Generation is a wrong translation choice for Greek genea

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Introduction

Many modern English translations of the Bible are using expressions like “people of this day” for the Greek phrase *tēn genean tautēn* (τὴν γενεὰν ταύτην). In the following, I shall explain why I think such a translation is not correct. The meaning is rather ‘this kind of people’ and it refers back to the people mentioned in the previous context. Since the phrase has two constituents, I shall divide the discussion into two sections. The first deals with the meaning of the referential word *houtos* (οὗτος - traditionally called “demonstrative”). The second deals with the meaning of *genea* which in most English translations is usually rendered “generation.”

1. The meaning of *houtos*

This word has no exact equivalent in English. The nearest equivalent is the word “this”, but there are several differences in meaning between *houtos* and “this.” One difference is that “this” in English is often **cataphoric**, referring to something coming later in the context, while *houtos* is normally **anaphoric**, referring to something mentioned in the preceding context. To illustrate, it is easy to cite examples of the word “this” in GNB (Good News Bible) which does not translate any Greek word, and in particular not the word *houtos* (for example, Matt 1:1, Mark 1:1). Another difference is that *houtos* might as well be translated “that” in most contexts, simply because the use of demonstratives as reference pointers vary from one language to another.

As I was studying the usages of *houtos* in the NT, I found it convenient to separate them into three categories with the following labels: anaphoric, deictic and contrastive. In addition, there are a few instances of cataphoric references, but these are specially marked cases.

1.1 Anaphoric reference

This kind of reference is the most common usage of *houtos*. The English word “this” can be used in the same sense.

The pronoun may occur on its own, but it is not common, for example, Matt 3:3 “*This* is he who was spoken of” (houtos gar estin). Here *houtos* refers back to John the Baptist from verse 1.

More often *houtos* occurs with a noun in Greek. In most cases the phrase refers back to something mentioned in the context immediately preceding, for example:

John 11:4: "*This sickness* will not end in death" (hautē hē astheneia). "This sickness" refers back to the cognate verb "be sick" in verses 1, 2 and 3.

Matt 5:19: "one of *these commandments*" (mian tōn entolōn toutōn). "These commandments" refer back to "the Law" in verses 17 and 18.

Notice that in John 11:4 quoted above, the referential word, the demonstrative hautē, precedes the noun while in Matt 5:19 the demonstrative toutōn follows the noun. The difference is a difference in focus (see my other article: Word order and relative prominence in New Testament Greek). The normal, unmarked order is for the demonstrative to follow the noun. If it precedes the noun, then there is focus on that part of the total meaning which is carried by *houtos*. This particular sickness will not end in death. I shall show whether the noun or pronoun is in focus by highlighting it in the English gloss in the following examples.

In some cases of anaphoric reference, the reference may go further back than the immediately preceding context, for example, 2 Cor 4:1 "having this *ministry*" (tēn diakonian tautēn) refers back to chapter 3:7-11 where the ministry under the old covenant is compared to the new ministry under the Spirit. In this case, the word "ministry" helps us to make the right connection back several verses.

In some cases there is no noun which is repeated, and one has to guess from context what is referred to, for example:

2 Cor 12:13: "Forgive me this *wrong*" (tēn adikian tautēn) refers back to the fact that "Paul was not a burden to them" (irony).

Eph 5:32: "This *mystery* is great" (to mustērion touto) refers back to the previous verses 21-30, but the exact reference is not specified.

Matt 17:20: "you can say to this *mountain*" (tō orei toutō). There is no mountain being talked about, and the word is used as an idiom referring to something very hard to tackle. It refers to the failure of the disciples to drive out an evil spirit.

1 Tim 1:18: "I give you *this* instruction" (tautēn tēn parangelian) refers all the way back to verses 3-5. This particular instruction is to command certain men not to teach false doctrines.

1.2 Deictic reference

This usage is much less common, although it is the "basic" demonstrative sense of the word. A deictic reference means that the pronoun points out from the linguistic context to the physical context. It points to a person or an object present in that particular situation. This sense is only found in quotes. When the pronoun occurs alone, a noun is often supplied in English, for example:

Matt 3:17: “This/that is my son” (houtos estin ho huios mou), *Houtos* here means ‘that person standing there’.

Matt 9:3: “That (fellow) is blaspheming” (houtos blasphēmei). The scribes “point” to Jesus by using this demonstrative pronoun.

Luke 2:34: “This (child)…” (houtos). Simeon stood with Jesus in his arms saying, “This one.”

As before, the pronoun may also occur with a noun in which case it functions more as an adjective:

Acts 1:11: “*this* (same) Jesus” (houtos ho Iēsous). *Houtos* is pointing to that particular person who until just a moment ago was still standing in the midst of the disciples. Here the demonstrative comes before the noun to indicate that it is this same Jesus who will come back, not another Jesus. The fronting of *houtos* is correctly rendered by “same” in KJV, JB and NIV (“very” in Phillips) to show the emphasis.

Acts 19:26: “that (fellow) Paul “ (ho Paulos houtos). When Demetrius was talking to his colleagues about Paul, they probably could not see Paul at that particular moment. But they had recently seen him, and he was the topic of discussion. This is a slightly extended usage of the deictic reference as a middle position between deixis proper and anaphoric reference. Here the demonstrative comes after the noun, putting the emphasis on Paul. It is not a contrast between this Paul and another Paul, but it is this fellow Paul and what he stands for.

1.3 Contrastive reference

It is difficult to find clear examples of *houtos* on its own under this heading. A possible example is: Acts 4:10 “in the name of Jesus Christ…in this (name) this (man) stands healed before you. This (Jesus) is the stone…” (en tō onomati Iēsou Christou…en toutō houtos parestēken…Houtos…). The first instance of the demonstrative (en toutō) refers back to “in the name of Jesus” and, therefore, is anaphoric. However, because of the repetition it does seem quite emphatic and contrastive: only this name of Jesus has the power to heal.

There are more examples of a contrastive *houtos* in combination with a noun, for example:

Matt 12:32: “in *this* age or in the coming age” (en toutō tō aiōni). Here the word “this” does not refer back to something mentioned previously or to something in the extralinguistic context (one cannot point to an age). However, there is a clear contrast between “this one present” and “that one coming.” The word *aiōn* commonly refers to one of two periods. “This age” is the period before the coming of the Messiah (for the Jews) and before the second coming of Jesus (for the Christians). “The coming age” is after Jesus’ second coming.

1 Cor 1:20: “the philosopher of this *age*” (tou aiōnos toutou). While the previous example with “age” had the demonstrative coming first, this example has the noun first. The

emphasis is on age rather than this. A better English translation than the one quoted here from NIV would be "this world" as for instance GNB and others have. The contrast is between the human way of thinking without revelation from God and the Christian thinking inspired by God. A similar example is: 1 Cor 2:6 "not the wisdom of this age."

1.4 Cataphoric references

These are very few and in restricted contexts. They seem to occur in a situation where the content of a kind of performative act is given and the word *houtos* can then refer to this content. The following are examples of this.

1 John 1:5: "This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light…" (estin hautē hē angelia…hoti…)

John 15:12: "This is my commandment: Love each other…" (hautē estin hē entolē…hina…).

2 Tim 2:19: "God's firm foundation stands having this *seal*: The Lord knows those who are his" (echōn tēn sphragida tautēn).

Mark 12:31: "The second command is this: Love your neighbour as yourself" (deutera hautē).

Matt 10:2: "The names of the twelve apostles are these…" (to onomata estin tauta…)

2. The meaning of genea

As I shall discuss the meaning of *genea* in the following, I am well aware that I go against a tradition, which is especially strong in the English-speaking world.

Who is this generation? Briefly stated, the tradition more or less equates the word *genea* with English 'generation'. This may work in a few places, especially when the word occurs in the plural form, but in the phrase "this *genea*" it is misleading to use "generation." It does not seem to agree with the meaning of the Greek phrase or the Hebrew behind it, and it does not make good sense in most places where the word occurs in the New Testament. Rather, *genea* means '*a class of people bound together through a common origin or with a common bond*.' In certain contexts *genea* does have the very restricted sense of the English "generation," but in most contexts it does not have this narrow sense. The English word "generation" has undergone a semantic shift so that the meaning today is very much narrowed down as compared to the Greek *genea*, the Latin *generatio* and "generation" in the English language as spoken when the King James translation was first made.

Even the Vulgate translation used four different Latin words to translate *genea,* one of which is *generatio*. But the word *generatio* is used to translate other Greek words as well, for example, Matt 1:1 *genesis* (GNB: family record) and Luke 22:18 *genēma* (fruit). In Danish we have the word "generation" as a modern adopted word. It has the same area of meaning as the corresponding English word, but it is never used to translate *genea* in the New

Testament. In English there is evidence that the area of meaning of "generation" has narrowed down considerably since the time of the KJV translation. The evidence is that the word *gennēma* 'brood' in Matt 3:7 is translated by "generation" in KJV as well as the word *genos* 'race, people' in 1 Pet 2:9. The Oxford Universal Dictionary gives the following, now obsolete (latest attested use 1727) sense of "generation": "class, kind or set of persons."

The purpose of the above remarks was to show that the meaning of the Greek word *genea* is not at all equivalent to the modern English word "generation." We shall now proceed to discuss what *genea* actually means.

2.1 The primary sense is 'descendants, family, clan, that is, a group of people with a common ancestor' (see for instance: New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, 2.35).

This primary sense occurs rarely in the New Testament. With the word in singular it occurs in Acts 8:33: "Who can describe his *genea*? For his life is taken up from the earth." Both GNB, JB (Jerusalem Bible) and NIV translate *genea* here by 'descendants.' The word occurs in plural in Matt 1:17 with a closely related sense of 'succeeding sets of descendants, stages in a genealogy' and is probably best translated generations: Matt 1:17 "So all the *geneai* from Abraham to David were fourteen *geneai*."

2.2 The secondary sense is a natural extension of the first sense and can be stated thus: 'a group of people with a common bond or characteristic; a certain class or type of people'. This sense is common in the New Testament. The GNB often translates it simply as "people." The characteristic feature of the people referred to is in all cases drawn out from the context. I shall go through all New Testament occurrences of *genea* below (references in parentheses are to parallel passages).

Luke 16:8: "The sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own *genea* than the sons of light." The important contextual clue to the characteristic of the group of people referred to is the word "own" which qualifies *genea*. Therefore, NIV, NEB (New English Bible) and JB have translated it as "dealing with [people of] their own kind." The sense is "people like themselves in their worldliness" and not as J.B.Phillips puts it: "contemporaries."

Acts 2:40: "For he [Peter] testified with many other words and exhorted them, saying, "'Save yourselves from this crooked *genea*'." Here the contextual clue is "crooked." GNB translates it reasonably well as "save yourselves from this wicked people." The demonstrative "this" is anaphoric, referring back to the preceding context about the people who rejected the Messiah and nailed him to the cross (v. 36). A more meaning-based (idiomatic) translation of this verse might be: "Disassociate yourselves from those wicked people" or "Turn away from that kind of people, and be saved."

Phil 2:15: “that you may be…without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse *genea*.” The contextual clue to the characteristic feature of the group of people referred to is “crooked and perverse.” GNB translates: “in a world of corrupt and sinful people.” NLT (New Living Translation) has “a dark world full of crooked and perverse people.”

Matt 17:17: (Mark 9:19; Luke 9:41) “O, faithless and perverse *genea* how long shall I stay with you?” Again the characteristic feature of the people referred to is shown by the qualifiers: faithless and perverse. Many commentators claim that the word *genea* has a pejorative character. This is reading the meaning of the contexts into the meaning of the word. This is what James Barr called “illegitimate totality transfer” (1961:218). Rather, the word *genea* in itself is neutral. The pejorative part of the overall meaning is supplied solely by the connotations of the context.
GNB translates this verse as “How unbelieving and wrong you people are.” J.B.Phillips has: “You really are an unbelieving and difficult people.” NLT has “You stubborn, faithless people!” The actual reference is mainly to the disciples.

Matt 12:39: (Mark 8:12; Matt 16:4; Luke 11:29) “Some of the scribes and Pharisees said to him, ‘Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.’ But he answered them [scribes and Pharisees], ‘An evil and adulterous *genea* seeks for a sign…’ “ As usual, the characteristics of the people referred to is shown by the qualifiers: “evil and (spiritually) adulterous.” The actual reference is to those scribes and Pharisees who demanded signs but did not want to accept Jesus.
In translating this passage, the GNB deviates from the pattern set by the examples quoted above. It says: “How evil and godless are the people of this day.” Nothing in the Greek text can justify the addition of the words “of this day.” Maybe the GNB translators had not realised at this point that *genea* is not the same as “generation”? Or maybe they were influenced by Matt 23:36 discussed below? CEV (Contemporary English Version) is better: “You want a sign because you are evil and won't believe!”

Matt 23:36 (Luke 11:50): “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! (See v.23,25,27,29) Truly, I say to you, all this will come upon this *genea*.” Having seen the pattern from the examples above where *genea* in itself refers to a class or type of people and the qualifying word(s) and the context describe the characteristic feature of the people, it is natural to expect the qualifying word “this” to point to the characteristics of the group of people referred to. The first instance of “this” refers back to the punishment mentioned in verses 33 and 35 (judgment of hell and the blood of all the righteous). It seems most likely that the phrase “this *genea*” refers back to the group of people he has just been speaking about. Since this is probably a new thought to many people, I shall spell out some of the arguments in more detail.

There are basically two possible interpretations of the meaning of the demonstrative in the

phrase “this *genea*.” (1) Either it refers to the “people living now” in contrast to people living at another time in history or (2) it refers to something mentioned in the preceding linguistic context. Interpretation (1) is very difficult to reconcile with the basic meaning of the phrase tēn genean tautēn and it also does not fit well with the context. First, there is nothing in the context which supports an idea of temporal contrast. Second, nowhere else can the word “this” possibly be understood as meaning “living now.” Third, and most important, in ALL instances of the phrase “this *genea*,” the demonstrative follows the noun. As mentioned in section 1 above, this means that the focus is on *genea*, not on “this.” If the expression had included a contrast between the generation of that time and any other generation, the word *houtos* should have preceded *genea* instead of following it. The second interpretation makes much better sense and is in accordance with the meaning attested to the words “this” and *genea* elsewhere, that is, “this” is a reference to something in the preceding linguistic context, and *genea* is a certain type of people.

Now let us look at the context of Matt 23:36. The relevant context is 23:1-39. The whole chapter is one long description and denunciation of the practices of certain hypocritical “scribes and Pharisees” and their like. In verse 35 the reference is broadened to similar people in the past who killed the righteous people (with an obvious sting to the self-righteous Pharisees who would soon kill the righteous Jesus). In verse 37 it is broadened to the people of Jerusalem as representing those people who kill the prophets. Upon SUCH PEOPLE (‘this *genea*’) will come a great punishment (‘all these things’). A possible, more faithful translation of tēn genean tautēn in v. 36 might be “you and people like you.”

Luke 17:25: “But first he [Son of Man] must suffer many things and be rejected by this *genea*.” Again, “this *genea*” refers to the kind of people that are being talked about in the context of this verse. The relevant context starts at verse 20 talking about the Pharisees as rejecting that the Kingdom of God had indeed come with Jesus. The reference for “this *genea*” in the immediate context is “those Pharisees who rejected Jesus as Messiah,” and in a broader context all the Jews who rejected Jesus as Messiah.

Matt 11:16: (Luke 7:31) “But to what shall I compare this *genea*?” The most relevant context is 11:2-30. First, John the Baptist had doubts about whether Jesus really was the Messiah (2-6). Second, both John and Jesus had a message to the people, but many rejected it. Jesus often used the phrase “this *genea*” to refer to that group of people who rejected him as Messiah. The best translation is probably “such people” or “that kind of people,” leaving the rest to the context.

Heb 3:8-10: “On the day of testing in the wilderness, where your fathers put me to the test….Therefore I was provoked with this *genea*.” The exact same Greek phrase is rendered as “this generation” by only one English translation that I know of, that is, J.B.Phillips translation. Several follow KJV in saying “that generation” (RSV, NEB, JB, NIV). In this

verse GNB felt free to simply say “those people” and NLT has “them.” It is a simple anaphoric reference to the people mentioned in the previous verse. No time element is present in the phrase itself, but, of course, it is present in the broader context. It would be tempting - and definitely more correct - to translate ALL instances of “this *genea*” in the New Testament by “those people” or “such people.”

Matt 24:34: (Mark 13:30, Luke 21:32) “Truly, I say to you [disciples], this *genea* will not pass away till all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.” This is one of the most difficult verses to interpret. Some have argued that the phrase “passing away” suggests that a temporal element is present in the sense of *genea* here. This does not sound convincing. The next verse says that “heaven and earth” will pass away, while “my words” will not pass away, but no one would suggest that “heaven,” “earth” and “my words” thereby acquire a temporal sense. The word “pass away” does not mean ‘to die’ as GNB suggests. The meaning is much broader and there is no restriction that the subject must be animate as there is in the word “to die.” It simply means “come to an end, cease to exist.” The most obvious meaning of the verse is that certain “things” will continue to exist, while other “things” will cease to exist. Heaven and earth will cease to exist (at least in the present form), but both “my words” and “this class of people” will continue to exist in spite of opposition and tribulation.

It has been suggested that the phrase might refer to the Jewish people as a whole. This, too, I find rather unconvincing. Although the other instances of “this *genea*” do seem to refer to a group of the Jews, namely those who rejected Jesus as Messiah, this does not necessarily mean that “this *genea*” always has to refer to Jews. One important difference is that where it refers to the Jews who rejected Jesus, the context has very negative and judgmental connotations. But in this context, the connotations are positive. Whatever the reference is, that class of people will endure through tribulations. By parallelism, the phrase is closely connected to “my words” which is also positive and has endurance. Who would ensure that the words of Jesus were kept in existence through difficult times? It seems to me that “this *genea*” in this verse most naturally refers to the class of Christians keeping the word of God throughout the ages until the end of heaven and earth. This ties in well with the whole discourse of Matt 24 being directed to the disciples in private (v. 3) and the frequent use of the word “elect” to signify an important thematic participant in the discourse (v. 22,24,31).

My point is not to be dogmatic on any particular interpretation of this prophecy. Rather, I am objecting to the use of the English word “generation” and in particular to the GNB rendering “before all the people now living have all died.” Such a translation chooses one interpretation (and in all likelihood the wrong one) to the exclusion of others. I believe it means “people like you,” but if this is felt to favour too explicitly another interpretation, then a translation like “those people” is neutral and accurate. The readers will then have to find

their own reference points for who those people are. This works as long as the word used for "those" has the sense of anaphoric reference as the Greek word *houtos* has.

Hebrew background: The phrase "this *genea*" is not common in the Greek language and is as far as I know not found outside the Greek NT and the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint (LXX). The background is Hebrew and the OT, so it is worthwhile to see how and where it occurs in the LXX. There are 3 cases:

Gen 7:1 - I have found you righteous in this generation (NIV)

I have found that you are the only one in all the world who does what is right. (GNB)

The point here is not so much a time reference, but a comparison between the kind of person Noah was (righteous) and the kind of people everybody else were (evil).

Psalm 12:8 (LXX 11:8) - You, O LORD, will keep them; You will preserve him from this generation forever. (NASB).

Keep us always safe, O LORD, and preserve us from such people. (GNB)

You will continually shelter each one from these evil people (NET).
The kind of people referred to here are clear from the context of the whole psalm. Let me here only quote the first 2 verses: "Help, LORD, for the godly are no more; the faithful have vanished from among men. Everyone lies to his neighbor; their flattering lips speak with deception." (NIV)
This was a famous psalm, and we can assume that the Jewish audience (especially Pharisees and teachers of the law) were familiar with this psalm and the expression *haddor zu* in Hebrew and *tēs geneas tautēs* in Greek. It is from this psalm that "this *genea*" gets a negative connotation in a negative context.

Psalm 24:6 - Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek your face, O God of Jacob (NIV)
Such are the people who come to God, who come into the presence of the God of Jacob. (GNB)
This psalm would also be very well-known by Jesus' audience, but here the context is very positive as seen again from the whole psalm, and specially verses 3-4: "Who may ascend the hill of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart,..."
This psalm is the positive background for "this *genea*" in Matt 24:34, where Jesus is telling his disciples about future hardships that believers will have to endure before the Son of Man finally comes in his glory as king. They were also sitting opposite the Temple (God's holy place) on the hill of the Lord.

2.3 The third sense of *genea* is closely related to "generation." It occurs in contexts which supply a time aspect to the basic meaning of *genea*. I shall divide this sense into two, where, although time and people are included in both, the first has the time reference in focus and the second has the people reference in focus.

2.3.1 "An age, a generation" - time in focus

Luke 1:5: "those who fear him *eis geneas kai geneas*." The plural form and the double use of *geneas* supply the time aspect of the word: those people in succeeding generations.

Acts 14:1: "He who in the past *geneais* allowed." Again the plural form and the qualifier "past" supply the time aspect. The time is so much in focus here that even KJV translated *geneais* as 'times'. NEB has "ages" while JB, GNB and NIV omit the word altogether, simply saying "in the past."

Acts 15:21 "For Moses has from ancient *geneōn*." Again the plural form and the words "from" and "ancient" supply the temporal aspect of the word. KJV translates "of old time," NEB uses "never lacked," JB has "always," NIV has "from the earliest times," and GNB has "a very long time." Other translations use "generations."

Eph 3:5: "which was not made known to men in OTHER *geneais*" (heterais geneais). Again the plural form and the dative case (translated "in") supply the time aspect. Here KJV has "other ages," GNB has "past times," while most other translations keep the word "generations." Note that *heterais* comes before *geneais* to show the contrast to prophets and apostles living "now."

Eph 3:21: "throughout all the *geneas* of the age of the ages." As before, the plural form and the context supply the time aspect. KJV has "all ages," GNB has "all time," while most others have "generations."

Col 1:26: "which has been hidden from the ages and from the *geneōn*." Again the plural form and context supply the time aspect.

Acts 13:36: "after having served God's purpose in his own *genea*." Here, of course, the plural is inappropriate, but the context is sufficient to supply the temporal aspect. It might also have an aspect of "contemporaries" (among his own generation). GNB has "in his own time," while others have "generation."

2.3.2 "A generation of people living at a certain time" - people in focus

Luke 1:48 "From now all the *geneai* will count me blessed." This instance has both a time and people reference in it. "From now" and the plural form indicate a temporal aspect, but since the word is subject for a verb which requires a human agent, the aspect of people reference takes priority over the time aspect. The word "generation" is then a convenient translation since it, too, contains both aspects of time and people. However, it is also

possible to use “all people” as GNB has done, since the people aspect is in focus and the time aspect may be inferred from the words “from now on.” All other translations use “generations.”

This concludes all usages of the word *genea* in the New Testament. I started this study because I felt that the traditional understanding of *genea* does not make sense in many contexts. In addition, I come from a tradition which does not equate *genea* with “generation.” It seems to me that both linguistic and contextual considerations call for a reappraisal of the very common notion that “this generation” refers to the contemporaries of Jesus.

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