

“THIS GENERATION” IN MATTHEW 24:34

S. JOSEPH KIDDER
Auburn, Washington

The use of the term γενεά, “generation” (or more precisely, ἡ γενεὰ αὐτῆ, “this generation”) in Matt 24:34 (and the parallel passages, Mark 13:30 and Luke 21:32) has been highly problematical to theologians, exegetes, and churches. Though this term seemingly suggests the imminent return of Jesus, obviously he did not return in the lifetime of the apostles in the described fashion, a circumstance which has led to a remarkable variety in the treatment given to γενεά.

A number of commentaries simply ignore the passage. Others look upon the saying as an unwarranted intrusion, and still others suggest such meanings as “race”/“clan”/“nation,” or as a kind or quality of people, or even as “spiritual descendants.”¹ And the list could be extended. The striking thing is that seldom, if ever, is there any significant attempt to relate the term “generation” to the rest of the chapter. It is the purpose of this study to do precisely that, and, in fact, to relate the use of the term in Matt 24:34 to its even broader context in that Gospel.

1. *The Literary Structure*

It is important to notice that chaps. 23-25 in Matthew serve as one broad literary unit, embracing paralleling materials in inverse order (i.e., in chiasmic structure), and, moreover, that within this literary unit the term ἡ γενεὰ αὐτῆ appears twice—as paralleling elements. The following analysis sets forth the broad chiasm, highlighting the main sections or themes that serve as counterparts.

¹Cf. Dallas M. Roark's remark in “The Great Eschatological Discourse,” *NovT* 7 (1964/65): 123: “The great eschatological discourse of Matthew xxiv is a thorn in the flesh of the interpreter.” He then calls attention to G. R. Beasley-Murray's review (in *Jesus and the Future* [London, 1954]) of “the many courageous attempts to deal with the passage” and goes on to indicate that “one of the problems in Mt. 24 centers around the words of verses 32-34 with special reference to v. 34.” A survey of commentaries will immediately reveal the great divergence in treatment of the term.

THE CHIASTIC STRUCTURE OF MATTHEW 23-25*

- J-a. Abomination of Desolation in
the holy place (24:15)
b. Gospel proclamation (24:14)
- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>I. The preliminary tribulation (24:9-13)
a. Persecution (vss. 9-12)
b. Promise of salvation (vs. 13)</p> <p>H. Signs on Earth (24:6-8): wars and rumors
of wars; nation against nation and
kingdom against kingdom; famines,
pestilences, and earthquakes</p> <p>G. False messiahs (24:5)</p> <p>F. End of the Temple and Jerusalem
(23:37-24:3)</p> <p>E. "This generation" (23:36): "Amen, I say
to you that all these shall come upon
this generation"</p> <p>D. Scribes and Pharisees kill the prophets
(23:29-35)</p> <p>C. Externally, scribes and Pharisees appear
good, but inside are bad (23:25-28)</p> <p>B. Scribes and Pharisees neglect works of
justice, mercy, and faith (23:23-24)</p> <p>A. Christ's Judgment on "Saying-versus-
Doing" (23:1-22)
a. Scribes and Pharisees sit in Moses'
seat: <i>Do</i> what they <i>say</i>, but not
what they do (23:1-2)
b. Scribes and Pharisees are boastful and
pretentious in their works (23:3-6)
c. Scribes and Pharisees love public dis-
play and titles of honor and author-
ity (23:5-12)
d. Scribes and Pharisees give evidence
of hypocritical attitude (23:13-22)</p> | <p>I'. The great tribulation (24:16-22)
a. Persecution (vss. 16-21)
b. Promise of salvation (vs. 22)</p> <p>H'. False messiahs and false prophets
(24:23-28)</p> <p>G'. Signs in heaven (24:29): sun darkened,
moon not giving light, stars falling,
powers of heaven shaken</p> <p>F'. End of the world, and Second Coming
of Christ (24:30-33)</p> <p>E'. "This generation" (24:34): "Amen, I say
to you that this generation shall not
pass until all these things be fulfilled"
(Also, a parallel statement in vs. 35, and
exhortations to readiness in vss. 36-44)</p> <p>D'. Evil servants smite fellow servants, while
faithful servants give meat in due
season (24:45-51)</p> <p>C'. Externally, all of the ten virgins have
lamps, but only five have the oil of
internal preparation (25:1-13)</p> <p>B'. The bad servant neglects to multiply his
talents, while the good servants do
their work of multiplying their talents
(25:14-30)</p> <p>A'. Christ's Judgment on "Saying-versus-
Doing" (25:31-46)
a. Son of Man sits on throne of glory:
He separates <i>sayers</i> from <i>doers</i>
(25:31-33)
b. People at Jesus' left are boastful and
pretentious in their works, while
those at Jesus' right hand do their
works sincerely and unpretentious-
ly (25:35-45)
c. People at Jesus' right hand serve
humanity as brothers (25:40; cf.
23:8)
d. People at Jesus' left give evidence of
hypocritical attitude, while those
at Jesus' right hand manifest genu-
ine spirit of service (25:34-45)</p> |
|---|--|
-

*Note: Major blocks of material are in general chiasmic pattern, but *details* within these major blocks are not necessarily in inverse parallelism with each other. (See, e.g., A, A', I, and I'.)

2. Significance of Several Structural Features

In analyzing the foregoing outline, it should be noted, first of all, that the GHG'H' pattern forms its own lesser chiasm within the broad chiastic structure of the three chapters. This phenomenon, which at first glance may seem irregular, is not unusual. It is similar to what occurs in the chiastic structure of Mark 13, Luke 21, the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7), and the book of Revelation.²

A careful look at the chiastic structure for Matt 23-25 as outlined above reveals several other interesting facts:

1. There are two separate and distinguishable series. The first, consisting of the left side of the chiasm (23:1-24:13), leads up to the destruction of Jerusalem, while the other series, consisting of the right side of the chiasm (24:16-25:46), treats events from that point onward and culminating in Christ's return at the end of the age.

2. The phrase "this generation" occurs *twice*, once within *each* of these two series. The first time is in connection with the Pharisees (23:36) in the period before Jerusalem's fall, whereas the other occurrence (23:34) is in connection with the period subsequent to Jerusalem's destruction. The first "generation" was to witness the signs on earth; the second was to witness the signs in heaven. For lack of good works, the first was to face the judgment of destruction; watchfulness through good works would bring the second to their judgment of reward.

3. It is important to note that the people facing the final judgment are divided into two basic types: (1) the good and

²This sort of *inversion* (or "chiasm within chiasm") is illustrated also in the diagram for Mark 13 by William H. Shea (see p. 209, below), as well as (presumably) in the structure for Luke 21 as I have outlined it (also p. 209, below). It may be noted, too, elsewhere in biblical literature—represented, e.g., by what K. A. Strand calls the "Exodus -from -Egypt"/"Fall -of -Babylon" motif within the broader chiastic structure of the book of Revelation (K. A. Strand, *Interpreting the Book of Revelation*, 2d ed. [Naples, Florida, 1979], p. 52); also by an inversion within the chiasm of Isa 1:18 (see the outline in Robert L. Alden, "Chiastic Psalms (III): A Study in the Mechanics of Semitic Poetry in Psalms 101-105," *JETS* 21 [1978]: 199; Alden himself does not call attention to the inversion—or possibly even *double inversion*—that may be deduced from an analysis of his outline).

watchful disciples; and (2) the false disciples whose attitudes and activities reveal a spiritual pharisaism. Thus, the latter group parallels the Scribes and Pharisees in the counterpart sections of the pre-Jerusalem-destruction series. (Compare A' through D' with the paralleling sections A through D.)

4. It is clear that the apex or pivotal point to the chiasm (or ABA' structure), is the "abomination of desolation in the temple" (24:15), which marks the judgment on Jerusalem. This pivotal positioning of the abomination-of-desolation/judgment-on-Jerusalem element suggests not only the *culmination of the series* at the left in our outline, but also a *typological prefiguring* for the final judgment at the end time (Matt 24:31-46).

Corollary Observation. A corollary observation concerning this twofold judgment (that of Jerusalem and that at the end of time) may be made from observing the groups to be judged. As noted earlier, one group of people is set forth prior to the judgment upon Jerusalem (see A, B, C, and D in the outline), whereas two groups appear prior to the end-time judgment (see A', B', C', and D' in the outline). The former group is, as we have noted, hypocritical and calls for judgment upon itself for lack of genuine good deeds; and thus, Jesus announced his verdict of destruction upon it (Matt 23:37-24:4). However, as we have also pointed out above, although the right side of the chiasm shows a similar hypocritical group continuing the spirit of Pharisaism, there is now also in view, in an eschatological dimension, another group of people—the genuine, watchful servants, who demonstrate their obedience to their Master by their good deeds. As judgment comes upon the *sole earlier* group depicted (24:15), so judgment will come upon the *two later* groups brought to view (with appropriate rewards for each).

5. Finally, it should be noted that the reference to the preaching of the gospel throughout the whole world as preliminary to the coming of "the end" (24:14) appears also at the apex of the chiasm—without a paralleling item, just as in the case of the "abomination of desolation." I would suggest that this statement, too, serves the function of a pivot, so as to look back to the left column in the outline and ahead to the right-hand column. In other words, the preaching of the gospel throughout the world has

relationship to both of the culminating events—the destruction of Jerusalem in the first Christian century, and the end of the age when Christ returns. Indeed, it may well be that Matt 24:14 in holding this pivotal position actually serves an alarm against the idea of merging the two judgment-events into only one single event, by pointing to the fact that proclamation of the gospel relates to *both* of them.

3. *The Term γενεά in Matt 24:34*

In conclusion, some observations are in order concerning the use of γενεά in Matt 24:34:

1. Irrespective of the exact meaning of the word γενεά as used in this verse, the application pertains to the series of events *subsequent* to the destruction of Jerusalem, not prior to it. This fact is made clear by the double reference to “this generation” (in 23:36 as well as here), the significance of which we have already noticed.

2. The right-hand sequence in the chiasm, as outlined earlier, entails a *period* of time. In fact, chaps. 24 and 25 of Matthew presuppose a rather long delay of the Second Coming of Christ. Indeed, it is such a long delay that the bad servant starts to smite his fellow servants, the ten virgins sleep, and the servants entrusted with talents could make substantial increase.

3. The kinds of events delineated in chap. 24 would also require some amount of time to be fulfilled. For instance, the preaching of the gospel to the whole world would entail a substantial period of time.

4. Finally, both the question proposed by the disciples (24:2-3) and the reply of Jesus (24:4-31) show that he was speaking of two events—the more-nearby destruction of Jerusalem, and the more-distant end of the world. Signs and “generations” would precede each of these, and the term γενεά in 24:34 relates to the latter.

On the following pages, I provide a general diagram for the chiastic structure outlined above and also present diagrams illustrating the chiastic structures of Mark 13 and Luke 21 (the former is by William H. Shea, and the latter is my own).

DIAGRAM 1
CHIASTIC STRUCTURE OF MATT 23-25

“HISTORICAL” SERIES:
PRE-FALL-OF-JERUSALEM

(Culminates in Negative
Reward for Scribes
and Pharisees)

“ESCHATOLOGICAL” SERIES:
POST-FALL-OF-JERUSALEM

(Culminates in Positive and
Negative Rewards for
Two Classes of People)

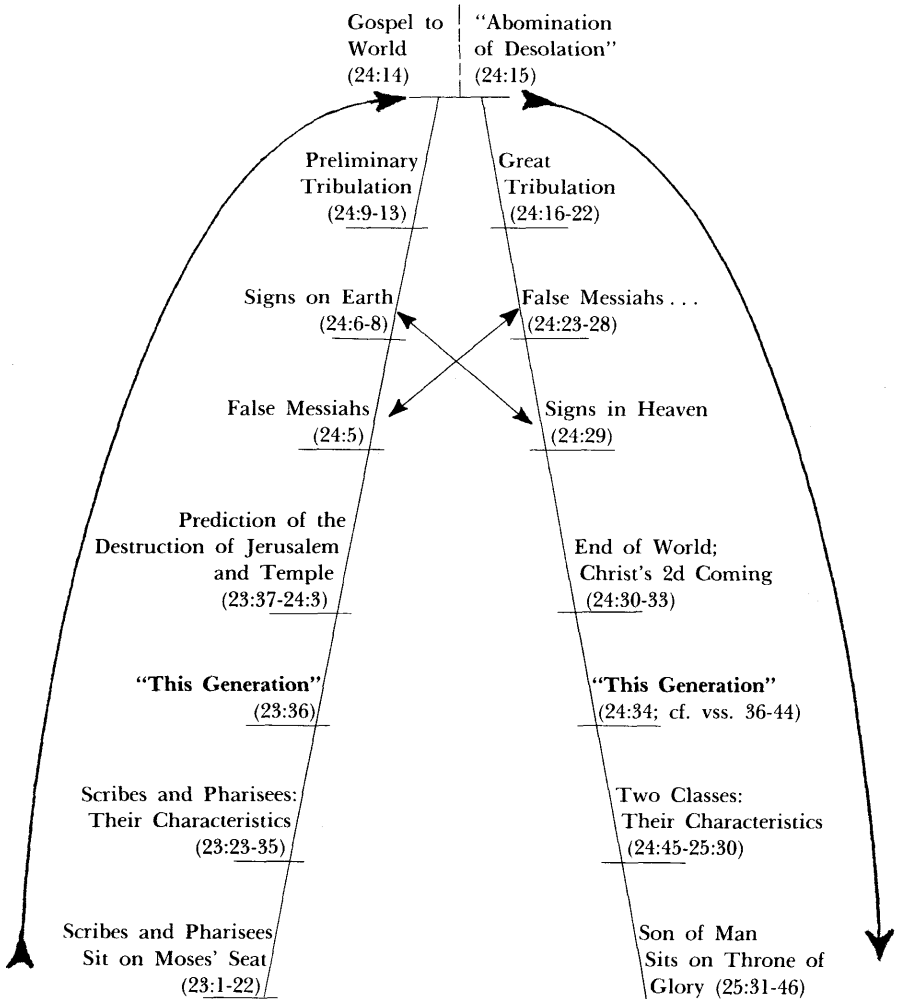
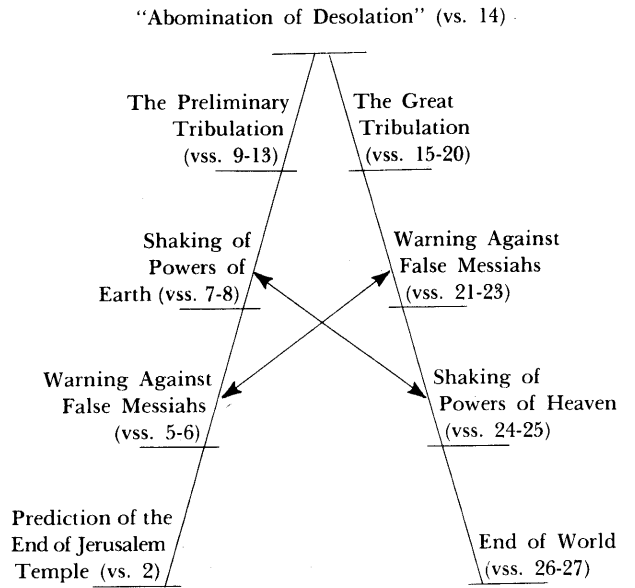


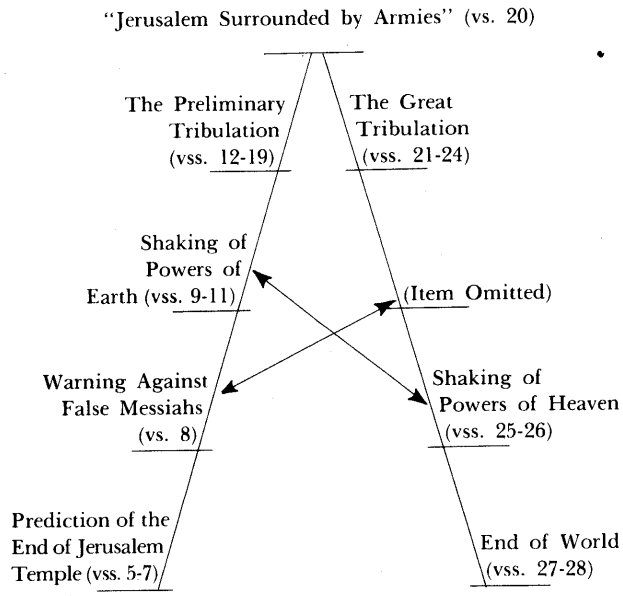
DIAGRAM 2
CHIASTIC STRUCTURE OF MARK 13
 (as outlined by William H. Shea)



"HISTORICAL" SERIES

"ESCHATOLOGICAL" SERIES

DIAGRAM 3
CHIASTIC STRUCTURE OF LUKE 21
 (as outlined by S. Joseph Kidder)



"HISTORICAL" SERIES

"ESCHATOLOGICAL" SERIES