

# "This Generation" and it's Preterist Exegetical Misuse

by Bob DeWaay

Several years ago I published an article about **Matthew 24:34** where I claimed that "this generation" was a pejorative term about rebellious Jewish leadership.<sup>1</sup> In today's article I will support that claim by providing a range of meaning study of the term "generation" (Greek *genea*) as used in the New Testament. I will show that the term "generation" is most often used in the New Testament in a qualitative (people of the same kind) not quantitative (people of the same time) sense.

The Greek word for generation is found 37 times in the New Testament. Only five of these are outside of the gospels and Acts. As with most words, it has a range of meaning depending on its context. When used in the plural, it denotes "succeeding generations of people" whether past or future and is used that way 8 times in the NT.<sup>2</sup> Of the 29 other instances of its use, the term clearly means during someone's lifetime or era — twice (**Acts 8:33** about Messiah and **Acts 13:36** about David's generation). It is the other 27 instances that will be important to help us understand how Matthew used the term in **Matthew 24:34**.

This passage is identical in the synoptics: "*Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place*" (**Matthew 24:34; Luke 21:32; Mark 13:30**), all from the Olivet discourse. The passage in Matthew is most commonly cited by preterists as proof that the prophecies Jesus gave had to have been fulfilled within forty years or a generation of people then living (70 A.D. they say). Taken that way, the term "generation" is a quantitative time modifier only. I will provide evidence that this interpretation is wrong. Besides these three cases under dispute, there remain 24 other times that *genea* is used in the New Testament. These will be the key to understanding **Matthew 24:34** and the synoptic parallels.

The term *genea* is used most often in the New Testament in a pejorative sense. In those cases when "generation" is used pejoratively (often with modifiers like "evil, unbelieving, perverse," etc.) it functions as a qualitative statement about a group of people. Though often, but not always, addressed to people then living, the key idea is the spiritual condition of the people, not the number of their years or the time of their living. The meaning in these cases is "an ethnic group exhibiting cultural similarities—'people of the same kind.'"<sup>3</sup> When used this way in the New Testament, the similarities are always bad characteristics. There are some cases where the ideas of "people of the same time" and "people of the same kind" are combined. For example, in **Luke 11:29-32** we see a negative characterization of those who demanded a sign:

*And as the crowds were increasing, He began to say, "This generation is a wicked generation; it seeks for a sign, and yet no sign shall be given to it but the sign of Jonah. For just as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so shall the Son of Man be to this generation. The Queen of the South shall rise up with the men of this generation at the judgment and condemn them, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and behold, something greater than Solomon is here. The men of Nineveh shall stand up with this generation at the judgment and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here."*

Though clearly referring to those who witnessed Jesus yet did not believe Him, the key idea is their wickedness—not just when they were alive. I say that because "this generation" does not apply to all Jews or all people then living. Some believed; those will not be condemned at the final judgment.

Amazingly, all 24 of the cases of the use of "generation" in the New Testament that do not refer to succeeding generations or obviously to someone's lifetime, are qualitative or have a strong qualitative component.<sup>4</sup> In none of these usages does "generation" mean "all people without exception alive at the same time" nor do they mean "all Jews without exception." The qualitative idea is seen, for example, in this passage: "*And his master praised the unrighteous steward because he had acted shrewdly; for the sons of this age are more shrewd in relation to their own kind than the sons of light*" (**Luke 16:8**). The NASB translated "*genea* – generation" as "kind." Paul used the term the same way here: "*that you may prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world*" (**Philippians 2:15**). He is discussing a type of person, not a period of history. This passage applies to all Christians throughout church history.

When conducting a range of meaning study, as we are here, it is of foremost importance to know how the same author used a term, particularly in the same piece of writing and in similar contexts. Therefore, how Matthew used *genea* in passages previous to **Matthew 24:34** is the strongest evidence for his meaning there. The first four usages (excluding 1:17 where the plural is used referring to a genealogy) are in **Matthew 12:39-45**:

*But He answered and said to them, “An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign shall be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet; 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. The men of Nineveh shall stand up with **this generation at the judgment, and shall condemn it** because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. The Queen of the South shall rise up with **this generation at the judgment and shall condemn it**, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and behold, something greater than Solomon is here. Now when the unclean spirit goes out of a man, it passes through waterless places, seeking rest, and does not find it. Then it says, ‘I will return to my house from which I came’; and when it comes, it finds it unoccupied, swept, and put in order. Then it goes, and takes along with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there; and the last state of that man becomes worse than the first. That is the way it will also be with **this evil generation.**”*

The qualitative dimension to these usages is undeniable. It was spoken in response to the Pharisees demanding a sign. Its application is not limiting “generation” to people alive whoever they may be or for however long they may live, but applies to those (like the parallel passage in Luke previously discussed) who refused to believe Christ and remained therefore under God's judgment.

The next usage in Matthew is in **16:4**: “*An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign; and a sign will not be given it, except the sign of Jonah.*” And He left them, and went away.” This is a repetition of the previous condemnation in chapter 12 and also characterizes people by their spiritual qualities not merely when they lived in history (people of the same kind is the more prominent idea, not people of the same time). The sign of Jonah is a reference to the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. That event is the sign that He is the Messiah. This sign applies to every generation, not just to those of the first century. Paul said, “Jews seek for signs” but Paul preached Christ crucified (**1 Corinthians 1:22, 23**). The cross of Christ became the definitive sign and those who reject that sign (anytime in church history) come under condemnation.

In **Matthew 17:17** we read: “*And Jesus answered and said, ‘O unbelieving and perverted generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring him here to Me’*” This was not spoken directly to the disciples alone, but to the general unbelief He found in Israel. Some scholars think “unbelieving and perverted” are allusions to **Deuteronomy 32:5, 20**.<sup>5</sup> The same Greek word for “perverted” is found in both Matthew and the LXX of Deuteronomy. The allusion to Deuteronomy shows the idea of corporate solidarity. Their unbelief when Jesus was present doing mighty deeds echoes the unbelief of those who were delivered from Egypt by God's mighty deeds and then grumbled in the wilderness. Moses wrote, “*They have acted corruptly toward Him, They are not His children, because of their defect; But are a **perverse and crooked generation***” (**Deuteronomy 32:5** – “generation” is *genea* in the LXX). Since this was part of Moses' song it was not just for people then alive but future generations: “*For I know that after my death you will act corruptly and turn from the way which I have commanded you; and evil will befall you in the latter days, for you will do that which is evil in the sight of the Lord, provoking Him to anger with the work of your hands*” (**Deuteronomy 31:9**). The people in Jesus' day had the same characteristics as those in Moses' day and those carried on after Jesus' ascension just as they did after Moses' death.

The next usage of *genea* in Matthew is also in a passage that links current negative qualities to people with similar qualities from other times in Israel's history:

*Therefore, behold, I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes; some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city, that upon you may fall the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. Truly I say to you, all these things shall come upon **this generation.**” (**Matthew 23:34-36**)*

This passage is clearly cross generational. It goes from the distant past (Cain's treatment of Abel) to the future (I am sending . . . you will kill). What characterizes "this generation" in **Matthew 23:36** (the closest parallel usage of *genea* to that in **Matthew 24:34**) is not how many years certain people were alive, but their spiritual qualities. Those who rejected Jesus and had Him killed are of the same **kind** as those who killed the righteous throughout Old Testament history and those who would kill Jesus' representatives in the future. What all these people have in common is not the era of history they live in, but their negative, spiritual characteristics. This is a vivid example of the qualitative use of "generation" in Matthew and elsewhere in the New Testament and in the Old as well.

Having seen that throughout Matthew *genea* is used qualitatively, often in connection with pejorative adjectives, we have established how Matthew used the term within its range of meanings. Let us therefore examine **Matthew 24:34** and see if there is reason to believe Matthew suddenly changed his usage. The passage says "*Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.*" Which generation? – Those who happened to be alive whoever they might be? The only other time we find that usage of *genea* in the New Testament is in **Acts 8:33** and **13:36** when it is attached to the lives of specifically mentioned persons (Messiah and David). Everywhere else the term "generation" used in the singular it has qualitative connotations. Preterists who take this incident in **Matthew 24:34** to be ONLY quantitative do so against the contextual evidence in Matthew. When Jesus wanted to make a time constraint, He said "*some of you standing here will not taste death until . . .*" (**Matthew 16:28** referring probably to the Mount of Transfiguration). Eight previous usages in Matthew ALL had qualitative connotations as we have shown. Why would this suddenly change without notice? The answer? It has not.

If we take "this generation" in **Matthew 24:34** to mean the same thing it does in **Matthew 23:36** and elsewhere—rebellious and unbelieving Jews as epitomized by their leadership, then we can make sense of it in the context of Bible prophecy. Jesus is predicting that the Jewish leadership and most of their followers would remain on the scene of history and remain in their unbelieving condition **until** the prophecies in **Matthew 24:1-33** have come to pass. They will then pass away. How and why? Because Messiah will return and bring judgment on the unbelieving, banishing them from His Kingdom and will gather together the believing remnant and "all Israel will be saved."

Paul made this important statement: "*For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery, lest you be wise in your own estimation, that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fulness of the Gentiles has come in; and thus all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, 'The Deliverer will come from Zion, He will remove ungodliness from Jacob'*" (**Romans 11:25-26**). The hardening of national Israel, which is what makes them a crooked and unbelieving generation, is partial and temporary. There always has been a believing remnant. Those are not included in "the generation of His wrath" (**Jeremiah 7:29**). Here is what Jesus predicts:

*The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.* (**Matthew 13:41-43**)

The same "Israel" that is partially hardened now will be "saved" – national, ethnic Israel. When Messiah bodily reigns on the earth it will be over a righteous Israel, not a wicked and perverse generation.

Our range of meaning study has concluded that *genea* is used more often in the New Testament as a qualitative term than a chronologically quantitative one. Our study in particular of the gospel of Matthew shows that Matthew uses it in that way. We have also shown that taking the usage in **Matthew 24:34** to be within that same range of meaning makes perfect sense in that context and fits with what we know about Bible prophecy from other passages. Therefore, the typical preterist interpretation is contrived and fails to consider the preponderance of evidence in the New Testament for the meaning of *genea* in such contexts.

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## End Notes

1. CIC issue 77; July/August 2003 <http://cicministry.org/commentary/issue77.htm>
2. Matt. 1:17; Luke 1:48, 50; Acts 14:16; 15:21; Eph. 3:5, 21; Col. 1:26.>
3. Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996, c1989). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament : Based on semantic domains* (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition.) (1:111). New York: United Bible societies.
4. Mat 11:16; 12:39, 41, 42, 45; 16:4; 17:17; 23:36; Mark 8:12, 38; 9:19; Luke 7:31; 9:41; 11:29, 30, 31, 32, 50, 51; 16:8; 17:25; Acts 2:40; Philippians 2:15; Heb. 3:10.
5. "The adjectives "unbelieving" and "perverse" echo Deut 32:5, 20 and suggest both faithlessness and immorality." Blomberg, C. (2001, c1992). Vol. 22: Matthew (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; The New American Commentary (267). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.