

"THIS GENERATION" IN MATT 24:34: A LITERARY CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

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The expression *hē genea hautē* ("this generation") in the Olivet discourse remains what Joseph A. Fitzmyer has termed "the most difficult phrase to interpret in this complicated eschatological discourse."¹ Narrative criticism will be employed in this paper to show that "this generation" in Matt 24:34 refers to a kind of people characterized by Matthew as unbelieving and headed toward eschatological judgment.² In the context of the discourse it refers to that type of consummately evil and unbelieving people who deceive and persecute the disciples of Christ until the time of the *parousia*, when the true followers of Jesus are vindicated and "this generation" passes away in judgment.

This study will propose literary characterizations of the disciples and "this generation" and show how these are keys to the purpose and interpretation of the discourse in general and to the parable of the fig tree (Matt 24:32-35) in particular.³ Next, the literary method of narrative analogy will be used to show the deliberate linkage and contrast Matthew makes between the chronic difficulties of the interadvent age in Matt 24:4-14

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¹ J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke* (AB; Garden City: Doubleday, 1981) 2.1353.

² A superb introduction to narrative criticism is M. A. Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990). Powell likens narrative criticism to a key on an exegete's key ring. He says, "The wise interpreter of the Bible will want to have as full a set of keys as possible" (p. 101). Scholars such as R. Alter, A. Berlin and M. Sternberg have proven the value of narrative criticism in OT interpretation. J. D. Kingsbury, A. Culpepper and R. Tannehill are among the leading narrative critics who have proven its worth in NT studies. Matthew in this paper will refer to the implied author of the gospel, a literary version of the first evangelist, a second self, whom the reader comes to know by reading the narrative.

³ J. F. Williams defines characterization as "the elements in a narrative text which state or present the traits of a particular character" (*Other Followers of Jesus: The Characterization of the Individuals from the Crowd in Mark's Gospel* [dissertation; Marquette University, 1992] 96). Powell says characters are distinguished by means of the narrator's evaluative point of view (the standards of judgment by which readers are led to evaluate the characters in the story) and by character traits (*Narrative Criticism* 51-58). Some important methods of characterization of the disciples in Matthew include the following: (1) the comparison of the values and thinking of the disciples with those of Jesus (e.g. their contrasting views on Jesus' passion, 16:21-23); (2) direct evaluation of the disciples by Jesus (e.g. "O men of little faith," 8:26; 16:8; cf. 14:31; 17:20); (3) the disciples' own speech and/or actions and the comparison of their words and deeds with those of Jesus (e.g. at Gethsemane); (4) the sequence of the text and the development of the character (e.g. in the early part of the narrative the disciples leave all to follow Jesus [4:18-22], while near the end of the story they all forsake Jesus and flee [26:56]).

(which do not signal an immediate end) and the acute tribulation that leads immediately to the end in 24:15–28.⁴ This contrast is important in the determination of the referents of “all these things” in vv. 33–34. Then an analysis will be made of the four major interpretations of *hē genea hautē* currently held. Conclusions will then be stated.

I. THE CHARACTERIZATION OF THE DISCIPLES AND THE AIM OF THE DISCOURSE

Redaction critics, following the work of Günther Bornkamm and Gerhard Barth, have generally characterized the disciples in Matthew's gospel as those who understand the words and mission of Jesus.⁵ In contrast Jack Kingsbury, using narrative criticism, persuasively argues that the disciples in Matthew are often imperceptive and deficient in their thinking.⁶ He notes that the conflict between the evaluative point of view of the disciples and that of Jesus increases throughout the narrative until it reaches great

⁴ Williams says, “Narrative analogy refers to two or more texts in a narrative that show similarity in plot, character, setting, theme, or terminology” (*Followers* 67–68). Through this similarity the narrator implies a connection and encourages the reader to compare the texts as a way of better understanding each passage. In addition narrative analogy involves dissimilarity, since a parallel text is not an exact repetition.

⁵ G. Bornkamm, G. Barth and H. J. Held, *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963). Barth (“Matthew's Understanding of the Law,” pp. 58–164) particularly presses the point that the essence of being a disciple is that he understands. The difference between the comprehension of the disciples before and after the resurrection so prominent in Mark is said to be nearly eliminated in Matthew (p. 109). See also F. W. Burnett, *The Testament of Jesus-Sophia: A Redaction-Critical Study of the Eschatological Discourse in Matthew* (Washington: University Press of America, 1981) 393. U. Luz says that in Matthew the disciples consistently do understand (“Die Jünger im Matthäusevangelium,” *ZNW* 62 [1971] 148). Matthew has eliminated the Marcan theme of their failure to understand.

⁶ J. D. Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story* (2d ed.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 17, 130, 139–145. R. A. Edwards notes that the disciples in Matthew are inconsistent followers (e.g. cf. 6:25–33 with 8:26; cf. 13:51 with 14:22–31; 15:10–20; cf. 16:5–12; 16:13–20 with 16:21–23; cf. 20:20–28 with chaps. 26–27) who frequently fail to speak and act in ways consistent with a true grasp of Jesus' teachings or with their own pronouncements of understanding (“Uncertain Faith: Matthew's Portrait of the Disciples,” *Discipleship in the New Testament* [ed. F. Segovia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985] 47–61). B. L. Melbourne, regarding the disciples in Matthew, says, “Despite their close association with Jesus, they remain slow to understand, fearful, impulsive, unwilling to learn, and insensitive. Besides, they are also self-assured and unwilling to listen and learn. As a consequence, they were totally unprepared for the events in Jerusalem, as it affected Jesus and themselves. Matthew occasionally attributes understanding to them after explanations by Jesus. Behind this attempt, however, their incomprehension is clearly visible. In the final analysis, however, their true character is exposed. One of them betrayed him, another denied him, and the rest forsook him and fled. If they had indeed comprehended, they ought to have reacted differently” (*Slow to Understand: The Disciples in Synoptic Perspective* [Lanham: University Press of America, 1988] 72). D. Müller says that one keeps coming up against the disciples' lack of understanding (a) of the message itself (Matt 13:36), (b) of their activity (19:13–15), (c) of the goal of discipleship (20:20–28), and (d), above all, of Jesus' suffering (16:22–23; 26:51–53) (“*mathētēs*,” *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* [ed. C. Brown; Grand Rapids: Zondervan] 1.489). K. H. Rengstorff says the disciples' lack of understanding of the goal and proclamation of Jesus is evident to the end of the narrative (Matt 8:19–22, 23–27; 13:36; 14:13–17; 15:32–33; 16:22–23; 20:20–28; 26:56). Only the risen Lord brought about a change in this understanding (“*mathētēs*,” *TDNT* 4.450–451).

intensity in the last third of the gospel.⁷ Jesus always "thinks the things of God," but the disciples often falter and "think the things of men" (Matt 16:23).⁸ Kingsbury says,

The basis of Jesus' evaluative point of view is devotion to God and love of the neighbor, which lead him to suffering and death. The basis of the disciples' evaluative point of view is self-concern, which is the opposite of servanthood: it counts as important having status in the eyes of others, possessing wealth, exercising authority over others, overcoming might with might, and "saving one's life" no matter what the cost.⁹

The failure of the disciples to grasp the fact that servanthood is integral for discipleship and that exaltation in the kingdom will necessarily be preceded by suffering in this age can be demonstrated literarily in two ways.¹⁰ First, there is a consistent pattern of Jesus teaching the same lesson repeatedly to the disciples, a lesson that they fail to grasp until the close of the story.¹¹ Jesus, for example, teaches the disciples many times that they, like him, will be suffering servants and rejected witnesses before they enter into future glory (Matt 5:10-12; 6:44; 10:14-39; 16:21-26; 20:18-28; 22:1-14; 23:34; 24:5-14). That the disciples fail to comprehend what Jesus says about his future suffering (16:22; 17:13; 20:20-21), that their minds are dominated by thoughts of present and future glory (8:1; 17:4; 19:27; 20:20-21), and that they speak and act in inappropriate ways from Gethsemane through the passion of Jesus (26:57-27:66) reveal how little they understand what life will be like for them between Jesus' departure and his *parousia*. The disciples' protest of the anointing of Jesus at Bethany (26:6-13), their failure to watch and pray at Gethsemane (26:36-46), a disciple's misguided resistance to Jesus' arrest (26:47-56), the abandonment of Jesus by his disciples (26:56)—all reveal how little they understood the purpose of the cross. One may wonder how well the disciples could have understood Jesus' second coming if they did not understand the purpose and necessity of his death and resurrection.

Second, the disciples in the last half of the gospel often come to Jesus thinking worldly thoughts, which Jesus then has to correct (14:15; 15:12-20, 23; 17:19; 18:1, 21; 20:20). In Matt 18:1 the disciples come to Jesus and ask him, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom?" Their thinking is antithetical to

⁷ Kingsbury, *Story* 129-130, 136-137. He says this conflict is low in Matt 4:17-11:1, marginally more frequent in 11:2-16:20, and of great intensity in 16:20-28:17. Resolution is reached only at the end of the story (28:18-20).

⁸ Which means they take Satan's point of view regarding the passion of Jesus.

⁹ Kingsbury, *Story* 141-142.

¹⁰ In addition to the fact that the level of conflict between the viewpoint of Jesus and the disciples regarding suffering servanthood escalates as the narrative progresses.

¹¹ An obvious example occurs in Matt 16:5-12. The disciples still did not grasp that in the presence of Jesus, and with the authority that he gave them, they had no need to worry about lack of provisions. In 14:15 they wanted to send the crowds away. But Jesus said, "You give them something to eat," and the 5,000 were fed. In 15:32 the disciples had another big crowd of 4,000 to feed, but they still could not figure out how to do it. Their lack of understanding had to be corrected a third time in 16:5-13.

that of Christ. The greatest is he who humbles himself like a little child. In 19:13 children are brought to Jesus, and the disciples rebuke those who brought them. Jesus in turn rebukes the disciples. The mother of James and John, on behalf of her sons (20:20), comes and commands Jesus to seat her sons next to Jesus in the kingdom. All the disciples resent this because they too want the most favored positions in glory.

Therefore when the disciples come twice to Jesus in Matt 24:1, 3 the implied reader is prepared to anticipate misunderstanding on the part of the disciples and a corrective response on the part of Jesus. At the start of Matthew 24 the disciples' admiration of the temple complex (24:1) shows them to be almost absurdly out of touch with Jesus' pronouncement of judgment upon Jerusalem, its temple and its leadership (Matthew 23; cf. also Jesus' decisive abandonment of the temple in 24:1). Jesus' response to the disciples in 24:2 is corrective.

The disciples then come to Jesus with their questions about the end of the age. Jesus clearly separated the destruction of the temple from his *parousia* in 23:38–39, but the disciples wrongly joined the timing of the two events in 24:3.¹² Sign-seeking is discouraged in the gospel ("an evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign," Matt 12:39; 16:4; cf. 24:24), and yet the disciples ask by what signs they can calculate the *parousia* and the end of the age (24:3). While the disciples seem anxious to experience soon the glories of the kingdom and long to know when the end is coming and what specific signs will allow them to predict its approach, Jesus immediately and often warns them against being deceived (24:4–8, 23–28, 36, 42; 25:13). The only specific answer to when the close of the age will come is "of that day and hour no one knows" (24:36; cf. vv. 42, 44, 50; 25:13).¹³ The only event called a "sign" is Christ himself appearing to all humanity at his *parousia* (24:30).¹⁴ Then it is too late for anyone to repent or prepare for the end.¹⁵

¹² The destruction of the temple meant the end was at hand to them. But Jesus' answer separates the two events. While the Jewish war ("you will hear of wars") will be part of the beginning of the birthpains (general signs that do not signal the end), the end of the age will be clearly and universally signaled by the sign of the Son of Man (24:30).

¹³ Day and hour speak of time in general, not of a specific time period. Jesus is not saying one can know the year but not the specific day. No datable end-time knowledge is given in the discourse. C. Blomberg notes the following: (1) "Day" and "hour" are regularly used throughout Scripture for time in general (Matt 7:22; 10:19; 26:45); (2) Matt 24:42–44 uses "day," "time of night" (watch), and "hour" interchangeably; (3) "day" and "hour" appear in synonymous parallelism in 24:50; (4) "day" especially reflects the OT "day of the Lord" as a stock phrase for the end of the age (Matthew [Nashville: Broadman, 1992] 365). The addition of "the hour" in 24:36 possibly suggests the suddenness of the *parousia*. D. A. Carson says, "Moreover, it is ridiculous quibbling divorced from the context to say that though the day and hour remain unknown, we can ascertain the year or month" ("Matthew," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* [ed. F. E. Gaebelin; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984] 8.508). The point is that the disciples' questions about the time and the signs of Christ's return are misguided.

¹⁴ The genitive *tou huiou* is probably appositional (BDR §167). Blomberg says, "In any event the sign does not enable anyone to recognize the 'signs of the times' until Christ is actually en route to earth" (Matthew 362).

¹⁵ Even sighting the abomination of desolation leaves no time to get ready (cf. *supra*). The only thing the elect can do then, apparently, is to flee for their lives and protect themselves from the ultimate deception.

The correct response to the future is not to calculate when the end will be but to redeem the time by being watchful (24:4) and ready (24:44), by loyally enduring opposition (24:13), by preaching the gospel (24:14) and by being faithful and merciful in ministry (24:45–51). Jesus' discourse is designed to correct the disciples' misguided perspective. Rather than giving them specific times by which to calculate when they would enter into the glories of his reign, Jesus warns them that they should expect severe opposition in this age and that he will bring his dividing judgment (24:30–31, 38–41, 45–51; 15:1–13, 14–30, 31–46) at a time they can neither know nor expect. Jesus did not structure his discourse according to the agenda of the disciples' questions but by what they needed to know and do in the time between Jesus' advents. Any interpretation of *hē genea hautē* that implies that disciples in Jesus' (or the evangelist's) time or at any future time can use the events of Matt 24:4–28 to calculate and expect Jesus' return within a thirty- to forty-year period (allowing themselves time to prepare in the future for his coming) seems to run counter to the whole purpose and emphasis of the discourse.¹⁶

II. THE CHARACTERIZATION OF "THIS GENERATION" AND THE PARABLE OF THE FIG TREE

The primarily pejorative force of *hē genea hautē* (often in combination with descriptive adjectives) in Matthew has been recognized by many interpreters.¹⁷ The moral or ethical use of *dōr* and *haddōr hazzeh* in the OT stands behind Jesus' use of the term in Matthew.¹⁸ His use of the phrase has deliberate connections to the two most notorious generations in the OT: the generation of the flood, and the generation of the wilderness wanderings.

¹⁶ The connection between the abomination of desolation and the final half of Daniel's 70th week in Dan 9:27 (cf. 12:11 [1,290 days]; Matt 24:15) may allow the careful reader of Daniel ("let the reader understand," Matt 24:15) to determine that the time from the sighting of the abomination of desolation till the *parousia* is about three and a half years. Therefore though no one before this cataclysmic event can calculate the time of Christ's return, the final generation seemingly can. But this is hardly Matthew's emphasis in the discourse. While in his mercy Jesus reveals beforehand what his own should do when the antichrist sets up his image to be worshiped, he expects disciples now to be prepared at any moment for his return. Anyone who waits until the events of 24:15–28 will be too late.

¹⁷ W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison say, "The term refers firstly not to chronological duration but to character, and it is pejorative" (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Matthew* [ICC; Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1991] 2.260–261). See also M. Meinertz, "Dieses Geschlecht im Neuen Testament," *BZ* 1 (1957) 283; E. Lövestam, "The *hē genea hautē* Eschatology in Mk 13, 30 parr.," *L'Apocalypse johannique et l'Apocalyptique dans le Nouveau Testament* (ed. J. Lambrecht; Leuven: University of Leuven, 1980) 403–413; R. Morgenthaler, "genea," *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* 2.36; H. Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1962) 502; R. H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 472, 491; V. Hasler, "genea," *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* 1.241; L. Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992) 612–613; R. Stein, *Luke* (Nashville: Holman, 1993) 527; L. Sabourin, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Rome: St. Paul Publications, 1982) 827–828.

¹⁸ R. D. Culver writes: "By a natural transition this word (*dōr*) is used widely with a metaphorical sense to indicate a class of men distinguished by a certain moral or spiritual character.

Adjectives like "evil," "perverse," "adulterous" and "faithless" (Matt 11:39, 45; 16:4; 17:17) come from the Song of Moses (Deuteronomy 32; cf. especially vv. 5, 20).¹⁹

Matthew also seems to have deliberately juxtaposed the phrase "this generation" with his account of the days of Noah (24:37–39), which are an explicit type of the coming of the Son of Man. This is probably a purposeful echo of Gen 7:1:²⁰ "Then the Lord said to Noah, 'Enter the ark (cf. Matt 24:38, "until the day when Noah entered the ark"), you and all your household, for I have found you righteous before me in this generation'" (*tē genea tautē*, LXX). In the LXX only Gen 7:1 and Ps 11:8 have the exact phrase *hē genea hautē*, which is used six times in Matthew.

Psalms 12:8 (11:8 LXX) says, "You, O Lord, will keep them (LXX "us"); you will preserve him (i.e. the godly man) from this generation (*haddôr zû; tēs geneas tautēs*) forever." "This generation" is described in context as lying, boastful, proud, violent and wicked and as exalting vileness. The godly do not belong to "this generation," though they live among them (cf. Acts 2:40; Phil 2:15). In Gen 7:1 Noah is described as the sole righteous individual in "this generation" (*tē genea tautē*). He, like the godly man in Psalm 12, lived in but did not belong to "this generation" (described as wicked, violent and corrupt in Gen 6:5–11).

Evald Lövestam persuasively argues that Jewish literature does not include Noah in the generation of the flood nor Moses in the wilderness generation.²¹ He says,

Just as Noah was a contemporary of the *dôr* of the flood and yet did not belong to it and Moses, Joshua etc. were contemporaries of the *dôr* of the wilderness without belonging to it, it is assumed in the New Testament that there are contemporaries (Jesus, of course, and others) who do not belong to "this generation". This emphasizes the decisive and demarcating stress on the spiritual character in the *hē genea hautē* conception. *Hē genea hautē* can from this point of view be compared to such a conception as e.g. *ho aiôn autos*.²²

Matthew 24:36–44 presents the same separation between the godly and the wicked as one finds in Gen 7:1 and Ps 12(11):8. The people of Noah's

Thus God is 'in the generation of the righteous' (Ps 14:5) and those whose 'hands' and 'heart' are clean are 'the generation of them' that seek God's face (Ps 24:6). The wicked 'fathers' of Israel were 'a stubborn and rebellious generation; a generation that set not their heart aright' (Ps 79:13). This usage is frequently employed (see Prov 30:11, 12, 13, 14; Jer 2:31; 7:29). This usage via LXX becomes, in the word *genea*, a Hebraism of frequent striking occurrence in the mouth of Jesus in the Greek NT (e. g., Mt 11:16; 12:29 [?], 45; 16:4; 17:17, etc.). . . . In the OT, the chronological use is predominant . . . though the metaphorical . . . is the most significant theologically" ("*dôr*," *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* [ed. R. L. Harris et al.; Chicago: Moody] 1.187).

¹⁹ The author of Hebrews praises Moses as a hero of the faith (11:23–28). Moses was faithful as a servant, just as Jesus was faithful as a Son (3:1–6). But while he praises Moses he says that the people of the wilderness generation (3:10) were unbelieving apostates (3:12) who forfeited the promised rest.

²⁰ Lövestam, "Eschatology" 411–412; Davies and Allison, *Matthew* 2.261.

²¹ Lövestam, "Eschatology" 406–410; *Gen. Rab.* 30.1–3; 37.6.5; VI.5; *b. Sanh.* 107b–108b, 110b.

²² Lövestam, "Eschatology" 410.

day were oblivious to God and to the preaching of repentance by Noah in their pursuit of life's pleasures. Noah was saved, and they were all swept away in judgment (24:39). Likewise the unrepentant, faithless and wicked people who are alive when the Son of Man comes will be taken in judgment (24:30, 40–41, 50–51; 25:11–12, 30, 41–46) and shut out of the kingdom. Noah must have endured ridicule and persecution as he exercised patient endurance over the many years it took him to build the ark. When the ark was completed and loaded, the situation immediately changed. The flood came and destroyed that generation. In the same way the signs of Matt 24:4–28 go on while the wicked (wickedness is multiplied, 24:12; cf. Genesis 6) deceive, persecute or ignore the godly (Matt 24:4–11; 25:31–46). "This generation will not pass away till all these things take place." But when Christ comes in judgment they are destroyed.²³

A study of the use of *hē genea hautē* (11:16; 12:41, 42, 45; 23:36; 24:34) and *genea* with other descriptive adjectives (12:39, 45; 16:4; 17:17) used in the same sense reveals that the kind of people referred to are characterized as those who reject Jesus and his messengers and the salvific message they preach, who remain unbelieving and unrepentant, who actively oppose Jesus and his messengers through testing and persecution, and who will face eschatological judgment. The pejorative adjectives given to "this generation" (evil, adulterous, faithless, perverse; cf. 12:39, 45; 16:4; 17:17) throughout the gospel are qualities that distinguish those who are subjects of the kingdom from those who are not.

"This generation" in Matthew is characterized in the following ways: (1) In 11:16–24 "this generation" displays the epitome of foolishness by judging Jesus to be an unrighteous sinner (glutton, etc.) and by failing to repent in the face of his mighty works. They will therefore face a harsher fate on the day of judgment than Sodom. (2) In 12:22–45 "this generation" (12:41, 45) will again be condemned at the judgment (12:41–42) because it failed to repent at the wisdom and miracles of Jesus and instead rejected him by attributing his exorcisms to Satan and by testing him by asking for a sign. (3) In 16:1–4 the Pharisees and Sadducees as members of "an evil and adulterous generation" again demonstrate their rejection of Jesus by testing him and asking for a sign (Jesus walked away from them). (4) In 17:17 Jesus was exasperated with a "faithless and perverse generation" ensnared in the grip of Satan. He would soon leave this unbelieving generation.²⁴ (5) In 23:13–36 Jesus delivers a scathing rebuke against the

²³ *Parerchomai* means "to pass away, to come to an end, to perish" (J. Schneider, "*parerchomai*," *TDNT* 2.681–682). Schneider says that in passages like Matt 5:18; 24:35 its focus is eschatological. Cf. also Jas 1:10 where the rich, like the flower or grass, will "pass away," and 2 Pet 3:10, which says the heavens will "pass away" with a loud noise. References in Matt 5:18; 24:35 to *parerchomai* are key to determining its meaning in 24:34. Matthew 5:18 says, "Till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot will pass away from the law until all is accomplished." The phraseology in this verse ("until all is accomplished") is very similar to that of 24:34. In the new heaven and new earth "the law" will have become superfluous. "This generation" will "pass away" when Jesus returns, like the law, and as "heaven and earth will pass away." Only Jesus' words "will not pass away" (24:35).

²⁴ The one place in Matthew where the disciples may be included in "this generation" is in 17:17. After the transfiguration, Jesus and the three disciples who accompanied him came to a

scribes and Pharisees who comprise a corporate kind of evil generation (23:36) with their fathers who killed the prophets (23:31, 35) and with those who would murder Jesus' messengers until the time of the *parousia* (23:32, 34, 38–39). Those who comprise "this generation" are hypocritical (23:3–7, 13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29), self-exalting (23:5–12), spiritually blind (23:16–17, 19, 24, 26), lawless (23:28) and foolish (23:17). They will kill and crucify disciples (23:34), they lead many astray and shut them out of the kingdom (23:13–15), and they are sentenced to hell (23:13–15, 33, 35–36).

The opponents of Jesus' disciples in Matthew 24–25 share similar traits with "this generation" as characterized in these preceding chapters. False prophets and Christs lead many astray (24:4–5, 11, 23–26; cf. 23:13–15). "They" will deliver disciples up to tribulation and put them to death, and disciples will be hated by all nations (24:9; cf. 23:34). The many who apostatize and turn on true disciples (24:11) demonstrate they are faithless (24:48–51; 25:14–25; cf. 17:17). The foolish virgins who are excluded from the marriage banquet remind one of the foolishness of "this generation" (11:16–24; 23:17). The lawless and loveless scribes and Pharisees (23:28; cf. 23:4–5, 13, 15, 23) are the precursors of the lawlessness and lovelessness of most people in the discourse (24:12). The "adulterous" nature of "this generation" (12:39; 16:4) is reflected in Matthew 24–25 by false Christs, the false prophets who trumpet them, and the many who follow them.²⁵ Its perversity (17:17) is found in the perversity of the false Christs and prophets who show great signs and wonders to lure the elect into apostasy during a time of incredible persecution and trial (24:23–26). The wickedness of "this generation" is seen in the wicked servants in 24:48–49; 25:26.

While "this generation" faces eschatological judgment for its evil unbelief in chaps. 11–23, throughout the discourse eschatological judgment is likewise the fate of evil, unbelieving humanity (24:30, 39–41, 48–51; 25:11–

crowd of people and found a demon-possessed boy whom his other nine disciples could not heal because of their "little faith." Jesus was exasperated with the "faithless and perverse generation" surrounding him. Were his disciples part of "this generation" or merely influenced by their unbelief? As has been shown, Jesus had consistently pronounced judgment on "this generation" (11:16; 12:39–45; 16:4). But in 17:20 Jesus gives these faltering disciples a word of great encouragement. He says, "For truly, I say to you, if you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you." He is preparing them to exercise faith when he is no longer with them. In relation to the faithless and perverse generation Jesus asks, "How long am I to be with you?" At the close of the gospel the Lord tells his disciples: "I am with you always to the close of the age" (cf. 24:3). "This generation" was faithless, but the disciples at least had in faith left everything to loyally follow Jesus. They had "little faith," not no faith. The disciples' subsequent question (17:19) and Jesus' response (17:20) suggests that the disciples, while influenced by "this generation," were not part of it. Even if one grants that they were part of it in chap. 17, after the resurrection the disciples were no longer part of "this generation." Thus in Matthew 24–25, which takes place after the resurrection, one can make a clear separation between true disciples and "this generation" (24:34).

²⁵ Also the antichrist, who sets up his idolatrous image to be worshiped (24:15; cf. Dan 9:27; 11:31; 12:11; 1 Macc 1:54; 2 Macc 8:17).

13, 24–30, 41–46). A clear differentiation is made between loyal, believing and obedient disciples who enter into eternal life in the kingdom and the wicked who enter into judgment. The implied reader of Matthew's gospel would therefore likely interpret *hē genea hautē* in Matt 24:34 based on the consistent pejorative characterization of *hē genea hautē* throughout the gospel. Just as in the rest of Matthew, "this generation" in chap. 24 is one that rejects Jesus and his messengers, is blind to the signs of his coming, remains unrepentant, and faces eschatological judgment. In the context of the gospel the obedience of Christ in the midst of "this generation" in the face of persecution, testing and death sets the pattern for the future, faithful obedience and endurance of his disciples in the midst of the same kind of people faced by Christ ("this generation" in 24:34).

The purpose of the parable of the fig tree (24:32–35) is not to give an exact date for Christ's return (cf. 24:36) but to stress the certainty of the *parousia* (the events of 24:4–28, while extremely difficult for disciples, are guarantees of Christ's ever nearer return). God will bring vindication to his elect, and the opponents of Christ and his disciples will pass into perdition.²⁶ The parable teaches the disciples again that they will have to endure tribulations and deceptions in the midst of an evil, rejecting people ("this generation") that will not pass away until the events of 24:4–31 take place, at which time true disciples will be gathered into the kingdom.

III. NARRATIVE ANALOGY AND "ALL THESE THINGS" (MATT 24:33–34)

Commentators generally agree that the first two main sections of the discourse are Matt 24:4–14 and 24:15–28.²⁷ Matthew 24:4–14 includes general signs of the interadvent age that do not yet signal the end. Matthew 24:15–28 includes the very specific sign of the abomination of desolation that causes or is followed directly by the greatest tribulation that will ever be. The tribulation is in turn followed "immediately" (*eutheōs*) by the *parousia* of the Son of Man. Commentators disagree as to whether 24:15–28 refers entirely to a future period of tribulation or wholly or in part to the events of AD 70.²⁸

The literary method of narrative analogy suggests that the implied author of Matthew distinguished between a general, chronic period of indefinite duration that the disciples endure during the interadvent age and a period of acute tribulation (which is "cut short") immediately before the end.²⁹ There are multiple literary (verbal and thematic) links between these two sections in Matthew. But in each case the opposition faced by the disciples in 24:4–14 is intensified in 24:15–28. This is illustrated by the following comparisons.

²⁶ The disciples will all the while preach the gospel of the kingdom to "this generation" to bring them into the kingdom. But opposition to this mission will last throughout this age.

²⁷ The remaining sections are as follows: 24:29–31, 32–35, 36–44, 45–51; 25:1–13, 14–30, 31–46.

²⁸ AD 70 may also be thought of as foreshadowing the events of the end.

²⁹ See n. 4 *supra* above on narrative analogy.

Chronic tribulation (24:4–14)

1. The end is not yet (24:6). The beginning of the birthpains (24:8).
2. Many false Christs lead many astray (24:4–5). Many false prophets lead many astray (24:11).
3. General wars, rumors of wars, famines, earthquakes, and disciples persecuted and put to death (24:6–9).
4. Disciples are not to be alarmed (24:6).
5. Disciples are delivered up to general tribulation (24:9).
6. Disciples are urged to endure for an indeterminate period and promised success in witnessing to the whole world (24:13–14). The end may be distant.
7. General disasters and opposition.

Acute tribulation (24:15–28)

The end comes immediately after the great tribulation (24:22, 29). The birthpains are intense (Flee! Woe!).

False Christs and false prophets work together performing great signs and wonders and leading almost everyone astray, very nearly deceiving the elect (24:23–28). This deception comes at the height of the great tribulation when the life of all humanity is threatened and hope for Christ's return is desperate.

If the days were not shortened by God, every human would die. Vultures gather at the slaughter (24:22, 28).

Disciples are to flee for their lives immediately (24:16–18).

A very specific and final tribulation immediately followed by the end. The greatest tribulation that has ever been and ever will be (24:21–22).

There is no time to do anything but flee for one's life and protect oneself from death and deception (24:22–26). The time is cut short (24:22). The end follows immediately.

A tribulation specifically centered on Jerusalem and Judea and prophesied by Daniel, which broadens out to affect the whole earth and threaten the life of every person and if possible the salvation of every disciple.

From the chart one may notice an escalation in the intensity of tribulation, death and deception as one moves from 24:4–14 to 24:15–28. The abomination of desolation and the great tribulation that proceeds from it are very specific events in relation to which the response of the disciples is

to be changed from "do not be alarmed" to "flee." The disciples are told that the disasters and persecutions of 24:4–14 are not signals of the end (24:6). But the great tribulation is followed immediately by the end (24:29).³⁰

The interpretation of the phrase *hē genēa hautē* is largely dependent on the referent of *panta tauta* ("all these things") in Matt 24:33 and in 24:34.³¹ Jesus draws an analogy from the lesson of the fig tree in 24:33: "So also, when you see all these things, you know that (it [the end] or he [the Son of Man]) is near, at the very gates."³² "All these things" in 24:33 is logically distinguished from "it/he is near." Since it is pointless to say, "When you see the Son of Man coming the end is near," *panta tauta* in 24:33 refers rather to all the events of 24:4–26 including the abomination that causes desolation (24:15) and the great tribulation that proceeds from it (24:21–26). The implied author of Matthew makes a deliberate literary link between "When you see all these things" in 24:33 and "So when you see the abomination" in 24:15. "All these things" then cannot be restricted to 24:4–14 (the beginning of the birthpains). In fact its special focus is on the abomination of desolation and the great tribulation that occurs immediately before the second coming (24:29).³³ "This generation" does not then refer to

³⁰ D. Bock, speaking of the Marcan and Matthean parallels to Luke 21:20–24, says, "Matt. 24:15 explicitly mentions the fulfillment of Daniel. Mark 13:14 and Matthew both make a call for the reader to understand what is meant. As such, these passages look like the end. They speak of the consummation, for the apocalyptic and OT notes struck here are stronger than in Luke's version. . . . There is persecution coming for Jerusalem soon (so Luke) and there is tribulation coming in the end (so Matthew and Mark)" (*Luke* [Grand Rapids: Baker, forthcoming]). He also writes: "In contrast to Luke's general remark about distress, Matthew and Mark speak of unprecedented tribulation, with Matthew speaking of 'great tribulation.' They both say that this tribulation is unprecedented in scale. There is no time like it before or after, a remark which shows the focus is on the end. . . . In Matthew . . . this is the period which immediately precedes the end, a period of intense persecution on Israel."

³¹ "All" takes on its naturally comprehensive force throughout the discourse. Its reference in each occurrence is determined by context. Thus *tauta panta* in 24:2 refers to all the buildings of the temple. *Panta de tauta* in 24:8 refers to the beginning of the birthpains mentioned in 24:4–13. Matthew 24:9–14 is not subsequent in time to 24:4–8 for the following reasons: (1) The preaching of the gospel (10:7; 28:18–20), like wars, earthquakes (27:51–54; 28:2), false prophets (7:15–20), apostasy and persecution will extend throughout the interadvent age; (2) Luke 21:12 says this type of persecution occurs before, not after, national conflicts, earthquakes and famines; (3) the sufferings of 24:9–11 were already predicted by Jesus in 10:17–25 with similar generalization; (4) *tote* (as in v. 10) probably means "at that time" and not "after." *Panta tauta* in 24:33 refers to more than the beginning of the birthpains. It encompasses all of 24:4–28. Finally, *panta tauta* in 24:34 is fully comprehensive. It encompasses all of 24:4–31. There is no logical restriction placed on "all" in v. 34 (as in 24:33), and the previous (24:29–31) and following context (24:35–37) both speak of the end. Therefore each use of *panta tauta* or *tauta panta* becomes more comprehensive in the discourse. It refers in sequence to AD 70, to the interadvent age, to the interadvent age and specifically to the great tribulation, and finally to all the events and specifically to the *parousia*. A. A. Hoekema rightly observes: "It seems arbitrary and unwarranted to impose any kind of limitation on the words 'before all these things take place'—since such a limitation really makes Jesus say, 'before some of these things take place' (*The Bible and the Future* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979] 116; italics his)."

³² Since in the discourse the end and the *parousia* happen at the same time, there is no significant difference between "it" and "he" here in v. 33.

³³ Burnett notes that the formula "spoken of through the prophet Daniel" is similar to the *Reflexionszeit* but does not contain the complete formula. He says factors that support that

the contemporaries of Christ. They did not see "all these things" of 24:15–28, which remain future.

IV. "THIS GENERATION" IN MATT 24:34

1. *Contemporaries of Jesus.* Many commentators say that "this generation" must refer to the contemporaries of Jesus. Proponents of this view (like Robert Maddox) have attempted to prove that *genea* in the gospels always means "contemporaries."³⁴ Any other interpretation is often dismissed as artificial. But "all these things" in Matt 24:34 includes the future, unparalleled tribulation and probably Jesus' *parousia*. The sermon's whole build-up, and especially the preceding paragraph on the *parousia* (24:29–31), prepares the reader for a reference to Jesus' return, not for the fall of the temple.³⁵

A central and persistent theme of the discourse is that no man, not even Christ himself, knows when the end will come (24:36, 42, 44, 50; 25:13). The Son of Man will return at a time that his followers cannot know and will not expect, thus prompting them to be ready now. The assertion that no man can know when Jesus will return (24:36) causes the implied reader of the gospel to reassess his view of "this generation" in 24:34. How could Jesus on the one hand assert that his own contemporary generation would see the fulfillment of all his prophecy and on the other hand assert just two verses later that no man, not even himself, could know the time of fulfill-

Matthew intentionally does not want this text to be understood as fulfilled include the following:

(1) Matthew 24:15 has all the essentials of a fulfillment formula except an explicit reference to any fulfillment of the Danielic text; (2) Matthew 24:15 is the only reference in Matthew to the text of a prophet either by name or allusion that has no indication that the prophecy has been fulfilled (*Testament* 306–307). The following reasons make it unlikely on an historical and exegetical basis that Matt 24:15–28 refers to the events of AD 70: (1) AD 70 was not "great tribulation such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be" (24:21). (2) Matthew declares that the abomination came first, followed by the great tribulation and flight. The abomination causes the desolation. In the siege of Titus, however, the tribulation preceded the abomination. (3) The abomination of desolation takes place "in the holy place," which is probably the Jewish temple (cf. Acts 6:13; 21:28). In Daniel the abomination is always linked to the temple. When the Roman standards stood in the temple it was too late for flight into the mountains. (4) If the elect are Christians who escaped to Pella, what need was there for shortening those days? (5) There is little historical evidence for false Christs appearing around the time of the Jewish war or for false Christs performing great miracles. (6) AD 70 did not drive masses of professing Christians to apostatize. (7) Every human being would not have been destroyed by the Jewish war (24:22). Would all Roman soldiers have been killed? (8) Matthew 24:29 states that the *parousia* (24:29–31) comes "immediately after those days" (24:15–28). (9) Matthew 24:14 speaks of the absolute end. Matthew 24:15 is connected by *oun* to the preceding verses. It is natural for 24:15–28 to describe the same general period. See Gundry, *Matthew* 482; J. F. Hart, *A Chronology of Matthew 24:1–44* (dissertation; Grace Theological Seminary, 1986) 125–147.

³⁴ R. Maddox, *The Purpose of Luke-Acts* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1982) 111–115.

³⁵ F. D. Bruner, *The Churchbook. A Historical Theological Commentary. Matthew 13–28* (Waco: Word, 1990) 877.

ment?³⁶ Jesus by his statements in Matt 24:4–14 ("but the beginning of the birthpangs," "the end is not yet," "this gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world"), 25:5 ("the bridegroom was delayed") and 25:19 ("after a long time the master of those servants came"), as well as the prophecy of a future great tribulation (24:15–28), is not emphasizing an immediate close of the age.³⁷

2. *Israel as a race.* Others take *hē genea hautē* to refer to Israel as a race. This is usually taken as a promise that God will preserve Israel to the end.³⁸ There are several problems with this view. Jesus tells us that the leafing fig tree represents the nearness of summer (and harvest) and by analogy the nearness of the vindication and judgment brought by our Lord at his return.³⁹ The fig tree is therefore not a cipher for Israel in this context.⁴⁰

"This generation" in Matthew speaks of a wicked kind of people who reject Jesus and face eschatological judgment, not all Israel (e.g. Jesus and the disciples). In the discourse the reference of *hē genea hautē* expands beyond the unbelieving in Israel to include the unbelieving of all the nations. There are several reasons why "this generation" includes Gentiles as well as Jews in Matthew 24–25. The Olivet discourse is an external prolepsis—that is, it narrates in advance that which will take place after the great commission, where mission expands beyond Israel to all the nations (28:18–20; cf. 24:14). Because of their identification with Christ and their

³⁶ Jesus always "thinks the things of God" in Matthew's story and thus always presents a reliable view of things. Since he has proven himself reliable and authoritative in terms of predictions, words and actions in the rest of the story, the implied reader will consider him reliable here as well. See Kingsbury, *Story* 11.

³⁷ Matthew's Jesus was speaking about evil, faithless contemporaries in his use of *hē genea hautē* in 11:16; 12:39, 41, 45; 16:4; cf. 17:17. But the contemporaries of Christ did not murder Zechariah son of Berechiah (23:35–36), and thus "this generation" in 23:36 extends beyond Jesus' contemporaries to include murderers back to the time of Abel and forward to those who would kill and crucify and persecute disciples until Jesus returns (23:34–39). Hoekema (*Bible* 117) says, "This generation' here cannot be restricted to the Jews living at the time Jesus is saying these words, for the context refers both to past sins (v. 35) and future sins ('Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some of whom you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from town to town,' v. 34)." While judgment was meted out when Jesus abandoned the temple (23:38; 24:1), and especially in AD 70, the judgment seems to extend throughout the interadvent age to all those—Jews and Gentiles (disciples are killed and hated by all nations in 24:9)—who stand in solidarity with the people who rejected the prophets and Christ.

³⁸ Others think Israel will remain wicked until the *parousia*, at which time it will be judged (e.g. R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1943] 953; E. Schweizer, *The Good News According to St. Matthew* [Atlanta: John Knox, 1975] 458).

³⁹ The association of judgment with harvest is well established in Matthew (e.g. 13:24–30, 36–43; 3:8–10). "Harvest" (*therismos*) is a derivative of *theros* ("summer"). Bruner says, "Since summer was the season for much of Palestine's harvest, and since harvest, in turn, is the Gospel's symbol of the end of the world and judgment (cf., e. g., 13:30, 39–43), the fig tree is a perfect parable of Jesus' point" (*Churchbook* 875). See also the wordplay between *qāyīṣ* ("figs") and *qēṣ* ("the end") in Amos 8:1–3.

⁴⁰ J. F. Walvoord contends that the fig tree nowhere in Scripture represents Israel as an entire nation (*Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come* [Chicago: Moody, 1974] 191–192). Literary critics will

preaching of the gospel, the disciples after the resurrection face the same opposition from Gentiles as they did from Jews in Matthew's story (cf. 23:35 with 24:9–14, "you will be hated by all nations"). The majority of Gentiles ultimately reject the gospel message ("all nations" [v. 9], "most men's love will grow cold" [v. 12], "all the tribes of the earth will mourn" [v. 30]). Since the gospel now goes to all nations (rather than just to Israel, 10:5–6), the nominal disciples who apostatize and turn on true believers (24:10) will also be largely composed of Gentiles.

Matthew 24:15 speaks of a desolating sacrilege probably set up by a Gentile ruler akin to Antiochus IV Epiphanes. The last days will be like the days of Noah, a day when the majority of Gentiles did not respond and were judged. In the judgment of the nations "the goats" are apparently judged because they reject or ignore the needs of disciples sent to minister to them.⁴¹ Finally 24:34 seems to imply that "this generation" will pass away after the events of 24:4–28 take place.⁴² Israel will not pass away when "all these things" take place. Rather, Matthew envisions a mission to Israel until the *parousia* (10:23) and a conversion of Israel before the *parousia* (23:39; cf. Romans 9–11; Isa 66:22; Zechariah 8, 13–14).⁴³ "This generation" refers to unbelieving, rejecting people, Jews and Gentiles, not to the righteous in Israel.

3. *The generation of the end.* Many evangelical scholars take "this generation" to refer to all the people who are alive when Jesus returns. They are the generation that witnesses the completion of the events of the end. The emphasis in this interpretation is that when the end comes it comes quickly. Darrell Bock writes:

notice the narrative analogy between the fig-tree-budding parable and the fig-tree-cursing event in 21:18–22. W. Telford suggests that just as the withering fig tree in Mark 11 (Matthew 21) was intended as a sign prefiguring an imminent judgment upon the Jewish people and their temple, in chap. 13 the disciples and the readers "are invited to look upon the fig-tree's *blossoming* as a sign likewise prefiguring an eschatological event, viz., the coming Age of both *blessing and judgment*" (*The Barren Temple and the Withered Tree* [JSNTSup 1; Sheffield: JSOT, 1980] 216; italics his). The leafing fig tree (Matthew 24) anticipated the dividing judgment or harvest that the Son of Man would bring upon his return. Thus while the fig tree does not equal Israel it may be a sign of Israel's blessing (in line with 23:39 where it seems many in Israel welcome Christ as believers at the end of the age). Luke makes it clear that the fig tree does not symbolize Israel by recording these words: "Look at the fig tree, and all the trees" (Luke 21:29). Any deciduous tree could have illustrated the point that the harvest is near. The fig tree with its relationship to eschatological judgment in context (Matt 24:29; cf. Isa 34:4) made this point best.

⁴¹ Thus they also reject the gospel message. See S. W. Gray, *The Least of My Brothers: Matthew 25:31–42—A History of Interpretation* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1989) on the interpretation of this highly debated portion of Scripture. See Blomberg, *Matthew* 377–378, for a succinct defense of the view that "the least of these brothers of mine" equals some part or all of the disciples of Christ.

⁴² J. F. Walvoord, *The Prophecy Knowledge Handbook* (Wheaton: Victor, 1990) 391; I. H. Marshall, *Commentary on Luke* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 780. See n. 23 *supra* for a discussion of "pass away."

⁴³ See Davies and Allison, *Matthew* 2.190; Gundry, *Matthew* 194–195, 601.

What Jesus is saying is that the generation which sees the beginning of the end, also sees its end. When the signs come, they will proceed quickly, they will not drag on for many generations. It will happen within a generation. . . . In the discourse's prophetic context, the remark comes after making comments about the nearness of the end to *certain signs*. As such it is the issue of the signs which controls the passage's force, making this view likely.⁴⁴

The major difficulty with this interpretation is that it ignores the primarily pejorative force of *hē genea hautē* throughout Matthew. It also ignores the implication that "this generation" will pass away when Christ returns. The wicked at the *parousia* are hovered over by a gathering of vultures (24:28), "swept away" (24:39), "taken" (24:40–41), put in hell (24:51), "shut out" of the marriage feast (25:11–12), "cast into outer darkness" (25:30). At the very end of the discourse Jesus says, "And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life" (25:46). In contrast the righteous will be (1) saved (24:13), (2) gathered by the angels of God (24:31), (3) left to enter the kingdom (24:40–41), (4) invited to the marriage feast (25:10), (5) placed in positions of authority and ushered into the joy of their master (25:21–23), (6) inheritors of the kingdom (25:34), (7) those who have eternal life (25:46). The wicked will be destroyed and will immediately pass away into perdition (cf. Rev 19:17–21; Zechariah 12–14). The righteous will never "pass away" but will have eternal life and joy in the kingdom.

4. *Hē genea hautē as an evil kind of people.* *Hē genea hautē* in Matthew describes unbelieving, rejecting humanity, unresponsive to God and oblivious to the possibility of facing his judgment. "This generation" that opposed the coming of the kingdom in Jesus' ministry stands in solidarity with those who reject and oppose God and his kingdom to the very end. Leon Morris says, "Right up to the time when *all these things happen* there will be people of the same stamp as those who rejected Jesus while he lived on earth."⁴⁵ While Jesus was addressing evil contemporaries in Matt 11:16; 12:39, 41–42; 16:4; 17:17, in Matt 23:36 his reference to *hē genea hautē* expands beyond his own contemporaries to include persecutors and murderers of the righteous from Abel to Zechariah to heralds of the gospel in the indefinite future (23:32–35). The context of the Olivet discourse indicates that the group described as *hē genea hautē* sees all the events (24:34) of 24:4–31. Therefore these are persecutors of Christ's disciples until the *parousia*.

Matthew seems to have deliberately juxtaposed the phrase "this generation" with his account of the days of Noah in 24:37–39 in order to echo the notorious generation of the flood (Gen 7:1 LXX). The flood generation is a type of "this generation" that sees the end signs, just as the flood itself typifies the judgment that will occur at the *parousia*. "This generation" in

⁴⁴ Bock, *Luke* (forthcoming), on Luke 21:32 (italics his).

⁴⁵ Morris, *Matthew* 613 (italics his).

24:34 represents a long line of unbelieving, unresponsive people from the time of Noah to the end of the age.⁴⁶

The disciples of Christ must endure the persecution and deception of "this generation." Yet they have the sure hope, based on Christ's word (24:35), that Jesus as Son of Man will come and gather them into his kingdom and vindicate them by judging the wicked. Just as Christ suffered, so will they in this age. Just as Christ was subsequently glorified, so they will "inherit the kingdom prepared for (them) from the foundation of the world" (25:34).

IV. CONCLUSION

The interpretation of Jesus' eschatological discourse is aided by analyzing literary features of Matthew's story such as the characterization of the disciples and "this generation" and the narrative analogy between the events and characters described in Matt 24:4-14 and 24:15-28. Matthew's literary characterization of the disciples reveals that they are people who failed to grasp that the essence of discipleship is servanthood and that exaltation in the kingdom will be preceded by an indefinite period of intense suffering and difficult ministry. This characterization helps show that Jesus' discourse was designed to correct the disciples' misguided perspective on the end. Rather than giving them specific times and signs by which to calculate when they would enter into the glories of Jesus' reign (24:3), Jesus instead warns them to expect severe opposition in this age from "this generation" (24:4-34). The same opposition Jesus faced from "an evil and adulterous generation" will also be faced by his disciples until the end.

Hē genea hautē is characterized throughout the gospel in consistently negative ways. The group known as "this generation" is always unbelieving, opposed to Christ, excluded from the kingdom, and destined to face eschatological judgment. The opponents of the disciples in Matthew 24-25 share the same characteristics and are called "this generation" in 24:34. Just as in the rest of Matthew, *hē genea hautē* in chap. 24 rejects Jesus and his messengers and is blind to the signs of his coming. The same sort of people who were oblivious to God's message in Noah's day (Gen 7:1) will be present through all the events of Matt 24:4-31, up to the very end itself. The purpose of the parable of the fig tree is to teach disciples (and the implied readers of the gospel) that while they will surely experience the types of troubles described in 24:4-28, as well as opposition from persecutors and deceivers as they minister, these very difficulties are God's guarantee of the certain and ever nearer return of Christ. Faithful servants of Christ will then receive full vindication and be gathered into the kingdom.

⁴⁶ Perhaps there is a particular reference to the consummately evil and unrepentant people who are alive during the time of the great tribulation and who "pass away" in the judgment that Christ brings at his *parousia* (24:28, 34, 38-41). This final, evil generation before the *parousia* sums up the wicked conduct and attitude of all previously faithless generations (cf. Rev 9:21; 16:9-11; 2 Tim 3:1-9).

The narrative analogy between the events of 24:4–14 and those of 24:15–28 reveals that the former are general signs of the interadvent age that do not signal the end and that the latter include an unparalleled tribulation that is followed immediately by the end. The special focus ("when you see," 24:15) of *panta tauta* in 24:33 is on the abomination of desolation and the great tribulation that proceeds from it. "This generation" does not refer then to the contemporaries of Christ, for they did not see "all these things" of 24:15–28.

"This generation" in Matt 24:34 does not refer to all people alive from AD 30 to AD 70 because they did not witness the events of 24:15–28, and Jesus stated that neither he nor any of his followers knew nor could anticipate when the *parousia* would be (24:36, etc.). Nor does "this generation" speak of Israel as a race. The leafing fig tree represents not Israel but the certain and unstoppable approach of the summer harvest (judgment) and by analogy the nearness of Jesus' second coming (where he will separate the elect from the wicked). All Israel will not "pass away" when Jesus returns, for many will welcome him at his return (23:39). In the Olivet discourse the opponents of Jesus' disciples include Gentiles as well as Jews. Together they comprise "this generation" of 24:34.

Hē genea hautē refers to the wicked who witness the events leading to the end, not to the final generation of people in general. In the context of the discourse where clear and strong lines are drawn between the faithful and the faithless, between the loyal and the apostate, between the deceiver and the elect, and between the persecutors and the persecuted, there is no convincing reason to doubt that *hē genea hautē* has any less pejorative a force than in all its previous occurrences in the gospel. "This generation" is bound for judgment. True disciples are bound for the kingdom.

"This generation" (24:34) represents an evil class of people who will oppose Jesus' disciples until the day he returns. His disciples will endure persecution and deception during this age. But as they watch and endure all the things Jesus warned about in Matt 24:4–28 they will know that Jesus and the dividing judgment he will bring is coming. "This generation" will oppose disciples until Christ's return, but upon that return they will be judged ("pass away") and the true disciples and the real Christ will be vindicated. Since endurance is the mark of election (Matt 24:13), disciples must be watchful, ready, faithful and obedient.