

The Interpretation of “Generation” in Matthew 24:32-35

By Garland H. Shinn

Matthew 24:32-35

“Now learn this parable from the fig tree: When its branch has already become tender and puts forth leaves, you know that summer is near. ³³ So you also, when you see all these things, know that it is near—at the doors! ³⁴ Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place. ³⁵ Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away. (NKJV)

Introduction

One’s approach to this passage is Scripture will be founded on how that individual views the Old Testament prophetic Scriptures. The various interpretations given below start with a set of interpretive assumptions which are first applied to Old Testament predictive prophecy, particularly with regards to the kingdom of God.

Simply stated, the amillennial view rejects the normal (literal) fulfillment of those prophecies. It holds that the prophecies concerning God’s future rule on the earth, unlike those already fulfilled, will never be fulfilled literally. They are to be spiritualized, and somehow attributed to the church. This attribution in turn is based on the covenantal theological position that there is only *one people of God* (because of the non-existent covenants, “the covenant of grace” and “the covenant of redemption” which place all the elect into one big pot) and further, that God set aside Israel permanently when Israel rejected Jesus as Messiah. Thus the church is an extension of Israel and inherits her promises and blessings (but not God’s cursings and judgments). But since those promises can no longer be fulfilled *literally* in the church, they must be *spiritualized*. This leads to what is incorrectly called the “allegorical method of interpretation.” The method is actually an abnormal interpretive approach used to justify the interpretations contrived so as to fit into the covenantal scheme of theology. Inductive Bible study is ignored in the amillennial approach, and the meaning of the text is assumed, based on a previous set of boundaries established by the amillennial interpreter.

Do not be mistaken here. The amillennialist is not simply confused or ignorant of correct interpretive procedure. He knows exactly what he is doing, and why he is doing it. He has willfully rejected the normal meaning of the Old Testament text for theological reasons, and substituted a set of meanings that are consistent with his assumptions. Even such a preeminent spiritualizer as Floyd E. Hamilton admits that if one applies a literal interpretation to Old Testament prophecies it would give us just the picture of the millennium as the premillennialists teach (*The Principle of Spiritualization in Hermeneutics*, page 5).

The premillennial position is the one this author takes. It is derived from an attempt to interpret and apply all Old Testament prophecy, whether fulfilled or not, in a normal sense as the original audience would have understood the communication.

Various Interpretations

1. Some say that the word *generation* in the passage under consideration refers to the people who were Jesus’ contemporaries and claim that Jesus was mistaken. We might term this the **liberal** interpretation, except that some who claim to be conservative hold this view. It is based on a false view of the *kenosis* (Philippians 2:7) which says that Christ gave up the use of His divine attributes at the incarnation and could, therefore, make a mistake. Christ gave up only a form, not any function, aspect of nature, or attribute. He took the form of a man and no longer appears in the form of God.
2. Others see the word *generation* referring to the people who were Jesus’ contemporaries and claim that Jesus was referring to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. We can call this the amillennial interpretation, as it was universally the view held by amillennialists until the

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preterist error came to be. In fact, it is still the majority view of amillennialists, who distinguish the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD with the second coming of Christ. This view states that the generation then alive lived to see the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem, both in 70 AD, but that the events do not include the actual second coming, which they place yet in the future.

3. The third interpretation of the word *generation* states that the generation was contemporary with Jesus, but that the words “take place” mean “begin to happen.” Therefore, it is said, the “things” of the context *began* during the contemporaneous generation, but are continuing today. This is an attempt to reconcile the amillennial and the premillennial views of this passage. The problem with this approach is that Jesus clearly states that “all things” that are discussed in the context are included. Vs. 33 clearly states that the Lord is “near, right at the door” clearly indicating that the Lord will soon return.
4. The preterist interpretation is that the *generation* was contemporary with Jesus, and that the entire context was fulfilled in 70 AD. There are actually two preterist interpretations, which might be called the *moderate view* and the *radical view*.
 - a. The moderate view says that the events all took place, but that the actual second coming of Christ is in two phases 1) His return spiritually in 70 AD as either Titus, the Roman general who destroyed Jerusalem, or as the actual Roman army itself, and 2) the actual future physical bodily second coming. This is a view to which normative amillennialists take great exception on interpretive grounds, because it involves a “dual reference prophecy” which is not, in their opinion, legitimate. However, it still falls within what is *normally called* conservative theology because it retains the future bodily return of Christ.
 - b. The “radical view” sees no future bodily coming of Christ at all, which its adherents consider to be inconsistent with the context as they see it.¹ This interpretation has clearly crossed the bounds of conservative interpretive theology. While one might make a case for the moderate preterist being a conservative,² no case can be made for the radical preterist being conservative. They have abandoned any attempt at normal interpretive methodology, even from the “loosey-goosey” approach normally taken by amillennialists.
5. Two premillennial approaches exist. The first is that the word *generation* actually refers to the Jews *as a people*. According to this approach, Jesus is saying that the Jewish people will never be wiped from the face of the earth, but will endure. This is certainly a legitimate approach, since the Greek word for “generation” can indeed mean “race, stock or lineage.” Therefore, according to this view, no single generation of Jews is in view. However, the phrase “this generation” seems to particularize rather than generalize. The more likely meaning is not “this race” but “this generation,” a specific group of Israelites.
6. The second premillennial approach is that the word “generation” refers to that future generation which will be alive at the time of the second coming of Christ.³ In view of the fact

¹ They are correct in this. The so-called moderate approach is an attempt to remain conservative by holding to a bodily second coming of Christ. But those who hold the so-called extreme view are correct in insisting that the passage is to be taken in its entirety, and not “divided up” as the moderates do.

² Or, if you insist, evangelical, which term has become so loose as to be almost meaningless. The attacks on a normal approach to Scripture continue, and are without let-up. Nevertheless, amillennialists have generally been considered conservative because they believe in certain literal events, such as the virgin birth, the bodily death and resurrection of Christ, His substitution for sinners, and His bodily return.

³ That the phrase “this generation” does not always refer to the same generation must be understood. Indeed, Jesus uses the phrase in Matthew 11:16; 12:41, 42, 45; 23:36. In those passages, which are not looking forward as prediction, the phrase is obviously referring to Jesus’ contemporaries. But that does not require that it always be

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that in Matthew 24:21-22 the Lord had just taught that except the days be cut short, no life would be saved, this seems to be a very likely interpretation. It is the view taken by Louis Barbieri, who states the following:

“One should keep in mind that the primary application of this section is directed toward the future generation that will experience the days of the Tribulation and will be looking forward to the immediate coming of the King in glory.... Just as a fig tree was a harbinger of summer, so these signs (24:4-28) Jesus had been speaking of clearly indicated that His coming would follow shortly. The Lord’s emphasis fell on the fact that all these things would be necessary. While various events throughout history have been pointed to as the fulfillment of this prophecy, clearly *all* these things (pertaining to the Great Tribulation) have never occurred. The completion of all these events is yet future. The generation (*genea*) of people living in that future day will see the completion of all the events. Jesus was not referring to the generation listening to Him then, for He had already said the kingdom had been taken from that group (21:43). That first-century generation would experience God’s judgment. But the generation that will be living at the time these signs begin to take place will live through that period and will see the Lord Jesus coming as the King of glory.” (Louis Barbieri, Jr. *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, “Matthew”)

Another reason this is the preferred view is that it is the only approach that actually conforms to the meaning of the word “generation” as understood in the first century when someone spoke of a specific generation rather than the entire Jewish stock.

The Meaning of *Generation*

It is strange that no commentators (at least in this author’s library), whether they be amillennial, preterist, or premillennial, actually attempt a definition of the word *generation* itself. Each assumes a meaning rather than determines a meaning. The question is, how was the word used in the first century when it means “generation” rather than “race” or “stock?” In other words, what is a generation, and, as a corollary, how long does a generation last? The following discussion is based on logic. So little serious work, if any, has been done on the idea of a generation, that certain approximations must be made even to approach the topic. But reasonable approximations and assumptions can be made, otherwise the word *generation* has no meaning that anyone at any time could understand.

The dictionary definition of the *English* word *generation* is “a group of individuals born and living contemporaneously.”⁴ It appears that in Matthew 24:34 Jesus is using the Greek word translated *generation* in essentially this way. While the meaning of *race* is also a legitimate meaning of the Greek word, in the context of Matthew 24 the issue appears *not* to be the

used that way. To simply violate the immediate context to force an interpretation (something that many do) is simply dishonest.

⁴ *Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition*. This definition, if it truly is such, leaves much to be desired. It is common to distinguish between generations today, and some cute names have been applied, such as the “baby boomer” generation, “generation X” and so on. It seems that a period of time from ten to twenty years exists between generations in modern society in the United States. That makes sense, because people generally begin having children in their late teens to early twenties. It doesn’t take long, perhaps fourteen to sixteen years, for children to consider themselves as belonging to a different group than their parents. Thus we have the “generation gap” so-called. A generation of twenty years or so seems reasonable to us, and one wonders if the same is not true of Jesus’ day.

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continuance of the Jewish race, but the shortness of time between certain events. This shortness of time is best expressed with the meaning of a group of people all living at the same time.⁵

In order to determine the biblical meaning of “generation,” three questions need to be asked: 1) How long was a generation (the time span)? 2) What was the statistical make-up of a generation (the part of the population that made up a generation)? And 3) How many, in terms of percentage, must survive in order to say that the generation still exists? These are not as simple to determine as one might assume. Let’s discuss the time span question.

How Long is a Generation?

Most interpreters do not discuss this issue, though some give a flat answer with or without a reason for it. The most common amillennial view is that a generation is a 40 year time span. A. T. Robertson says flatly, “In the Old Testament a generation was reckoned as forty years.”⁶ However, he does not explain why he holds this view.

Amillennialists hold this 40 year time span for two reasons. First, they *must* hold it for theological reasons, which are discussed below. Second, the reason that they sometimes give, if they give one, is that this is the biblical meaning of a generation as presented in the Old Testament, which they take from the wilderness wanderings of Israel. Since, they say, the generation in the wilderness wandered for 40 years, a generation must last 40 years.

However, this is specious reasoning. The Scriptural text does not say that a generation was 40 years long. It says is that within a 40 year time span an entire generation died (Numbers 23:13). However long a generation existed, it died off within 40 years. This indicates that statistically a generation is not the entire population (see discussion below) because all young children, for instance, could not be expected to die within 40 years from normal causes such as old age, illness, accident, etc.

The wilderness wandering illustration is particularly interesting, because it states that the entire generation died, not just a significant portion of it. In other words, with the exception of some individuals who were young, no one survived longer than 40 years. (This speaks to our third question about the generation of Jesus’ day). If this is true, and it is, then a generation is significantly shorter than 40 years. But at this point it is impossible to know for sure how much shorter.

What Part of a Population makes up a Generation?

As stated above, statistically a generation is not the entire population because all young children, for instance, could not be expected to die within 40 years from normal causes. In fact it is difficult to determine precisely what percentage, or what age group of a population make up a generation, but we will attempt to arrive at some general idea.

One way to attempt this is to pick an age of a person, and proceed from there. For instance, using the Matthew 24 discourse as an example, suppose we take the age of the Lord Jesus at the time as our starting point. This is not too difficult, because we have a general idea, at least, of how old He was. Most scholars believe that according to our present calendar the Lord was born between 4 and 6 BC and died between thirty and thirty-five years of age. Usually He is considered to have been about 33 years old at the time of His death. If that is true, and if this discourse was given near the end of His life, it was given probably between 28 and 30 AD.

Now, would a man who was, say, 10 years older than Jesus have been part of His generation? Most would answer “yes.” How about 20 years older? Again many, if not all would

⁵ The word contemporaneously which occurs in the above Webster definition is misleading. It generally is used of a current situation unless specified otherwise. A better way of stating the idea is that a generation consists of people all living at the same time, whether it be past, present, or future. Only context can tell which.

⁶ *Word Pictures in the Greek New Testament*, Comments on Matthew 24:34.

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answer “yes,” a person of 53 would still be in the same generation as Jesus. Well, now how about adding another 10 years. Would a person of 63 have been in that same generation? It is difficult to say, but at this point many would begin to say “probably not.” Certainly, one would doubt that Jesus’ “generation” extended to those older than, say, sixty-five, and perhaps not even that old. It is impossible to know exactly, and no scholarly work that this author knows of has attempted to answer this question. But the answer, given that the word generation does not refer to race in this passage, is rather important. So for the sake of our discussion we will say that anyone of Jesus’ day older than 60 would have *not been included* in His generation, although there is really no way to tell exactly.⁷ Perhaps everyone older than Jesus would have been considered part of that generation.

But now one must consider the other side of the question. How much younger than Jesus would a person have to be in order to *not* be excluded from His generation? Was a person who was twenty-three still part of His generation? Perhaps, but when we get significantly lower than that, we enter some cultural gray areas. Young men below marrying age (which among the Jews was somewhat older than today, probably near the end of their twenties or into their thirties) may not have been considered part of a 30 year old’s generation. Certainly, a male teenager would not have been so considered. It seems best to think statistically that Jesus’ generation from about 20 years of age to about 60 years of age, *at the most*. It’s possible that Jesus would have been referring to those from about 30 years up, rather than 20, and perhaps no older than 50 or 55 years. Again, it is impossible to know for certain.

How Many Individuals must Survive in order to state that the Generation still exists?

The answer to this question is based on the average life span of the individual living during the Roman period. Some scholarly work has been done in this area, but there are a wide variety of answers that have been given. It is beyond the scope of this presentation to detail them all, but the following will summarize the options.

One assumption is that the average life-span of a Roman living during this period was some where between 45 and 55. Some have thought more in the range of 48 to 55, but that is of little difference for present purposes. While there were some notable exceptions (the apostle John appears, according to Irenaeus, to have lived to over 90) a man of 60 would have been considered elderly, and a man of 70 quite old.⁸

At any rate, for an individual to reach seventy was an unusual occurrence. So a person who was 30 years old when Jesus died, would most likely not have lived for another 40 years. Certainly a person who was 40 or older had very little chance to live that long. Why is this important? It is important because the amillennial view that “all these things” of Matthew 24:34 refers either to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD (normative amillennialism) or to spiritual second coming of Christ in 70 AD (preteritism). In fact, only a small percentage of those Jews living in 30 AD would have still been alive at 70 AD. If Jesus meant that the generation living when He was speaking would make it to 70 AD, He was being very generous in His estimation. That did not happen. Jesus’ generation was mostly gone by the time of 70 AD.

Actually, we do not know how many people of Jesus generation lived to 70 AD. There may have been some. But it’s a good guess that it was a number significantly fewer than half of them. If Jesus’ contemporaries had an easier life than the wilderness Jews of Moses day, and therefore lived somewhat longer, it is still unlikely that anywhere near a majority of them were

⁷ Remember the wilderness wandering issue. The word “generation” used there probably meant everybody from a certain age up. In other words, the word “generation” was not limited by upward age, but it probably was limited by lower age.

⁸ The “three score and ten” or seventy years of Psalm 90:10 cannot be taken as an average life span, as most people didn’t live that long. The 70 years of that Psalm was actually a metaphorical expression of a complete life.

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still alive at 70 AD. Perhaps two thirds or more of them had died by that time. All we can do is guess!

So the question is, what percentage would need to be alive in order to apply Matthew 24:34 to 70 AD. and “this generation” to Jesus’ contemporaries? Clearly the majority of that generation had “passed away” by 70 AD. And equally clearly, those born in and around Jerusalem after Jesus death would have suffered through the 70 AD. events.

As previously mentioned, normative amillennialists must hold that a generation is 40 years. The reason is simple. They must have the generation of Jesus’ day living until 70 AD, a period of some 40 years from the date of His prophecy in Matthew 24. They have no choice, because they have committed themselves to an interpretation that is driven by their own assumptions as to the non-literal nature of the kingdom of God as presented in Old Testament prophecy. As we have seen, the wilderness wanderings cannot be used for a definite period of 40 years to equal a generation. A generation may be somewhere between 25 to 30 years. It may be as low as 20 years.

By the time 70 AD had come along, the generation who experienced it would have had little personal memory of the events in Jerusalem during Jesus’ life. The majority of Jews living at 70 AD would not have thought of themselves as the same generation as the Jews of Jesus’ day. The argument that Jesus is discussing the 70 AD events is specious, and cannot stand. It assumes that the generation of 70 AD is the same generation as 30 AD, a clear impossibility.

Conclusion

The only approach that makes contextual sense is the view that is held by many premillennialists that the word “generation” refers to the future generation alive at the time of the second coming of Christ. That generation will see these things unfold in their lifetimes. The Jew of that future day will observe the Lord Jesus coming in clouds of glory.

That Jesus is speaking of the present generation of His day as seeing “these things” cannot hold. No one (even a preterist) believes that these events took place before 70 AD and Jesus’ generation did not last until 70 AD according to any normal interpretation. Of course, the key is literal interpretation, which amillennialism and postmillennialism reject, not only in the New Testament, but throughout Scripture.

The conservative Bible student must see that “this generation” of which Jesus spoke can contextually only refer to the generation alive at the predicted time, just before His bodily return. The significance of the statement “this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place” speaks of the quickness of the events from the beginning of the seventy weeks until the second coming, a period of somewhat less than seven and a half years.