



Critical Issues Commentary

A BIBLICALLY BASED COMMENTARY ON ISSUES THAT IMPACT YOU

JULY/AUGUST 2003

ISSUE NUMBER 77

A SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM OF "THIS GENERATION"

IN MATTHEW 24:34

BY BOB DEWAAY

"Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place." (Matthew 24:34)

Matthew 24:34 is a difficult passage for Bible interpreters. The problem is that Jesus appears to be predicting that the generation of Jews alive when He made the prophetic predictions found in Matthew 24 would also be alive to witness the fulfillment of His prophecies. This difficulty has sparked numerous proposed solutions.¹ The solutions fall into camps based on whether or not the interpreter believes in a literal, future fulfillment of the prophecies in Daniel, Matthew 24, and Revelation. Those who believe in future prophecy often consider "generation" either to mean the Jews in general, or a generation that will arise later in history and witness these things. Those who believe that everything was fulfilled by 70 AD (these are called preterists) take "this generation" to mean "those alive when Jesus gave His prophecies."

Gary Demar writes, "That is, the generation that was in existence when Jesus addressed His disciples would not pass away until all the events that preceded verse 34 came to pass."² This would mean that the gathering of the elect would have to have already happened: "And He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other" (Matthew 24:31). Another preterist writes: "All Scripture referring to "end-time" events must relate to the Jewish war with Rome during the period A.D. 66-70 which culminated in the destruction of the temple and the end of animal sacrifices. The promised second coming, resurrection and judgment must have

occurred during that period. All 'difficult' prophetic passages must be interpreted based on this premise."³

Some who believe in a future literal fulfillment of Bible prophecy have claimed that "this generation" means: "those who will be alive when Israel is regathered as a nation." Preterists have attacked that interpretation as being contrived. They rightly point out that at least some of what was predicted in Matthew 24 did happen within the lifetime of the disciples (particularly the destruction of the temple). Why would "this generation" refer to a future generation that will not have witnessed that event? Other suggestions by futurists have not done justice to the text and grammar of Matthew 24:34.

In this article I will propose and defend my solution to this difficulty. My thesis is that "this generation" as used in Matthew 24:34 is not a chronological modifier,⁴ but a qualitative statement⁵ about the spiritual condition of the Jewish leaders and those who follow them. I will defend this thesis by showing the usage of this phrase in Matthew, Mark, Luke, Acts, Hebrews, and the Psalms and by showing how the Jewish concept of corporate solidarity⁶ applies to its usage. The reason this is important is that preterists have been confusing many sincere Christians and discrediting the study of Bible prophecy by using Matthew 24:34 as a key proof text. Those of us who believe in literal Bible prophecy need to give a cogent interpretation of the text that does justice to the historical and grammatical issues.

THIS EVIL GENERATION

Matthew 12:41-45 contains the most concentrated usage of the phrase "this generation" in the Bible. Jesus is condemning those (particularly the Pharisees who had just claimed that Jesus had a demon -- verse 24) who rejected the evidence that Jesus was the Messiah. Here is what Jesus said:

*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**. (Matthew 12:41-45)*

"This generation" is mentioned three times; referring to the leaders who had refused the evidence that Jesus was the "Son of David" (Messiah) and accused Him of casting out demons by the power of Satan. Jesus warned that these rebellious Jewish leaders will be worse off on the Day of Judgment than pagans who had responded to less evidence than the Pharisees had witnessed. The further

implication is that their situation will be worse in the future because Jesus had come and cast out demons, but since they refuse to come to faith in Him, they shall be overrun with worse demons in the future. The demons become a metaphor for the spiritual condition of the Jewish leadership and the “house” they are managing.

Clearly these things do apply to the Jewish leaders who are contemporaries with Jesus. However, do they apply to all Jews then living? The answer is “no.” Those who come to faith in Christ are not the ones who face future judgment and being overrun with worse demons. Only those who rejected Him are in mind (and the “house” they are managing). The chronological factor is important in that those who were alive saw the greatest evidence that Jesus was who He claimed and thus face stricter judgment at the end of the age. However, others then alive are not included in the condemnation of “this evil generation.” The leaders refuse to come to faith in the face of Jesus’ power over nature, sickness, and death as shown in the previous chapters of Matthew. This soon leads to the demand for yet more signs. Here is Jesus’ answer to that request: “An **evil and adulterous generation** seeks after a sign; and a sign will not be given it, except the sign of Jonah.” (Matthew 16:4a). Later in the New Testament Paul wrote “For indeed Jews ask for signs, and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness” (1 Corinthians 1:22, 23). The one sign that was offered was still the watershed issue when Paul wrote. One must either come to faith based on the crucified and resurrected Christ or continue in spiritual blindness and face judgment.

I believe that “this generation” has to do with the refusal of Jewish leaders and those who follow them to believe the clear evidence that Jesus is the Messiah. This is epitomized by those who were contemporary eyewitnesses of Jesus and His mighty works, but not limited to them. As I will show later, those who rejected Christ are standing as one with the generation who witnessed all

the miracles at the time of Moses and yet died in unbelief. They are one with their fathers and all who follow who refuse to believe the gospel. In this sense, “this generation” includes sinful Jewish leadership at the time of Christ, but is not thereby exhausted of meaning. All future generations must face up to the evidence and either join their fathers in rejecting the evidence, or join with the remnant that believes and is saved. Though the same issues confront the Gentiles until the end of the age, the term “this generation” is used to refer to the Jewish leaders and their followers.

The incident in Luke where Jesus casts out demons and laments an “*unbelieving and perverted generation*” provides another example of “generation” used in a pejorative sense. Here is the story of the incident:

*“And I begged Your disciples to cast it out, and they could not.” And Jesus answered and said, “O **unbelieving and perverted generation**, how long shall I be with you, and put up with you? Bring your son here.” And while he was still approaching, the demon dashed him to the ground, and threw him into a convulsion. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, and healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. And they were all amazed at the greatness of God. But while everyone was marveling at all that He was doing, He said to His disciples, “Let these words sink into your ears; for the Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men.” But they did not understand this statement, and it was concealed from them so that they might not perceive it; and they were afraid to ask Him about this statement. (Luke 9:40-45)*

The failure to be able to cast out the demon caused Jesus to link His own disciples with the “*unbelieving and perverted generation*.” The question is, “why”? The answer is found in the context. Notice that Jesus went from lamenting the perverted generation to a solemn state-

ment about His arrest and crucifixion which the disciples failed to understand. Their lack of understanding is underscored by the next verse (Luke 9:46) where they are arguing about who will be the greatest. If they really understood the true mission of Messiah (to be arrested and crucified) they would not be clamoring for greatness. The “unbelieving . . . generation” is one that does not perceive the nature of Jesus’ person and mission.

The passage shows (much like Matthew 12) that people do not receive or understand the true purpose, mission, and nature of Messiah they will be left powerless in the face of demons. As long as the disciples did not understand the cross, they were still in the same spiritual condition as the “perverted generation” (the Jewish leaders and their followers who reject Christ). The disciples wanted greatness (just like the leaders who had rejected Christ) and they were just as powerless to bring true freedom from satanic oppression. This freedom comes only through the cross. The disciples’ “understanding” is not opened up until the 24th chapter in Luke’s narrative.⁷ Though “this generation” refers to those who reject Christ, as long as the disciples lack understanding of the cross and seek greatness, they too are sharing in spirit the nature of “an evil and perverted generation.” This problem is rectified later when their eyes are opened to the true mission and nature of Messiah.

The next usage of “*this generation*” in Matthew (after the one in Matthew 12 discussed earlier) shows that the term is not referring to all Jews, or all Jews alive at the time, but to those who reject Messiah. The passage also shows the idea of corporate solidarity in Jewish thinking that transcends chronological considerations:

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)

In Matthew 23 Jesus rebukes the Jewish leadership pronouncing woe after woe upon them (showing Jesus' solidarity with the true prophets of the Old Testament). Notice how Jesus' statement transcends chronological limitations. Not only does He refer to future messengers He would send and whom they would reject, but He includes the Jewish leadership in the guilt of all those who before them persecuted God's chosen ones.⁸ The issue was not chronological (though Jesus' contemporary "judges" epitomize the wickedness of rejecting God's prophets) but moral and spiritual. All those who reject God's ordained messengers, past, present, and future are included in the condemnation of "this generation." It is becoming clear that "this generation" is a phrase that Jesus used qualitatively rather than chronologically.⁹ At issue was not when certain Jewish people were born and how many years they might live, but their response to divine revelation: including that which comes through the Old Testament prophets, the person of Jesus, and future preachers of the Gospel.

The term "this generation," is also used qualitatively in the other synoptic gospels. An important one is found in **Mark 8:38**: "*For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels.*" The adjectives "adulterous and sinful" show that Jesus is speaking of the general rebellion against Him and His message as epitomized by Israel's leadership. Is there any reason to limit the warning about being ashamed of Christ and His teaching to only those alive before 70 AD? **Luke 9:26** issues the same warning but makes it universal. **Luke 11:29-32** uses "this generation" in a rebuke to those who demanded signs from Jesus.

When Jesus did intend a chronological limitation, He used different terminology. Consider the next verse after **Mark 8:38** cited above: "*And He was saying to them, 'Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who shall not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power.'*" (**Mark 9:1** also **Matthew 16:28**) The phrase "this . . . generation" denotes the moral and spiritual qualities of those included, the phrase "*some of those who are standing here who shall not taste death until*" denotes a time limitation. Keep this in mind when we return to **Matthew 24:34** to understand why Jesus uses "this generation" in that passage.

At Pentecost Peter used similar terminology when preaching to his Jewish audience: "*And with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, 'Be saved from this perverse generation!'*" (**Acts 2:40**). Could we possibly construe his words to mean, "Be saved from all Jewish people now alive"? No. The perverse generation was the Jewish leadership who had rejected their own Messiah. There was no concern about how many years they could be expected to live in a normal lifetime. At issue was their beliefs and behavior. Again we have an example of "*this generation*" being a qualitative statement that connoted spiritual wickedness.

In the case of Peter's sermon in Acts 2 we find out how people can be saved from "this . . . generation"? by repenting and believing the gospel. Later in Acts Saul of Tarsus was listening to Stephen's preaching and indictment of the Jewish leadership by linking them with Jewish rebellion from previous generations:

You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; (Acts 7:51, 52)

They subsequently killed Stephen for these words as Paul held their coats. At that point in his life Paul was still a part of the perverse generation that some of Peter's hearers were saved out of. In Acts 9 Paul was converted from being a leader of the "perverse generation" who kills God's spokespersons, to one who embraced Messiah. He joined other Jewish believers in Messiah in the early Jewish church, many who had been saved under Peter's preaching. By God's grace they escaped from the wicked generation. Paul had been one of the leaders who was indicted by Stephen's sermon. "*This generation*" is something one can be saved from!

THE OLD TESTAMENT AND CORPORATE SOLIDARITY

Most Americans prize individuality. We have a hard time understanding the thinking of the Jewish people who wrote the Bible. However, we need to comprehend the idea of corporate solidarity to make sense of many Biblical passages. For example, the author of Hebrews argued that Levi paid tithes in Abraham when Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek (**Hebrews 7:4-10**). Levi was Abraham's descendent so according to Jewish thinking, if Abraham was lesser than Melchizedek, then Levi was too.

Often the idea of corporate solidarity is applied to guilt. Paul uses this reasoning in Romans 5. All "sinned" in Adam: "*Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned.*" (**Romans 5:12**). The word translated "sinned" is in the aorist tense in the Greek, meaning a point in time event. This event is Adam's sin.¹⁰ The Jewish idea of corporate solidarity sees all of Adam's posterity as sinning "in Adam." The converse of this is found later in Romans 5 where all of those who are "in Christ" are made alive by His one act of righteousness.¹¹ The issue is which group does one belong to, those who are only in Adam, or those of Adam's race who are now in Christ by faith in His finished work. Corporate solidarity is true in each case.

Another way the Jewish idea of corporate solidarity is expressed is through Hebraic idioms. A common one is where someone is called “a son of” with the meaning, “characterized by.” This finds numerous expressions throughout the Bible. Consider this example: “Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest” (**Ephesians 2:3**). Those who are “children of wrath” are not literally “conceived by” wrath but are characterized as being under God’s wrath against sin. Jesus uses this terminology in Matthew 23 in the same context as the “this generation” statement discussed earlier: “Consequently you bear witness against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets” (**Matthew 23:31**). By killing God’s messengers, they make themselves “sons of” those who did likewise in the Old Testament, though the Pharisees considered themselves “sons of the prophets” not the “sons of” their murderers. The idea is this: they are in corporate solidarity not because of family tree, but because of belief and behavior. Likewise Christians are called “children of light” as opposed to being “of darkness”: “For you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness” (**1Thessalonians 5:5**).

The idea expressed in these and many other passages is that those who follow the example of certain people in previous generations are participating in their guilt. How one believes and acts makes him a “son of” one who previously did the same. For example, in John 8 Jesus called those who considered themselves “sons of Abraham,” actually “sons of the devil” (**John 8:33-59**). Here is a verse that shows the Jewish understanding of corporate solidarity in guilt or righteousness: “They answered and said to Him, ‘Abraham is our father.’ Jesus said to them, ‘If you are Abraham’s children, do the deeds of Abraham’” (**John 8:39**). The “sons of Abraham” are those who “hear God’s word” and listen to the truth that Jesus proclaims. The “sons of the devil” believe “the lie” (**John 8:44**). This whole section illustrates the difference

between sonship based on genetics and sonship based on faith; contrasting the literal use of “son” and the idiomatic use where it means “characterized by.” The notion of corporate solidarity as used in passages like this shows that generational guilt is passed along not by family tree (though being Jewish is still an important issue as shown in **Romans 9-11**) but by belief and practice.

The Old Testament also uses such terminology. For example:

“Because of the devastation of the afflicted, because of the groaning of the needy, now I will arise,” says the Lord; “I will set him in the safety for which he longs.” The words of the Lord are pure words; As silver tried in a furnace on the earth, refined seven times. Thou, O Lord, wilt keep them; Thou wilt preserve him from this generation forever. The wicked strut about on every side, when vileness is exalted among the sons of men. (Psalm 12:5-8)

Notice that the phrase “*this generation*” is not used to mean “all those now alive” nor “a forty year period of time.” It means “the wicked who afflict the righteous.” The issue is moral, spiritual and transgenerational, as shown by the phrase “forever.”

We have seen that many times the phrase “*this generation*” refers to people who are refusing to listen to God. We have also seen that the Jewish concept of corporate solidarity often links people to one another across various generations based on following the same pattern as important people in Jewish history. One can be a “son of Abraham” by listening to God or a “son of those who kill the prophets” by rejecting God’s authoritative spokespersons, regardless of one’s literal family tree.

“FILLING UP THE MEASURE” OF GUILT

Before applying what we have learned to **Matthew 24:34**, let us consider passage that show a Jewish transgenerational understanding of guilt and “sonship.” Paul had preached Christ in

Thessalonica and was fiercely opposed by the Jews (**Acts 17:1-9**). When he later wrote to the church in Thessalonica he wrote this:

For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews, who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out. They are not pleasing to God, but hostile to all men, hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved; with the result that they always fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them to the utmost. (1Thessalonians 2:14-16)

Some have considered this passage evidence of anti-Semitism in the New Testament. Though it is surely harsh, one ought to consider what Paul wrote in Romans 9-11 before charging Jewish Paul with anti-Semitism. Paul was not indicting Jews as merely being Jewish, but was only speaking of those who rejected God’s Jewish Messiah and sought to drive away the Jewish Paul who was giving them evidence from the Jewish scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah (**Acts 17:2, 3**). Their hostility was to the gospel. By driving Paul out of town they tried to keep Gentiles from hearing the gospel and being saved. Paul is referring to the events found in Acts 17.

The key word **1Thessalonians 2:16** is the one translated “*fill up the measure*” which often means “to supply what was lacking.” It is only used six times in the New Testament. One of its usages is in this passage where it is translated “fulfilled”: “And in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled, which says, ‘You will keep on hearing, but will not understand; And you will keep on seeing, but will not perceive’” (**Matthew 13:14**). The “filling up” here is seen in the fact that the people to whom Jesus preached had the same response as those to whom Isaiah preached. In both cases they do

not listen and are subjected to the judgment of hardening. In Isaiah's day we have the idea of the "already and not yet." Though the immediate context (God telling Isaiah about his calling and the response he would get to his ministry) had to do with people alive in Isaiah's day, the passage also has a later fulfillment in history, in this case the preaching of Jesus. Those in Jesus' day "fill up" the sins of those in Isaiah's day by doing likewise.

Interestingly the same Isaiah passage is cited in Acts 28 in the context of Paul preaching to Jews in Rome. This passage demonstrates clearly the idea of corporate solidarity we have been discussing:

And when they had set a day for him, they came to him at his lodging in large numbers; and he was explaining to them by solemnly testifying about the kingdom of God, and trying to persuade them concerning Jesus, from both the Law of Moses and from the Prophets, from morning until evening. And some were being persuaded by the things spoken, but others would not believe. And when they did not agree with one another, they began leaving after Paul had spoken one parting word, "The Holy Spirit rightly spoke through Isaiah the prophet to your fathers, saying, 'Go to this people and say, You will keep on hearing, but will not understand; And you will keep on seeing, but will not perceive; For the heart of this people has become dull, And with their ears they scarcely hear, And they have closed their eyes; Lest they should see with their eyes, And hear with their ears, And understand with their heart and return, And I should heal them.' Let it be known to you therefore, that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will also listen." (Acts 28:23-28)

The same Isaiah passage cited by Jesus to show the guilt of those who would

not listen to Him is used by Paul later. The passage continues to find fulfillment in those who are like their "fathers" to whom Isaiah preached. Here also it was not all the Jews that are indicted (some believed) but those who acted like their "fathers" in Isaiah's day and refused to listen to God's word.

So in Isaiah's day we have the "already" (those who refuse to listen and are hardened) and the "not yet" (future Jews who would not listen to Messiah). In Paul's day we have the "already" (those who were the "fathers" of the Jews who did not listen) and the "yet still" those alive in Paul's day who refused to listen and were hardened. In the 1Thessalonians 2 passage Paul says that the Jews "fill up the measure of their sins." He means that they continue in the pattern of those who went before and rejected God's message and add to the corporate pool of sin of which they are a part.

Paul's teaching in 1Thessalonians 2 echoes the words of Jesus in Matthew 23:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, and say, 'If we had been living in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' Consequently you bear witness against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up then the measure of the guilt of your fathers. (Matthew 23:29-32)

They would soon "fill up the measure of the guilt" by turning Christ over to be crucified. Thus they make their "fathers" to be the ones who killed the prophets and not the prophets themselves. In this sense one has moral culpability as to who one's "father" is. In either case they are still Jewish.

THIS GENERATION IN MATTHEW 24:34

"Truly I say to you, this generation will not

pass away until all these things take place." (Matthew 24:34)

As I mentioned earlier, the assumption that "generation" is a time qualifier is problematic. "All these things" did not take place during the lifetime of anyone then alive [unless one believes the preterists who claim that the Son of Man came in the clouds of glory and gathered His elect in 70AD]. So either "all these things" is not literal but actually means "some of these things" or some other solution must be found. Many have been suggested. These include the idea that it means "race" (i.e. the Jews will still be alive, or others have said that the "race" of the church will still be here) and even some have said that the generation did not begin until 1948.¹²

Those who solve the problem by saying it is a chronological statement but only about a limited part of what Jesus predicted in Matthew 24 point out that "this generation" elsewhere in Matthew is always about those who were living when Jesus spoke to them. But they fail to consider the fact that even though addressed to people then living, the phrase "this generation" had a qualitative connotation in each of the passages. As I have shown, in the nearest context to Matthew 24 (Matthew 23) Jesus linked "this generation" to those who had gone before and those who would come later. I also showed that in Acts, "this generation" was something that one could be saved from by repenting. I also showed that when Jesus did want to qualify a statement by limiting it to the lifetime of His hearers He said, "some of you standing here will not taste death until. . .," a phrase that could have been used in **Matthew 24:34** without ambiguity if it was His intent to mean the same thing (Matthew used the phrase in **16:28**). So I conclude that though "this generation" did include some of those who were living when Jesus spoke to them (just those who rejected His message), it also includes those in the future who would make these rejecters of Messiah their "fathers" by doing likewise.

Let us apply my thesis (that “this generation” is a qualitative modifier that applies to Jewish resistance to God’s message and messengers and that it is transgenerational) to **Matthew 24:34**. There is a time modifier in **Matthew 24:34** and it is this phrase: “*shall not pass away until . . .*” This means that the Jewish leadership and their followers will continue to reject the gospel of Jesus as the crucified Messiah until the end, when Jesus returns. It is not a prediction that Jews will not be saved; but that the bulk of them as epitomized by their leaders will continue in the same manner as their “fathers” did, from the time of Moses, the time of Jesus, the time of Paul, throughout the “times of the Gentiles” (**Luke 21:24**) until finally Christ returns and rectifies the situation.

This fits with a common theme in Matthew -- that Jesus never predicted that the masses would become His followers or that national Israel would accept Him as their King during His first advent and the indefinite period that would follow. This theme is shown in the teaching of the “narrow gate”; the parable of the soils, the other parables of Matthew 13, and many other parables that teach a Messiah rejected by those who rightfully belong to Him (such as the parable of the landowner - **Matthew 21:33-41**).

To conclude that **Matthew 24:34** predicts continued Jewish rejection of the gospel until the very end fits Matthew’s theme, fits the word usage of “this generation” as being qualitative elsewhere in Matthew, and fits historical reality. One Jewish objection to the Gospel at the time of Matthew’s writing was this, “if this Jesus is the Jewish Messiah, then why was He rejected and crucified and why are not more Jews following Him?” Matthew uses a considerable amount of his Gospel answering this objection by showing that Jesus predicted His own crucifixion and also predicted that He would be rejected and most people would not become His followers. Therefore things are right on track as Jesus predicted them. I believe that the interpretation of Matthew

24:34 that I am proposing fits Matthew’s theme and purpose as revealed elsewhere in Matthew. That in Matthew’s day and in the indefinite future most Jews would reject Messiah is not proof of the invalidity of the gospel claims, but proof that Jesus really was a true prophet; in fact He was the Prophet that God promised through Moses (**Deuteronomy 18:15**).

AVOIDING ANTI-SEMITISM

Many passages I have cited in this article are harsh rebukes to Jewish hardness to the Gospel. Because of such passages, some have accused the New Testament writers of being anti-Semitic. I believe this charge is invalid for several reasons. I will state these reasons and then discuss Paul’s attitude as seen in Romans 9-11. Paul serves as model for Christians to follow in order to have a right attitude toward God’s special people, the Jews.

What the critics often fail to realize is that passages such as Matthew 23, 1Thessalonians 2; John 8, and others were written by Jews. These are not the compositions of a Gentile church in 350 AD reflecting the anti-Semitism of that later day, but were written in the 1st century by Jews. Even the Christian Jews of Paul’s day were not in a power position vis-à-vis non-Christian Jews. Paul was under arrest by the Romans when he made his statements in Acts 28. The Christians who wrote the New Testament were under Jewish and Gentile persecution and were a minority. So the documents they left us do not reflect hatred of the Jews by powerful Gentiles, but a compassion for other Jews by Jews who firmly believed that Jesus was indeed the promised Son of David and that the salvation of their Jewish loved ones depended on them coming to faith in Christ. Thus love and not hatred was the motivation for these strong statements.

Jesus’ harsh rebukes in Matthew 23 were against Jewish leaders who were abusing those they were supposed to help. Their victims were Jewish victims. So when Jesus condemned the Pharisees as “making children of hell,” he was

standing in the place of Jewish prophets from the Old Testament who stood up to corrupt Jewish leadership. Do people accuse Jeremiah of being anti-Semitic? Jesus and His apostles claimed to be the “sons of” such prophets. What is at issue is whether there is sufficient evidence to believe Jesus was who He claimed to be. If so, He was no anti-Semite, but the Jewish Messiah who was and is filled with compassion for the lost sheep of the tribes of Israel.

Paul reflected the compassion of Christ for Jewish people; so much so that he was filled with grief and sorrow over their spiritual condition and could even wish him self accursed if it would mean bringing them to salvation (see **Roman 9:1-5**). Paul prayed for the salvation of Jews (**Romans 10:1**). Paul warned Gentile Christians not to boast against the Jews (**Romans 11:18**). Paul reminded us that we are grafted into a Jewish olive tree (**Romans 11:17-24**). Even the “times of the Gentiles” which persist until the end of the age, have a saving purpose for Jews -- to provoke them to jealousy and thus motivate some to come to Messiah (**Romans 11:14**).

This brings us to the passage in the Bible that tells us the nature of the time clock that God has set for the end of “this generation.” Since “this generation” constitutes Jewish leadership and their followers who reject the message of the gospel, it will come to an end when Christ comes again in judgment, saves a remnant of the Jews, gathers together all of His elect (**Matthew 24:29-31**), and banishes the rebels to punishment before setting up his Messianic kingdom. Here is how Paul describes it:

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 fullness 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 removal of ungodliness from Jacob will be when “this generation” passes away. After that only the godly will remain and the phrase “this wicked generation” will no longer apply.¹³ Notice also that the hardening that characterizes “this generation” as the term is used in the Bible is two things: 1) partial 2) temporary. Just as was the case in the gospels and Acts, there are those who are saved out of the hardened majority.

CONCLUSION

We have shown that “this generation” is used in a pejorative sense in the New Testament and is therefore qualitative and not setting a time limit. We have also seen the transgenerational idea of guilt in Jewish thinking as it applies to the phrase. This guilt is being “filled up” by those who follow in the footsteps of their “fathers” who did likewise. Matthew includes a statement at the trial of Jesus to emphasize this: “*And all the people answered and said, ‘His blood be on us and on our children!’*” (**Matthew 27:25**). Clearly the issue of “this generation” rejecting Messiah is seen as a continual problem down through subsequent generations. By taking “this generation” in **Matthew 24:34** in the sense of Jewish hardness to the gospel we are able to take the statement completely literally and avoid the problems of other proposed interpretations. This also fits with what Paul taught in Romans 11. Let us join with Paul in praying for the salvation of the Jewish people. That many are hardened should never deter us from praying for them and preaching the gospel to them.

END NOTES

1. See W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison; “Matthew vol. III” in *The International Critical Commentary*; Emerton, Cranfield

& Stanton ed. (T&T Clark: Edinburgh, 1997) 367 for a list of 8 possibilities, which is not exhaustive of those which have been proposed.

2. Gary Demar, *End Times Fiction*, (Nashville: Nelson, 2001) 67, 68.

3. <http://www.preterism.info/> from an article by Michael Fenemore, *Were the Apostles False Prophets?*

4. Here “chronological modifier” would mean a time limit as to when “all these things” would take place.

5. I mean by “qualitative” that “this generation” is a pejorative term about the moral condition of the group in question.

6. The Jewish idea of corporate solidarity is that a person’s identity is intrinsically tied to the group, so much so that the group identity takes priority over individual identity.

7. This is found in Luke 24:45-47.

8. The incident of Zechariah’s murder is found in 2Chronicles 24:20-22. Though it happened hundreds of years before, Jesus said “whom you murdered.” This shows how, in Jewish thinking, one’s present behavior determines whose true “son” he is; in this case either a true son of the prophet Zechariah who spoke for God or a son of his murderers. Jesus claimed they were the later.

9. Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew; A commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*, (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1994) 2nd edition; 491; suggests understanding “this generation” in a qualitative rather than chronological sense. Gundry writes, “Matthew seemingly shifts direction, however, by dwelling on the qualitative rather than chronological sense of *genea* [generation]. . . Therefore he may intend “this generation” to be

understood as meaning “this kind.” The emphasis would then fall on the perversity of the scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees (see the contexts of 12:39; 16:4), and the chronological extent of the generation would remain open.” He then cites Matthew 23:35-36 as evidence. I found Gundry’s comments after I had come to a similar conclusion through my own exegetical studies.

10. Leon Morris, *The Epistle to The Romans*; (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1988) 231, 232. Morris says, “The aorist points to one act, the act of Adam; we would expect the present or the imperfect if the apostle were thinking of the continuing sins of all people.”

11. Romans 5:18, 19.

12. Some used this faulty reasoning to predict the rapture of the church in 1988.

13. This is also confirmed by Daniel’s prophecy of the 70 weeks. The end of the 70th week will be the end of sin for the Jewish people: “*Seventy weeks have been decreed for your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to make an end of sin, to make atonement for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy, and to anoint the most holy place*” (**Daniel 9:24**).

Critical Issues Commentary
copyright © 2003

cicministry.org