


'This generation' in Matthew 24:34 as a timeless, spiritual generation akin to Genesis 3:15

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In this article, the phrase 'this generation' [ἡ γενεὰ αὕτη] in Matthew 24:34 is read in terms of the larger category to which it is argued to belong, namely the two respective timeless, spiritual generations akin to Genesis 3:15: the one that bears the right fruit and belongs to God's kingdom and the other one that bears the wrong fruit and belongs to the kingdom of the devil (the serpent). Such a connotation is especially traced in the three occurrences of the expression γεννήματα ἐχιδνῶν [offspring or generation of vipers] in the gospel (Mt 3:7; 12:34; 23:33) and other generational language within the gospel that differentiates these two generations. The same connotations are argued to lie behind the generational language in the other gospels too. Such an understanding of 'this generation' would solve the eschatological problems that are often attached to prevalent interpretations thereof and would alleviate much of the charges of anti-Judaism levelled against the gospels.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The two main areas where this research challenges traditional discourses are (1) on the traditional interpretation that Jesus would envision his contemporary generation to witness his second coming and (2) that generational language in Matthew would be confined to a group of people being time-bound or being defined by racial and/or ethnic affiliation. On an interdisciplinary level, this has implications for (1) the perception of eschatology in Systematic Theology or Biblical Theology, especially in terms of the way in which a distinction is often drawn between Paul and Jesus' eschatology and (2) the perception of ethnicity or race in the New Testament, which has to do with identity formation and overlaps with both Systematic Theology and Sociology. In other words, Jesus would critique prevalent perceptions of identity by critiquing them on a spiritual level.

Introduction

The phrase 'this generation' [ἡ γενεὰ αὕτη] in Matthew 24:34 (cf. also Mk 13:30 and Lk 21:32) has often perplexed New Testament scholars and has been interpreted in numerous ways. This phrase has been called 'the most difficult phrase to interpret in this complicated eschatological discourse' (Fitzmyer 2008:1353). In the most prevalent interpretation, 'this generation' is understood as Jesus' contemporaries, implying that Jesus anticipated that his contemporaries would experience 'all these things' [πάντα ταῦτα] to happen in their own lifetime. Albert Schweitzer (1910:356–364) and others¹ considered Jesus to be wrong in his prediction that the second coming would be in the lifetime of Jesus' contemporaries. The contention of this article is that the view that 'this generation' in Matthew 24:34 would point to Jesus' contemporaries *per se* is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of what 'this generation' means in Matthew and, arguably, in the other Synoptic gospels. The main aim of this article is to further develop and substantiate an existing view that 'this generation' in fact points to a *kind* of generation, a view that has surfaced occasionally in New Testament scholarship. This will be carried out by primarily tracing the concept of 'this generation' in the Gospel of Matthew and secondarily in the other Synoptic gospels as well. A special focus of the proposed reading will be to identify and describe the connection of the concept of 'this generation' in the Gospel of Matthew with the 'generation of vipers' (Mt 3:7; 12:34; 23:33) and its likely connection to Genesis 3:15. Finally, some implications of such an understanding of 'this generation' will be pointed out.

Interpretations of 'this generation' in Matthew 24:34

'This generation' [ἡ γενεὰ αὕτη] in Matthew 24:34 has been interpreted in various ways. The main interpretations can be categorised as follows:

- 'This generation' refers to Jesus' contemporaries who would witness 'all these things' [πάντα ταῦτα] as outlined in verses 4–31, including Jesus' second coming (Davies & Allison 1997:367–368;

¹While Schweitzer, in his conception of Jesus' failed eschatology, focused more on Jesus' prediction in Matthew 10:23, it is the same reasoning that lies behind the interpretation that 'this generation' exclusively points to Jesus' contemporaries.

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Hare 1993:281; Maddox 1982:111–115).² Because Jesus' contemporaries did not witness his second coming, some contend that Jesus erred in his predictions (Luz 2005:209; cf. Schweitzer 1910:356–364).

- 'This generation' refers to Jesus' contemporaries who would witness 'all these things' as outlined in verses 4–22 or 4–28, pointing to the destruction of the temple in 70 CE and everything leading up to it. Jesus' second coming (vv. 29–31) is thus excluded from 'all these things' (Blomberg 1992:364; Carson 1984:507; France 2007:930; Hagner 1995:715).
- 'This generation' points to the Ἰουδαῖοι [Jews or Judaeans], implying that they as a race would last until the Parousia (Hendriksen 1973:868–869; Schweizer 1976:458).
- In patristic opinion, 'this generation' points to the church against which the gates of Hades would not prevail (cf. Chrysostom, *Hom. Matt. 77:1*; Eusebius, *Frag. in Lc. ad loc.*).
- 'This generation' points to some future generation, from Matthew's perspective, that sees 'all these things' (Bock 1996:538–539; Conzelmann 1982:105).
- The words 'take place' or 'have happened' [γένηται] is interpreted as an ingressive aorist: 'to begin' or 'to have a beginning'. In other words, 'all these things' would start to happen in the generation of Jesus' present disciples, but would not necessarily finish in their time (Cranfield 1954:291; Talbert 2010:270).
- 'This generation' points to a certain *kind* of people in accordance with the pejorative connotations to 'generation' [γενεά] elsewhere in the gospel (Morris 1992:613; Nelson 1996:385; Rieske 2008:225; see, e.g., Mt 11:16; 12:39, 41–42, 45; 16:4; 17:17; 23:36).³ While DeBruyn (2010:190) and Lenski (1943:953) interpret the expression in a similar way, they connect 'this generation' to a certain kind of people from the Ἰουδαῖοι who resisted Jesus (cf. view 3 discussed earlier).

Critiquing prevalent interpretations of Matthew 24:34

From evangelical quarters the main critique that is normally levelled against the interpretation that Jesus' contemporaries would witness all the events spoken of in Matthew 24:4–33, including Jesus' second coming (view 1) is that Jesus' second coming and its surrounding events has not happened yet. In other words, if Jesus was whom he said he was, how could he not foresee that his second coming would not be in his contemporaries' lifetime? Of course, such critique is a contemporary theological problem and would not have been a problem for the first hearers. Yet it is this exact concern that gave rise to the second interpretation (view 2). It is quite plausible, and, in fact, quite likely that verses 4–22

2. See also Nolland (2005:989) and Osborne (2010:899–900), who see Jesus' contemporaries as somehow participating in the reality of what would one day be fully true eschatologically, finding themselves at a climax point in the purposes of God in judgement, just as they had been experiencing a climax point of God's saving purposes in Jesus' ministry.

3. See Ridderbos (1978:502, 535) on Mark 13:30. See also Lövestam (1995:85–87, 102–103) who does not see ἡ γενεὰ αὕτη as being connected to time, but as a salvation-historical concept that is characterised by having experienced God's works of salvation at the time of fulfillment, while reacting with doubt, disbelief and rejection.

or 4–28 *do* pertain to the destruction of the temple in 70 CE and that verses 29–31 point to the end time. But there is nothing explicit in the text of Matthew 24 that would suggest that the events described in verses 29–31 are *excluded* from 'all these things' [πάντα ταῦτα] mentioned in verse 34. On the other hand, scriptures that are often listed in support of view 1 – such as Matthew 10:23, Mark 9:1 and John 21:20–23 (Davies & Allison 1997:367) – are not necessarily decisive either.

In Matthew 10:23, the 'coming' [ἔρχομαι] of the 'Son of Man' could just as well point to Jesus' coming in judgement, as executed at the sacking of the temple in 70 CE. This 'coming' of the Son of Man would then cohere with Jesus coming in his kingdom, which happens in stages (Carson 1984:252–253; France 2007:397; Hagner 1993:279–280). The 'coming' of Jesus (Mt 10:23) could even point to Jesus coming to help with the disciple's mission, similar to Luke 9:52 (Talbert 2010:135). In Mark 9:1, the seeing of God's kingdom coming in power can point to the proleptic preview and preliminary fulfilment constituted by the transfiguration (Adams 2005:52; Edwards 2002:260; Lane 1974:313; Stein 2008:411; Strauss 2014:376). According to John 21:20–23, Jesus did not specifically predict that the disciple whom Jesus loved would remain alive until his coming, but that whether this disciple stays alive or not is none of Peter's concern, but is dependent on Jesus' will. Neither is it necessary to assume that the beloved disciple has died at the time of writing. It is, in fact, quite possible that John himself wanted to lay to rest the rumour that Christ had promised to return during his lifetime (Carson 1991:681–682; Köstenberger 2004:601; Michaels 2010:1050–1053).

While views 3–5 are all theoretically possible, they tend to be arbitrary. In none of these views is the concept of 'this generation' firmly linked to any of these proposed entities (the Ἰουδαῖοι, the church or a future generation) within the context of Matthew. Similarly, view 6 is certainly possible, but sounds too much like special pleading, in that it seems to rely on a counter-intuitive reading of γένηται in order to avert the possible theological consequences (that Jesus would have been wrong in his prediction) if the verb is taken as a more common, punctiliar aorist (Wallace 1996:554–555). That 'this generation' refers to a certain *kind* of people holds the most promise, especially if it can be demonstrated how such an interpretation coheres with similar references in the rest of the gospel.

Pursuing the concept of 'this generation' through Matthew

In pursuing a concept such as 'this generation', there is always the danger of attaching inherent meaning to specific terms without giving full account of the context in which such terms are used. The approach that will be followed here is to pursue both related terms and related contexts. In this approach there will thus exist an overlap between the semantic and exegetical level of enquiry.

As will be argued, in the Gospel of Matthew a catena of what may be called *generational language* can be identified, which forms the background of the language used in Matthew 24:34. This generational language can be categorised as follows: (1) language directed to the scribes and Pharisees being a 'brood, offspring or generation of vipers' (γεννήματα ἐχιδνῶν; Mt 3:7; 12:34; 23:33; cf. Lk 3:7); (2) language about being 'children' [τέκνα] of Abraham (Mt 3:9; cf. Lk 3:8); (3) references to being 'sons of God' (υἱοὶ θεοῦ, Mt 5:9; cf. Lk 20:36),⁴ 'sons of the Father' (υἱοὶ τοῦ πατρός, Mt 5:45), 'sons of the kingdom' (υἱοὶ τῆς βασιλείας, Mt 8:12; 13:38), 'sons of the evil one' (υἱοὶ τοῦ πονηροῦ, Mt 13:38),⁵ 'sons of the bridegroom' (υἱοὶ τοῦ νυμφῶνος, Mt 9:15), and 'sons of those who murdered the prophets' (υἱοὶ ἐστε τῶν φονευσάντων τοὺς προφήτας, Mt 23:31); (4) Jesus' reference to a 'generation' [γενεά] in a pejorative context (Mt 11:16; 12:39, 41, 42, 45; 16:4; 17:17; 23:36; cf. Mk 8:12, 38; 9:19; Lk 7:31; 9:41; 11:29, 30, 31, 32, 50, 51; 16:8; 17:25); and (5) Jesus' reference to the 'seed' [σπέρμα] in the parable of the weeds (Mt 13:24, 27, 32, 37, 38). As can be seen from the above Scripture references, many of these categories are used together or are used in close proximity, and will be discussed accordingly.

The offspring of vipers and the children of Abraham

Matthew 3:7–11 narrates about John the Baptist who addresses the Pharisees and Sadducees who attend his baptism. John refers to them as a γεννήματα ἐχιδνῶν.⁶ The term γέννημα can refer to 'that which is produced or born', denoting a 'child' or 'offspring' (Bauer et al. 2000, s.v. γέννημα; cf. domain 23.53 in Louw & Nida 1989:256) or it can denote 'a kind or class of persons, with the implication of possessing certain derived characteristics' (domain 58.26 in Louw & Nida 1989:588). Some commentators suggest that John the Baptist's characterisation of the Pharisees and Sadducees resembles the poison of a serpent as portrayed in Psalm 58:4 (Turner 2008:112) or the mortal threat posed by snake venom as portrayed by Deuteronomy 32:33; Isaiah 11:8; 14:29; 30:6 and 59:5 (Carson 1984:103; Evans 2012:70; Nolland 2005:143). While the latter connotations are certainly possible, others specifically refer to an allusion in John's words to the narrative of the serpent in the garden from Genesis 3 (Albright & Mann 1974:26; Blomberg 1992:77–78; Lenski 1943:106; Mitch & Sri 2011:66; Newman & Stine 1992:64; Osborne 2010:113; Rieske 2008:211; Turner 2008:112). The idea of being the 'offspring of vipers' (Revised Version; American Standard Version [ASV]), 'children of serpents' (ASV) or being a 'generation of vipers' (King James Version) could more specifically be linked to the idea behind Genesis 3:15.

In Genesis 3:15, Yahweh declares that he would put enmity between the 'seed' of the serpent and the 'seed'

4. See 'sons of the Most High' [υἱοὶ ὑψίστου] in Luke 6:35 and 'sons of the resurrection' [τῆς ἀναστάσεως υἱοὶ] in Luke 20:36.

5. See the 'sons of light' [υἱοὺς τοῦ φωτός] versus the 'sons of this world/age' [υἱοὶ τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου] in Luke 16:8 (cf. Lk 21:34).

6. This expression occurs four times in the New Testament: Matthew 3:7; 12:34; 23:33; Luke 3:7.

(σπέρμα, LXX) of the woman. The reference to the 'seed' is clearly metaphorical (Mathews 1996:246) and denotes the respective offspring or descendants of the woman and the serpent. Yet the respective offspring of the woman and the serpent each seems to point to a certain *kind* of people. In their commentary on Genesis 3:15, Waltke and Fredricks (2001) argue that:

humanity is now divided into two communities: the elect, who love God, and the reprobate, who love self (John 8:31–32, 44; 1 John 3:8). Each of the characters of Genesis will be either of the seed of the woman that reproduces her spiritual propensity, or of the seed of the Serpent that reproduces his unbelief. (pp. 93–94)

Similarly, Ross (2008:53) states that the 'seed' of the serpent in Genesis 3:15 refers 'to anyone who shares the nature of the evil one behind the serpent (such as the "sons of vipers", Matt 23:33)'. Sailhamer (1992:107–108) is thus probably right that Genesis 3:15 sets forth a programme for the plot and characterisation of the rest of the book. In the narrative that immediately follows, there is already enmity between Cain and Abel (Gn 4; cf. Hamilton 2006:33). Pointedly, even the theme of Cain's 'fruit'⁷ that was not accepted (Gn 4:3–4) features in the narrative about Cain and Abel.

In the context of Matthew 3:7–11, the Pharisees and Sadducees who oppose John the Baptist can be seen as representatives of the generation stemming forth from the serpent (Gn 3:15; Hamilton 2006:33). That a *kind* of generation is at stake is reinforced by John's reference to the bearing of fruit. The generation of vipers is characterised as such by their lack of the fruit of 'repentance' (μετάνοια, v. 8). Yet, the deepest note is struck in verse 9 where John critiques their claim on being Abraham's children, pointing to God's ability to raise up children for Abraham from stones (cf. Lk 3:8).⁸ The implication is that only those bearing the right fruit are considered as the real children of Abraham. Being children of Abraham is thus not based on physical descent but could, in principle, include gentiles (France 2007:111; Morris 1992:59; cf. Carson 1984:104). The 'wrath to come', which is directed to the generation of vipers (v. 7), is linked to the cutting down and the burning of those who do not bear the fruit of repentance (v. 10). Even the baptism of repentance (v. 11) stands in contrast with the lack of repentance from the generation of vipers (v. 8). Yet, John's baptism is transcended by Jesus' baptism, which is portrayed as with/in the Holy Spirit. By implication, those being baptised with or in the Holy Spirit are the real children of Abraham. If Matthew 3:7–11 is taken as a whole, two generations emerge. The one generation is a generation of vipers that lays claim on being children on a natural or physical basis. They are characterised by not bearing the fruit of repentance. They will be condemned as a result of it. It is noted by several commentators that such a notion corresponds to Jesus' confrontation with the Pharisees according to John 8:33–47 (e.g. Davies & Allison 1988:304, 307; France 2007:111; Hendriksen 1973:204; Lenski 1943:106), where they claimed

7. The LXX uses καρπός, the same word used in Matthew 3:8 and 10.

8. A Hebrew pun between the Hebrew אבנים [stones] and בנים [children] is probably intended (France 2007:111).

Abraham as their father. Jesus denied them this claim for not doing Abraham's works (v. 39) and accused them of having the devil as their father (v. 44).⁹ The other generation, according to Matthew 3:7–11, is a generation of which being children is not based on physical descent from Abraham, but is based on the baptism with or in the Holy Spirit. They are characterised by bearing the fruit of repentance and will thus not be condemned (by implication). If understood in this context, the designation 'generation of vipers' is not principally or inevitably confined to the Pharisees and Sadducees or *their* conduct as such but, in accordance with Genesis 3:15, it forms part of a larger category, which seems to correspond to not being God's people or not being part of God's kingdom (see 'This generation' in Matthew 24:34, Mark 13:30 and Luke 21:32).¹⁰

The second time in the gospel where the designation 'generation of vipers' occurs, is in Matthew 12:34, which forms part of the pericope about a tree that is known by its fruit (v. 33–37), which, in turn, is sandwiched between the pericope about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (vv. 22–32), the one on the sign of Jonah (38–42) and the one on the return of an unclean spirit (vv. 43–45). In the pericope about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (vv. 22–32), the gospel-writer narrates about Jesus healing a blind and mute man for which Jesus was accused of casting out demons through Beelzebul, the prince of demons (v. 24). Jesus then answered by pointing to the problematic nature of a kingdom that would be divided against itself (v. 25), which he contrasts with the kingdom of God where demons are cast out by the Spirit of God (v. 28). The pericope ends with Jesus referring to the unpardonable sin of speaking against the Holy Spirit (v. 32). In the subsequent pericope about a tree that is known by its fruit (vv. 33–37), Jesus addresses the Pharisees as a 'generation of vipers', asking them how they can speak good when they are evil and speak from an evil heart (v. 34). The pericope ends with a reference to people who will have to give account for the words they speak and the fact that they will ultimately be justified or condemned on the basis of their words (vv. 36–37). The third pericope (vv. 38–42) reports of the Pharisees asking for a sign (v. 38), on which Jesus answered that 'an evil and adulterous generation' [γενεὰ πονηρὰ καὶ μοιχαλὶς] seeks for a sign (v. 39). According to verse 41, Jesus indicates that the men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgement with 'this generation' [γενεὰς ταύτης] and condemn it, which is clearly the same 'evil and adulterous generation' that is mentioned in verse 39 (Mitch & Sri 2011:171–173). 'This generation' is again mentioned in verse 42 in rising together with the queen of the South who will condemn it. The identification of the men of Nineveh and the queen of the South with 'this generation' (vv. 41–72), which includes the kind of people Jesus addresses, provides a timeless sense to the concept of 'this generation'. In the last pericope about the

9. That a contrast between two spiritual families is at play here in John is further confirmed by Jesus' reference to a person who is 'of God' against those who are 'not of God' (Jn 8:47).

10. A very similar picture emerges in analysing the parallel text in Luke 3:7–9. Yet, Luke only mentions the multitudes attending John's baptism without a specific mention of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Neither is this passage followed by a reference to the baptism with or in the Holy Spirit. The central elements, however, are the same.

return of the unclean spirit (vv. 43–45), Jesus refers to an unclean spirit that is driven out of a person, but finding that person empty of spirits, and not filled by the Holy Spirit by implication,¹¹ the unclean spirit comes back together with seven other spirits more evil than itself, which will indwell that same person. The pericope ends by Jesus saying that the state of that person is worse than the first and that it will be so with 'this evil generation' (γενεὰ ταύτη τῆ πονηρᾷ, v. 45; cf. v. 39). The gospel-writer's use of 'this' and 'evil' together with 'generation' binds all the references to 'generation' (vv. 39, 41, 42, 45) together (cf. Blomberg 1992:208; Evans 2012:263; Hendriksen 1973:541; Keener 1997), which arguably includes the reference to the 'generation of vipers' in verse 34.

If all of four pericopes that are mentioned above are read together, two kingdoms that are each linked to a specific kind of generation can be identified: (1) a generation (vv. 34, 39, 41, 42, 45) that belongs to the kingdom of Satan (v. 26), that does not bear good fruit (vv. 33–35), that seeks a sign (v. 39) and that multiplies in the absence of God's Spirit (v. 45); and (2) an implied generation¹² that belongs to the kingdom of God, that operates through God's Spirit (v. 28), that bears good fruit (v. 35) and that will be justified (v. 37). These two generations are once again not defined in terms of physical or natural characteristics, but are rather defined in a *timeless, spiritual* way. Such a notion is confirmed by the last pericope of Matthew 12 (vv. 46–50), which ends with Jesus' reference to those who do the will of his Father who are Jesus' real brother, sister and mother (v. 50). They are the real *spiritual* (Blomberg 1992:208; Davies & Allison 1991:364; Hendriksen 1973:542; Keener 1997), *timeless* generation to which Jesus and his followers belong. Again, the differentiation between these two opposite generations corresponds well with the similar notion behind Genesis 3:15.

The third and last time where the expression γεννήματα ἐχιδῶν is mentioned in the gospel, is Matthew 23:33, where it occurs right at the end of the seven woes directed against the scribes and Pharisees (vv. 13–30). In verses 31–32, Jesus condemns them for being 'sons' [υἱοί] of those who murdered the prophets, followed by a reference to their 'filling up the measure of' their 'fathers' [τὸ μέτρον τῶν πατέρων ὑμῶν]. This generational language then culminates in calling the scribes and Pharisees once again a 'generation of vipers', which is connected to their ultimate condemnation in hell (v. 33). Following the similar pattern of Matthew 12:34, 39, 41, 42 and 45, the reference to 'this generation' [γενεὰν ταύτην] in verse 36 is likely to be identified with the 'brood of vipers' in verse 33, and the nature and conduct of the evil generation that was described by the preceding woes and condemnations (cf. Blomberg 1992:349; Morris 1992:590). The fact that Jesus refers to Abel and Zechariah whom 'you murdered' (ἐφονεύσατε, v. 35) points to more than the 'solidarity in guilt with the fathers' (Nolland 2005:947) of his listeners, but seems to point to the notion that Jesus does not merely have

11. Such a link is made more likely by the reference to the Spirit's role in exorcism in v. 28 (France 2007:493; cf. Morris 1992:329; Osborne 2010:488).

12. Such a generation is implied by the reference to those who gather with Jesus (v. 30).

the actual people listening to him in mind, but this *timeless generation* from which they are descendants and with which Jesus identifies them. Yet the accusation is also directed against the people listening to him personally, for they are of the same *kind* or of the same *spiritual, evil generation* of vipers as the fathers who killed the prophets. In addition, being the first enmity following the pronouncement of the enmity between the two ‘seeds’ in Genesis 3:15 (see Gn 4), the reference to the murder of Abel (Mt 23:35) specifically links the murderous behaviour of this generation of vipers that Jesus is addressing to the enmity between the two ‘seeds’ as portrayed by Genesis 3:15. Lastly, the content of the seven woes also points to the notion that it is not a physical or natural generation that Jesus has in mind, but a *spiritual generation* (Rieske 2008:212, 214, 217, 225) in that they are characterised by a certain conduct.

References to ‘sons of’ and ‘seed’

References in the Gospel of Matthew on the lips of Jesus to being ‘sons of...’ can all be considered as part of the generational language expounded above. This is quite evident in Jesus’ reference to the scribes and Pharisees being ‘sons of’ those who murdered the prophets (Mt 23:31, see previous section ‘The offspring of vipers and the children of Abraham’). But apart from this reference, in the seventh beatitude (Mt 5:9), the peacemakers are called ‘sons of God’ [υιοι θεου]. People displaying this *quality* are therefore considered as God’s children and as being part of God’s spiritual family, constituting the opposite family or generation to that of the serpent. The ‘sons of God’ bear the good fruit that was mentioned by John the Baptist (Mt 3:10). The prominence of this beatitude is reinforced by Jesus’ subsequent practical instruction on making peace (Mt 5:21–26). Similarly, the beatitude on persecution, of which the blessing consists of being partakers of ‘the kingdom of heaven’ (ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν, Mt 5:10), is complemented by Jesus’ later reference to loving your enemies and those who persecute you (Mt 5:44). Being partakers of the kingdom of heaven is then specifically expanded as being ‘sons of your Father in heaven’ (υιοι του πατρος υμων του εν ουρανοις, v. 45). Being partakers of the kingdom of heaven thus converges with being children (‘sons’) of the Father. In other words, kingdom language and generational language overlap here.

The connection between kingdom language and generational language can also be seen from the expression ‘sons of the kingdom’ [υιοι της βασιλειας] in Matthew 8:12, but the context in which Jesus uses this expression is somewhat surprising. One would expect that the ‘sons of the kingdom’ would be ultimate partakers of God’s kingdom. But here it seems to point to the opposite, which is ironic. It probably points to those from historical Israel who ‘should have belonged to the kingdom but has rejected their Messiah’ (Osborne 2010:293; cf. Nolland 2005:357).¹³ In other words, instead of ending up in the kingdom of heaven (v. 11), they end up in the opposite

13. It is noteworthy that the ‘sons of the kingdom’ are not here qualified as being ‘from heaven’. There is also a lack of clarity as to what exactly ‘outer darkness’ (cf. 22:13; 25:30) points to.

kingdom. As Nolland (2005:357) points out, Israel would have been the natural heirs of the kingdom but, in the end, natural descent does not guarantee membership of the kingdom (cf. Carson 1984:203). In Matthew 13:36–43, Jesus explains the parable of the weeds (Mt 13:24–30). Jesus explains that the field is the world, the good ‘seed’ [σπέρμα] is the ‘sons of the kingdom’ [υιοι της βασιλειας] and the weeds are the ‘sons of the evil one’ (υιοι του πονηρου, v. 38), whom Jesus identifies as the devil (v. 39). Apart from the term σπέρμα (Mt 13:24, 27, 32, 37, 38), which corresponds with the term used in Genesis 3:15 (LXX), there is theological correspondence between these passages in that there is a clear delineation between two types of seed. In Matthew 13:24–30 and 36–43, there is a clear delineation between the ‘sons of’ God’s kingdom (or the kingdom of heaven) or the ‘good seed’, and the ‘sons of’ the evil one or the weeds. Two opposite generations are thus identifiable akin to Genesis 3:15. Again, the contrast is not ethnic¹⁴ but spiritual. The ‘good seed’ represents those who produce the right harvest (the righteous, v. 43), whereas the weeds represent those who do not produce the right harvest but practice lawlessness (v. 41).

Lastly, in the pericope about the question about why Jesus’ disciples do not fast (Mt 9:14–17), he asks how the ‘sons of the bridegroom’ (υιοι του νυμφου, v. 15) can mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them. While the expression ‘sons of’ could here merely be a Semitism indicating the wedding guests (Davies & Allison 1991:109), it might denote a close relationship to Jesus by the ties of sonship (Gibbs 2006:475; cf. Hagner 1993:243).

Jesus’ reference to a ‘generation’ [γενεά] in a pejorative context

In the Gospel of Matthew, the term γενεά occurs in Matthew 1:17; 11:16; 12:39, 41, 42, 45; 16:4; 17:17; 23:36 and 24:34. Except for Matthew 1:17, where γενεά is the only occurrence in the gospel that is not part of Jesus’ speech and which denotes a time of a generation or an age (Bauer et al. s.v. γενεά 3a), according to Bauer et al., in the rest of the gospel it denotes ‘the sum total of those born at the same time, expanded to include all those living at a given time and frequently defined in terms of specific characteristics, *generation, contemporaries*’ (Bauer et al. s.v. γενεά 2; cf. domain 11.4 in Louw & Nida 1989:120). It is a question, however, if γενεά in Matthew denotes a time-bound generation at all, apart from Matthew 1:17. Bauer et al. specifically provides a meaning for γενεά that indicates ‘those exhibiting common characteristics or interests, *race, kind*’ (Bauer et al. sv. γενεά 1) with neither explicit connotations about ethnicity nor about being time-bound, citing Luke 16:8 as an example.¹⁵ Does the generational language in Matthew not rather belong to this category?

14. While the concept of ethnicity has recently been understood as a cultural construct and a matter of self-ascription (Punt 2012:4), the term ‘ethnicity’ or ‘ethnic’ is normally used in a more restricted way to point to a group’s shared biological origins and, in a broader sense, to resemble the concept of nationality (cf. Lemert 2006:174–175), which includes things such as ancestral traditions, customs, norms, conventions, mores and laws (Mason 2007:484). In this article it is used with a slight preference towards the biological side.

15. Louw and Nida (1989:111) list a similar meaning for γενεά under domain 10.4, but with the inclusion of ethnicity (‘an ethnic group exhibiting cultural similarities – “people of the same kind.”’).

As discussed above, within the context in which γενεά is used in Matthew 12:39, 41, 42 and 45, it carries pejorative connotations: it denotes a generation that belongs to Satan and does not bear good fruit. According to Matthew 11:16, Jesus asks to what he shall compare 'this generation' [γενεάν ταύτην] that is like children sitting in the marketplaces, calling to their playmates, 'A wedding song we played for you, the dance you simply scorned. A woeful dirge we chanted, too, but then you would not mourn' (v. 17; International Standard Version). Although the pejorative connotation attached to 'this generation' is not that strong at this point in the gospel, the notion already exists that 'this generation' have 'failed to respond and have misconstrued the nature of Jesus' ministry, as they had already done that of John' (France 2007:433; cf. Hagner 1993:310; Nolland 2005:461). In Matthew 16:4 there is reference to 'an evil and adulterous generation' [γενεά πονηρά και μοιχαλίσ] who seeks for a sign, having the same wording and conveying the same idea as in Matthew 12:39 (see section 'The offspring of vipers and the children of Abraham'). According to Matthew 17:17, Jesus responded to the crowd who asked the disciples to heal an epileptic but could not because of their lack of faith (v. 20) as a 'faithless and perverse generation' [γενεά ἄπιστος και διεστραμμένη].¹⁶ Lastly, as was seen from the discussion of Matthew 23:36 mentioned earlier, 'this generation' in this verse is identified with the kind of generation described by the seven woes in Matthew 23:13–30 (cf. Nelson 1996:383; Rieske 2008:225), epitomised by the designation 'generation of vipers' in Matthew 23:33. Apart from Matthew's reference to γενεά in 1:17, which is not on Jesus' lips, and 'this generation' in 24:34 that still needs to be examined (see section "'This generation" in Matthew 24:34, Mark 13:30 and Luke 21:32'), all instances of γενεά in Matthew occur in a *pejorative* context, a usage that has roots in the Old Testament (e.g. Gn 7:1; Dt 1:35; 32:5, 20; Davies & Allison 1991:260–261; DeBruyn 2010:190; Lövestam 1995:8; Nelson 1996:373–376; Rieske 2008:217, 223–226). The pejorative use of the term can also be derived from the Gospels of Mark (Mk 8:12, 38; 9:19; Lövestam 1995:103; Ridderbos 1978:502, 535; Rieske 2008)¹⁷ and Luke (Lk 7:31; 9:41; 11:29, 30, 31, 32, 50, 51; 16:8; 17:25; Johnson 1991:328; Lövestam 1995:103; cf. Rieske 2008).¹⁸

It is likely that the connotations associated with the spiritual generation descending from the serpent in Genesis 3:15 lie behind the generational language in Matthew. At this stage, it has come to the fore that within the generational language, two distinct generations are continuously identified, the one displaying the bad fruit of unbelief and resistance against the

16. There is some ambiguity as to whom Jesus addresses. Does he address the disciples or the crowd? Davies and Allison (1991:724) are probably right that these two groups are conflated, but it has to be noted that Jesus did not directly address the disciples (v. 17), but the man bringing the child to him (vv. 14–15). Yet the crowd, represented by the man, was probably the real target of Jesus' rebuke (Hagner 1995:504; Luz 2001:408). In light of Jesus' identification of the disciples' unbelief in verse 20, however, his rebuke of the crowd seems to have implied an indirect rebuke to the disciples too. Yet the disciples were probably affected by the unbelief of the crowd (Hagner 1995:504).

17. For Mt 13:30, see section "'This generation" in Matthew 24:34, Mark 13:30 and Luke 21:32.

18. For Luke 21:32, see section "'This generation" in Matthew 24:34, Mark 13:30 and Luke 21:32. Interestingly, in Luke 16:8 the expression 'sons of' is used in conjunction with γενεά, denoting the two distinct generations, akin to Genesis 3:15.

kingdom that Jesus represents, who can be considered as being part of the same family of the serpent, and the other one who bears the fruit of repentance who Jesus considers as part of his spiritual family. Further, Jesus' references to the ultimate destiny of the evil generation (e.g. Mt 3:10; 7:19; 12:42; 13:40–42; 23:13–29, 33, 36, 38; 24:51; 25:46) would correspond to the bruising of the serpent's head (Gn 3:15).

'This generation' in Matthew 24:34, Mark 13:30 and Luke 21:32

In light of the way in which γενεά is used in the Gospel of Matthew, it would be an exception if 'this generation' in Matthew 24:34 would not carry any connotations about a spiritual *kind* of generation. But can the notion that γενεά does carry connotations of a timeless, spiritual *kind* of generation be derived from the text itself? I will argue that such is exactly the case. In the Gospel of Matthew, the Olivet Discourse (Mt 24) directly follows the seven woes and Jesus' subsequent condemnation of 'this generation' of vipers (Mt 23:33, 36, see section 'The offspring of vipers and the children of Abraham'). In fact, Jesus' prediction of the destruction of the temple (Mt 24:2) can be seen as a direct consequence of his condemnation of this generation of vipers. This is followed by the twofold question of the disciples about the time of the destruction of the temple and the sign of Jesus' coming and the end of the age (Mt 24:3). In Jesus' answer he elaborates on the false prophets and false messiahs, including the abomination of desolation, which will operate in this period (Mt 24:5, 9, 15, 24, 26). These false prophets and false messiahs logically belong to this same wicked generation that was mentioned in Matthew 23:36 (cf. Lövestam 1995:85; Nelson 1996:385). Such a connection is pertinently drawn in Matthew 7:15–20, where Jesus explicitly points to the bad fruit of the false prophets and their ultimate destiny. Such a reference, in turn, goes back to the bad fruit displayed by the generation of vipers and their cutting off as uttered by John the Baptist (Mt 3:7–10, see section 'The offspring of vipers and the children of Abraham').

Jesus' references to 'all these things' [πάντα ταῦτα] in Matthew 24:33 and 34 thus include the ultimate bad fruit of those who do not belong to his kingdom or those who are not part of the spiritual generation to which Jesus himself belongs (cf. Nelson 1996:379). These false prophets and false messiahs would in fact act directly against Jesus' messiahship and, in this sense, resemble the ultimate enmity underlying Genesis 3:15. Within the same sequence of events and thoughts, Jesus' reference to 'this generation' in Matthew 24:34 is thus probably going back to Matthew 23:33 and 36 and most likely refers to this wicked spiritual generation of vipers who oppose God's kingdom and contribute in causing 'all these things' to happen.

Such a notion is further cemented by Jesus' subsequent reference to 'the days of Noah' [αἱ ἡμέραι τοῦ Νῶε], which in itself resembles Jesus' coming (Mt 24:37–39). In Genesis 7:1 there is a purposeful reference to 'this generation' (τῇ γενεᾷ ταύτῃ, LXX) in the days of Noah (Nelson 1996:374; cf. Davies

& Allison 1991:261), which was characterised by wickedness, evil thoughts in their hearts (Gn 6:5), and corruptness (Gn 6:11–12). However, Noah himself was excluded from ‘this generation’ (Lövestam 1995:18–19). This evil generation ate, drank and married without knowing about God’s coming condemnation (Mt 24:38–39). Although Hendriksen argues that ‘this generation’ in Matthew 24:34 points to the Ἰουδαῖοι, he considers it worthy of consideration that, in passages such as Deuteronomy 32:5, 20, Psalm 12:7 and 78:8 in the LXX, the term γενεά is used with a meaning that goes beyond a group of contemporaries. A similar use occurs in Acts 2:40, Philippians 2:15 and Hebrews 3:10 (Hendriksen 1973:868). In all these New Testament references, γενεά is used in a pejorative context. Lastly, although it is more difficult to establish the meaning of ‘this generation’ within the Olivet Discourse of the other two Synoptic gospels because of their seemingly isolated placement within the respective narratives, it is possible to understand ‘this generation’ in both Mark 13:30 and Luke 21:32 in a way similar to the interpretation of Matthew 24:34 that is presented here.

In respect of Mark 13:30, Ridderbos (1978:502, 535) advances the view that ‘this generation’ constitutes ‘the people of this particular disposition and frame of mind who are averse to Jesus and his words’. A pertinent example in the gospel of the *spiritual* connotation attached to ‘this generation’, which is arguably related to the two generations in Genesis 3:15, presents itself in Mark 9:29, where ‘this generation, offspring or kind’ [τοῦτο τὸ γένος] denotes evil spirits. While the pejorative connotations to ‘this generation’ are quite evident in Mark (see section ‘Jesus’ reference to a ‘generation’ [γενεά] in a pejorative context’), the occurrence of ‘this generation’ in Mark 13:30 seems to be relatively isolated from the other occurrences. However, similar to Luke, the Olivet Discourse in Mark is preceded by a reference to the hypocritical and pretentious conduct of the scribes (Mk 12:38–44; cf. Lk 20:45–4). This is followed by Jesus’ reference in Mark 13 to the destruction of the temple (vv. 1–2, 21), the reference to false messiahs (vv. 6, 22), false prophets (v. 22), the abomination of desolation (v. 14) and other operations of adversaries during the cosmic events (vv. 6–22). Therefore, the same logic as in Matthew 24 is operative here. ‘This generation’ in Mark 13:30 could thus well be a reference to the evil, spiritual generation who causes the opposition to God’s kingdom and Christ’s messiahship, akin to the idea behind Genesis 3:15. The use of ‘(all) these things’ (Mk 13:4, 23, 29, 30) is also similar to its use in Matthew and Luke.

In respect of Luke 21:32, a reading that understands ‘this generation’ as one of two opposing generations that link up with the idea put forth by Genesis 3:15 is quite conceivable in view of the fact that Luke (1) contains a specific reference to the generation or offspring of vipers (Lk 3:7–9), which carries the same spiritual connotations about two different kinds of generations as Matthew 3:7–10 (see section ‘The offspring of vipers and the children of Abraham’); (2) the fact that Luke contains numerous pejorative references to γενεά that are similar to the connotations attached to the term in Matthew

(see section ‘Jesus’ reference to a ‘generation’ [γενεά] in a pejorative context’) as well as various references to the ‘sons of’ either one of the two spiritual generations (Lk 6:35; 16:18; 20:36); and (3) Luke’s reference on the lips of Jesus to the seventy-two reporting on the demons who are subject to them, to Satan’s falling from heaven, and especially to Jesus giving them authority to trample on serpents (Lk 10:17–20). Similar to the context of Matthew 24, in Luke 21:8–31 there are also references to false messiahs (v. 8) and other adversaries that bring final resistance to God’s kingdom amidst cosmic events (vv. 9–24), which are included in ‘(all) these things’ or ‘all things’ (vv. 9, 28, 31, 32) that would happen. The latter resistance also resembles the resistance of the serpent’s ‘seed’ according to Genesis 3:15.¹⁹

Conclusion and implications

Jesus’ reference to ‘this generation’ in Matthew 24:34, which constitutes the last of such references in the gospel, can be understood against the way in which generational language is used throughout the gospel. While the interpretation put forth here confirms the view that ‘this generation’ has a pejorative connotation that refers to an evil *kind* of people, it has been argued that ‘this generation’ forms part of a larger, dual category *akin to Genesis 3:15*. Such a connection can especially be identified with the three references in the gospel (vs. only one in Luke) to the *generation or offspring of vipers*. The generation of vipers closely coheres with the idea behind the ‘seed’ of the serpent in Genesis 3:15. Such language, in turn, forms part of a continuous contrast within Matthew between the *timeless generation* or family belonging to the devil or the serpent, and the generation or family belonging to God or his kingdom. The enmity between the different ‘seeds’ (Gn 3:15) is especially resembled (1) by the murdering of the prophets, who Jesus considers as the spiritual fathers of the scribes and Pharisees (Mt 23:31–37), and (2) by the opposition against Jesus and his messiahship, constituted by the false prophets and false messiahs (Mt 7:15; 24:11, 24). Yet, the enmity between the different kinds of generations is also evident in the contrast between the ‘good seed’ and the ‘weeds’, constituting those who belong to God’s kingdom and bear good fruit, versus those who belong to the kingdom of the devil and do not produce the right harvest (Mt 13:24–30, 36–43). In conclusion, ‘this generation’ in Matthew is *neither time-bound*, in that it would refer to Jesus’ contemporaries exclusively, *nor* is it connected to a certain *ethnic group or race* exclusively. Ultimately, ‘this generation’ points to the *spiritual generation* belonging to the devil (the serpent) and his kingdom, as opposed to the generation belonging to God and his kingdom. Such an opposition is especially *based on the enmity portrayed by Genesis 3:15*.

The implications of the above interpretation of ‘this generation’ in Matthew 24:34, and arguably in Mark 13:30 and Luke 21:32, are twofold:

¹⁹See Stein (1992:528) who sees ‘this generation’ here as ‘pejorative’, referring to ‘the final generation that stands in solidarity both in descent and behavior with the generation of Jesus’ day’.

- It solves the eschatological problems attached to the interpretation that Jesus solely had his contemporaries in view:
 - it relieves the charge that Jesus would have been incorrect in his alleged prediction that his contemporaries would witness his second coming
 - it counters the idea that ‘all these things’ (Mt 24:33, 34) would arbitrarily point to the events leading up to the destruction of the temple in 70 CE and exclude Jesus’ second coming
 - it removes the need of a preterist view in order to account for Jesus’ reference to ‘this generation’.
- Because ‘this generation’ is not race-specific in principle, it relieves much of the charges of anti-Judaism or even anti-Semitism that are often laid against the gospel in instances where Jesus addresses his opponents. In light of my proposed understanding of the generational language in the gospel, it is in fact conceivable that the reference in Matthew 27:25 to Jesus’ blood being ‘on us and our children’ might also be interpreted as a reference to spiritual rather than a biological offspring.

Lastly, while generational language has mainly been pursued in the Gospel of Matthew, and partly in the other Synoptic gospels, my reading could pave the way for understanding generational language in a similar way in the Gospel of John. The reference in John 8:44 to the devil as the father of Jesus’ opponents is a pertinent example. If such an accusation is understood against the spiritual enmity as portrayed by Genesis 3:15 between the ‘seed’ of the serpent and the ‘seed’ of the woman, ethnical or racial connotations can be dislodged from such an accusation.

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