

What is the Meaning of a Generation in the Bible?

In the book, **Living on Borrowed Time**, Dr. David Reagan queries a panel of 20 prophecy experts for answers to ten end-times prophecy questions. The fourth question is: 4) **How do you interpret Matthew 24:32-35**. The two key questions associated with this passage are: (1) What does the fig tree symbolize? (2) What generation was Jesus talking about?

I was intrigued by Tim LeHaye's answer to the question. This is because while doing the research for the Christmas Star, in order to estimate how many generations of wise men would be required from the time of Daniel to the birth of Jesus in order to fulfill bible prophecy, I had to do some serious research on the issue of a "generation" in the Bible. The following is Tim LeHaye's answer to the question posed by Dr. Reagan:

The most surprising response came from Tim LeHaye: "Perhaps the greatest mistake I have made interpreting prophecy through the years was to follow my friend Hal Lindsey in assuming the generation that saw Israel back in the land as they were recognized by the UN in 1948, would not pass until the Rapture, or in that a generation was "40 years," meaning 1988. Obviously that has not happened."

Dr. Reagan goes on to note: *This is a reference to the fact that Hal Lindsey, in his book, **The Late Great Planet Earth (1970)** took the position that the re-blossoming of the fig tree was fulfilled in the reestablishment of Israel and that the generation that witnessed the event would live to see the Lord's return. In all fairness, I think I should point out that Hal Lindsey never set a date for the Lord's return. What he said in his book was this: "A generation in the Bible is something like forty years. If this is a correct deduction, then within forty years or so of 1948, all these things could take place." (page 54 1970 edition) Notice, he said they "could" take place, not that they would.*

After reviewing the answers of the prophecy experts who responded to Dr. Reagan's question, along with his concluding remarks, I realized that the answer revealed from my research was not given by any of the prophecy experts. In 2011, I concluded that the length of a generation was most likely 80 years based on Psalm 90:10, not 40. But, my conclusion became in doubt when I initially began doing genealogy research on the wise men for the Christmas Star because my initial calculation for the wise men yielded the same result that Hal Lindsey came up with in *The Late Great Planet Earth* – about 40 years for a generation. It was at this point that I realized my understanding of the meaning of a generation in the Bible was more complicated than I initially thought.

I believe the answer to the question: "How long is a generation in the Bible?" was revealed to me in 2011 when I was watching a DVD on Joel Rosenberg's Epicenter Conference on the book of Joel. Anne Graham Lotz led off the conference with her presentation on Joel chapter 1. In her discussion about the signs pointing to Christ's return and how the signs were like birth pangs, increasing in frequency and intensity (Matt 24:8) as the time of His return drew near, she referred to the recent history of world-wide natural disasters to make her point. But she also tied this increase in frequency and intensity directly to the signs for Israel and pointed to Israel's rebirth in 1948 as the most important of all the second coming signs. Then she said something like this: "My birthday is May 1948 so I believe Israel's rebirth and my birth date coincide to define the generation that will see Christ's return" (Matt 24:34).

She went on to say that she very much looked forward to being raptured and to be with “my Lord”. “He is returning soon...even in my generation’s lifetime.”

Remarkably, Anne Lotz’ definition for “the” generation varied only slightly from the one given by Dr. Reagan in the **Living on Borrowed Time** passage. Dr. Reagan identified “the” generation as the one that would witness Israel’s rebirth, whereas Ann Lotz defined it as the one that would coincide with Israel’s rebirth. This turns out to be a subtle, but significant difference about how “the” generation that will see all these things come to pass is defined. Even so, this difference does not answer the question, “How long is a generation?” It was after watching the Epicenter Conference DVD that I turned to my concordance and found Psalm 90:10 for the first time:

Psalms 90:10- *The days of our years are threescore years and ten, **and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years**, yet is their strength labor and sorrow, for it is soon cut off, and we fly away.*

A note on this verse in Dr. Henry Morris’ *New Defenders Study Bible* was illuminating: **“It is remarkable that after over 3,000 years of human history after Moses, including the great medical advances of recent centuries, 70-80 years is still the normal lifespan.”** By applying Dr. Reagan’s two most important prophecy fundamentals: “What is the common sense meaning?” and “Does the common sense meaning change based on the context?” I concluded that this passage means exactly what it says. Confirmation of this conclusion is revealed in the title for Psalm 90 in my Bible: “Teach us to number our days”. I concluded that the context supports a literal, common sense interpretation of this passage.

After confirming that this was the only reference in the Bible that actually defined the length of a generation, I decided to see if the Bible would confirm this period as the length of a generation, at least back to the time of King David. 2 Samuel 5:4 says: *David was **thirty years old** when he began to reign, and he reigned for **forty years**.* That would make David about seventy years old when he died. If Solomon’s lifespan fit this pattern, then it would be confirmation for me that at least from the time of kings David and Solomon until today, the length of a generation has averaged 70-80 years. 1 Kings 2:11 says: *And the days that David reigned over Israel were forty years; seven years reigned he in Hebron, and thirty and three years reigned he in Jerusalem.* 1 Kings 11:42 says: *And the time that Solomon reigned in Jerusalem over all Israel was **forty years**.*

David was about 37 years old when he began to reign in Jerusalem and it was probably early during his reign in Jerusalem when the events with Bathsheba leading to Solomon’s birth took place. Assuming David was no more than about 40 years old when Solomon was born, Solomon would have assumed the throne about the age of 30 so he too would have been at least 70 years old when he died.

In mid 2012, before I did serious research on the generations of the wise men, I came across a Douglas Hamp article: **The Fig Tree has Budded – Evidence the Lord May Return this Generation** in a Prophecy in the News update. The Hamp article seemed to confirm what Anne Lotz said, which is that “the” generation that will see all these things is the one whose birth coincides with Israel’s rebirth, not the one that witnessed Israel’s rebirth. Hamp then applied an 80 year generation length, based on Psalm 90:10 to the date for Israel’s rebirth and the fulfillment of all these things to create a timeline based on Matthew 24:33-34 – *So likewise ye, when ye shall see all these things, know that it is near, even at the*

door. *Verily I say to you, **this generation shall not pass, til all these things be fulfilled.*** While Hamp does not imply that this is rock solid evidence for a generation or the timeframe for Christ's return, his implication is that since Israel was re-established in 1948, it is clearly possible for Christ to return before "that" generation (defined as 80 years) passes away. He states that, if true, then the timeframe around the year 2028 could be important in God's plan for Christ's return.

By the time I began my serious research on The Christmas Star in December 2012, I was confident that, while I had not done extensive research on the issue of the length of a Bible generation myself, I felt comfortable with what I believed to be the following biblical truths: (1) the generation that would see all these things fulfilled was most likely the post WWII baby boomer generation, the one that coincided with Israel's rebirth. (2) The length of a generation was about 80 years, not 40.

As I began doing the Christmas Star research on the issue of the generations of the wise men and the length of those generations, I was quickly confronted with the same problem that Hal Lindsey and Tim LeHaye experienced more than 40 years ago. It happened this way. First, I wanted to know how many generations of wise men were required from the time of Daniel to Christ's birth in order to fulfill the nativity scriptures. I thought the answer would be easy to determine from the genealogy in Matthew chapter 1 which, in part, says this: *Matthew 1:13-17- And Zorobabel begat Abidad; and Abidad begat Eliakim; and Eliakim begat Azor... And Jacob begat Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ. So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations, and from David until the carrying away into Babylon are fourteen generations, **and from the carrying away into Babylon unto Christ are fourteen generations.***

This passage makes it clear that for the period from the end of the Jewish captivity at the time of Zorobabel to Jesus, there were twelve generations covering the period of time I was interested in for the wise men. I assumed that the generation of wise men that saw the sign for the Messiah would be the generation before Jesus, so began my analysis thinking that if Zorobabel's generation was the first generation of wise men after Daniel, then 11 generations of wise men would be required to watch the heavens in order to fulfill scripture for the Christmas Star. But, the simple math for the 560 year period I estimated for Zorobabel's mid captivity birth date to Jesus 02 BC birth for eleven generations of wise men yielded (560 divided by 11 = 50) a generation length of about 50 years, not the 80 years I was expecting. Since I was confident that the length of a generation (based on Psalm 90:10) from the time of David to Jesus (28 generations) might be more reliable, I determined from Ussher that David was born in about 1085 BC. Since the 27th generation from David would be the generation of wise men who would see the star, I decided to see what this math would yield: (1085 divided by 27 = 40 years).

I did not have the benefit of Dr. Reagan's calculations in **Living on Borrowed Time** when I did my calculations, but he came up with a similar number by figuring the length of a generation for the 42 generations from Abraham to Jesus (2160 yrs divided by 42 = 51 years). These answers, all in the 40-50+ year range, better support Hal Lindsey's 40 year estimate for the length of a generation than the 80 year length I was expecting. I thought, "Could Psalm 90:10 be wrong?" The Bible clearly says that the length of a generation is 80 years, yet the calculations based on the numbers of generations and their

associated dates we just considered appear to support a generation length of just over half the period of time required for Psalm 90:10 to be true.

I did not immediately delve into this issue because of my pressing Christmas Star timeline. I decided to pray about it and see if Holy Spirit would lead me to an answer. My prayer and patience paid off in October 2013 while preparing for a prophecy study on Dr. Lennart Moller's -**The Case for the Exodus Crossing**, and Jim and Penny Caldwell's- **Sinai in Arabia**. This got me back into the books of Exodus and Numbers. Incredibly, it was while doing this research that God revealed what I now believe to be the key to understanding the definition and length of a generation from the Exodus story, and it is tied directly to the 40 year period of the Jewish wandering in the desert between the exodus from Egypt and the entering of the Promised Land. I believe the following two Numbers passages provide the keys to understanding the length, significance and importantly the makeup or structure of a generation from God's perspective.

Numbers 14:28-29 says: *Say unto them, "As truly as I live, saith the Lord, as ye have spoken in mine ears, so will I do to you: Your carcasses shall fall in this wilderness; and all that were numbered of you according to your whole number, **from twenty years old and upward**, which have murmured against me."*

Numbers 1: 45-46 says: *So were all those that were numbered of the children of Israel, by the house of their fathers, **from twenty years old and upward**, all that were able to go forth to war in Israel: Even all they that were numbered were six hundred thousand and three thousand and five hundred and fifty.*

After the twelve spies returned from surveying the Promised Land and their reports caused the people to rebel against God and Moses, God condemned all those in the multitude 20 years and older to die in the desert and not enter the promised land because of their murmuring and rebellion. Ussher indicates that this event took place during the first year after the Exodus. So the following can be surmised from these passages:

1. The Jewish population exiting Egypt consisted of people of all ages, including some over 60 years of age.
2. Those 19 years old and younger at the time of the Exodus were adolescents and children, not adults. They were the only humans who left Egypt in the Exodus who would be allowed to enter the Promised Land.
3. The oldest people entering the Promised Land (except for Joshua and Caleb) forty years after the Exodus at the time of Jericho were all 60 years old or younger.
4. Therefore, of the number of able bodied men (able to make war) aged 20 to 60 who entered the promised land were 603,550, none of whom was older than 19 at the time of the Exodus or 60 at the time of Jericho. Assuming an equal population distribution, this means that there were also about 600,000 women between the ages of 20 and 59 and there would be at least 600,000 – 900,000 adolescents and children under the age of 20. This would make the total Hebrew population, all less than 60 years of age, nearly 2 million at the time Israel entered the Promised Land.

From the above, there is much we can learn about how God defines a generation. First, it becomes clear that a generation is composed of three primary age groups, not unlike the way a generation is divided today:

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| A. Ages 0-20 | - Children and adolescents | The Maturing population |
| B. Ages 20-60 | - Adults | The Productive population |
| C. Ages 60 and older | - Senior Adults | The retired or Post Productive population |

Interestingly, this is how a generation breaks down based on the total years in a generation:

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| a. Maturing population | 20 years | 0-20 |
| b. Productive population | 40 years | 20-60 |
| c. Post Productive population | <u>20</u> years | > 60 |
| | Total | 80 years (Biblical length of a generation per Ps 90:10) |

Importantly, it appears that from these numbers, the 40 year productive period of a given population is what defines the length of a generation in the Bible genealogies. This makes complete sense since the productive years, not the maturing or post productive years are the focus of every generation in the Bible. In the initial script for the Christmas Star, I estimated that 12 – 14 generations of wise men were required to observe the heavens in order to fulfill scripture. If I take what has been determined to be a 40 year productive generation above and apply that to the 530 years from the period of Daniel’s death to Jesus’ birth (530 divided by 40 years = 13), there were 13 productive generations of wise men required from the time of Daniel to fulfill scripture. This fits well with both the scriptures and the generations described in Matthew 1 if the focus on each generation is the *40 year productive period* of that generation.

My conclusions are these: Psalm 90:10 is the biblical basis for the duration or length of any given generation. In the modern era, the 2010 U.S. population demographics reveal that less than 1% of the population is over 85 years old, and the number hasn’t changed much in the past six decades. This means that more than 99% of any given generation passes away by age 85. The percentage for age 80 was not given, but it is estimated that more than 97% of that same generation would have passed away by age 80. If Matthew 24:34 is taken literally to mean that at least a part of the generation being referred to is still alive at the time “all these things take place” (representing Christ’s second coming), then it is clearly possible that a remnant of the generation whose birth coincided with the 1948 birth of Israel will still be alive when that generation is between 80-85 years old. This equates to the period of time between the years 2028 and 2033. The forty year period relating to a generation as described in the Bible refers to the forty year productive period of a generation and does not include those younger than 20 or older than 60. This not only makes sense, it is supported by scripture if the forty year productive period of each generation is represented in the Matthew and Luke genealogies as the “period of a generation”. Moreover, God demonstrates his focus on the productive population and the structure of a generation in the story of the Exodus.

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