

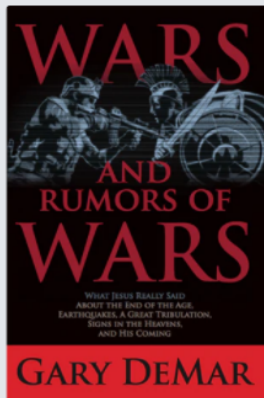
How Should “This Generation” be Understood?

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I continue to see debates about the proper understanding of “this generation” repeatedly used by Jesus in the gospels. Does “this generation” refer exclusively to the generation to whom Jesus was speaking, or is it somewhat elastic and expansive to include the entire New Covenant era?

First, *genea* (generation) always means people living at the same time. It does not mean “race” (*genos*) or “nation” (*ethnos*). Matthew 1:17 makes this clear: “So all the **generations** from Abraham to David are **fourteen generations**; from David to the deportation to Babylon, **fourteen generations**; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, **fourteen generations**.” This means there were 42 generations (people living at the same time), not 42 nations or 42 races.



Wars and Rumors of Wars

Skeptics read the Olivet Discourse in the right way, but come to the wrong conclusion. Christian futurists read it the wrong way and come to a different wrong conclusion. Jesus predicted that He would return within the time period of that generation alone. Unfortunately, too many Christians are giving the wrong answer when skeptics claim Jesus was mistaken. Everything Jesus said would happen before that generation passed away did happen.

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Second, as we will see, Jesus does not include “kind of” in the passages below. If Jesus wanted to say, “this kind of” (ποταπός) or “type of” generation will not pass away until all these things take place, He would have said so.

Third, some argue that Jesus adds qualifiers to “generation” in certain places, and because of their use, it could mean that we can assume the use of a qualifier in Matthew 24:34, even though one is not mentioned. Let’s be clear. There is no qualifier. The Pharisees demand of Jesus, “**We** want to see a sign” (Matt. 12:38). Jesus answers, “An **evil and adulterous** generation craves for a sign” (12:39). That made **their** generation an evil and adulterous generation since they were the ones who asked for a sign. Jesus gave **them** a sign, “the sign of Jonah the prophet” (12:39). And when was the sign of Jonah the prophet fulfilled? In their day, and only their day: “for just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (12:40).

The use of “this generation” (12:41–42) is used by Jesus to point out how *their* generation would be judged by the people of Nineveh and the Queen of the South because someone greater than Jonah and Solomon “is **here**.” The “here” was in Jesus’ day and the “someone greater” was Jesus since only those people living in Jesus’ day saw the sign of the resurrection (Acts 1:3). To repeat, Jesus does not say “this kind of generation will not pass away.” He says, “this generation,” the same phrase that is used in Matthew 23:36, a verse that even Thomas Ice, a dispensationalist, says, “is an undisputed reference to A.D.70.” Why a sudden change in Matthew 24:34?

Fourth, Jesus always used “this generation” in reference to His contemporaries (Matt. 11:16; 12:41, 42; 23:36; 24:34; Mark 8:12; 13:30; Luke 7:31; 11:29, 30, 31, 32, 50, 51; 17:25; 21:32). The use of “this,” a near demonstrative, identifies the generation as the one to whom Jesus was addressing. The use of the second person plural (you) throughout Matthew 24 beginning with verse 2 and continuing through with verse 34 identifies the audience. Then there’s verse 33: “so **you** too, when **you see** all these things, recognize that it is near, at the doors.”

The following is a partial list of commentators who understand that “this generation” refers to their generation, the generation to whom Jesus was speaking (taken from my book [*Wars and Rumors of Wars*](#)):

- Grant Osborne (2010): “[T]his generation’ (ἡ γενεὰ αὕτη) in the gospels always means the people of Jesus’ own time (11:16; 12:41–42; 23:36) not, as some have proposed, the generation of the last days in history, the Jewish people, the human race in general, or the sinful people.”
- Henry Hammond (1653): “I now assure you, that in the age of some that are now alive, shall all that has been said in this chapter [Matt. 24] be certainly fulfilled.”
- John Lightfoot (1658): “Hence it appears plain enough, that the foregoing verses [Matt. 24:1–34] 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 until the city was destroyed.”

- Philip Doddridge (1750): “And verily I say unto you; and urge you to observe it, as absolutely necessary in order to understand what I have been saying, That this generation of men now living shall not pass away until all these things be fulfilled, for what I have foretold concerning the destruction of the Jewish state is so near at hand, that some of you shall live to see it all accomplished with a dreadful exactness.”
- Thomas Newton (1755): “It is to me a wonder how any man can refer part of the foregoing discourse to the destruction of Jerusalem, and part to the end of the world, or any other distant event, when it is said so positively here in the conclusion, All these things shall be fulfilled in this generation.”
- John Gill (1766): “This is a full and clear proof, that not any thing that is said before [v. 34], relates to the second coming of Christ, the day of judgment, and the end of the world; but that all belongs to the coming of the son of man in the destruction of Jerusalem, and to the end of the Jewish state.”
- Thomas Scott (1817): “This absolutely restricts our primary interpretation of the prophecy to the destruction of Jerusalem, which took place within forty years.”
- Henry Cowles (1881): “Some interpreters have construed the words—‘this generation’—to mean this sort of people, i.e., the Jews, or the wicked, etc., seeking to set aside its only legitimate sense, viz., the men then living. Such wresting of Christ’s words cannot be reprobated too severely.”
- Milton Terry (1898): “Is it not strange that any careful student of our Lord’s teaching should fail to understand his answer to this very question? The disciples asked, definitely, WHEN shall it be [Matt. 24:3]? And Jesus proceeded to foretell a variety of things which they would live to see — all preliminary to the end. He foretold the horrors of the siege of Jerusalem, and an intelligible sign by which they might know the imminence of the final catastrophe of Judaism. And having told them of all these things, and of his own coming in the clouds and its glorious significance, he added: ‘When ye see these things coming to pass, know that it is nigh, at the door. Verily I say unto you, this generation shall not pass away until all these things be accomplished.’ The ruin of the temple was, accordingly, the crisis which marked the end of the pre-Messianic age.”
- John Broadas (1886): “Verily, I say unto you (see on 5:18), calling attention to something of special importance. This generation, as in 23:36, also 11:16 12:41f.; and compare Luke 17:25 with 21:32. The word cannot have any other meaning here than the obvious one. The attempts to establish for it the sense of race or nation have failed. There are some examples in which it might have such a meaning, but none in which it must, for in every case the recognized meaning will answer, and so another sense is not admissible. (Comp. on 3:6) Some of the Fathers took it

to mean the generation of believers, i. e., the Christians, etc., after the loose manner of interpreting into which many of them so often fell. We now commonly make the rough estimate of three generations to a century. The year in which our Lord said this was most probably A.D. 30, and if so, it was forty years to the destruction of Jerusalem. The thought is thus the same as in 16:28; and comp. John 21:22f. Till all these things be fulfilled, or, more exactly, take place, 'come to pass,' see on 5:18. The emphasis is on 'all.' All the things predicted in v. 4–31 would occur before or in immediate connection with the destruction of Jerusalem."

- G. R. Beasley-Murray (1957): "Despite all the attempts to establish the contrary, there seems to be no escape from the admission that here [in Mark 13:30] ἡ γενεὰ αὕτη is to be taken in its natural sense of the generation contemporary with Jesus."

- Robert G. Bratcher and Eugene A. Nida (1961): "[T]he obvious meaning of the words 'this generation' is the people contemporary with Jesus. Nothing can be gained by trying to take the word in any sense other than its normal one: in Mark (elsewhere in 8:12, 9:19) the word always has this meaning."

- William L. Lane (1974): "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."

- D. A. Carson (1984): "[This generation] can only with the greatest difficulty be made to mean anything other than the generation living when Jesus spoke."

- William Sanford LaSor (1987): "If 'this generation' is taken literally, all of the predictions were to take place within the life-span of those living at that time."

- Jack P. Lewis (1976): "The meaning of generation (*genea*) is crucial to the interpretation of the entire chapter. While Scofield, following Jerome, contended that it meant the Jewish race, there is only one possible case in the New Testament (Luke 16:8) where the lexicon suggests that *genea* means race. There is a distinction between *genos* (race) and *genea* (generation). Others have argued that *genea* means the final generation; that is, once the signs have started, all these happenings would transpire in one generation (cf. 23:36). But elsewhere in Matthew *genea* means the people alive at one time and usually at the time of Jesus (1:17; 11:16; 12:39,41,45; 23:36; Mark 8:38; Luke 11:50f.; 17:25), and it doubtlessly means the same here."

"Christ's use of the words 'immediately after' [in Matthew 24:30] does not leave room for a long delay (2,000 years or more before his literal second coming occurs), neither does the explicit time-scale given in Matthew 24:34. The word 'parousia' does not occur in this section but is prominently reintroduced in the new paragraph which begins at Matthew 24:36, where its

unknown time is contrasted with the clear statement that the events of this paragraph will take place within ‘this generation’ (Matthew 24:36). This section is therefore in direct continuity with what has gone before, the account of the siege of Jerusalem. Here we reach its climax.” (P. 936) “The language ... is drawn from Daniel 7:13–14, which points to the vindication and enthronement of Jesus (rather than his second coming [‘parousia’]). ... In this context, therefore, this poetic language appropriately refers to the great changes which were about to take place in the world, when Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed. It speaks of the ‘Son of Man’ entering into his kingship, and ‘his angels’ gathering in his new people from all the earth. The fall of the temple is thus presented, in highly allusive language, as the end of the old order, to be replaced by the new regime of Jesus, the Son of Man, and the international growth of his church, the new people of God.... The NIV margin offers ‘race’ as an alternative to ‘generation.’ This suggestion is prompted more by embarrassment on the part of those who think Matthew 24:30 refers to the ‘parousia’ (second coming) rather than by any natural sense of the word ‘genea’!”

- F. F. Bruce (1983): “The phrase ‘this generation’ is found too often on Jesus’ lips in this literal sense for us to suppose that it suddenly takes on a different meaning in the saying we are now examining. Moreover, if the generation of the end-time had been intended, ‘that generation’ would have been a more natural way of referring to it than ‘this generation.’
- John Nolland (2005): “Matthew uses *genea* here for the tenth time. Though his use of the term has a range of emphases, it consistently refers to (the time span of) a single human generation. All the alternative senses proposed here [in 24:34] (the Jewish people; humanity; the generation of the end-time signs; wicked people) are artificial and based on the need to protect Jesus from error. ‘This generation’ is the generation of Jesus’ contemporaries.”
- R. T. France (2007): “‘This generation’ has been used frequently in this gospel for Jesus’ contemporaries, especially in a context of God’s impending judgment; see 11:16; 12:39, 41–42, 45; 16:4; 17:17, and especially 23:36, where God’s judgment on ‘this generation’ leads up to Jesus’ first prediction of the devastation of the temple in 23:38. It may safely be concluded that if it had not been for the embarrassment caused by supposing that Jesus was here talking about his parousia, no one would have thought of suggesting any other meaning for ‘this generation,’ such as ‘the Jewish race’ or ‘human beings in general’ or ‘all the generations of Judaism that reject him’ or even ‘this kind’ (meaning scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees). Such broad senses, even if they were lexically possible, would offer no help in response to the disciples’ question ‘When?’”
- Paul Copan (2008): “In these passages, the ‘coming’ (the Greek verb is *erchomai* = ‘[I] come’) is expected within Jesus’ own ‘adulterous and sinful generation.’ Something dramatic will apparently take place in the near future.”