

CRUCIAL NEW TESTAMENT MISTRANSLATIONS

An Examination of Word-Study Failures

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Part I: An Examination of Luke's Gospel

Textual Study 4: LUKE 21:32 (Also Matthew 24:34, Mark 13:30)

CHRIST'S RETURN IN ONE GENERATION?

Current Problematic Rendering:

At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift your heads, because your redemption is drawing near. . . Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near. I tell you the truth, this **generation** will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away" (Lk. 21:27-8, 31-3, NIV).

Suggested Improved Rendering:

At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift your heads, because your redemption is drawing near. . . Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near. I tell you the truth, this **nation (Israel)** will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away" (Lk. 21:27-8, 31-3, NIV).

Analysis

One of the most serious and widespread mistranslations is the rendering of *genea* as "generation" in Luke 21:32 (also Matthew 24:34, Mark 13:30) in virtually all Bible translations:

The normal rule in translation should be to give preference to the primary meaning of a word unless it clearly does not fit the context, in which case the translator must select a secondary or tertiary meaning. Since none of the lexicons or theological dictionaries list 'generation' as the primary meaning of the word, either in the extra-biblical Greek or in the New Testament, it is clear that serious consideration should have been given to the primary meaning 'race', 'stock', 'family', or 'nation', which makes better sense in the context and in the analogy of Scripture. This also avoids the tremendous apologetic, interpretative, and theological problems with the standard rendering.

First, let us note the absolute confusion that this mistranslation has caused. The liberal critics endlessly attack Christ's deity by saying that Christ and the apostles expected His return in one generation and they were obviously wrong.¹ Thus, this mistranslation has raised a serious apologetic problem! The preterist people have tried to resolve it by spiritualizing these events to have taken place with the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, but since the Lord described His sudden return in graphic

¹ R. Morgenthaler, in *NIDNTT*, II:37,38; Colin Brown in *ibid.*, II: 38.

language, spiritualization is an improbable solution. Then there was the Jehovah's Witness fiasco of dating Armageddon at 1975 based upon the 'one generation' from 1914. On the other hand, many evangelical commentators and preachers have assumed that 'this generation' means 'that generation' and have come up with a 'terminal generation' notion, which tends to date setting as well. So calculations are made from 1948 or 1967, and at present that 'generation' has pretty well run its course without the return of Christ. This is not to say that they could not be right, but the string seems to be running out! Needless to say, such irresponsible date setting has brought the word of God into disrepute, despite Christ's clear warning (Mt. 24:36).

Some in the past have proposed a very simple solution: simply translate *genea* by its primary meaning, 'race' or 'nation.' Thus it would refer to the perpetuation of the Jewish people, which is one of the unique facts of human history and had been promised repeatedly in the Old Testament. What other people has survived for four millennia, despite many Satanic attempts to eradicate them, including not only the holocaust, but also the Arab hatred toward Israel even to the present? This is what was suggested by the distinguished editors of the original *Scofield Reference Bible* a century ago:

Gr. *genea*, the primary definition of which is, "race, kind, family, stock, breed." (So all lexicons.) That the word is used in this sense here is sure because none of "these things," i.e. the world-wide preaching of the kingdom, the great tribulation, the return of the Lord in visible glory, and the regathering of the elect, occurred at the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus, A.D. 70. The promise is, therefore, that the generation—nation, or family of Israel—will be preserved unto "these things"; a promise wonderfully fulfilled to this day.²

Fifty years earlier, Dean Henry Alford had given strong evidence for this view. Building upon the connection with the reference to the nation Israel as a fruitless fig tree (24:29-30), thus obviating recourse to a AD 70 fulfillment, he explains:

As this is one of the points on which the rationalizing interpreters lay most stress to show that the prophecy has *failed*, it may be well to shew that *genea* has in Hellenistic Greek the meaning of a race or family of people. See Jer. 8:3, LXX; compare ch 23:36 with ib. ver. 35, *ephoneusate* . . . but *this generation* did not slay Zacharias— so that the *whole people* are addressed: see also ch. 12:45, in which the meaning absolutely requires this sense. See also Luke 17:25: Matt. 17:17: Luke 16:8: Acts 2:40: Phil. 2:15. In all these places *genea* is = *genos*, or nearly so; . . . (refs. converted)³

Alford also points out that the usage of *parerchomai* (pass away) in 24:34 and in vs. 35 militates for their connection and usage in the same sense (to be explained later). Bishop J. C. Ryle also took the same view and referenced Mede, Paroeus, Facius Illyricus, Calovius, Jansenius, Due Veil, Adam Clarke, and Stier as earlier advocates.⁴ More recently Homer Kent argues for this as well.⁵

1. Secular Greek. The meaning of *genea* in the extra-biblical Greek literature strongly supports this view. The LSJ lexicon reports classical Greek usage: "1. birth, 2. birth, race, descent, esp of noble birth, 3. a race, a generation, 4. offspring, descendants (post-Homeric usage)."⁶ Moulton and Milligan conclude: "The collective sense of this word—involved in its historic relation to *genos*—is normal throughout, and survives in MGr *genia* = 'race, lineage'." Six out of the seven citations they give from the papyri have the meaning 'family.'⁷ Buchsel in *TDNT* lists the usage in this order: "a. *birth, descent*; b. *what is born, progeny, descendant*; c. *race* in the sense of those bound by common descent; d. *generation*, also in the sense of *age*."⁸ This seems very clear and straightforward. Thayer also had supported Alford's understanding by listing the two senses of 'generation' or 'age' as third and fourth in his listing.⁹ Subsequently, Abbott-Smith listed "generation" second after "race, stock, or family."¹⁰ Similarly, the BAG lexicon puts 'generation' or 'age' second and third after: "1. lit., those descended fr. a common

² C. I. Scofield, ed., *The Scofield Reference Bible* (NY: Oxford, 1909), p. 1034, footnote. The consulting editors included the presidents of two seminaries and two Bible institutes.

³ Alford, I: 244.

⁴ J. C. Ryle, *Espository Thoughts on the Gospels* (NY: Robert Carter, 1875), pp. 323-4.

⁵ Homer A. Kent, Jr. in Pfeiffer and Harrison, eds., *Wycliffe Bible Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1962), p. 973.

⁶ LSJ, p. 288.

⁷ M M,, pp.122-3.

⁸ G. Buchsel in *TDNT*, I:662-3.

⁹ Joseph Henry Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (NY: American Book Co, 1889), p. 112.

¹⁰ Abbott-Smith, p. 89.

ancestor, a clan, then race, kind gener. Lk. 16:8. The meaning *nation* is advocated by some in Mt. 24:34; Mk. 13:30; Lk. 21:32, but also see 2.”¹¹

2. The impact of Septuagintal usage. Why then do the translators stick so stubbornly to the rendering ‘generation’ if there is such little support in extra-biblical Greek as attested by the lexicons? The fly in the ointment is the way the Septuagint renders the Heb. *dor* quite consistently as *genea*, since *dor* seems to mean ‘generation’ primarily. Thus the BDB Hebrew lexicon lists for *dor*: “1. period, age, generation; 2. of men living at a particular time (period, age), generation; 3. generation characterized by quality or condition, *class of men*.”¹² There are only about a dozen references listed to support the last connotation. R. D. Culver essentially agrees by listing: “1. *circle of a man’s lifetime, from birth to death*; 2. more freq. to *birth of offspring*; 3. *a period of time, age*; 4. the group . . . as related to another by natural descent; . . . 6. metaphorical sense to indicate a class of men distinguished by a certain moral or spiritual character.”¹³ Thus by principally rendering *dor* as *genea*, the Septuagint translators emphasized a meaning which is rare in the extra-biblical Greek. Apparently, translators over the centuries have been more influenced by the Septuagintal usage, despite the poor quality of many of their renderings. The question we face is which meaning is predominant in the New Testament, especially in Matthew 24:34? Nothing can be assumed. Have the translators been right to favor the LXX, if indeed this was their rationale?¹⁴

3. Usage in the Gospels. The only way to resolve this is to examine each of the 40 New Testament usages in context with an open mind. Eighteen of these references (excluding Mt.24:34=Mk.13:30=Lk. 21:32) in eight different contexts strongly favor the connotation of ‘nation;’ four in one context have the meaning of ‘genealogy;’ eight have the sense of ‘generation,’ that is, the people living at the same time; one has the sense of ‘age;’ and six in four contexts are difficult to determine from the context. This leaves the three references in one context as the crucial passage under consideration.

In identifying the eighteen other usages as a reference to the nation Israel, the clear contrast with Gentiles in these contexts really demands this understanding, as Alford pointed out. Let us start with Matthew 11:16=Luke 7:31. Christ was about to rebuke the cities of Israel when he uses the word *genea* the first time: **“To what can I compare this *genea*?”** In vs. 20 He began to excoriate the towns of the Galilee by contrasting them with Sodom, Tyre and Sidon. It is not incidental that these were Gentile cities. He was rebuking His own people, Israel. The language in Matthew 12: 39, 41, 42, 45 is similar. He rebuked an evil and adulterous *genea*, which was seeking a sign from God, and contrasted it with Nineveh and the queen of the south, both Gentile. In this context it also makes best sense to see the usage in the parable of the man who was repossessed by seven worse demons as a reference to Israel. The nation was delivered from idolatry only to be captured by the worst contemporary sects. There is a similar context and language in Luke 11:29, 30, 31, 32, although this incident probably was different.

In Matthew 16:4=Mark 8:12 the Lord used the same language upon a further demand for a sign, and then He warned the apostles to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees, the leaders of the nation. Mark alone recorded His further reference at Caesarea Philippi to those who were ashamed of His words in **“this adulterous and sinful *genea*”** (Mk. 8:38). This was just after He had announced for the first time that the leaders of Israel would have Him killed (Mk. 8:31). As Alford notes, Mt. 23:31=Lk. 11:50, 51 is also crucial since Christ said that judgment for the murder of God’s prophets in previous ages could not justly be said to fall upon only Christ’s contemporary generation. Christ immediately explained in vs.37 that it is Jerusalem as the head of the *nation* which has killed the prophets! It should be noted also that in vs. 33 He had just called the scribes and Pharisees a brood (*genn_ma*) of vipers. The close relationship of *genea* and *genn_ma* has been noted by one of the lexicographers. This identification of the nation is reinforced by the Lord again calling them **“an evil and adulterous *genea*”** which seeks for a sign. Later the apostle Paul gave an inspired comment that **“Jews demand miraculous signs”** (1 Cor. 1:22, NIV). Finally, in His last weeks He announced that before His glorious return: **“He must suffer many things and be rejected by this *genea*”** (Lk. 17:25). Then He referred to God’s coming judgment. God’s judgment did not just come upon one generation of people, but upon the whole nation, right up to the present day. Additionally, some of the references we have labeled ambiguous also could well be

¹¹ The BAG lexicon, p. 153.

¹² BDB p. 190.

¹³ Robert Duncan Culver in *TWOT*, 1:186-7.

¹⁴ Morgenthaler, II:36.

references to the nation Israel (Mt. 17:17=Mk. 9:19=Lk. 9:41). Thus the New Testament usage, especially in the Gospels, is heavily weighted toward an indication that the Lord Jesus was referring to the perpetuity of the nation Israel.

4. The repetition of *parerchomai* in 24:34 and 35. Alford suggested that the parallel usage of *parerchomai* (pass away) in vss. 34 and 35 suggests that the subjects of both sentences must be similar entities appropriate to this verb. Indeed, the BAG lexicon lists both references under the same heading: “*pass away, come to an end, disappear.*”¹⁵ Although it is used in reference to time in other contexts, this context presumes a parallel usage. Both the nation and Christ’s words are concrete substantives, but ‘time’ is abstract. *Thus, there is a parallelism in the fact that the nation will not pass away, which is guaranteed by the fact that Christ’s words will never pass away.*

5. The analogy of Scripture. Much more convincing than this last point, however, is the consistent testimony of the Old Testament that God promises the perpetuity of the nation Israel. Thus the Lord Jesus was just reaffirming that which had already been promised repeatedly. Of the many such promises, perhaps that in the New Covenant promise passage in Jeremiah is the most striking, “**Thus says the LORD, Who gives the sun for light by day and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night, . . . ‘If this fixed order departs from before Me,’ declares the LORD, ‘Then the offspring of Israel also will cease from being a nation before Me forever’**” (Jer. 31:35-6). Paul also reaffirmed this in Romans 11:25-29. On the other hand, there is no analogy of Scripture, rightly interpreted, for the idea that Christ would return in one generation.

We conclude then that there was no adequate reason for translators to follow the dubious usage of *genea* in the Septuagint, but rather should have followed the secular and other New Testament usages, which heavily support the rendering ‘race’ or ‘nation.’ This translation obviates the liberals’ accusation that Christ was wrong. It also eliminates the cultic misinterpretations. It helps to undermine the tendency to date setting, which the Lord explicitly prohibited (Mt. 24:42-44). Since the lexical support, the usage support, the contextual support, and the analogy of Scripture are so strong, yes, overwhelming, what is wrong with the translators that they so persistently and perniciously ignore the evidence and cling to a problem-laden rendering? We can only surmise theological bias against the idea of Israel’s survival and restoration. This verse, correctly translated, is strong evidence for the premillennial view that Israel has a place in God’s prophetic program.

¹⁵ BAG, p. 631.