

*An Original Harmony and Exposition of the Twenty-Fourth  
Chapter of Matthew and the Parallel Passages in  
Mark and Luke*

by  
D. D. Buck

**Part II: "The Exposition"  
Chapter XVII**

**"This Generation"**

**"Verily I say unto you,  
This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled."  
Matthew 24:34**

By many this verse has been deemed of itself sufficient to prove that all that had been predicted by our Saviour must be applied to Jerusalem and the Jews of that age, and not to the end of the world, because *that generation* (interpreted to mean those then living) should not pass until all should be fulfilled.

Bishop Newton observes:

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.*

The Bishop makes no attempt to prove that  $\gamma\epsilon\nu\epsilon\lambda$  has, or must have, this meaning in the verse under notice. He seems to have supposed that it should be taken for granted by everyone that this is the proper and common meaning of the word. Yet he must have known that the word was not usually so understood either by classical or inspired writers, and that the meaning which he insisted upon was very generally disallowed by the more ancient Christian divines. And yet how *positive* he is in maintaining his assertion! He even deems the bare expression, "this generation," a sufficient proof that all that has preceded it in the prophecy should be applied to Jerusalem.

Dr. Whitby is, if possible, still more positive than the former. But Whitby usually has the merit of undertaking to *prove* his assertions. This, it may be observed, is to some extent the difference between these two great and excellent men: Newton more frequently asserts without laboring to prove, Whitby almost always brings forth his strong reasons. One is the better historian, the other the better logician. Newton labors to *illustrate* his position, Whitby labors to *establish* it. It is so in respect of the matter now before us. Whitby says,

These words, ἡ γενεὰ αὕτη, "this age, (or generation,) shall not pass away," afford a full demonstration that all which Christ had mentioned hitherto was to be accomplished, not at the time of the conversion of the Jews, or at the final day of judgment, but in that very age, or while some of that generation of men lived; for γενεὰ αὕτη, "this generation," never bears any other sense in the New Testament than the men of this age.

Then follow quotations and references, as follows: Matt. 11:16; 12:42, 45; 23:36; Mark 8:12; Luke 7:31; 11:29, 30, 32, 50, 51; 16:8; Acts 2:40.

In reply to this, let it be noticed:

I. That the affirmation concerning the New Testament use of the word is by no means proved the passages referred to.

(1) Matt. 11:16: "But whereunto shall I liken this generation? It is like unto children sitting in the markets," etc. The whole passage relates to the captiousness and obstinacy of the Jews generally in their treatment of their divinely commissioned teachers. The particular instances referred to had reference to the reception of John and of Christ himself. Now let it be remembered that this trait in the Jews was not confined to the men of that time, nor was it, perhaps, any more characteristic of those then living than of men of former times and of times subsequent. Captiousness and obstinacy were from the beginning a striking characteristic of that γενεὰ,--of that *race, or kind of people*. There are multitudes of references to this trait in Jewish character in both the Old Testament and the New. It may be admitted, indeed, that Christ had more particular reference to his own and John's treatment by the persons then living, but the expression "this generation" did not *limit the character developed to that age*; it had been developed in almost every age. That generation--that people--that *race* of people--had been accustomed to display the same character from the times of their fathers, who had "killed the prophets and stoned those that were sent unto them."

(2) The next references are to Matt. 12:42, 45; to these there should have been added verse 39, which introduces the subject. Verses 38-40: "Then certain of the Scribes and Pharisees answered, saying, Master, we would see a sign from thee. But he answered and said to them, An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and there shall no sign be given to it but the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the whale's belly, so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." Then follow three other instances of the use of the word generation, which will be considered in due time.

In respect to that generation seeking a sign, though it was true of the people *then living*, they were not called a generation because they were then alive, but they were simply addressed as an evil and adulterous *people*. Neither was this *peculiar* to those then living, nor can it be justly *limited* to those then alive. They were that *sort* of people. To seek for signs was a *Jewish* characteristic: "For the *Jews* require a *sign*, and the *Greeks* seek after wisdom" (1 Cor. 1:22). This was not to be restricted to those of any particular age; it was characteristic of the *races*. The Greeks as a *people* were thus characterized; and the Jews as a *γένεα* were so characterized from the beginning.

Moses knew very well that some *sign* must be exhibited by him in order to make the people believe; and the Lord gave him power to exhibit several signs to convince the people (see Ex. 4:1-9). The people living at the time of Christ were "evil and adulterous," just as their fathers had been before them. Being in covenant relation with God, under the similitude of a marriage contract, they were often charged with adultery on account of their evil conduct. But it is a question whether the people were in the time of Christ particularly distinguished on this account from their ancestors for many ages. A little acquaintance with Malachi and most of the other prophets will suffice to show that the Saviour's expression in respect to their being "evil and adulterous" and "seeking after a sign" must not be restricted to the men of that age. The men of that age did exhibit the national traits, but they were not called a generation because they were then living but on account of being of a certain *race*, or *lineage*. This appears the more certain from an expression of the Saviour just previously, verse 34: "O generation of vipers, how can ye, being evil, speak good things?"

Dr. Clarke's note on a similar expression, "O generation of vipers, who has warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" (Matt. 3:7, the words of John), is impressive:

A terribly expressive speech. *A serpentine brood from a serpentine stock.* As their fathers were, so were they, children of the wicked one.

Our Lord uses the same expression in Matt. 23, and it seems that he bestowed the epithet upon the men of that age not because they were living at that time, but on account of their *descent*. Verses 31-33: "Wherefore ye be witnesses unto yourselves, *that ye are the children of them which killed the prophets.* Fill ye up then the measure of *your fathers.* *Ye serpents, YE GENERATION OF VIPERS,* how can ye escape the damnation of hell?"

The intention of the word "generation" here is too evident to need further elucidation, unless it be simply to repeat that they were not called a generation because they were living at that time, but because of their *lineage* and *character*. So in respect to verse 36: "Verily I say unto you, All these things shall come upon *this generation.*"

Now to limit the term to the persons then living will necessarily lead to the following untenable conclusions. First, that the blood of all the martyrs from the beginning should be visited upon the persons living at the same period of time. Now this is neither just, true, nor according to God's established system of governing the world. It would not be *just*. It would be isolating the people of a particular *time* and making them to bear the punishment for sins of which they of *that time* were not guilty. It would contradict all our convictions of equity and wisdom in the administration of justice. Such a restriction of the term would not be in harmony with *truth*. It is not *true* that the men then living were punished for all the blood shed by their fathers. Much of the previous sufferings of the Jews were on account of their treatment of their prophets, and much of the after suffering should undoubtedly be attributed to the same source. The calamities that befell the Jews *then living* were but a little more distressing than had befallen the Jews in previous ages, and but a little more distressing than befell them under the Emperor Hadrian about fifty years after their overthrow by Titus.

Now to suppose that *the men of that age* were punished for all the blood shed upon the earth from the beginning in addition to their own blood-guiltiness in murdering the Lord Jesus, and yet suffered only a little more severely in the same kind than their fathers and descendants suffered, is, to say the least, speaking without demonstration. And it cannot help the matter by saying that the overthrow and calamity of the Jews at that time lasted longer than any former desolation, for if the generation upon whom the whole was to be visited meant *the men of that age*, then of course the

eighteen centuries of continued affliction must be left out of the account. The restriction of the punishment of all the previous martyrdoms to the people that were *then living* is not in accordance with *truth*. Neither is it in harmony with God's established principles of administration. He visits the iniquities of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of them that hate him. But to concentrate the punishment of fifty generation--that is, fifty successions or productions of men, reckoning from father to son--to concentrate all upon those living at any one period of time is directly at variance with this divine method of administration.

There is no difficulty at all in understanding this matter and keeping rigidly to the etymological meaning of the term generation. Indeed, this is the only possible method of reconciling the declaration of Christ with truth, justice, and the divine principles of government. It is according to truth, justice, and the divine procedure to deal with *racas as racas*. And this was particularly and eminently true in respect to the Jewish  $\gamma\epsilon\nu\epsilon\acute{\alpha}$ --*race, generation, or kind* of people. As a  $\gamma\epsilon\nu\epsilon\acute{\alpha}$  they had shed all this blood of martyrdom, as a  $\gamma\epsilon\nu\epsilon\acute{\alpha}$  they should be punished for it; not any part of it should be left out. What had not been before visited upon them as a  $\gamma\epsilon\nu\epsilon\acute{\alpha}$  of people should nevertheless be visited upon them. This is not only God's published method of dealing with men, but it is the historically and experimentally proved method of governing the world. Upon that  $\gamma\epsilon\nu\epsilon\acute{\alpha}$ , thus scripturally and historically explained, there should indeed be visited all the iniquities that they as a *people* had committed.

But did not the Lord--speaking to those then living--say, "That upon YOU may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth," etc.? He did, indeed. And did he not in the same connection--speaking of the death of Zecharias<sup>1</sup>--say, "whom YE slew"? Did he not also say, "Behold, YOUR house is left unto YOU desolate. For I say unto YOU, YE shall not see me henceforth till YE shall say, Blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord"?

What can be more certain than that he was not here speaking restrictively to those before him but of them as a particular  $\gamma\epsilon\nu\epsilon\acute{\alpha}$ --*race, or family* of men? As *such* they had indeed slain not only Zecharias but many others. As *such* they possessed the house of the Lord. To them the temple should continue desolate until they as a *people* shall be brought to say, "Blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord." And this they as a  $\gamma\epsilon\nu\epsilon\acute{\alpha}$  shall certainly do, for so it is written in the prophecies. And in the same connection, in many places, it is as clearly predicted that Jerusalem shall be

---

1 Commentators are obliged to refer this to a martyrdom several hundred years before the time of Christ. See Whitby, Clarke, Wesley, etc.

again built and be holy unto the Lord: "For the children of Israel shall abide many days without a king, and without a prince, and without a sacrifice, and without an image, and without an ephod, and without a teraphim. Afterwards shall the children of Israel return, and seek the Lord their God, and *David their king*; and shall fear the Lord and his goodness in the latter days" (Hos. 3:4,5).

Our Lord was accustomed to speak of a *γενεά*, or class of men, as if they were all before him, though they might be expected to continue for many ages. The ministers of Christ, as a distinct *γενεά*, are still acting under the authority and still claiming the promise of the original commission which was thus delivered to the apostles: "Go YE therefore and teach all nations. . . . and lo, I am with YOU to the end of the world."

Thus we see that the instances of the use of the word *γενεά*, which was supposed to be most decisive in limiting the term to the persons then living, so far from deciding the matter in that way do most evidently decide it *against* that application, and in *favor* of the primitive and ordinary use of the term--meaning a *race, lineage, or class* of people.

The other instances which Whitby cites to prove the limitation of the term to the men of that particular time have no more logical potency than those already considered. The whole argument of Whitby is open to the charge of entire misconception, not only of the legitimate and Scripture use of the term but also of the teachings of all history, our natural convictions of equity, and the established principles of divine legislation.

Besides, such a restriction of the term in question not only hopelessly embarrasses all our endeavors to systematize and expound the Lord's discourse, but (to use a homely yet expressive word) it entirely *ignores* that most important verse from Luke which refers to the treading down of Jerusalem by the Gentiles. That verse cannot be otherwise than of the highest importance. But how has it been treated? The ink almost blushes that records the inquiry. It has indeed been *alluded* to by most, perhaps all, of our commentators. But what *influence* has it been allowed to exert in explaining and modifying their theories of interpretation? What influence? Let him answer who can find in many of our commentaries the least evidence that it was esteemed of any importance, either in its chronological relations or historic teaching. Belonging necessarily to a *previous* part of the prophecy and yet reaching forward for its complete fulfillment to a still future day, the expression, "This generation shall not pass until all these things be fulfilled," is affirmed to include all that had previously been spoken; and yet the word generation is as confidently asserted to include

only the men of that age.

Whitby is a powerful reasoner. And when he proceeds from *correct premises*, the author of this Treatise is not anxious to stand in the way of his logic, for there is usually an overwhelming power in it. But when by an erroneous theory he is led to reason from incorrect premises, Whitby, like Samson from Delilah's lap, rises up shorn of his locks.

The author was not aware, when he adopted his present views (which was about ten years ago) that any leading divines had been led to the same conclusions respecting the use of the word *γενεά*. So far as he has power to recollect how he obtained his impressions, it was rather from a consideration of the nature and necessities of the case than from any critical examination of the word in question. It is with great pleasure that he finds that others--more wise, more learned, more good--have also come to the same conclusions, and apparently from the same independent, personal research, and from the same consideration of the nature and circumstances of the case.

Among this number it is pleasing to reckon Dr. Adam Clarke. This truly learned divine, like many others, was occasionally led into glaring errors *by trusting to the researches and opinions of others*, as has been previously shown in respect to several matters pertaining to the Jewish war and the progress of the primitive Christian church. Those matters he had not thoroughly examined himself. He trusted to the report of others and was lamentably, yet undeniably, deceived. *General history* was not his proper sphere of labor and research. His special endowment was for the investigation and elucidation of *Oriental customs and literature*. In *that* department he scarcely had a peer. In *that* department, in the nature of the case, he must have excelled in his knowledge of the languages in which the Scriptures were written; and he seems, indeed, to have had an almost intuitive perception of the use and proprieties of the ancient languages. He not only understood the *languages* scientifically, but he seems to have been perfectly familiar with the *idioms* and, of course, the *uses* of the various forms of speech which it became his peculiar province to examine.

As might be expected then, though unfortunately embarrassed by an erroneous theory which, by the way, he adopted from others, and misinformed in respect to some important historical matters which he had, perhaps, neither time nor taste to examine, yet after all he was too thoroughly and independently skilled in his own peculiar department as an antiquarian in ancient languages and customs to be led into an important error in the nature and use of so common and plain a word as *γενεά*. He well understood its derivation, its composition, and its classic and Scripture use.

His opinion in this matter should not be hastily thrown aside.

In giving his opinion of this term, however, which he does frequently and confidently, he was obliged to *differ* from those whom he usually (some would say blindly) followed. See his note on the passage last under notice.

Matt. 23:33: "*Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers,*" etc.

What a terrible stroke--Ye are serpents, and the offspring of serpents. This refers to verse 31. They confessed that they were the children of those who murdered the prophets; and they are now going to murder Christ and his followers, to show that they have not *degenerated*--an accursed seed, of an accursed breed."

Verse 36: "*Shall come upon this generation.*"

Ἐπὶ τὴν γενεὰν ταύτην, *upon this race of men, viz: the Jews.* This phrase often occurs in this sense in the evangelists.

Matt. 11:16: "*Whereunto shall I liken this generation?*"

That is, the Jewish people-- τὴν γενεὰν ταύτην, *this race?* and so the word γενεὰ is often to be understood in the evangelists.

Matt. 12:39: "*An evil and adulterous generation.*"

*Or race of people;* for so γενεὰ should be translated here, and in most other places in the gospels: for our Lord, in general, uses it to point out the *Jewish people*. This translation is a key to unlock some very obscure passages in the evangelists. Our Lord terms the Jews an adulterous race.

Luke 11:29: "*This is an evil generation.*"

Or, *This is a wicked race of men.* See on Matt. 12:38-42.

Matt. 24:34: "*This generation shall not pass.*"

Ἡ γενεὰ αὕτη, *this race;* i.e., the Jews shall not cease from being a *distinct people*, till all the counsels of God relative to *them* and the Gentiles be fulfilled. Some translate ἡ γενεα αὐτα, *this*

*generation*, meaning the persons who were then living, that they should not die before these signs, &c., took place. But though this was true, as to the calamities that fell upon the Jews, at the destruction of their government, temple, &c.; yet as our Lord mentions Jerusalem's continuing to be under the power of the Gentiles, till the fullness of the Gentiles should come in, i.e., till all the nations of the world should receive the gospel of Christ, after which the Jews themselves should be converted unto God, Rom. xi. 25, &c., I think it more proper not to restrain its meaning to the few years which preceded the destruction of Jerusalem; but to understand it of the care taken by Divine Providence to preserve them as a *distinct people*, and yet to keep them out of their own land, and from their temple service.

Thus far Dr. Clarke.

In the generally excellent work of Rev. Joseph Towers, LL.D., entitled "*Illustrations of Prophecy*," to which reference has been had previously, we find the following observations on the text under notice:<sup>2</sup>

This clause of the prediction has, I conceive, not merely been generally misapprehended, but moreover falsely translated; and this is the opinion of men, who hold the first rank in Scriptural criticism, namely, of Mede<sup>3</sup>, and Wolfus, and Dr. Sykes. To the destruction of Jerusalem a Mr. Hayne had applied this part of our Lord's prophecy. Hear a part of Mr. Mede's reply: "I answer, first, while you endeavor in this manner to establish a ground for the first coming of Christ, you bereave the church of those principal passages of the Scripture, whereon she hath always grounded her faith of the *second coming*.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, you ground all this upon the *ambiguity* of the word *generation*, whereas, *γενεα* signifies not only *ætas*, but *gens, natio progenies*; and so ought to be here taken, viz: *the nation of the Jews should not perish, till all these things were fulfilled*. For so signifies *παρέλθῃ* in the Hebrew notion, as you may see even in the verse following. Chrysostom among the ancients, and Flacius Illyricus (a man well skilled in the style of Scripture,) among the moderns, and those who follow them, might have admonished others to take

---

2 First American ed. 1808, 2d vol. on p. 176.

3 This Mr. Mede was called the most learned man of his age.

4 How true! And by this we also learn what had always been the general understanding of this part of the prophecy. The principal effort of this Treatise is to correct a prevalent, dangerous, and *modern error*, and *bring back the church to its ANCIENT FAITH*.

the word  $\gamma\epsilon\nu\epsilon\alpha$  in this acceptation, rather than by turning it *ætas*, or *seculum*, to put this prophecy in little ease, *and the whole harmony of Scripture out of frame, by I know not what confused interpretation.*<sup>5</sup> I only add that Dr. Sykes declares himself the more confirmed in this translation "from the remarkable, and indeed, unparalleled, *preservation* of the Jews in the midst of hatred and continued persecution." The meaning then is, the Jewish nation shall assuredly subsist as a distinct people, till *all* that has been previously mentioned shall have been *fulfilled*.

In a *note*, Dr. Towers adds, "Indeed, by the fathers in general, who must be admitted to have been competent judges of the meaning of the word,  $\gamma\epsilon\nu\epsilon\alpha$  was not understood as signifying the generation then living. Some persons, however, there were, who held this opinion; but, says Maldonatus, Origen entitles them *simplices*."

It is not a little remarkable, after the use which Newton, Whitby, Wesley, Watson, Burkitt, and others have made of the word *generation*, how little authority they can bring even from the *English* definition of the term.

Walker's large Dictionary gives *seven* definitions of the word, but *two* of which (and these are the last mentioned) even *favor* the use to which this Treatise objects; and these *two* definitions are neither of them *decisive*. Webster's Quarto Dictionary gives *seven* different classes of definitions, and but *one* of them favors the use of the word here objected to. Out of *thirteen* or *fourteen* different definitions, but *two* favor the application of the term to those living at the same time, and but *one* is really decisive. For a further dissertation on the word  $\gamma\epsilon\nu\epsilon\alpha$ , the reader will please consult Note Q in the Appendix.

The word *generation*, then, so far from embarrassing this method of expounding the Lord's prophecy, is in fact a most important auxiliary in harmonizing and elucidating some of the parts which have been deemed most obscure. The predicted gathering of the elect, and the long continued desolation--but finally implied restoration--of Jerusalem, and the astonishing preservation of that most unfortunate and yet fortunate people all derive light from the prophecy of our Lord, that "this  $\gamma\epsilon\nu\epsilon\alpha$ "--this *race*-- of people shall not pass away until all these things be fulfilled.

---

5 So it must ever be, whenever any but the legitimate construction is put upon the word in question. As Mr. Mede observes, *it puts the whole harmony of Scripture out of frame*, to translate the term  $\gamma\epsilon\nu\epsilon\alpha$  in this place so as to be limited to that particular age.

Section from Part II, Chapter XVII of *An Original Harmony and Exposition of the Twenty-Fourth Chapter of Matthew and the Parallel Passages in Mark and Luke* by Rev. D. D. Buck (Auburn: Derby & Miller, 1853). **Note:** The text has not been modified, except that format, punctuation, and KJV-era pronouns and verb forms have been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.

**Special Note:** For an alternate interpretation of Matt. 24:34 and of the Greek word *γενεα*, see Ken's paper, "[The Structure of the Olivet Discourse](#)," also on this Web site.