

The Olivet Discourse: the use of the term “this generation” in the Discourse

I. Texts

- A. Matt 24:32-36 – ³² “From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. ³³ So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁴ Truly, I say to you, this generation [Greek *genea*] will not pass away until all these things take place. ³⁵ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. ³⁶ But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.”
- B. Matt 23:36 – Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation [Greek *genea*].

II. Two options for interpretation briefly evaluated

A. “This generation” = the people of God

1. Explanation: “This generation” refers to a people, i.e. “the people of God,” who will endure until the second coming.
2. For: v. 35-36 seem to disregard any attempt to specify a timeframe.
3. Against: v. 35-36 say the day and hour are not know, but this does not inherently exclude a longer period of time such as 40 years.
4. **NB**: The timeframe is figurative, but the fulfillment is literal.

B. “This generation” = the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70

1. Explanation: “This generation” refers not to the end of history and the second coming, but to the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70.
2. For: the use of “this generation” takes seriously the context [Jesus’ answering the question, “When will these things be?” (Matt 24:3)] and the original audience (the disciples).
3. Against: the above discounts the fact that all of Scripture is intended for all following generations of Christians.
4. **NB**: The timeframe is literal, but the fulfillment is figurative.

III. “This generation”

- A. To the original hearers, “this generation” could mean only one thing: those within a *generation*, i.e. 30-40 year timeframe, of the original words.
- B. Evangelical commentators in the past 150 years, though, have been reticent to concede such a timeframe.
- C. “Far, however, from accepting this decision of our Lord as final, the commentators have violently resisted that which seems the natural and common-sense meaning of his words. They have insisted that because the events predicted did not so come to pass in that generation, therefore the word *generation* (*genea*) cannot possibly mean, what it is usually understood to mean, the people of that particular age or period, the contemporaries of our Lord. To affirm that these things did not come to pass is to beg the question, and something more. But we submit that it is the business of grammarians not to be apprehensive of possible consequences, but to settle the true meaning of words. Our Lord’s predictions may be safely left to take care of themselves; it is for us to try to understand them.”¹
- D. “...the use of ‘this generation’ throughout the Gospels makes it clear that it means the generation to whom Jesus was speaking. It never means...some future generation. The adjective *this* points to the contemporary nature of the generation. If some future generation had been in view, Jesus could have chosen the adjective *that*: ‘That [future] generation.’

¹ . Stuart Russell, *The Parousia: A Critical Inquiry into the New Testament Doctrine of Our Lord’s Second Coming*, new ed. (1887; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 84-85 (emphasis original).

“‘*Not one* of [the New Testament uses of *genea*] is speaking of the entire Jewish race over thousands of years; *all* use the word in its normal sense of *the sum total of those living at the same time*. It always refers to *contemporaries*. (In fact, those who say it means “race” tend to acknowledge this fact, but explain that the word suddenly *changes* its meaning when Jesus uses it in Matt. 24!’”²

IV. J. Stuart Russell’s argument for a literal timeframe use of *genea*:

- A. Matt 23:36 [All commentators believe this to be Jesus’ current generation.]
- B. Matt 11:16 – “But to what shall I compare this generation?...”
- C. Matt 12:39 – But he answered them, “An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.”
- D. Luk 11:49-51 – ⁴⁹ “Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, ‘I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute,’ ⁵⁰ so that the blood of all the prophets, shed from the foundation of the world, may be charged against this generation, ⁵¹ from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, it will be required of this generation.”
- E. Mar 8:38 – “For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed...”
- F. Luk 17:25 – “But first he must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation.”

V. Other texts for consideration:

- A. Matt 16:27-28: ²⁷ “For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done. ²⁸ Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”
- B. Matt 10:23: “When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next, for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.”
- C. **What will the disciples witness while some are still alive?**
 - 1. “The Synoptic Gospels link this coming of the Son of Man with some manifestation of the kingdom of God. Many commentators see this manifestation in various critical moments of redemptive history, such as Christ’s resurrection, his ascension, or Pentecost, all of which provide some outward manifestation of the kingly glory of Christ.”³

² Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness: The Folly of Trying to Predict When Christ Will Return* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1991), 32-34. David Chilton, *The Great Tribulation* (Fort Worth: Dominion, 1987), 3. Emphases original.

³ R. C. Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus: When Did Jesus Say When He Would Return?* (1998; new ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015), 60-61.