ‘kind’ exists throughout all periods of time starting with when Jesus said those words. In particular the ‘kind/generation’ that is **evil, adulterous and crooked** are not bounded by time periods fixed by humans, but come to their end as a ‘kind’ when God brings them to an end i.e. they don’t exist just from 1914 to that end. So “this generation” refers to people throughout human history since Jesus’ time and of this particular ‘kind’ i.e. evil, adulterous and crooked and living during what the Scriptures call “the present age.” So they come to their end at “the end of **the age**” (not “system of things”) when Jesus returns. In Hebrew thinking “this generation” refers to the people that Jesus was speaking of at that time, **but taken ‘corporately’** of the **entire wicked society** of mankind which is organized against God and *living throughout the present age* between the two advents or ‘comings’ of Jesus. This is verified by considering the context of Jesus’ words about “this generation.”

THE CONTEXT OF “GENERATION” MATTHEW 24:34

The Journal of the evangelical Theological Society 38:3 (Sept 1996) states:

“In the context of the discourse it (*this generation*) refers to that type of consummately evil and unbelieving people who **deceive and persecute** the disciples of Christ until the time of the parousia...”

Therefore, the “*generation that will not pass away until all these things take place*” is the section of humanity that epitomizes “this age” in being evil, adulterous, sinful, perverse, crooked, unbelieving and pure in their own eyes. It therefore exists in opposition to God and exists right up to the time of Jesus’ return. So although this is not the way we use the term ‘generation’ in 21st century Western thinking, it is the meaning in 1st century or even earlier Jewish thinking. However, because the WBTS wishes to save its 1914 doctrine of the invisible return of Christ it has developed unbiblical definitions of some of the terms that Jesus used. They needed to do this because the 1914 set of people were dying off without Armageddon having come.

THE WTS’ ‘OVERLAPPING LIVES DOCTRINE’

In the late 1990s the WBTS redefined what Jesus meant by “generation” to be as of an undetermined length of time for “this **wicked society** of mankind” but still as existing between 1914 and “the end,” and as involving only those who will see Armageddon. This period is linked with the time of Christ’s so-called invisible presence in heaven. Yet because the WBTS still wishes to portray “this generation **of the wicked society** of mankind” as existing only between 1914 and “the end,” and as involving only those who will see Armageddon, they have the usual continuing problem that Armageddon never seems to come within any WBTS time scale and because many ‘anointed’ class individuals of Jehovah’s Witnesses continue to

die off and not “see” Armageddon. So steadily the connection between the two events of 1914 and “the end” is being broken. To solve this problem they did a little more redefining of the term “generation” and this was published on April 15th of 2010. The Watchtower magazine issue of that date said:

How then, are we to understand Jesus’ words about “this generation”? He evidently meant that the lives of the anointed who were on hand when the sign began to become evident in 1914 **would overlap** with the lives of other anointed ones who would see the start of the great tribulation.

Watchtower magazine April 15th, 2010.

So as an example of how this works out as occurring before Armageddon: what if, at the annual Lord’s Evening Meal, one of the ‘anointed’ class of Jehovah’s Witnesses who saw 1914 is the last one of these 1914ers. And another of the ‘anointed’ class of Jehovah’s Witnesses born much later also partakes of the emblems at the same annual Lord’s Evening Meal (perhaps in a different area). If the older ‘anointed’ one then dies what happens to the continuity of the ‘anointed’ class who must not pass away until “the end” of the age? Prior to 2010 this situation would have been a major cause for alarm among the rank and file Jehovah’s Witnesses, and embarrassment for the WBTS as regards its teaching. But since April 2010 this problem has now been alleviated because there **will always be a new person claiming to be of the ‘anointed’ class!**

However, on a question of definition it seems presumptuous to speak of what Jesus “evidently meant” without Jesus giving that definition or any proof from other parts of the Scriptures. It also seems to be extremely imaginative to say that the lives of those who did not see with understanding the events of 1914: **“would overlap** with the lives of other anointed ones who would see the start of the great tribulation.” This is a wholly unbiblical approach which is purely from the schemes of men. Nevertheless even this metaphorical sleight-of-hand could not continue indefinitely because it only works with younger ones of the ‘anointed’ class of Jehovah’s Witnesses whose lives overlap the last of the 1914ers. Once the more recent ‘anointed’ ones begin to die off before Armageddon then eventually there will be no more overlap with the 1914ers and the whole connection is lost unless the WBTS comes up with a further new definition of these terms and events. However, if we examine all of the details of Jesus great “time of the end” prophecy, from Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21 we get a significantly different picture.

PRECURSORS TO THE SIGN OF THE END OF THE AGE

- ❖ “And in answer Jesus said to them: ‘Look out that nobody misleads you; for many will come on the basis of my name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and will mislead many. You are going to hear of wars and reports of wars; see that you are not terrified. For these things must take place, but **the end is not yet**” (*Matt. 24:4-6*).

Before answering the disciples’ question in verse 3 Jesus gave them the above warning. Yet as an example of one claiming ‘I am the Christ,’ i.e. a messianic claim, there was Bar Kochba in 135 AD. Nevertheless, such ones appear on the scene throughout the period when *“the end is not yet.”* Jesus then went on to say:

- ❖ “For nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be food shortages [*“famines”* KIT] and earthquakes in one place after another. All these are **a beginning of pangs of distress**” (*Matt. 24:7, 8*). Also see Mark 13:4-8 and Luke 21:8-11a.

NOTE: There is a significant difference between “food shortages” in the NWT and “famines” as the rendering given in the Kingdom Interlinear Translation and all other translations. The lexicon definition for the Greek word *limos* in the Olivet discourse is *famine* and not simply “food shortages”

A MIDDLE-EASTERN SCENARIO

Jesus draws upon the information provided by all the ancient prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures. In particular he draws upon Daniel's prophecies (Matt. 24:15) which include the wars of the King of the North ("the disgusting thing that causes desolation") in Daniel 11 when "**nation will rise against nation**" and these events will naturally be followed by **famines** and **pestilences** (Luke 21:11). Jesus also adds **earthquakes** (Joel 2:10; Isa. 29:6) as part of these characteristics of "*the beginning of the birth pains*" (verse 8). Because Jesus' focus is on *Judea* (Matt. 24:16; Zech. 12-14) all these events are yet to occur in the middle-east in harmony with the general location detailed by all the ancient prophets, although they do finally involve the whole world.

TIME OF THE END PERSECUTION

MATTHEW GIVES A SYNOPSIS OF THE GREAT TRIBULATION

It would appear that in Matthew's version of the Olivet discourse, before going into greater detail from verse 15 to 31, Jesus gives a synopsis of the Great Tribulation in verses 9-14:

- ❖ "Then (**At that time**) they will deliver you up to tribulation" and that they will be "hated by **all nations** for my name's sake. And then (**at that time**) many will fall away" (Matt. 24:9-14).

Such tribulation means persecution and experiencing hatred resulting in a falling away by many from their Christian faith. This reminds us of Paul's words at 2 Thessalonians 2:2, 3 that the day of the Lord "*will not come unless the apostasy*" ("rebellion" in many translations is a better rendering) *comes first.*"

NOTE: Contextually the "*lawlessness*" mentioned in Matthew 24:12 is not world crime statistics, i.e. not a reference to the lawlessness within society in general, but rather lawlessness against God by Christians because they "fall away"

THE SIGN

After giving his synopsis of the Great Tribulation in Matthew 24:9-14, Jesus, in Jewish literary fashion, goes into greater detail by now discussing what causes the Great Tribulation and in giving warnings of what Christians must watch out for, namely, the false prophets who will attempt to mislead them and details of what they must do concerning fleeing to the mountains. So when Jesus says in verse 14 "*and then the end will come*" he is speaking of the end of the age which begins:

- ❖ "...when you [*Christians*] see "**the disgusting thing that causes desolation**" ["when Jerusalem' is surrounded by armies"] standing in the holy place..."
(Matt. 24:15-28; Mark 13:14-23 and Luke 21:20-24).
- ❖ "So when you see **the disgusting thing that causes desolation** spoken of by the prophet *Daniel*, standing in the holy place ... For then there will be **great tribulation**, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no and never will be" (Matt. 24:15, 21)

So by studying the book of Daniel it is evident that this is the time of the appearance of the Antichrist as **the desolator** of Jerusalem and the instigator of a relatively short but intense burst of persecution upon both Jews and Christians. This event begins in the middle of Daniel's 70th week and continues for about 3½ years – a fact that *The New American Commentary* on Daniel (p. 325) notes as when: "In 12:6-7 Daniel had already revealed that the great tribulation will last for three and one-half years (approximately 1260 days in round numbers, figuring thirty days per month)."

THE END BECOMES EVIDENT TO THE WHOLE WORLD

- ❖ "Immediately **after** the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

Then will appear in heaven the **sign of the Son of Man**...and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” (*Matt. 24: 29, 30*). See also in Mark 13:24-26.

- ❖ “And there will be **signs in sun, moon and stars**, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves” (*Luke 21:25*).

Clearly Christians will understand that what begins to take place in and around Jerusalem with the subsequent Great Tribulation is the sign that in approximately 3½ years time Jesus will return. Yet the unbelieving world does not know that Jesus is about to appear until he is actually visible in glory, as described in Matthew 24 and Luke 21, and with devastating plagues being poured out on the unbelievers.

SUMMARY OF LANGUAGE AND SCRIPTURAL POINTS

1. When it is with reference to a visiting dignitary the Greek word *parousia* means **coming in order to be present** and not simply being present. The *parousia* of Jesus is the same event as his appearing (*Epiphania*).
2. It is not a sign of “the last days” but rather it is a single “**sign**” for the two aspects “of 1) your *coming to be present* and of 2) the conclusion of the *age*” (*Matt. 24:3*).
3. The **sign** is for the purpose of letting Christians “*know that he [Jesus] is near at the doors*” (*Matt. 24:33*) and not that he is already present. It will be a visible return as demonstrated in STUDY 2.
4. It is not the conclusion of ‘the system of things’ but of “the age” and so relates more to time.
5. In Matthew 24:13, 14 the Greek word *telos* meaning “**the end**” is synonymous with *syntelia* meaning “conclusion” and so refers to a relatively short period of time.
6. “The end” refers to “the great tribulation” which is shown by Daniel, and by Jesus in the Olivet discourse, and by John in the Revelation to be of short duration.
7. History shows that the 20th century did not have the worst of wars, famines and earthquakes. Neither did the composite of these events make the 20th century the worst ever.
8. The wars around the globe of the past 2,000 years (including world wars) are not related to the sign because “these things must take place, but **the end is not yet**” (*Matt. 24:4-6*).
9. The phrase “this generation” concerns the section of mankind with bad characteristics and covers the period between Jesus’ first appearance and his return i.e. “this present age.” It has nothing to do with 1914.
10. The WBTS 2010 doctrine of “this generation” as involving the overlapping of the lives of ‘anointed Christians’ is pure human fabrication.
11. **THE SIGN** for the singular future return of Jesus is: “***When you see the disgusting thing... standing in the holy place.***”
Other studies show this to be the coming events concerning “the man of lawlessness.”
12. However, as “**a beginning of pangs of distress**” there will be **Middle-Eastern events** focussed on Jerusalem and Judea of nation rising “against nation and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be food shortages [“*famines*” KIT and all other translations] and earthquakes in one place after another” (*Matt. 24:7, 8*) as described by the Hebrew prophets and concerning the nations which are presently Arab and/or Muslim.

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