

Matthew 24 and the Great Tribulation

Chapter 3: The Time of the Text

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As Jesus draws to a conclusion His prophecy regarding the destruction of Jerusalem, the temple and the dissolution of Israel as a special covenant nation, He presses upon the disciples the urgency and certainty regarding His prediction. The urgency and need to be prepared is set forth in the illustration of the fig tree. The certainty of Christ's words coming to pass in that evil and adulterous generation is presented in our Lord's twofold solemn pronouncement of verses 34 to 35. "Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away" (Mt. 24:34-35; cf. Mk. 13:30-31; Lk. 21:32-33). This passage is crucial to understanding the whole preceding discourse. The importance of what Jesus says can be ascertained by our Lord's use of "Amen, I say to you." The word "amen" (a transliteration of the Hebrew word for truth) translated as truly, assuredly, verily, or solemnly, indicates the *absolute veracity* of the words of our Lord whose every word is truth. The statement "I say to you" indicates the *absolute authority* of the Mediator. Jesus only uses this introduction at the head of statements that He wants to underline and embolden with divine authority. The absolute truth and authority of Christ's words are restated in verse 35 which indicate that our Lord's words are more lasting, abiding or permanent than even heaven and earth.¹ They will stand the test of time. "You can be assured that not one word will fall to the ground unfulfilled." Verse 35 applies not only to verse 34 but to the whole preceding prophecy.

As we turn our attention to the key text (i.e. v. 34) for the understanding of the preceding section of the Olivet Discourse, we will review our previous discussion of this passage as well as consider more in depth the most common interpretation, that the word "generation" refers to the Jewish race.

When Jesus says that "this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place" (v.34), He means that *all of the things* He prophesied prior to verse 34 would occur during the generation of Jews who were alive when He spoke those words. That this verse is incapable of any other meaning is proved by the following points.

The word generation (*genea*) in the gospels *always* refers to a specific generation living at the same period of time.² Since this point was demonstrated by an examination of several biblical passages earlier in this study, we will now examine the definition of this word by various Greek scholars and commentators. a) After noting that *genea* can mean a clan, race or kind in ancient Greek literature (Walter Bauer cites Luke 16:8 as the only possible New Testament example of such a usage), Bauer writes, "basically, the sum total of those born at the same time,

¹ Jesus' reference to heaven and earth passing away may refer to the dissolution of the Mosaic economy. The Old Testament prophets often used language relating to the universe's collapse or returning to chaos to describe judgments on various nations. Plummer writes, "'Heaven and earth shall pass away' perhaps looks back to ver. 29, where the beginning of a break-up of the universe seems to be indicated [i.e. figuratively]. But as in ver.35, the 'passing away of heaven and earth' may be a figurative expression for the end of the existing dispensation, of all that was regarded as most durable and permanent. Christ's words will be more sure than anything, -His words in general, but especially His words about the coming judgment" (*An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel to St. Matthew*, 338). See the section above that discusses "signs in the heavens."

² The one possible exception, Luke 16:8 is discussed in footnote number 10.

expanded to include all those living at a given time *generation, contemporaries*...Jesus looks upon the whole contemporary generation of Jews as a uniform mass confronting Him...Mt. 11:16; 12:4 f.; 23:36; 24:34; Mk. 13:30; Lk. 7:31; 11:29-32, 50 f.; 17:25; 21:32.”³ Note that Bauer references Matthew 24:34 and its parallels (Mk. 13:30 and Lk. 21:32) as examples of *genea* meaning generation or contemporaries. b) After Thayer discusses the classical Greek usage of *genea* he writes, “*the whole multitude of men living at the same time*: Mt. xiv. 34; Mk. xiii. 30;...Lk. xxi. 32.”⁴ Once again note that Matthew 24:34 and its parallels are cited. c) Greek scholar V. Hasler writes, “Of the 43 references to *genea* in the NT, 33 are in the Synoptic, where the word refers in 25 of its occurrences to the Jewish people in the time of Jesus, 17 times in the expression ‘*this generation*.’”⁵ In other words every time the expression “this generation” occurs in the synoptic gospels it refers to the Jewish people living in the time of Jesus. d) After noting that *gennoma* in the New Testament means “race, stock or family” Abbott-Smith writes regarding *genea*, “of all the people of a given period: Mt. 24:34, Mk. 13:30, Lk. 21:32....”⁶ e) A. T. Robertson writes, “In the Old Testament a generation was reckoned as forty years. This is the natural way to take [Matthew 24] verse 34 as of 33 (Bruce), ‘all things’ meaning the same in both verses.”⁷ f) Bushel writes, “In the NT *genea* is common in the Synoptic, rare in Paul, absent from Jn., including Rev. As a purely formal concept it is always qualified. It mostly denotes ‘generation’ in the sense of contemporaries. We often have the formula *hegenea haute* [this generation], as at Mk. 8:12 (Lk. 11:29, 30); 13:30 (Mt. 24:34; Lk. 21:32)... This generation is to be understood temporarily...”⁸ (g) Morgenthaler writes, “In Matt. it has the sense of *this generation*, and according to the first evangelist, Jesus expected the end of this age...to occur in connection with the judgment on Jerusalem at the end of that first generation (see Mk. 9:1 and Matt. 16:18).”⁹ (h) Conrad writes, “Hebrew *dór*, Aram. *dar* and Gk *geneà* refer to a period of time loosely defined as the time between a parent's prime and that of his child...Those living at a given time in history are referred to as a generation (Jer. 2:31; Mt. 11:16), and can be characterized as a whole, e.g., as a ‘perverse and crooked generation’ (Dt. 32:5), as a ‘faithless and perverse generation’ (Lk. 9:41).”¹⁰ (i) Cranwell says that *genea* refers to, “the people of a period: ‘this generation shall not pass away’ (Lk. 21:32).”¹¹

³ F. Wilbur Gingrich and William F. Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature: A Translation and Adaptation of the Fourth Revised and Augmentation Edition of Walter Bauer's Griechisch-Deutsches Worterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der Übrigen Urchristlichen Literatur* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979 [1957]), 154.

⁴ Joseph Henry Thayer, *The New Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Lafayette, IN: APXA, 1979 [1889]), 112.

⁵ V. Haster, “*genea*” in Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider editors, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 1:241.

⁶ G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1937), 89.

⁷ Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, no date [1930]), 1:94. Robertson leaves open the possibility that Christ is speaking about a specific generation at the end of the world. He writes, “The problem is whether Jesus is here referring to the destruction of Jerusalem or to the second coming at the end of the world. If to the destruction of Jerusalem, there was a literal fulfillment” (*Ibid.*, 193).

⁸ Frederick Bushel, “*Genea*” in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 1:663.

⁹ R. Morgenthaler, “Generation” in *New International Dictionary of the New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 2:37-38; as quoted in Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness*, 186.

¹⁰ E. W. Conrad, “Generation” in general editor, Geoffrey Bromiley, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 2:431.

¹¹ Philip Wendell Cranwell, “Generation” in general editor James Orr, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939 [1929]), 2:1199. Earlier Cranwell does argue that generation (*genea*)

Now let us turn our attention to the comments of the great Bible expositors of the past and present. This section is important for it proves that what has been labeled partial or orthodox preterism is not a new or recent doctrine among Protestants.¹²

- a) The greatest of Bible interpreters among the reformers was John Calvin (1509-1564). He writes, “‘This generation shall pass away.’ Though Christ employs a general expression, yet he does not extend the discourses to all the miseries which would befall the Church, but merely informs them, that before a single *generation* shall have been completed, they will learn by experience the truth of what he has said. For within fifty years the city was destroyed and the temple rased, the whole country was reduced to a hideous desert, and the obstinacy of the world rose up against God....Now though the same evils were perpetrated in uninterrupted succession for many ages afterwards, yet what Christ said was true, that, before the close of a single *generation*, believers would feel in reality, and by undoubted experience, the truth of his prediction.”¹³
- b) The covenanter Matthew Poole (published 1685) writes, “There are several notions men have of that term, *this generation*, some by it understanding mankind; others, the generation of Christians; others, the whole generation of Jews: but doubtless our Savior means the set of men that were at that time in the world: those who were at that time living should not all die until all these things shall be fulfilled, all that he had spoken with reference to the destruction of Jerusalem...”¹⁴
- c) The professor of Divinity in Glasgow during the second reformation in Scotland-David Dickson (1583-1663) writes, “And at first, he certifies them of the destruction of the temple under the parable of the fig tree; that when the fig-tree begins to bud summer is near. So when they should see the Jews doting on false christs, hearkening to false prophets, persecuting the preachers of the gospel, growing tumultuous and seditious under hopes of a bodily liberation from the yoke of the Romans, rumors of wars arising, armies coming in upon Judea, then let them persuade themselves, says he, that when these signs should appear judgment was at the door upon that nation, and that both these

does mean race in Matthew 17:17. However, (as we noted before) it can only mean a race or nation at a particular point in history. The Jews were not always guilty of gross covenant breaking during their history.

¹² Some of the commentaries quoted are not partial preterists in the modern sense of believing everything up to verse 34 refers to the destruction of Israel (e.g., John Calvin, David Dickson, Matthew Poole, Matthew Henry, J. A. Alexander and C. H. Spurgeon). These men are quoted because they take Matthew 24:33-34 literally or at face value and thus apply the time text to the generation of people alive to witness the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. These men avoid the obvious import of the phrase "all these things" by means of appealing to double fulfillment, or the destruction of Jerusalem as a type of the end of the world, or arbitrarily applying "all these things" to only most of or part of the things discussed, or appealing to the common Old Testament prophetic method of slipping prophecies regarding the distant future into prophecies dealing with events in the immediate future. While this author has the utmost respect for these excellent scholars, he is not willing to circumvent the obvious meaning of "all these things will come to pass in this generation."

¹³ John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, Matthew, Mark, and Luke (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 3:151.

¹⁴ Matthew Poole, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 3:116.

signs and the destruction of Jerusalem with the temple should all come to pass in the days of them that were then living (vv 33, 34).”¹⁵

- d) The most popular of Protestant commentators-Matthew Henry (1662-1714) writes, “As to these things, the wars, seductions, and persecutions, here foretold, and especially the ruin of the Jewish nation; ‘This generation shall not pass away, till all these things be fulfilled (Mt 24:34); there are those now alive, that shall see Jerusalem destroyed, and the Jewish church brought to an end.’ Because it might seem strange, he backs it with a solemn asseveration; ‘Verily, I say unto you. You may take my word for it, these things are at the door.’ Christ often speaks of the nearness of that desolation, the more to affect people, and quicken them to prepare for it.”¹⁶
- e) The great reformed Baptist scholar John Gill (1679-1771) writes, “‘Verily I say unto you, this generation shall not pass,’ &c. Not the generation of men in general; as if the sense was, that mankind should not cease, until the accomplishment of these things; nor the generation, or people of the Jews, who should continue to be a people, until all were fulfilled; nor the generation of Christians; as if the meaning was, that there should be always a set of Christians, or believers in Christ in the world, till all these events came to pass; but it respects that present age, or generation of men then living in it; and the sense is, that all the men of that age should not die, but some should live ‘till all these things were fulfilled’; see Matt. xvi. 28. as many did, and as there is reason to believe they might, and must, since all these things had their accomplishment, in and about forty years after this: and certain it is, that John, one of the disciples of Christ, outlived the time by many years; and, as Dr. Lightfoot observes, many of the Jewish doctors now living, when Christ spoke these words, lived until the city was destroyed; as Rabban Simeon, who perished with it, R. Jochanan ben Zaccai, who outlived it, R. Zadoch, R. Ishmael, and others: this is a full and clear proof, that not any thing that is said before, relates to the second coming of Christ, the day of judgment, and end of the world; but that all belong to the coming of the son of man, in the destruction of Jerusalem, and to the end of the Jewish state.”¹⁷
- f) Professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, J. A. Alexander writes (published 1858), “But the critical word in this critical sentence is *generation*, which some make here synonymous with *race* or *nation*, and apply it to the Jews, who are not to lose their separate existence until all these changes have been realized. This gives a wide scope to the prophecy, and readily enables us to transport what is said in vs. 24-27 to an indefinitely distant future. But although some English writers, for this reason, still adhere to that interpretation, others of the same class, and the German philologists almost without exception, treat it as a sheer invention without any authority either in classical or Hellenistic usage, so that some of the best lexicons do not give this definition, even to condemn it. Of the few alleged examples, chiefly in the Septuagint version, all admit of being taken in one of the acknowledged senses, which in the New Testament are three in number, all reducible to one and the same radical idea, that of a contemporary race, or the

¹⁵ David Dickson, *Matthew*, 334.

¹⁶ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (McLean, VA: McDonald Publishing, n. d.), 5:361.

¹⁷ John Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament*, 1:296.

aggregate of those living at the same time. This is the direct sense in the great majority of cases (such as 8, 12, 38, 9, 19, Matt. 11, 16, 39-45, 16, 4, 23, 36, Luke 7, 31, 16, 8, 17, 25, Acts 2, 40, 13, 36, Phil. 2, 15, Heb. 3, 10), and is scarcely modified when transferred from men to time (as in Acts 14, 16, 15, 21, Eph. 3, 5, 21, Col. 1, 26), or to the stages of descent and degrees of genealogical succession (as in Matt. 1, 17.) Common to all cases is the radical idea of *contemporaneous existence*, which it would be monstrous therefore to exclude in that before us, as we must do, if we understand it of the whole race in its successive generations. It follows, therefore, that unless we forge a meaning for the word in this place, which is not only unexampled elsewhere, but directly contradictory to its essential meaning everywhere, we must understand our Lord as saying, that the contemporary race or generation, i.e. those then living, should not pass away or die till all these prophecies had been accomplished.”¹⁸

- g) James Morison (1816-1893), a college professor in Scotland, writes, “But it does always, when used absolutely, and it does always in the New Testament, involve as an element of its import, either outstandingly and obtrusively or inobtrusively and implicitly, a reference *to limit a period of durations, and such a limited period too as may be measured by the natural life-term of the persons referred to as generated.* That natural life-term may be generalized into an average, or looked at in some of its manifold actual variations; but the word has reference to it. Hence the processional expression in Luke i. 50, ‘from generation to generation.’ Hence too the implicitly contrastive expression in Acts xiii. 36 concerning David, ‘after he had served *his own generation*, he fell on sleep.’ Hence too the plural expression in Col. i. 26, ‘hid from ages, *and from generations.*’ Comp. Eph. iii 5, 21, Acts xvi. 16. Hence also the expression, also implicitly contrastive, in Heb. iii. 10, ‘I was grieved *with that generation*’ ‘and I swear in My wrath, *They shall not enter into My rest.*’ As to the expression before us, *this generation*, it evidently means, as in all the other passages where it occurs (Matt. xi. 16, xii. 41, 42, xxiii. 36; Mark viii. 12; Luke vii. 31, xi. 30, 31, 32, 50, 51, xvii. 25), *this present generation.* The verb with which it is connected, *shall (not) pass*, literally *shall (not) go by*, that is *shall (not) pass away*, is appropriate to describe the fleeting course of a generation. See Eccles. i. 4. It would by no means be so appropriate if used in reference to the fate of a people, as a people. And then, besides, the corresponding expression in Matt. xvi. 28, ‘Verily I say unto you, *there be some standing here, which shall not taste of death* till they see the Son of man coming in His kingdom,’ settles our Saviour’s reference. The great body of critics agree with us. They are firm in the conviction that the expression must mean *this present generation.*”¹⁹
- h) Thomas Scott writes, “Our Lord here answers the former part of the apostle’s questions, concerning the time when these events would take place. In general he assured them, that their approach would be as certainly determined by the signs that he had mentioned, as the approach of summer was by the budding and the tender branch of the fig-tree, and that they would all be accomplished before the generation was passed away. This

¹⁸ J. A. Alexander, *Mark*, 362-363.

¹⁹ James Morison, *A Practical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 485.

absolutely restricts our primary interpretation of the prophecy to the destruction of Jerusalem, which took place within forty years.”²⁰

- i) John Lightfoot writes, “*This generation shall not pass*, &c. Hence it appears plain enough, that the foregoing verses are not to be understood of the last judgment, but, as we said, of the destruction of Jerusalem. There were some among the disciples (particularly John), who lived to see these things come to pass. With Matt. xvi. 28, compare John xxi. 22. And there were some Rabbins alive at the time when Christ spoke these things, that lived till the city was destroyed, viz. Rabban Simeon, who perished with the city, R. Jochanan Ben Zaccai, who outlived it, R. Zadoch, R. Ismael, and others.”²¹
- j) The great reformed Baptist preacher C. H. Spurgeon (1834-1891) writes, “The King left his followers in no doubt as to when these things should happen: ‘Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till and these things be fulfilled.’ It was about the ordinary limit of a generation when the Roman armies compassed Jerusalem, whose measure of iniquity was then full, and overflowed in misery, agony, distress, and bloodshed such as the world never saw before or since. Jesus was a true Prophet; everything that he foretold was literally fulfilled.”²²
- k) The Episcopal scholar Ezra P. Gould (p. 1896) writes, “*this generation*. The word is always used by Jesus to denote the men living at the time. This use is sufficient against the supposition that it means the Jewish race, or the human race, devices introduced to make it possible to interpret the prophecy as applying to the end of the world. But what meaning would either have as marks of time for the general winding of human affairs? No, the statement means that these events are to take place during the lifetime of Jesus’ contemporaries, and the events are, therefore, what the whole prophecy surely indicates, those connected with the fall of the Jewish state and the destruction of Jerusalem. *panta tauta*- Here is the answer to those who suppose that the prophecy is to be divided into two parts, one prediction the Jewish catastrophe, and the other the world-catastrophe. All these things, and not the minor part of them, are to take place within that generation.”²³
- l) Alfred Plummer (p. 1909) writes, “[W]e need not make ‘all these things’ refer to anything beyond the judgment on Jerusalem and the tribulation which preceded the execution of it. If the Day of Judgment is in any way included, it is as being symbolized by the judgment on the guilty city. It is not satisfactory to extend the meaning of ‘this generation’ to future generations of either the Jewish or the whole human race. ‘This generation’ (*he genea haute*) is an expression of common and definite meaning; viz. ‘the generation which was

²⁰ Thomas Scott, *Commentary on the New Testament* (Cornhill, England: Samuel T. Armstrong, 1817) as quoted in John L. Bray, *Matthew 24 Fulfilled*, 200.

²¹ John Lightfoot, *A Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Hebraica* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1961 [1859]), 2:320, as quoted in John L. Bray, 201.

²² Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1987), 353.

²³ Ezra Gould, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Mark* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975 [1896]), 253.

alive when the words were spoken,' many of whom did live to see 'the abomination of desolation' and the subsequent desolation of Jerusalem."²⁴

- m) Henry Barclay Swete (p. 1913) writes, "*he genea haute* is frequent in the Gospels (cf. e.g., viii. 12 (note), 38, Mt. xi. 16, xii. 41 ff., xxiii. 36, Lc. xvii. 25), referring apparently in every instance to the generation to which the Lord Himself belonged. In the present context it is certainly more natural to take *genea* in its normal signification; the passage is similar to Mt. xxiii. 36, where there can be no doubt as to the meaning. Men who were then alive would see the fulfillment of the sentence pronounced upon Jerusalem (v. 2)."²⁵
- n) R. V. G. Tasker writes, "Jesus is here saying in effect that it will be as certain that Jerusalem will fall when *all these things* (i.e. the appearance of the abomination of desolation, and the advent of false Messiahs, etc.) have become apparent, as it is certain that summer will follow when the first eaves are seen on the fig tree's tender branches. Moreover, the generation He is addressing will live to see it all. So sure is He of this, that He affirms that His words on this, as on other subjects, will be shown to possess everlasting power and validity (32-35)."²⁶
- o) William L. Lane writes, "The significance of the temporal reference has been debated, but in Mark 'this generation' clearly designates the contemporaries of Jesus (see on Chs. 8:12, 38; 9:19) and there is no consideration from the context which lends support to any other proposal. Jesus solemnly affirms that the generation contemporary with his disciples will witness the fulfillment of his prophetic word, culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem and the dismantling of the Temple. With this word Jesus responds to the initial question of the disciples regarding the time when 'these things' will take place."²⁷
- p) Beasley-Murray writes, "The phrase 'this generation' should cause no difficulty for interpreters. While admittedly *genea* in earlier Greek meant birth, progeny, and so race, in the sense of those descended from a common ancestor, in the LXX it most frequently translated the Hebrew term *dor*, meaning age, age of humankind, or generation in the sense of contemporaries. The expression 'this generation' is often found on the lips of Jesus in the Gospels, but rarely elsewhere in the NT. In sayings attributed to Jesus the term appears to have twofold connotation: on the one hand it always signifies his contemporaries, and on the other hand it always carries an implicit criticism."²⁸
- q) Robert H. Gundry writes, "[T]he combinations of 'you' and 'this' in Mark 13:29-30 (note esp. the emphatic *umeis* in v. 29) makes a reference to Jesus' contemporaries much more natural. We might therefore restrict 'these things...all these things' to the destruction of the Temple, which, occurring in A.D. 70, did fall within the lifetime of Jesus' contemporaries. Support for this restriction comes from the appearance of 'these

²⁴ Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982 [1909]), 338.

²⁵ Henry Barclay Swete, *Commentary on Mark* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1977 [1913]), 315.

²⁶ R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 227.

²⁷ William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, 480.

²⁸ George R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Last Days*, 444.

things...all these things' in the question of the disciples, who, so far as we can tell from the text, had in mind only the destruction of the Temple, which Jesus had just predicted."²⁹

The meaning of Jesus' words "this generation will not pass away until all these things take place" is so clear that most competent scholars take the statement at face value. The only reason that so many responsible theologians and exegetes often end up torturing and convoluting the clear meaning of this passage is their mistake in applying the apocalyptic and "coming" terminology (prior to verse 34) to the second bodily coming of Christ which is still future. We have demonstrated in our examination of these passages (above) that they do not apply to Christ's second and still future bodily coming but to His coming in judgment upon Jerusalem. (Now, let us return to a review of our consideration of the phrase "this generation").

The "this generation" of Matthew 24:34 is a repetition of the same phrase used in Matthew 23:36 "all these things will come upon this *generation*." In normal didactic interpretation, if a word or phrase is used by the author or speaker in a certain manner with a specific meaning during a discourse or passage, we would expect him to continue to use it in the same manner at the end. Therefore, contextually "the 'this generation' of Matthew 24:34 *must* speak of the same idea as that of Matthew 23:36."³⁰ To argue otherwise is to assert that our Lord with no warning or explanation arbitrarily changed the meaning of the phrase "this generation" within the space of an hour or two. This would mean that Christ purposely misled the disciples after saying "Take heed that no one deceives you" (Mt. 24:4). Such an interpretation is obviously exegetically and theologically unacceptable. In addition, the use of the word "this" indicates that our Lord had in mind that which is near or distinguished from that which is distant. If Jesus had in mind events two thousand years in the future He would have said, "that generation" (see the discussion of the normal meaning and usage of the word "this" above).

That "this generation" means the generation alive when Christ spoke those words is supported by audience relevance. Throughout the discourse, our Lord looked the disciples in the eye and use the personal pronoun "you" 26 times. In the illustration of the fig tree Jesus said, "So you also, when you see all these things, know that it is near-at the doors" (Mt. 24:33)! "The expression 'Ye shall see' would not be proper if spoken of something which the hearers would none of them live to witness, and which would not take place for thousands of years."³¹ Further, that "this generation" refers to the contemporary generation of Jews is supported by the repeated use of the phrase "*all these things*." After the scathing condemnation of the Jewish leaders of His day and the promise of severe judgment our Lord said "Assuredly, I say to you, *all these things* will come upon this generation" (Mt. 23:36). He then added, "See! Your house is left to you desolate" (23:38). Then when Jesus and the disciples left the temple area and the disciples pointed out the magnificence of the buildings, Christ said "Do you not see *all these things*" (24:2). This statement is immediately followed by a prophecy of the destruction of the temple complex. Then when the disciples were seated on the Mount of Olives overlooking the temple complex, their minds still engrossed with the Savior's words regarding "*all these things*," they asked, "Tell us, when will *these things* be? And what will be the sign when *all these things* will be revealed" (Mk. 13:4). Then toward the end of the discourse when Jesus warned the disciples

²⁹ Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 490.

³⁰ Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *He Shall Have Dominion* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1992), 162.

³¹ J. Stuart Russell, *The Parousia* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990 [1881]), 115.

to be on the alert, our Lord said, “when you see *all these things*” (Mt. 24:33). Then, to close His discussion of the destruction Jerusalem and the temple, our Lord said, “Assuredly I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till *all these things* take place” (Mt. 24:34). The expression “all these things” is repeated with explicit reference to the destruction of Jerusalem in Mt. 23:36; 24:2, 3 and 24:33. It should be obvious to any unbiased interpreter that the phrase “all these things” in Matthew 24:34 must refer to the same judgment event predicted in Matthew 23:36, 24:2-3 that precipitated the disciples’ (“all these things”) question in Matthew 24:3. “This is the only interpretation which the words will bear; every other involves a wresting of language, and a violence to the understanding.”³²

Before we conclude our consideration of verse 24 we will briefly return to an examination of the idea that “generation” in Matthew 24:34 means the Jewish race. The *New Scofield Bible* reads, “The word ‘generation’ (Gk. *genea*) may be used in the sense of *race* or *family*, meaning that the nation or family of Israel will be preserved ‘till the day all these things take place,’ a promise wonderfully fulfilled to this day.”³³ Earlier we noted that in the Bible *genea* is never used to denote a race, but virtually always used to describe a group of people living during a particular period of time. The New Testament authors used a different Greek word *genos* when they wanted to convey the idea of race (cf. Mk. 7:26; Ac. 4:36; 7:19; 13:26; 17:28; 18:24; 2 Cor. 11:26; Gal. 1:14; Phil. 3:5; 1 Pet. 2:9). Perhaps this is why virtually all English translations and paraphrases of the Bible translate *genea* in Matthew 24:34 as generation, not race.³⁴

However, even if we presuppose the possibility that the word *genea* (“generation”) could be translated race in Matthew 24:34 the context of the passage would disallow it. To prove this point, just substitute the word “race” for “generation.” “The Jewish race will not become extinct until all these things take place.” This translation removes the problem of reconciling our Lord’s statement with the fact that the second bodily coming has not occurred almost 2,000 years after He uttered those words. (Note that such a serious contradiction only exists for those who believe the preceding passages are discussion the second *bodily* coming of Christ). This solution to the alleged “problem,” however, renders Jesus’ solemn statement rather absurd and meaningless as a warning. Russell writes,

Imagine a prophet in our own times predicting a great catastrophe in which London would be destroyed, St. Paul’s and the Houses of Parliament leveled with the ground, and a fearful

³² *Ibid.*, 87.

³³ *The New Scofield Study Bible*, 1169, footnote number 2.

³⁴ Note the following translations and paraphrases: (1) “This *generation* shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled” (KJV). (2) “This *generation* may not pass away till all these things come to pass” (Young’s Literal Translation). (3) “This *generation* shall not pass away, till all these things be accomplished” (ASV). (4) “This *generation* will not pass away till all these things take place” (RSV). (5) “This *generation* will not disappear till all this has taken place” (J. B. Phillips). (6) “This *generation* will not pass away until all these things take place” (NASB). (7) “All these things will take place before this present *generation* passes on” (Modern Language Bible). (8) “Before this *generation* has passed away all these things will have taken place” (Jerusalem Bible). (9) “This *generation* will by no means pass away till all these things take place” (NKJV). (10) “This *generation* will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened” (NIV). (11) “The present *generation* will live to see it all” (NEB). (12) “All these things will happen before the *people now living* have all died” (TEV). (13) “The present *generation* will not pass away, till all this happens” (James Moffat). (14) “The present *generation* will certainly not pass away until all this has taken place” (Weymouth). (15) “The present *generation* will not pass away until all this takes place” (New American Bible). (16) “This *generation* will not pass away until all these things have taken place” (NRSV).

slaughter of the inhabitants be perpetrated; and that when asked, “When shall those things come to pass?” he should reply, “The Anglo-Saxon race shall not become extinct till all these things be fulfilled!” Would this be a satisfactory answer? Would not such an answer be considered derogatory to the prophet, and an affront to his hearers? Would they not have reason to say, “It is safe prophesying when the event is placed at an interminable distance!” But the bare presupposition of such a sense in our Lord's prediction shows itself to be a *reductio ad absurdum*. Was it for this that the disciples were to wait and watch? Was this lesson that the budding fig-tree taught? Was it not until the Jewish race [i.e. nation] was about to become extinct that they were to “look up, and lift up their heads?” Such a hypothesis is its own refutation.³⁵

When Jesus says “this generation will not pass away until all these things take place” (as a prophet) He is doing two things. First, He is warning His audience to be on the alert, for some will still be alive when this catastrophe occurs. Second, He is being very specific with regard to the time of fulfillment so that everyone will know that He was a true prophet; that He really was the Christ, the Son of the living God. If we ignore the plain *literal* meaning of generation and substitute the “Jewish race” then the whole purpose of our Lord's statement falls to the ground. We could paraphrase Jesus' statement as follows: “Truly I say to you (My disciples living in the first century), there will still be ethnic Jews around when the tribulation occurs and I return in glory thousands of years from now.” The natural response to such a general statement would be: “Yes, so what.” The only thing such a statement proves is that the Jews (like everyone else) have the ability to beget children.

Yes, (but some may object) isn't the fact that Jews have maintained a separate identity as a people over the last nineteen centuries remarkable and miraculous given the fact they were often a hated and persecuted people? No. This historical fact is not significant at all. When Jerusalem was destroyed in A.D. 70 and when the last Jewish communities were swept out of the area around Galilee by the Romans in A.D. 135, there were thriving Jewish communities in almost every major city of the Roman Empire (i.e. in North Africa, Asia Minor, the Middle East, Rome, Greece, Syria, etc.) and even in areas outside the Roman Empire (e.g., Babylon). That a group of people united around a monotheistic religion and a distinct culture, already accustomed to living a somewhat segregated lifestyle, could maintain some type of separate identity is actually to be expected.

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³⁵ J. Stuart Russell, *The Parousia*, 87.