

# The Meaning of *genea* in Matthew 24.34

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## THE ISSUE DEFINED

My first experience with hermeneutics took place at a roller rink. I was 15 years old, and I was obsessed with the Bible – Bible prophecy to be precise. While other teenage boys circled the rink trying to work up the courage to ask a girl for a skate, I sat alone in a dark corner with my bright green Gideon New Testament opened to Matthew 24.

Then I saw it – a verse of prophecy that I was sure my pastor had never noticed. A verse that gave me the assurance I wanted: the rapture would definitely happen in my lifetime. I was not going to die (barring any unforeseen accident, that is)!

That magical verse was Matthew 24.34 (repeated in Mark 13.30 and Luke 21.32):

*Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place.*

Here is how I interpreted this verse: “this generation” must mean the generation in which the signs occurred. Was I living in that generation? What were the signs that would indicate whether or not I was?

“Wars and rumours of wars” (Matthew 24.6) – I gave that a tick: we had Vietnam and the Cold War happening. Then there were “famines and earthquakes” -- yes, it all made sense: starving kids in Africa and buildings shaking somewhere in California. “False prophets” -- I knew this had to be Hare Krishna or Henry Kissinger, one of the two. Add all of it up, and I was convinced that I was living in the “End Times Generation” -- the very generation that Jesus said would not pass away, which, of course, meant that we would not die because we were going to be raptured!

I was so excited by my discovery that I rushed out onto the rink to show my youth leaders. One by one I received their affirmation: “That's interesting. I never saw that verse before”; “I hope you are right. I want to be raptured – and the sooner, the better. If you work out the date, let me know.” I was convinced that God had shown me a secret that no-one else yet knew.

On Sunday, I decided to fill my pastor in on this wonderful news. Maybe he would want to preach a sermon on it so the whole congregation could get as excited as I was. It only took a breath for him to burst my bubble. “That verse is not talking about the rapture, and it is not saying that you will escape death.”

“Then what does it mean?” I asked.

“It is talking about Israel. The nation of Israel will not be wiped out before the Lord comes. That is why the return of Israel to the Promised Land is so important. Hitler tried to exterminate them, but God is true to His promise in Matthew 24.34.”

## The Various Interpretations of *genea*

Thus ended my career as a great Bible expositor. But now I am wondering if even my pastor was right. R. T. France, in the Tyndale New Testament Commentary volume on Matthew, takes yet another view. He interprets the verse to mean the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in

AD 70. “. . . the time references of vv. 29 and 34 refer not, as is generally assumed, to the *parousia*, but to the coming judgement of Jerusalem.”<sup>1</sup>

The issue becomes even more confusing when other sources are consulted. It soon becomes clear that this is not an easy passage to interpret. New Testament scholar, Fr Joseph Fitzmyer, labels Matthew 24.34, “. . . the most difficult phrase to interpret in this complicated eschatological discourse.”<sup>2</sup> France agrees, “Chapter 24 poses great challenges for the interpreter.”<sup>3</sup>

The pivotal word in the verse is the word “generation” (*genea* in the Greek). A survey of scholars reveals that there are two basic definitions for this word. Either it means “people living at the same time” (ie contemporaries), or it means a “family or race.”<sup>4</sup> These two possible meanings branch into at least eight different points of conclusion.

If *genea* means contemporaries, then both the signs preceding Christ's coming and the *parousia* itself (at least partially) must occur within the span of a single generation – variously understood to mean between 20 and 80 years, with the majority of opinion favouring 30-40 years.<sup>5</sup> Scholars who define *genea* in this way, arrive at one of the following interpretations of Matthew 24.34:

1. Christ was mistaken – he thought the *parousia* (coming) would occur in the first century, but it did not. (This view represents liberal theologians and skeptics. It is acknowledged, though not subscribed to, by France.)<sup>6</sup>
2. Christ was referring to the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in AD 70.<sup>7</sup>
3. Christ was indicating the generation that would be alive when the signs reached the stage of final fulfilment.<sup>8</sup>

If, however, *genea* means family or race, then there are no time constraints on Christ's *parousia*. It can happen now, or it might not occur for many years. There would be no problem, for example, if Christ did not return during the lifespan of the early disciples to whom He made this prediction. This definition of *genea* leads to one of the following conclusions:

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1 R T France, *Matthew*, p. 335.

2 Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV*, in the *Anchor Bible Commentaries* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1985), p. 1353 as quoted in Richard L. Mayhue, *The Master's Seminary Journal* (Sun Valley CA: The Master's Seminary, Spring 2003), vol. 14, p. 21.

3 France, p. 333.

4 W E Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Old Tappan NJ: Fleming H Revell Co., 1940) p. 42.

5 Jack Kelley, “The Terminal Generation”. Available from <http://www.gracethrufaith.com/ikvot/the-terminal-generation>. Kelley holds to 80 years because he defines *genea* as lifespan, and updates the number of years to the current life expectancy in western civilisation. This is a dubious conclusion, in my opinion, which is probably influenced by the author's compulsion to reconcile his speculative eschatology with the passage of years since Israel re-inhabited Palestine in 1948. By claiming 80 years, Christ has until 2028 to return. For the more traditional interpretation of 40 years, see *Smith's Bible Dictionary*, Revised by F N and M A Peloubet, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1948), p. 211.

6 France, p. 346. France parenthetically offers that Matthew may have mistook Jesus, but this is not plausible. Mark and Luke would then have to be accused of perpetuating the misunderstanding, since they, too, record Jesus as having said “this generation”.

7 See Kenneth L. Gentry Jr and Thomas Ice., *The Great Tribulation: Past or Future?* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1999), pp. 26-27, 181; R C Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), pp. 51-68; and Gary DeMar, “Ice-DeMar Debate”, February 2002 as cited in <http://www.leftbehind.com>.

8 Darrell L. Bock, “Luke 9.51-24.53”, in *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), pp. 1688-1692; John MacArthur, “Matthew 24-28”, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989), pp. 63-67; as quoted in Mayhue, p. 21.

4. Christ was speaking of the human race in general (Jerome).
5. Christ spoke of faithful Christians in general (Chrysostom).<sup>9</sup>
6. Christ referred to the Jewish race generically.<sup>10</sup>
7. Christ referred to a future evil generation.<sup>11</sup>

One final interpretation combines the two. This interpretation is favoured by D A Carson and David Turner:

8. Christ was implying a double fulfilment – the destruction of the Jerusalem temple within the lifetime of the disciples, as well as the future *parousia*, which would take place beyond their lifetime.<sup>12</sup>

Which of these conclusions is to be preferred? We will examine the strengths and weaknesses of each at a later point in this paper. First, however, we must consider the word *genea*. Our interpretation of this single word will narrow the possibilities for a final interpretation.

When noting the wide range of speculation and disagreement among scholars regarding *genea*, it might be tempting to ask, “Does it really matter?” In other words, if the scholars can't seem to work it out, shouldn't we leave it alone?

### **The Importance of Defining *Genea***

As it turns out, Matthew 24.34 is a watershed separating two theological camps. Preterists (a name derived from a Latin term that means 'past') and Futurists. Thomas Ice, a futurist, highlighted the importance of this discussion before debating Gary DeMar, a preterist, at Biola University in 2002.

For anyone who is interested in reaching even a beginner's level of understanding about what the Bible teaches, especially the New Testament, they must come to grips with whether Matthew 24:27-31 or Revelation 1:7 and 19:11-21 speaks of a past or future event. Preterist R. C. Sproul estimates that at least 60% of the New Testament is affected by one's view of Bible prophecy. I think it's probably higher, when you consider all the secondary implications.<sup>13</sup>

### **Preterism v Futurism**

Preterists understand Matthew 10.23; 16.28; 24.34, and the book of Revelation to be descriptions of events that are now past, having been fulfilled in the first century AD. The Roman invasion of Palestine, which began in AD 66 and culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem and of the temple, is thought to be the subject of these passages.

It should be noted that there are two kinds of preterists. Full preterists hold that all of

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9 This list comes from Mayhue, p. 21.

10 Duane A. Dunham, “Genea in Matthew 24.34,” New Testament Essays in Honor of Homer A. Kent, Jr., ed. Gary T. Meadors (Winona Lake IN: BMH, 1991), pp. 125-141; as quoted in Mayhue, p. 21.

11 Evald Lovestam, Jesus and 'this Generation' (Stockholm: Almquist & Wiksell, 1995), p. 81-87; Neil D. Nelson, Jr., “‘This Generation’ in Matt 24.34: A Literary Critical Perspective,” JETS 38 (1996), pp. 369-385; as quoted in Mayhue, p. 21.

12 D A Carson, “Matthew”, The Expositor's Bible Commentary, ed. Frank E Gaebelein, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), p. 507; David L Turner, “The Structure and Sequence of Matthew 24.1-41: Interaction with Evangelical Treatments”, Grace Theological Journal 10 (1989), pp. 3-27; as quoted in Mayhue, p. 21.

13 Thomas Ice, “Great Controversies Series”, Biola University, February 26, 2002. See <http://www.leftbehind.com>

eschatology was fulfilled in the destruction of the temple, including the return of Christ, the general resurrection, and the final judgement. Moderate preterists, such as R C Sproul and Kenneth Gentry, teach that these events are yet future. Interestingly, moderate preterists judge full preterists to be heretical.<sup>14</sup>

Futurists, on the other hand, understand these passages to be entirely predictive of a time yet to come. Many futurists express belief in a rapture of believers prior to a seven year tribulation, at the end of which Christ will return to inaugurate His earthly millennial kingdom.

### **Literal v Symbolic**

One of the ironies of this debate is that the futurists, who include dispensational premillennialists – a group that trumpets literal interpretation of the Scripture as their battle cry – base their conclusion on a metaphoric understanding of *genea*. In contrast, the preterists, who are generally regarded to be more symbolic in their interpretation of eschatology, are in this case the literalists.

At face value, *genea* means the current generation. This is supported by the fact that the normal usage of the word elsewhere in the New Testament has this very meaning. For example, in Matthew 12.41, there can be no doubt that Jesus was referencing those who were hearing Him at the time (contemporaries) – not some generalised group of people who may not have been born yet.

The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here.

Additionally, the use of the word, 'this' before 'generation' in Matthew 24.34 seems to make the verse applicable to those who were listening to Jesus at that moment. Otherwise, Jesus might better have said, “that generation” if indeed He meant a generation yet to be.

To be fair, futurists also emphasise the wording of the text. Their support comes from the latter half of Matthew 24.34 in the words, “till all these things take place.” The preterists must become symbolic to account for “all things” because it necessarily includes the event described in Matthew 24.30: “they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.” This, of course, did not literally happen in AD 70. How do preterists explain this? They view the destruction of the Jerusalem temple to be vindication of Christ and His claims to be the Messiah – claims that were rejected by the Jews. In this sense, His glory and power were validated by the ruin of the temple.

### **Wisdom v Foolishness**

This point could also be labeled verifiable fact v apparent error. Skeptics love Matthew 24.34 because they see in it the fallibility of Jesus – a fallibility that discredits the whole of His mission.<sup>15</sup> Was Jesus mistaken?

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14 Mayhue, p. 10.

15 Mark Smith, “What the Scholars Say”, [The Skeptical Review](http://www.infidels.org/library/magazines/tsr/2000/4/004genea.html), July/August 2000. This article can be found at: <http://www.infidels.org/library/magazines/tsr/2000/4/004genea.html>. In it Smith cites 52 translations, 5 lexicons, 25 Bible dictionaries, 6 Bible encyclopedias, 16 Bible commentaries, 8 Christian scholars on *genea*, and 13 Christian scholars who dispute the “race” argument – all to make the point that both the Bible and Christians admit that Jesus made a mistake.

Preterists solve this problem by putting the fulfilment in the past. The destruction of Jerusalem is historically verifiable, thus the inerrancy of Scripture – yea, the deity of Christ – is preserved if Matthew 24.34 is predictive of that event. Gary DeMar makes this point, “The integrity of the Bible is at stake in the discussion of the biblical meaning of ‘this generation’.”<sup>16</sup>

This puts the futurist on the back foot. How is it that those who pride themselves as the staunch defenders of inerrancy are cast in the role of actually eroding its credibility? The conundrum intensifies when the writings of some notable futurists are considered. How can futurists be taken seriously when some proponents, such as Hal Lindsey, make date predictions for the rapture – predictions which later prove erroneous? Dave Hunt, a futurist, admits to the damage done by those within his own camp who resort to speculation:

Needless to say, January 1, 1982, saw the defection of large numbers from the pretrib position. . . . Many who were once excited about the prospects of being caught up to heaven at any moment have become confused and disillusioned by the apparent failure of a generally accepted biblical interpretation they once relied upon.<sup>17</sup>

Donald Green, managing director of *Grace to You*, describes how the sensationalism of some futurists makes preterism appear more reasonable:

By portraying the past sensationalism of some futurist writers, the preterist is able to cast all futurists in a negative light. That opens the door for him to introduce a seemingly more sane approach to biblical prophecy. The preterist’s affirmation of the inerrancy of Scripture gains him an even more sympathetic hearing with the earnest, but unprepared, believer. In contrast to the sensationalistic futurists, the preterist appears as a sober student of Scripture who has done his homework.<sup>18</sup>

Gary DeMar, an ardent preterist, seizes on this characterisation to accuse all futurists of being simpleminded and sensationalistic. “Little has changed in the ranks of those who continue to insist that “this generation” of Matthew 24.34 should not be interpreted literally.”<sup>19</sup> Peter Jensen, Archbishop of Sydney (Anglican), is more generous in his assessment. Noting the publishing success of the “Left Behind” series (more than 62 million copies sold), he defends the intellectual ability of futurists (even if he disagrees with them).

The prophetic movement – usually linked to a theology originating in the nineteenth century called 'dispensational premillennialism' – also has its genuinely impressive scholars and places of learning. You would be very ill-informed to regard these beliefs as the work of a tiny group of illiterate and unsophisticated people.<sup>20</sup>

Even so, it must be admitted that a substantial amount of published literature representing

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16 Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness*, 3d ed., (Atlanta: American Vision, 1997), as quoted in Donald E. Green, “A Critique of Preterism”, <http://www.swordandtrawel.org/index.htm>.

17 Dave Hunt, *Whatever Happened to Heaven?* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1988), 64.

18 Green, “A Critique of Preterism”, pp. 36-37.

19 Gary DeMar, “Letting the Bible Speak for Itself – The Literal Meaning of “This Generation” (Atlanta: American Vision, 2005). See <http://www.americanvision.org/articlearchive/06-17-05.asp>

20 Peter Jensen, “Jesus and the Millennium – Will He Never Come Back?”, Boyer Lectures (Sydney: ABC Radio National, 2005), p. 2.

the futuristic position lacks scholarship. In researching this paper, I was disappointed to find that authors who were at the forefront of evangelicalism twenty to fifty years ago often made speculative assertions regarding prophetic fulfilment. Their conclusions were drawn more from current events than from the Scripture – and, sadly, some of these proved to be wrong.<sup>21</sup> To be sure, even today, the futuristic position gains little from having its most visible representation coming from novels (the *Left Behind* series) and motion pictures.

### **Rationalism v Fundamentalism**

One does not have to read much to sense that *genea* is at the centre of a heated exchange. Why so much passion over this single word? The answer is in how Christians approach truth. Don Green summarises it well when he observes that satisfying the criticism of liberals and secularists matters more to preterists than it does to futurists. Whereas fundamentalists (a classification sometimes used by preterists of futurists) are satisfied with the propositional truth of the Bible and seek no outside affirmation, preterists are more in tune with rationalism.

Ultimately, the attacks of liberal critics will concern evidentialist apologists like Sproul more than the presuppositional apologist. The church does not need a new eschatological system simply because unbelievers question the return of Christ. The humble child of God should meet such skeptics with 2 Peter 3:3-7, which promises judgment against those mockers who say, “Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation.”<sup>22</sup>

It is on this point that preterists are guilty of reading into the text. Whereas futurists have been at times influenced by hermeneutical speculation prompted by news events, preterists have been no less influenced by the voice of critics. For example, as a result of starting at Matthew 24.34 and interpreting *genea* to be contemporaries, preterists succumb to speculation of their own – as applied to first century events. “Wars and rumours of wars” must be Titus leading the Roman army in laying siege to, and then destroying Jerusalem. The “abomination of desolation” is accounted for by the Roman standards entering the temple.<sup>23</sup> And the seemingly cosmological events of Matthew 24.29 (sun darkened; stars falling) are spiritualised. R T France acknowledges that this verse is surprising, yet he persists in his allegiance to Matthew 24.34 (*genea*) as the key to understanding the whole:

When v. 29 speaks of a cataclysmic event it is natural to expect Jesus to complete the account with a specific mention of the fate of the temple. But these verses contain no explicit mention of the temple . . . yet the events so described are explicitly dated

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21 I am making reference to books that have been in my library for many years: M R DeHaan, [The Jew and Palestine in Prophecy](#) (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1950); Theodore Epp, [A Brief Outline of Things to Come](#) (Chicago: Moody Press, 1952); Charles Ryrie, [The Final Countdown](#) (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1982); John Walvoord, [The Return of the Lord](#) (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1955); and Leon J Wood, [The Bible & Future Events](#) (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973). These books speculate about factors that no longer exist – such as the Soviet Union. To be fair, it must be remembered that these authors wrote in a different context to today, and therefore, it is not right to expect modern standards of scholarship, especially in relation to theological issues that were not as significant then.

22 Green, p. 36.

23 France, p. 341.

within 'this generation' . . .<sup>24</sup>

Without question, defining *genea* is an all-important consideration. Does it mean contemporaries? Preterists would say, “Yes.” Surprisingly, so would some futurists. Those who believe that both the signs and the *parousia* will transpire within a single “end times” generation, define *genea* in the same way as preterists. The difference is in the era of the generation.

Other futurists, however, define *genea* in general terms. This viewpoint is unconcerned with signs and fulfilment occurring within a set timeframe (a generation). It allows for signs to be an ongoing phenomenon meant to inspire readiness and expectancy in the believer, and it accounts for Jesus' assertion in Matthew 24.36 that not even He knows the hour of His coming (whereas the 'contemporary' definition of *genea* cannot escape a clear approximation). In response to this perspective, it must be conceded that Jesus hints at an element of delay in the parable portion of the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 25.1-30). Do the parables of the ten virgins and of the talents fit a family or race definition of *genea* better? For an answer, we will briefly examine the text.

## TOWARD A SOLUTION

To understand the verse, we must consider the context. Matthew 24 and 25 are called the “Olivet Discourse” because it was at that location, just outside of and overlooking the walls of Jerusalem, that Jesus gave this talk. Jesus and His disciples arrived at the Mount of Olives fresh off a tour of Jerusalem. During that tour, the disciples had admired the buildings of the temple precinct – I imagine that they were like tourists, pointing out to Jesus the grand achievement of their forefathers in constructing such an impressive edifice (Matthew 24.1; see especially Mark 13.1 and Luke 21.5).

Jesus, however, quashes their enthusiasm by revealing that the temple will be so utterly destroyed that not one stone will remain upon another (Matthew 24.2). The curiosity of the disciples was piqued by this prediction.

### Understanding the Question

As soon as Jesus sat down on the Mount of Olives, the disciples<sup>25</sup> began: “When will these things be, and what will be the sign of Your coming and of the close of the age?” (Matthew 24.3). We must make a decision before proceeding. Were the disciples asking in regards to one topic or two?<sup>26</sup> If they were asking two questions – as in, “when will the temple be destroyed” and “how will we know when you are coming”, then we would expect two answers from Jesus. But on the other hand, if the disciples conceived of the destruction of the temple and the *parousia* to be one and the same event, then only one answer would be expected from Jesus.

I believe the disciples were asking about the single topic of the *parousia*. I do not think that they considered the destruction of the temple to be an independent topic. There are several reasons for this conclusion.

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24 Ibid., p. 343.

25 According to Mark 13.3, it was Peter, James, John and Andrew who approached Jesus.

26 J Dwight Pentecost interprets this to be one question (Things to Come, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958, p. 276). Leon J Wood (Wood, p. 90), John MacArthur Jr., and R T France, among others, conclude that there are two questions.

1. It was they who raised the topic of the *parousia*. Jesus spoke only about the temple, why then do the disciples shift the focus to the consummation? The only reasonable explanation is that they anticipated Christ's coming to coincide with judgement – perhaps even a cataclysmic event.
2. No objection is made by the disciples to the prediction. Based on previous behaviour (for example, when Jesus announced His impending crucifixion in Matthew 16.21), we would expect the disciples to question the prophecy. After all, they were admiring the temple when Jesus spoke against it. Why does this prediction seem to be accepted without a fuss? Could it be that the disciples saw the *parousia* in it?
3. A plausible explanation for their acceptance may be another prophecy they had heard from Jesus: “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.”<sup>27</sup> Later, at the trial of Jesus, his accusers quoted this prophecy against Him. In so doing, they affirmed the understanding that it was the Jerusalem temple that was the subject: “This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and to build it in three days.'”<sup>28</sup> Did the disciples, therefore, conceive of the temple destruction and restoration as the focal point of Christ's *parousia*? I think this is probable.<sup>29</sup>
4. The record of the disciples' question in Mark and Luke is less detailed than in Matthew. It appears to be one topic, the *parousia*. Notice the doubling of the word 'things', and the use of the word 'accomplished' – hardly a term one would choose to describe destruction: “When will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are about to be accomplished?”<sup>30</sup>
5. Jesus give an answer regarding the temple. His answer is entirely on the topic of the *parousia*.<sup>31</sup>

### **Understanding the Answer**

Jesus begins His answer with a caution that is the predominant theme throughout the discourse: “See that no-one leads you astray.”<sup>32</sup> This is repeated in verses 5, 10, 11, 12, 24, and inferred in the illustration regarding Noah (vv 37-43), the illustration regarding the servant (vv 44-51), and the parables of the virgins and talents in chapter 25.

Why would perseverance be the primary concern of Jesus?<sup>33</sup> There is only one explanation: delay. His answer to the disciples' question “when” is clearly “not yet”. In fact, Jesus categorises the first few 'signs' (wars, famine, earthquakes, persecutions, martyrdom, apostacy – see Matthew 24.4-14) as non-signs.<sup>34</sup> I believe this is because these occurrences are common in every age as a consequence of sin. It can be said that they are pointers to a better hope ahead, but as definitive

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<sup>27</sup> John 2.19-20

<sup>28</sup> Matthew 26.61. See also Mark 14.58, which is even clearer: "We heard Him say, 'I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and within three days I will build another made without hands.'"

<sup>29</sup> Matthew 26.61. See also Mark 14.58, which is even clearer: "We heard Him say, 'I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and within three days I will build another made without hands.'"

<sup>30</sup> Mark 13.4

<sup>31</sup> We have already shown that even France, a preterist who would be motivated to find the temple in the Olivet Discourse, admits that it is surprisingly missing from Jesus' answer.

<sup>32</sup> Matthew 24.4

<sup>33</sup> In this respect, note Matthew 24.13, “But the one who endures to the end will be saved.”

<sup>34</sup> Robert H. Gundry, A Survey of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), p. 196.

signs, they are unremarkable.

The actual signs of Christ's coming, revealed in verses 15-28, are distressing to the point that “if possible, even the elect”<sup>35</sup> would be led astray. These signs are the “all these things” Jesus references in Matthew 24.34.

With this being the case – that Jesus was urging the disciples to be patient, watchful and to persevere – we should not feel compelled to force a short time frame on our passage in question. It is my contention that our understanding of *genea* should be determined by the context of Matthew 24-25, not by the dictionary, or by the usage of the term in other contexts. In this respect, *genea* does not require a first century fulfilment.

### **Arriving at a Conclusion**

We return now to the eight possible interpretations of Matthew 24.34 listed earlier in this paper.

1. Christ was mistaken – he thought the *parousia* would occur in the first century, but it did not.
2. Christ was referring to the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in AD 70.
3. Christ was indicating the generation that would be alive when the signs reached the stage of final fulfilment.
4. Christ was speaking of the human race in general.
5. Christ spoke of faithful Christians in general.
6. Christ referred to the Jewish race generically.
7. Christ referred to a future evil generation.
8. Christ was implying a double fulfilment.

In response, option 1 is theologically flawed, and can be dismissed outright. Options 4 and 5 are too general to be helpful. Christ's promise would have been stating the obvious, in which case it didn't need to be stated.

Option 2 accounts for “this generation” but is unsatisfactory on other counts. Firstly, it fails to do justice to the *parousia*. Consequently, the coming of Christ in 24.30-31 is problematic to those who hold this view. Either they have to spiritualise this coming to be in AD 70, or they have to differentiate between this coming and the coming of 24.37-25.30. Secondly, it does not satisfy the “all things” of 24.34. The “abomination of desolation”; the coming of the Son of Man in glory – as visible and as unmistakable as lightning – and the cosmological signs were not present in AD 70. Thirdly, the reference to Daniel made by Jesus, makes the prediction of the “abomination” too specific for a general fulfilment. It has a direct biblical precedent in Daniel 11.31, as well as an historic precedent in Antiochus IV Epiphanes. Fourthly, this view depends on dubious interpretations of Matthew 10.23 and Matthew 16.23, as well as an unlikely early dating of Revelation. Fifthly, if this were the understanding of the disciples – that the *parousia* would occur in their *genea* – then we would expect fall out when it did not. Keep in mind that Jesus, in His answer, said nothing about the temple, and everything about His coming. Would the disciples, then, be satisfied with a ruined temple, but no Jesus? In actual fact, the disciples (some of them, at least) lived through AD 70 and persisted with their hope in the return of Christ. There is no

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35 Matthew 24.24

indication in the later books of the New Testament, nor in early church history, of a crisis of faith caused by the failure of Christ to return in AD 70.<sup>36</sup>

Options 7 and 8 are novel approaches – which is why I don't think they can be taken seriously. I doubt that these would even be considered, except that no other view has gained a sizable consensus. Regarding the evil generation, this view both states the obvious – the evil will continue until Christ's coming – and it fails to acknowledge that the subject of Matthew 24-25 is the perseverance of believers, not the triumph of evil. The dual fulfilment theory may have some merit in that there are some biblical precedents for this type of prophecy (Isaiah 7.14, for example). It also is appealing because it attempts to find the middle ground between opposing theological camps. Even so, I cannot conceive that this view would have ever been put forward without the controversies surrounding the other views. In other words, the dual fulfilment theory is not solely motivated by the text. It is a response to human interpretations of the text.

This leaves options 3 and 6, which is where we started with this paper. The idea that “this generation” indicates that those living when the signs reach their climax will be the ones who welcome Christ's second advent is satisfactory in a couple ways. Firstly, it makes use of the normal meaning of *genea*. Secondly, it accounts for “all things”. It is not, however, without its weaknesses. How would this generation recognise that it is the designated generation? If we say the “abomination” is the telltale sign, then this prediction is redundant. We already know that the “abomination” occurs at the end of the age. Also, this view opens the door for the kind of wild speculation that has plagued futurists. I find it somewhat distasteful that a generation could know for certain that they are the lucky ones to be raptured. The antithesis to this is that every other generation could be equally convinced that Christ would not come in their lifetime. Is this the “blessed hope” the early disciples expected?

Could my pastor be right then? Is *genea* a reference to Israel? It is possible – such a conclusion would fit the “all things”, and it has the backing of history. Despite numerous attacks against the Jews, they have survived and prospered even to this day. The same cannot be said of other nationalities existing at the time of Christ. Yet this view, also, has problems. Firstly, it does not use the natural meaning of *genea*. To this objection, Gleason Archer offers an interesting rebuttal. He notes that Jesus is likely to have delivered the Olivet Discourse in Aramaic, not Greek. “The Aramaic term that Jesus probably used is susceptible to either interpretation, and thus could mean the Jewish 'race' rather than the circle of Christ's own contemporaries.”<sup>37</sup> In other words, something was lost when the Aramaic was translated into Greek by the writers of the synoptic gospels. Secondly, to make the Jews the meaning of *genea* has been criticised for being too general.<sup>38</sup>

### Summary

In coming to the conclusion of this study, I can venture only a tentative solution to *genea*. I think the word is in reference to the Jews. This interpretation makes sense of both “this generation” (because Jesus was addressing Jewish disciples, who would have been naturally concerned about the future of their nationality given the forecast ruin of their temple) and “all things” (because the Jewish people would still be in existence at Christ's *parousia*). Having said this, I am acutely aware

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36 Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1981), p. 796.

37 Gleason L. Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), p. 339.

38 Mayhue, p. 22.

that I am not a scholar, and that some scholars I respect reject this conclusion.

I think the final solution is found in keeping *genea* in its proper place. To be sure, it is an important issue worthy of study and debate. But it must not detract from what is the point of the Olivet Discourse: The Son of Man is coming again in glory – this coming is yet future, it is imminent and it will consummate this age. In the intervening time, believers are to persevere and be ready stewards.

On these points moderate preterists and futurists both agree. It can also be said that on these points the early disciples depended and lived.

“Even so, come, Lord Jesus!”

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