

What Jesus said about coming again

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Jesus spoke about coming again on a number of occasions. What he said presents problems for Christians today because he gives the impression that he would come again in the 1st century. For example, in Matthew 24:34 he said, ‘this generation will by no means pass away until all these things [including his coming] happen.’¹ Some commentators conclude from this that Jesus was mistaken about the future. Francis Beare, for example, wrote: ‘it must be recognized that the entire apocalyptic framework of early Christian preaching is shattered beyond any hope of rescue.’² Even C.S. Lewis took this view, describing Matthew 24:34 as ‘the most embarrassing verse in the Bible’.³

Here I examine this problem and seek a solution to it. I will look at the main occasions Jesus spoke about coming again and consider what he meant on each. I take the occasions in chronological order.

Matthew 10

Jesus first spoke about coming again when he sent out his disciples into the towns and villages of Israel (Mat. 10). He instructed them at length about this in terms that went beyond their first mission to cover their subsequent missions. It is in this context that he tells them,

²³‘But when they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly I say to you, you will by no means finish [going round] the towns of Israel until the Son of Man comes.’

¹ This and other texts are translated as literally as Greek or Hebrew idiom will allow.

² Francis Wright Beare, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981), 473.

³ C.S. Lewis, ‘The World’s Last Night,’ in Lyle W. Dorsett (ed.), *The Essential C.S. Lewis* (New York: Touchstone, 1988), 385.

Here Jesus refers to himself, as he often did, as ‘the Son of Man’ (John 9:35–37). This evokes the vision the prophet Daniel had when he was in Babylon (Dan 7:13–14):

¹³‘I was seeing visions in the night, and behold, [one] like a son of man was coming with the clouds of the heavens, and came to the Ancient of Days, and was brought near before him. ¹⁴And to him was given dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion [is] an everlasting dominion ...’

When Jesus says, ‘you will by no means finish going round the towns of Israel until the Son of Man comes’, he is addressing his twelve disciples (vv. 1–5). By ‘you’ he therefore means ‘you disciples’. The implication of what he says is therefore that he will come again in their lifetime. This immediately brings us up against the problem we are addressing.

Matthew 16

The next occasion Jesus speaks about coming again follows Peter’s confession of him as ‘the Christ, the Son of the living God’ (Mat. 16:13–20). At this point, Jesus begins to prepare his disciples for what lay ahead of him in Jerusalem (v. 21). Peter protests against this (vv. 22–23), leading Jesus to spell out what is expected of disciples (vv. 24–26). It is following this that he says,

²⁷‘For the Son of Man is about/going^a to come in the glory of his Father with his angels, and then he will reward each one according to his conduct. ²⁸Truly I say to you that there are some of those standing here who will by no means taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.’

^aGk. *mellō*

Mark and Luke record the same events in similar terms (Mark 8:27–9:1, Luke 9:18–27).

There is some uncertainty over the meaning of *mellō* here. The word usually denotes imminence ('is about to come').⁴ The translators of the ancient Latin version (the Vulgate) understood it in this way.⁵ Many modern translators and commentators, however, take the word to denote certainty ('is going to come').

Of these two readings, the first links verse 27 more closely with verse 28. These verses then both speak of Jesus' coming as being imminent, and tie in with Matthew 10.

Some commentators suggest that verse 28 was fulfilled by the Transfiguration (Mat. 17:1–8, Mark 9:2–8, Luke 9:28–36).⁶ This suggestion has considerable merit. The Transfiguration took place shortly afterwards, and the gospel-writers draw attention to this. However, the Transfiguration was hardly a 'coming', still less 'the kingdom of God having come in power' (Mark 9:1), the perfect tense of the Greek verb signifying an ongoing state. Also, reading verse 28 in this way breaks the link with verse 27 and Matthew 10.

Luke 12

Sometime after the Transfiguration, Jesus advised his disciples to be ready for his coming in the following terms:

³⁵Let your loins be girded and your lamps burning, ³⁶and be like men waiting for their master when he returns from wedding festivities, that when he comes and knocks they may open up to him immediately. ³⁷Blessed are those servants whom the master will find watching when he comes. ...'

⁴ Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th edn. (revised by Henry Stuart Jones and Roderick McKenzie) (Oxford: Clarendon press, 1996).

⁵ They render *mellei erchesthai* as *venturus est*.

⁶ See, e.g., W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, Vol. II (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 677–9.

In military terms, Jesus tells his disciples to be on *red alert* – in their stations, in battle dress, ready for action. Jesus continues,

³⁹‘And know this, that if the master of the house knew at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have allowed his house to be broken into. ⁴⁰And you be ready, because the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.’

That Jesus spoke these words specifically to his disciples is clear from the context (v. 22), so once again ‘you’ means ‘you disciples’ and the implication is that Jesus will come again in their lifetime.

Peter, however, goes on to ask him whether his warning applies only to the disciples: ‘Lord, are you saying this parable to us, or also to all?’ (v. 41). Jesus answers him at length (vv. 42–48), and extends his warning to others according to the light that they have:

⁴⁷‘But that servant, the [one] having known the will of his master and not having prepared or done according to his will, will be beaten [with] many [strikes]; ⁴⁸but the [one] not having known, and having done [things] worthy of strikes, will be beaten [with] few.’

Luke 17

Jesus spoke about coming again after the Pharisees asked him when the kingdom of God would come, to which he gave an enigmatic answer, ‘the kingdom of God is within you’ (Luke 17:20–21). This prompted him to speak to his disciples about his coming, and how it would catch many people unprepared, as ‘in the days of Noah’ and ‘in the days of Lot’ (vv. 22–29). He continues, ‘It will be the same on the day the Son of Man is revealed...’ (vv. 30–37).

Matthew 24-25

The next occasion when Jesus spoke about coming again was when he was in Jerusalem for the last time, and prophesied that the magnificent temple Herod had built in the city would be destroyed. This led the disciples to ask him about when this would happen and about his coming again. The whole

incident is recorded by Matthew (24–25), Mark (13), and Luke (21). I will follow Matthew’s account, which is the fullest, but refer to the others where appropriate.

^{24:1}And Jesus, departing, was going from the temple, and his disciples came to [him] to show him the buildings of the temple. ²And he answering said to them, ‘Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, there will by no means be left here [one] stone on [another] stone that will not be thrown down.’

³And as he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately saying, ‘Tell us, when will these things be, and what [will be] the sign of your Coming^a and of [the] completion of the age?’ ⁴And Jesus answering said to them, ‘See [that] no one misleads you. ⁵For many will come in my name saying, “I am the Christ,” and mislead many. ⁶And you will be about/going to hear [of] wars and rumours of wars; see [that] you are not alarmed; for this must happen, but the end is not yet. ⁷For nation will rise up against nation and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. ⁸All these things [are] but [the] beginning of birth pains.

⁹‘Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and will kill you, and you will be hated by all the nations because of my name. ¹⁰And then many will fall away and will deliver up one another [to their persecutors] and hate one another; ¹¹and many false prophets will rise up and mislead many; ¹²and because of increased lawlessness, the love of many will grow cold. ¹³But the [one] who endures to [the] end, this [one] will be saved. ¹⁴And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed in all the inhabited [earth] for a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come.

¹⁵‘When therefore you see the abomination of the desolation spoken of through Daniel the prophet stand in [the] holy place (let the reader understand),^b ¹⁶then those in Judea, let them flee to the mountains, ¹⁷the [one] on the housetop, let him not come down to take the things out of his house, ¹⁸and the [one] in the

field, let him not return back to take his cloak. ¹⁹And woe to the women who are pregnant and to those giving suck in those days. ¹⁹And pray that your flight may not happen in winter or on a Sabbath [when the rabbis restricted travel]; ²⁰for then there will be great tribulation, such as has not happened from [the] beginning of [the] world until now, nor by any means will happen. ²²And except those days were cut short, no flesh would be saved; but for the sake of the chosen those days will be cut short. ²³Then if anyone says to you, “Behold, here is the Christ!” [or] “Here!” do not believe [it]; ²⁴for false Christs and false prophets will rise up, and they will give great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the chosen. ²⁵Behold, I have told you beforehand. ²⁶If therefore they say to you, “Behold, he is in the wilderness!” do not go out, [or] “Behold, [he is] in the private rooms!” do not believe [it]; ²⁷for as the lightning comes out from [the] east and shines unto [the] west, so will be the Coming of the Son of Man [everyone will see it]; ²⁸wherever the carcass may be, there the vultures will be gathered [they somehow know it is there].

²⁹‘And immediately after the tribulation of those days, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ³⁰And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will bewail, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and much glory; ³¹and he will send his angels with a great trumpet [call], and they will gather his chosen out of the four winds, from extremities of [the] heavens unto extremities.

³²‘Now from the fig tree learn the parable: when its branch becomes tender and it puts out its leaves, already you know that summer [is] near; ³³so also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at [the] doors. ³⁴Truly I say to you that this generation^c will by no means pass away until all these things happen. ³⁵Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will by no means pass away.

³⁶But concerning that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in the heavens nor the Son, except the Father only. ³⁷For as [were] the days of Noah, so will be the Coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸For as in those days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until that day Noah entered into the ark, ³⁹and knew not [what was coming] until the flood came and took all away, so also will be the Coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰Then two men will be in the field, one is taken and one is left; ⁴¹two women grinding in the mill, one is taken and one is left. ⁴²Watch, therefore, because you know not on what day your Lord is coming. ...'

^a Gk. *parousia*, presence, a coming to be present.

^b Dan. 9:27, 11:31, 12:11. Luke has: 'But when you see Jerusalem being surrounded by encampments ...' (21:20).

^c Gk. *genea*.

Following this are reasons to be ready (vv. 43–51) and three parables on being ready—the Parable of the Ten Virgins (25:1–13), the Parable of the Talents (25:14–30), and the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (25:31–46).

Now what Jesus says in the above passage as I have translated it points very much to a fulfilment in the lifetime of the disciples. Not only does Jesus say, 'Truly I say to you that this generation will by no means pass away until all these things happen' (v. 34), but throughout he addresses his disciples ('you') as if they will go through what he describes. Thus at the end of telling them what will happen he says, 'Now from the fig tree learn the parable ... when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the doors' (vv. 32–33). It is at this point that he says, 'Truly I say to you that this generation will by no means pass away until all these things happen' (v. 34).

Commentators seek to avoid this conclusion by giving a different meaning to the Greek word *genea*.⁷ However, Matthew uses it in the sense 'generation' elsewhere in his gospel (1:17; 11:16; 12:39, 41, 42, 45; 16:4;

⁷ See Marshall Entrekin, 'Did Jesus Wrongly Predict a First Century Return in Matthew 24:34?' www.thingstocome.org/whatgen.htm

17:17; 23:36). An alternative suggestion is that the aorist *genetai* refers to the beginning of the happenings Jesus describes ('until all these things begin to happen'), but it would normally refer to their completion ('until all these things have happened'). These suggestions thus strain the Greek text.

Let us therefore go back and consider what 'all these things' are. They begin with times of trouble for the known world (vv. 4–7) and the disciples (vv. 9–14). Then comes a siege of Jerusalem (Luke) and sacrilege in the temple of a kind foreseen by the prophet Daniel (Dan. 9:27, 11:31, 12:11), followed by a time of great distress (vv. 15–28). There was such a time when the Romans sought to put down a revolt by the Jews beginning in the year AD 66. It included soldiers breaking into the temple and setting it on fire. All this is vividly described by the Jewish historian, Josephus, in *The Jewish War*.⁸

What follows the time of great distress Jesus describes in verses 29–31. This is generally taken to refer to the Second Coming, hence the problem with verse 34. But the first part of this (v. 29) is in the language used by the Prophets to forecast major upheavals in the world (Isa. 13:10, 24:21–23, 34:4; Ezek. 32:7–8; Joel 2:10, 2:31, 3:15; Amos 8:9).⁹ These include upheavals that subsequently took place in history—the overthrow of Babylon by the Persians (Isa. 13:10) and of Egypt by the Babylonians (Ezek. 32:7–8). The language Jesus used is therefore figurative of cataclysmic events of a kind that had already occurred. He could thus be using it to signify another such event, the destruction of Jerusalem.

The Romans finally destroyed Jerusalem in AD 70. Josephus describes this as follows:¹⁰

The army now having no victims either for slaughter or plunder, ... Caesar ordered the whole city and the temple to be razed to the ground, leaving only the loftiest of the towers ... and the portion of the wall enclosing the

⁸ Josephus, *The Jewish War*, in Josephus, Works (tr. H.St.J. Thackeray), Loeb Classical Library (London: William Heinemann, 1927), Vols. II and III.

⁹ The NIV treats verse 29 as a quotation from Isaiah 13:10 and 34:4, but if it is a quotation, it is not exact.

¹⁰ *Jewish War* 7.1–4.

city on the west: the latter as an encampment for the garrison that was to remain, and the towers to indicate to posterity the nature of the city and of the strong defences which had yet yielded to Roman prowess. All the rest of the wall encompassing the city was so completely levelled to the ground as to leave future visitors to the spot no ground for believing that it had ever been inhabited. Such was the end to which the frenzy of revolutionaries brought Jerusalem, that splendid city of worldwide renown.

Jesus's prophecy about the temple was therefore amply fulfilled.

The second part of what Jesus says in verses 29–31 also draws on the Prophets. In connection with the rise and fall of the four great empires Daniel sees in a dream, he beholds, as we read earlier, a 'son of man' with authority over the nations, able to save his people, and give them the rule (Dan. 7). The four empires Daniel sees are earthly and the dream as a whole is figurative (the empires are represented by beasts). Jesus could be drawing on this imagery to assure his disciples that they will be kept safe when Jerusalem is destroyed.

We must remember that Jesus often spoke figuratively. He made claims like 'I am the bread of life' (John 6:35), 'I am the light of the world' (John 8:12), 'I am the door of the sheep' (John 10:7), and 'I am the vine' (John 15:1, 5). He also made figurative statements (often misunderstood) like 'beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees' (Mat. 16:5–12), 'Destroy this shrine, and in three days I will raise it up' (John 2:13–22; cf. Mat. 26:59–61, 27:39–40), 'you must be born again' (John 3:1–8), and 'Lazarus has fallen asleep' (John 11:11–15). He evidently said some things in such a way that hearers had to think about them very carefully to understand them correctly (cf. Mat. 13:10–17p).

If my interpretation of Matthew 24 is correct, it means that other references Jesus made to coming again in the lifetime of his disciples relate to the destruction of Jerusalem. Certainly, the disciples may not have finished 'going round the towns of Israel' by AD 70 (Mat. 10), and although some had 'tasted death' by then (see *Chronology*), some had not (Mat. 16). Jesus's focus on the destruction of Jerusalem doubtless reflected his foresight that this would be a traumatic event and his concern to prepare his disciples for it.

<i>Chronology (NBD)</i>	
<i>ca.</i> AD 44	Death of James (Acts 12:2)
<i>ca.</i> AD 67	Death of Peter and Paul
AD 70	Fall of Jerusalem
<i>ca.</i> AD 100	Death of John

A second implication of my interpretation derives from the similarity between the language Jesus uses to describe his coming to judge Jerusalem in verses 29–31 and that used by the Prophets to describe major interventions God would make in the history of Israel and her neighbours. This suggests that verses 29–31 could describe other major interventions Jesus will make in the history of the world besides the judgment of Jerusalem. I discuss this further below.

This leaves us with the last part of the disciples’ question, ‘what will be the sign of ... the completion of the age?’ Jesus had spoken about ‘the completion of the age’ in his explanation of the Parable of the Weeds (Mat. 13:36–43). In this ‘the completion of the age’ corresponds to the harvest, and marks the point at which ‘the sons of the evil one’ are separated from ‘the sons of the kingdom’ and thrown into fire. In their question to Jesus, the disciples link this to the destruction of the temple (24:3), but these do not necessarily go together.

In Matthew 25, Jesus goes on to describe what will happen at ‘the completion of the age’ in a similar parable, the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (vv. 31–46):

³¹‘And when the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, then he will sit on [the] throne of his glory; ³²and before him will be gathered all the [peoples of the] nations, and he will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; ³³and he will set the sheep on his right, but the goats on [his] left. ³⁴Then the king will say to those on his right, “Come, those blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from [the] foundation of [the] world. ³⁵For [when I was in need, you helped me].” ... ⁴¹Then he will say also to those on [his] left, “Depart from me, [those]

*cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.
⁴²For [when I was in need, you did not help me].” ... ⁴⁶And these
 will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into
 eternal life.’*

Jesus had earlier told his disciples that they would share in the judgment (19:28):

*²⁸And Jesus said to them, ‘Truly I say to you that, in the
 regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on his throne of glory,
 you who have followed me will yourselves also sit on twelve
 thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.’*

The ‘regeneration’ corresponds to the creation of a new heaven and a new earth foreseen by the prophet Isaiah (Isa. 65:17). This marks the completion of the present age.

If I have understood Matthew 24–25 correctly, therefore, Jesus speaks in these chapters about *two* comings: his coming to bring judgment on the city of Jerusalem, and his coming at ‘the completion of the age’ to judge the world. If this distinction does not come through clearly it is because of the way the disciples posed the question (24:3), bringing these two events together. It may also be because Jesus himself thought of the two events as occurring together. He does not correct the disciples on this point, and confesses that he does not know all the details of his coming again: ‘concerning that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven nor the Son, except the Father only’ (24:36). It is only after his resurrection and ascension into heaven that he is presented as being able to open the scroll listing future events (Rev. 5).

In Jesus’s answer to the disciples’ question, the dramatic account of his coming in 24:29–31 relates to the first of the two comings, but as we have seen, it could equally well apply to the second. There are other examples in the Bible of prophecies having more than one application. One is Isaiah’s prophecy, ‘Behold, the young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and she shall call his name Immanuel’ (Isa. 7:14). In its context, this was addressed to Ahaz, king of Judah, to assure him that the two neighbouring kings who were ganging up against him (v. 1) would not prevail (‘For before the boy

knows [how] to reject the evil and choose the good, the land that you hate shall be forsaken before both her kings', v. 16). In the NT, Matthew sees the prophecy as being fulfilled in Jesus (Mat. 1:22–23).

Another example is Ezekiel's prophecy following the defeat of the Jews by the Babylonians and their exile to Babylon (Ezek. 36). God says:

²⁴'I will take you from the nations, and gather you out of all the lands, and bring you to your own terrain. ²⁵I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean: from all your filth and all your idols, I will cleanse you. ²⁶I will give you a new heart, and put a new spirit within [you]: I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh, give you a heart of flesh, ²⁷put my Spirit within you, and enable you to follow my rules, and practise my judgments.'

This prophecy was fulfilled when the Persians conquered Babylon and allowed the Jews to go back to their land under the godly leadership of Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah. Yet Jesus invoked this prophecy in his interview with Nicodemus ('Truly, truly, I say to you, unless someone is born of water and [the] Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God', John 3:5). Jesus expected Nicodemus to know this prophecy ('Are you the teacher of Israel and do not know these things?', v. 10).

An example closer to the present study is Daniel's prophecy that an enemy would set up an 'abomination of desolation' in the temple (Dan. 9:27, 11:31, 12:11). This prophecy had already been fulfilled once when Jesus cited it in Matthew 24:15. This was in 169–7 BC when the Seleucid king, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, plundered the temple and set up a pagan altar in it (1 Maccabees 1:20–24, 54). What Jesus foresaw would take place in AD 66–70 was therefore a *second* fulfilment.

John 14

The last time Jesus spoke to his disciples about coming again before his death was after the Last Supper (John 14). He said to them:

¹‘Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in me. ²In my Father’s house are many abodes; otherwise, would I ever have said to you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I am coming again, and will escort^a you to myself, that where I am you may be also.’

^a Gk. *paralambanō*, as in 19:17.

He went on to say to them,

¹⁸‘I will not leave you as orphans [i.e. on your own]; I am coming to you.’

He further promised:

²³... ‘If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him, and make an abode with him.’

All these promises imply that Jesus would come *in spirit*, as he must have meant when he said to his disciples after his resurrection, ‘...behold, I am with you all the days until the completion of the age’ (Mat. 28:18–20). This coming is therefore different from his coming in glory which he spoke about earlier.

Matthew 26

Jesus spoke about coming again when he was interrogated by Caiaphas, the high priest (Mat. 26:57–68, Mark 14:53–65). He told the assembled company, ‘hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at [the] right hand of Power and coming in the clouds of heaven’ (v. 64). Since ‘you’ refers to all those listening, Jesus is presumably referring to his coming to judge Jerusalem.

John 21

Jesus mentioned coming again after his resurrection when he rebuked Peter for asking him about John’s future (vv. 21–23):

²¹Peter therefore, having seen this one [John], says to Jesus, 'Lord, and what [about] this one?' ²²Jesus says to him, 'If I want him to remain until I come, what [is that] to you? You follow me!' ²³Went out therefore this word to the brothers that that disciple is not to die; but Jesus did not say to him that he is not to die, but, 'If I want him to remain until I come, what [is that] to you?'

John outlived Peter by about 33 years, and will have seen or heard about the fall of Jerusalem.

Acts 1

At the ascension of Jesus into heaven, two angels said to the disciples (Acts 1:11):

¹¹'Men of Galilee, why stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will thus come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.'

What coming the angels are referring to here is not clear. They do not say that the disciples will live to see this coming.

Revelation 2–3

Further references to Jesus coming again occur in the book of Revelation. Most scholars date this in the reign of Domitian, about AD 95. If this is correct, John wrote it *after* the destruction of Jerusalem.

In the Revelation, Jesus, now risen and ascended, reveals himself to John and what will happen in the future (1:1–2). He also dictates letters to seven churches in Asia Minor (2–3).

In several of the letters he speaks about coming again. In his letter to the church at Ephesus, he complains that they have left their first love, and says to them:

2:5 ‘Remember then from where you have fallen, and repent, and do the first works [you did]; but if not, I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand [symbol of the church (1:20)] from its place, unless you repent.’

Here his coming is conditional and it is to remove the church. This is different from his coming at ‘the completion of the age’.

Similarly, in his letter to the church at Pergamon, he complains that they are holding the teaching of false teachers, and says to them:

16 ‘Repent therefore; but if not, I am coming to you quickly^a and will war against them with the sword of my mouth.’

^a Gk. *tachu*.

Here again his coming is conditional, and is to exercise discipline. He says that he is coming ‘quickly’ to hasten their response.

Likewise, in his letter to Sardis, he says that he has not found their works satisfactory, and goes on:

3:3 ‘Remember therefore how you received and heard, and keep [to this] and repent. If therefore you will not watch, I will come as a thief, and you will by no means know at what hour I will come upon you.’

Here his coming is again to exercise discipline, and the warning is that he will come unexpectedly (‘as a thief’ parallels ‘quickly’ in 2:16).

There is a different reference to his coming in his letter to the church in Philadelphia. In this letter, he commends the church for keeping the faith despite having little strength. He goes on:

***10 ‘Because you kept the word of my endurance, I also will keep you from the hour of the trial that is about/going to come upon all the inhabited [earth], to try those who dwell upon the earth.
11 I am coming quickly; hold fast what you have, so that no one may take your crown.’***

Here Jesus speaks about a trial the Christians in Philadelphia are going to experience. This trial is therefore immanent for them whatever the meaning of *mellō*. The trial cannot be the destruction of Jerusalem because the church is in Asia Minor, and the trial is across the known world. What this was can only be speculated. It could have been a natural disaster, or it could have been persecution. Whatever it was, Jesus promises to come to the church to help it through the trial.

Finally, there is a reference to his coming in his letter to the church at Laodicea. Having rebuked them for being lukewarm, he issues the invitation:

²⁰Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him and he with me.'

This coming is evidently in spirit, and of the same kind as in John 14.

Revelation 16

In this chapter, John sees, in symbolic terms, God's wrath being poured out on the earth. In the course of this, the risen and ascended Jesus says,

¹⁵Behold, I am coming like a thief; blessed is the [one] watching and keeping his garments in order that he might not walk naked and [people] see his shame.

When this outpouring of wrath will happen is not stated. The implication of Jesus's words is that he is involved in the outpouring, but will spare those who watch for his coming. Again he emphasizes that this will take place at a time no one expects ('like a thief').

Revelation 19

Jesus does not speak in this chapter, but John is given a vision of his coming:

¹¹And I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse; and the [one] sitting on it is called ‘Faithful and True’, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. ¹²And his eyes [are like] a flame of fire, and on his head [are] many diadems; [he] has a name written which no one knows except himself, ¹³and [he] is clothed [in] a garment dipped in blood; and his name is called ‘The Word of God’. ¹⁴And the armies in heaven were following him on white horses, dressed [in] white, clean, fine linen. ¹⁵And out of his mouth proceeds a sharp sword, that with it he might smite the nations; and he shall shepherd them with an iron rod; and he treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. ¹⁶And he has on [his] garment and on his thigh, a name written: ‘King of kings and Lord of lords’. This reads like his coming at ‘the completion of the age’.

Revelation 22

The final references in Revelation come at the end of the book, where Jesus tells John three times, ‘Behold, I am coming quickly (*tachu*)’:

⁷‘And behold, I am coming quickly. Blessed [is] the [one] who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.’

¹²‘Behold, I am coming quickly, and my reward [is] with me to render to each one [according] as his work is.’

²⁰‘He who testifies these things says, ‘Yes, I am coming quickly.’

...

This coming could be the same as the one Jesus refers to in his letter to the church at Philadelphia, but the wording of verse 12 suggests a final coming—a coming at ‘the completion of the age’. This is supported by what he goes on to say:

¹²‘Behold, I am coming quickly, and my reward [is] with me to render to each one [according] as his work is. ¹³I [am] the alpha and the omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.

¹⁴Blessed [are] those who wash their robes [7:14]^a in order that they may have a right the tree of life [22:2] and enter into the city [21:2] by the gates. ¹⁵Outside [are] the dogs and the

sorcerers and the fornicators and the murderers and the idolaters and everyone who loves and practises falsehood.'

^a Some manuscripts have 'do his commandments'.

Taking these verses to refer to a final coming creates a problem if *tachu* means 'soon' as many translators render it here. But we have seen that, up to this point in Revelation, *tachu* has meant 'quickly' and is parallel to 'as a thief'. If this is Jesus's meaning here, he is telling readers always to be on 'red alert' as he told his disciples in Luke 12.

Conclusion

Jesus spoke of coming again in several different ways:

1. He spoke of coming in spirit to be with and in his disciples (John 14:3, 18, 23; Rev. 3:20).
2. He spoke of coming to discipline or help churches (Rev. 2:5, 16; 3:3, 11).
3. He spoke of coming to judge Jerusalem (Mat. 10:23, 16:27–28p; Luke 12:40; Mat. 24:29–31p, 26:64p).
4. He spoke of coming at 'the completion of the age' to judge the world (Mat. 24:29–31p repeated, 25:31; Rev. 22:7, 12, 20).

This conclusion combines the view that what Jesus said was all fulfilled in the 1st century ('preterism') and the view that it will all be fulfilled in the future ('futurism').

Postscript: apostolic teaching

Paul spoke about Jesus coming again in several of his letters (1 Cor. 15:20–25; Phil. 3:20–21; 1 Thes. 1:9–10, 4:13–18; 1 Tim. 6:13–16; Tit. 2:11–14). In all cases, the references are to Jesus coming at the end of time – he says nothing about Jesus coming to judge Jerusalem, presumably because he was writing to Christians living in other parts of the Roman world. Like the other apostles, he regards the end of time to be imminent. He writes, for example (1 Thes. 4:15–17):

¹⁵For this we say to you by a word from [the] Lord, that we who are living [and] remain until the Coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who have fallen asleep; ¹⁶because the Lord himself, with a word of command, with a voice of an archangel, and with a trumpet of God, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first; ¹⁷then we who are living [and] remain shall be caught up together with them in [the] clouds to meet the Lord in [the] air; and so we shall be always with [the] Lord.

Note that Paul cites the source of what he writes as Jesus himself (v. 15).

Peter also spoke about Jesus's coming (2 Pet. 3:1–13). Like Paul, he does not mention Jerusalem, again presumably because he was writing to Christians living away from Judea ('expatriates of [the] dispersion', 1 Pet. 1:1). He helpfully answers the charge of those who say, 'Where is the promise of his Coming?' by invoking Psalm 90:4:

⁸But let not this one thing escape you, beloved, that one day [is] with the Lord like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day [Psa. 90:4]. ⁹[The] Lord is not slow [in respect] of the promise, as some deem slowness, but is longsuffering towards you, not willing any to perish, but all to come to repentance.

Peter goes on:¹¹

¹⁰But [the] day of [the] Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and [the] elements will burn intensely and be dissolved, and [the] earth and the works in it will be refined by fire. ¹¹[Since] all these things are thus [to be] dissolved, what sort [of persons] ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, ¹²waiting for and hastening the Coming of the day

¹¹ In verse 10, I have assumed that *heurethēsetai* (lit. 'will be found') is a metallurgical term which later copyists explained as *katakaēsetai* ('will be burned up') (cf. Al Wolters, 'Worldview and Textual Criticism in 2 Peter 3:10,' *Westminster Theological Journal* 49 (1987) 405–13). For other readings, see B.M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (United Bible Societies, 1971), 705–6.

of God, because of which [the] heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and [the] elements burn intensely and melt. ¹³But we, according to his promise, are waiting for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells.