Eschatological vision or exhortation to visible Christian conduct? Notes on the interpretation of Colossians 3:4

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ABSTRACT
The aim of this paper is to plead for a more original interpretation of the Biblical source text by translators. The case is argued in two phases: firstly, a critical comparison of different renderings of Colossians 3:4 (and some other related phrases); and, secondly, a suggested interpretation of Colossians 3:4 with due regard for the immediate and the broader context.

1 INTRODUCTION

It would be stating the obvious to mention that phenomenal development has taken place in the Biblical sciences over the last decades. As far as translation is concerned, it seems that the most momentous impact has come from the application of modern linguistics to the study and interpretation of Biblical texts. Semantics, especially, has brought new insights into the nature of language and linguistic communication. This, in turn, has led to a shift from word-by-word translation to a method which entails inter alia the identification of kernel sentences and their transformation and/or restructuring to suit the specific genius of the receptor language. Intellegibility of the translated text has become a more important aim than formal correspondence to the source text.

All these developments have to be welcomed, and I am well aware of the positive results they have brought in promoting the reading and better understanding of the Bible. Yet one does feel, when reading some of the products of this movement, that the resultant texts have lost much of the cohesion that characterizes the source texts as literary entities. Could it be that the strong emphasis on kernel sentences has brought about an atomistic approach to translation which, in turn, caused the neglect of those elements that mould literary texts into coherent units of linguistic expression?

In an attempt to answer this question and to suggest some possible corrective steps, I will refer to some instances of mistranslation of the original, which have seemingly resulted from neglect of contextual as well as cotextual clues to a more satisfactory interpretation. Let us take the fourth verse of the third chapter of Colossians as an instance.
2 COLOSSIANS 3:4 IN THE KJV

The venerated King James Version renders this verse as follows:

When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory.

The King James translators truly had to consider various options of interpretation:
1. The adverbial clause introduced by ὅταν plus subjunctive, and followed by a main clause containing τότε, could either refer to some indefinite future event, or could be the equivalent of an open conditional clause (ἐάν+subjunctive). In terms of function, one could say, it can mark either an expectation or a supposition. Compare 1 John 5:2, where ὅταν clearly introduces a supposition—the condition which is to be fulfilled for us to know that we love God’s children. (Cf also Mt 5:11.) The opposite—ἐάν meaning ‘when’—occurs in 1 John 3:2.

In the New Testament, clauses introduced by ὅταν plus subjunctive most frequently have indefinite temporal meaning. Therefore, the criterion of verbal consistency—which has been in vogue until quite recently—obviously dictated the first option (‘when’=‘at the time when’) to the KJV translators, ruling out the second (‘when’=‘if’).

2. The passive verb φανερωθη can have Christ, or a nominal clause, as its syntactical subject. In the former case, it would mean ‘become visible’ /‘appear’ (literally); in the latter case ‘be revealed’ /‘become known’. These meanings of φανερωθη are defined in domains 24.19 and 28.36, respectively, of the Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament based on Semantic Domains (Louw & Nida 1988).

The former possibility has as a seemingly obvious reference the expected second coming of the Lord, while the latter possibility seems—or seemed to the KJV translators—to lack an obvious co-textual reference. In this paper, I will attempt to demonstrate that there are indeed co-textual as well as contextual points of reference which would support this second interpretation of φανερωθη.

3. The phrase our life is not connected to the rest of the clause by any explicit syntactical means. It could either be appositive to Christ, or it could be the predicate of a kernel (Christ is (y)our life) which is then the subject of φανερωθη. The translators opted for the first interpretation, as is indicated by the phrase who is ...(inserted in cursive type in the KJV text).

Note, incidentally, the textual variants ἡ ζωή ἡμῶν (our life) and ἡ ζωή ὑμῶν (your life). The former was the only possibility considered by the KJV translators, for they followed the Textus Receptus. It would, also, seem unambiguously to support their interpretation of the rest of the sentence. However, the reading ὑμῶν is supported by ‘considerably stronger manuscript evidence’ (Metzger 1971:624) and is also preferred by the editors of the 26th edition of Novum Testamentum Graece (Nestle-Aland 1979:527).

Opting for the first possibility in the case of the ὅταν clause (i.e. interpreting it as an indefinite temporal clause referring to a future event), the KJV translators found
it natural to take \( \varphi \alpha \nu \varepsilon \rho \omega \theta \eta \) as ‘(shall) appear’, with \( \text{Christ} \) as subject. This, in turn, cancelled the possibility of taking \( \text{Christ is (your life} \) as the subject of \( \varphi \alpha \nu \varepsilon \rho \omega \theta \eta \).

4. The \( \delta \tau \alpha \nu \ldots \tau \tau \tau \ldots \) connection, consequently, made it seem obvious to the \( \text{KJV} \) translators that \( \varphi \alpha \nu \varepsilon \rho \omega \theta \eta \sigma \varepsilon \sigma \theta \varepsilon \) should also be taken as ‘(ye shall) appear’.

3 CONTINUATION OF THE \( \text{KJV'S INTERPRETATION} \)

This interpretation of Colossians 3:4 has been continued—and thus been reinforced—by almost all English translations. Suffice it to quote some examples (which I will cite in chronological order, disregarding later editions featuring only minor changes):

\textit{Modern Language Bible} (1945):
When Christ, who is our life, makes His appearance, then we also will appear in glory with Him.

\textit{Revised Standard Version} (1946):
When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

\textit{Today’s English Version} (1966):
Your real life is Christ and when he appears, then you too will appear with him and share his glory!

\textit{Living Bible} (1971):
And when Christ who is our real life comes back again, you will shine with him and share in all his glories.

\textit{New International Version} (1973):
When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

\textit{Revised English Bible} (1989):
When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you too will be revealed with him...

A good illustration of the persuasive force of this interpretation is to be seen in \( \text{H KAINH \DIA\Theta\KH} \), the modern Greek revision of the New Testament (1967):

\[ \begin{align*}
\text{Ota} & \text{v o Xristov, po } \epsilon \text{i} \text{nai } \eta \ \zeta \omega \ \mu \alpha \epsilon \text{, } \varphi \alpha \nu \varepsilon \rho \omega \theta \eta \text{, } \tau \tau \tau \text{ kai } \sigma \epsilon \iota \sigma \text{ } \theta \alpha \ \varphi \alpha \nu \varepsilon \rho \omega \theta \eta \text{ } \mu \alpha \zeta \text{ } \tau \\text{o } \delta \omega \lambda \alpha \sigma \mu \epsilon \nu \epsilon \nu \iota \\
\end{align*} \]

This interpretation has also been reinforced by the parallels quoted in the margin of \( \text{Novum Testamentum Graece} \) (Nestle-Aland 1979:527). Both Lk 17:30, 1 Jn 3:2, and 1 Cor 15:43 seem to refer to the second coming of Christ. We should note, however, that the terms occurring in these passages are different from Colossians 3:4: Lk 17:30 has \( \acute{\alpha} \rho \kappa \alpha \lambda \upi \upi \tau \tau \tau \text{, } \) and 1 Cor 15:43 has \( \sigma \pi \varepsilon \iota \rho \tau \tau \tau \text{, } \) \( \acute{\epsilon} \varepsilon \iota \rho \tau \tau \tau \text{. } \) These two parallels, then, seem to have been selected on the basis of a particular interpretation; not in terms of correspondence within the Greek text itself. The third, 1 Jn 3:2, has \( \acute{\epsilon} \varphi \alpha \nu \varepsilon \rho \omega \theta \eta \text{, } \) but with \( \tau \iota \ \acute{\epsilon} \sigma \omicron \mu \beta \theta \alpha \text{ as its subject, and—notably—} \acute{\epsilon} \alpha \nu \ \varphi \alpha \nu \varepsilon \rho \omega \theta \eta \text{ meaning ‘at the time when ...’ This seems to indicate that } \acute{\epsilon} \alpha \nu \text{ plus subjunctive and } \delta \tau \alpha \nu \text{ plus subjunctive are used interchangeably.} \]
A closer parallel to Colossians 3:4 would be 2 Cor 4:10, where Christ's life becoming visible in our (mortal) bodies is mentioned:

πάντοτε τὴν ῥέξσαν τοῦ Ἰησοῦ ἐν τῷ σώματι περιφέροντες, ἵνα καὶ ἡ ζωὴ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ ἐν τῷ σώματι ἡμῶν φανερωθῇ.

Note that the phrase ἵνα...φανερωθῇ definitely does not refer here to Christ's second coming, but to the continuing process (cf πάντοτε, and ἐὰν in verse 11) of being endangered (ἐἰς θάνατον παραδίδομεθα) and thereby rendering visible the life of Christ in our mortal bodies. This is the most exact parallel I could find to the interpretation of Colossians 3:4 which I propose. Incidentally, it is also a closer parallel in terms of the shared phraseology of the Greek passages.

In the Dutch tradition, the same interpretation of this verse has been repeated from the Staten Vertaling to the Afrikaans translation of 1983, and recently in Die Boodskap:

Staten Vertaling (1637):

Wanneer [nu] Christus sal geopenbaert zijn die ons' leven is dan sult oock gy met hem geopenbaert worden in heerlickheyt.

Die Bybel in Afrikaans (1933; revised 1954):

Wanneer Christus, wat ons lewe is, geopenbaar word, dan sal julle ook saam met Hom in heerlikheid geopenbaar word.

Die Lewende Bybel (1978):

Christus het nou ons werklike lewe geword. Wanneer Hy eendag terugkom en almal Hom sal sien, sal julle saam met Hom gesien word en ook deel hé aan sy eer.

Die Bybel—Nuwe Vertaling (1983):

Wanneer Christus, wat julle lewe is, by sy wederkoms verskyn, sal julle ook saam met Hom verskyn en in sy heerlikheid deel.

Die Boodskap (1996):

Wanneer Christus eendag weer kom, sal julle almal by Hom kan gaan staan as mense wat Hy lewend gemaak het. Almal sal julle saam met Hom sien.

Note especially the insertion of an explicit reference to the second coming. This does not occur in the English tradition, with the exception of the Living Bible, but a comparison of the different English translations seems to leave no doubt that this reference is implicit throughout.

4 AN ALTERNATIVE PROPOSAL: CONTEXTUAL INTERPRETATION OF COLOSSIANS 3:4

What, then, is my objection to the usual interpretation of this verse, as attested by so many different translations? Simply this: it does not seem to fit the context of the
textual unit commencing at Colossians 2:20 and terminating at 3:17. Wendland and Nida, for instance, in *Lexicography and Translation* (Louw 1985:28), express the relevance of the context for interpretation in these words: ‘... the correct meaning of a lexical unit in any context is that which fits the context best. In other words, the correct interpretation maximizes the relevance of the context rather than the role of the isolated word or phrase.’

Let us turn our attention to the textual environment—the ‘context’—of Col 3:4. The internal cohesion of this textual unit is secured by thematic and stylistic means. Stylistically it concerns the following sets of contrasting images: dying—living, hiding—revealing, and undressing—dressing. Compare the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Colossians 2:20</th>
<th>Colossians 3:1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ἀπεθάνετε σὺν Χριστῷ</td>
<td>Ἀνευρέθη τῷ Χριστῷ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ὃς ζῶντες...</td>
<td>ἀπεθάνετε γὰρ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>κέκρυπται (3:3)</td>
<td>φανερωθῆ (3:4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ἡ ζωή ὑμῶν (3:4)</td>
<td>νεκρώσατε (3:5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>νεκρώσατε (3:5)</td>
<td>ἐζητε (3:7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ἀπόθεσθε (3:8)</td>
<td>ἐνυδάτωσθε (3:12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ἀπεκδυσάμενοι (3:9)</td>
<td>ἐνυδύσαμενοι (3:10)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These antithetical pairs recur throughout the passage, all serving to emphasize the theme of transition from one state to another. What is not apparent at first glance, though, is that the transitions in question are all associated with, or symbolized by, the baptismal rite. Baptism, to the Christians of Colossae, literally meant being submersed (hidden) in the water and emerging (re-appearing) from it; it meant taking off their old garments and being dressed in new baptismal robes; and symbolically it meant dying with Christ and being resurrected with Christ. This association with different images of baptism has already been hinted at in 2:11–12. There, ‘being buried’ (συναντάφεινες) is not only explicitly linked with baptism (ἐν τῷ βαπτισμῷ), but also connects two of the images recurring in chapter 3, namely ‘being hidden’ and ‘dying’.

Baptism, then, is the unifying theme permeating the entire passage. But what is its rhetorical function? What point is there for the author to refer to the Colossians’ baptism? Probably this: Baptism was the initial and decisive event signifying their identification with Christ. This meant more than mere association; it was like obtaining a new identity. It could best be imagined as dying and being resurrected to a new life. Now indeed, Christ had become their life.

What stronger appeal could the author of the epistle have, when admonishing his readers to really live as Christians, than to remind them of their baptism? By being baptized, they had obtained a new identity. They had died with Christ; had been resurrected with Christ; Christ had become their life. Now they only had to act out this new identity. They should behave in such a way as to make it visible to all that they were different people now, Christ’s people.

The gist of this argument is summed up in 3:3–4: death and burial (being hidden) with Christ symbolizes the break with their non-Christian past; but this has another
side, namely the realization of their new life in Christ. If this becomes manifest to the world, so will their new identity as people belonging to Christ (σὺν αὐτῷ).

A notable stylistic feature of verses 3–4 is the concentrical pattern:

\[
\text{aπεθάνετε} \quad A \\
\text{ἡ ζωὴ ὑμῶν} \quad B \\
\text{κέκρυπται} \quad C \\
\text{σὺν τῷ Χριστῷ} \quad D \\
\text{ἐν τῷ θεῷ} \quad E \\
\text{ὁ Χριστός} \quad D \\
\text{φανερωθῇ} \quad C' \\
\text{ἡ ζωὴ ὑμῶν} \quad B \\
\text{φανερωθησεσθε} \quad A'
\]

In this pattern, διώκ...φανερωθῇ (C') is the antithesis of κέκρυπται (C); and similarly φανερωθησεσθε (A') is contrasted to απεθάνετε (A). Now this dying and being hidden is not physical death and burial, but an image indicating conversion to Christianity. Its antithesis, I believe, is not an appearance at the second coming of Christ, but the visible manifestation of a new Christian identity. If Christ is to be glorified by it (ἐν δόξῃ), then it must occur in the present dispensation.

Before proceeding to the practical realization of this interpretation in a proposed English translation of verse 4, we must add a note on verse 3:

The phrase σὺν τῷ Χριστῷ is usually taken by translators with κέκρυπται, and rendered as 'your life is now hidden with Christ in God'. This ignores a chiasm occurring within the larger concentrical pattern:

\[
\text{απεθάνετε} \quad A \\
\text{ἡ ζωὴ ὑμῶν} \quad B \\
\text{κέκρυπται} \quad B \\
\text{σὺν τῷ Χριστῷ} \quad A
\]

In terms of this figure, BB (ἡ ζωὴ ὑμῶν κέκρυπται) is seen to be a synonymous paraphrase, hidden, as it were, within AA (απεθάνετε...σὺν τῷ Χριστῷ). The latter statement, of course, echoes 2:20. Noticing this chiasm would lead the attentive reader to identify another in 3:4—an inverted one, where the antithesis of AA is expressed in DD, and that of BB expressed in CC:

\[
\text{ὁ Χριστός φανερωθῇ} \quad C \\
\text{ἡ ζωὴ ὑμῶν} \quad D \\
\text{τὸτε καὶ ὑμεῖς σὺν αὐτῷ} \quad D \\
\text{φανερωθησεσθε} \quad C
\]

Taking both occurrences of φανερῶ as 'it is revealed that ...' (thus CC), I would count both 'Christ is your life', and 'you (have been raised) with him' as belonging to DD.

How, then, is the interpretation of Colossians 3:4 which is being proposed here to be realized in a translation? Briefly, as follows:

(a) The διώκ+subj. clause should be rendered as 'if ...' instead of 'when ...';
(b) the verb ϕανερωθη should be taken as 'it is made visible' instead of 'he appears';
(c) Χριστος...ζωη υμων should be understood as 'that Christ is your life';
(d) and, consequently, ϕανερωθησεθε should be rendered as 'it will become visible that you (have been raised to life with him).

This last item, (d), might seem grammatically impossible, but it is not. An identical mismatch of syntax and meaning (incidentally, involving the same verb, ϕανερω) occurs in 2 Cor 3:3: ϕανερομενοι οτι έστε έπιστολη Χριστου 'while it is clear that you are a letter from Christ'. In strictly logical terms, the construction should have been a genitive absolute. The construction as it appears, though, is merely the passive voice equivalent of the proleptic use of a noun or pronoun in the accusative case.

We should go one step further, though: Taking the οταν...τοτε... construction as 'if ... then ...', we should note that this is more than a mere matter-of-fact statement of what may happen under certain conditions. It is closely linked to the imperatives of 3:1 and 2 (ζητειτε and φρονειτε), and followed by more imperatives in 3:5 ff. It seems to function as an exhortation, suggesting what should be done and promising—or at least hinting at—a reward. Thus: 'If you let it become visible that Christ is your life, then to his glory it will also become manifest that you have been raised to a new life with him.'

5 FURTHER IMPLICATIONS FOR THE TRANSLATION OF COLOSSIANS 2:20 TO 3:17

The interpretation of Colossians 3:4 proposed here has been motivated through reference to the context of Colossians 2:20 to 3:17. If accepted, it has some implications for the rendering of this entire passage in translation.

Firstly, the imagery which permeates the passage should not be ignored in translation. It is a fallacy to believe that the total semantic content of a passage is constituted merely by the sum of its kernel sentences. The passage communicates as a whole, and its thematic and literary structure is part of this communication. This structure is borne out by the imagery—the recurrent contrasting of dying and living, of hiding and revealing, and of undressing and dressing. It is to be deplored that the Afrikaans Nuwe Vertaling (1983), for instance, translates Col 3:9-10 as follows:

Julle het met die ou, sondige mens en sy gewoontes gebreek en leef nou die lewe van die nuwe mens ...

The image of 'taking off' the old and 'putting on' a new identity is fully comprehensible to the modern reader, and need not be shunned in translating the passage. Moreover, the exhortation contained in the Greek participles ἀπεκδυσάμενοι and ἐνδυσάμενοι—which take on the 'colour' of their environment, that is, the force of the imperatives in verses 5, 8, 9, and 12—should not be lost by translating them as if they represented indicatives.
Secondly, the cohesion of the literary unit 2:20 to 3:17 should be made discernable to the modern reader. Obviously, this could hardly be done by changing the chapter and verse divisions. Many readers have become accustomed to these, and changing them would lead to difficulties in cross-referencing between translation and original, or between different translations. What can be done, however, is this: the section headings should be turned into succinct formulations of the rhetorical intention of the passage. Once again, the NAV is an instance of ineffective or even misleading use of section headings. Before 2:20 it has Julle het saam met Christus gesterwe; before 3:1, Julle is saam met Christus uit die dood opgewek; and before 3:5, Die ou en die nuwe lewe. This gives the impression of unrelated statements of theological fact. The rhetorical impact is entirely lost. What is needed—if section headings are to be used at all—is perhaps a fitting heading before 2:20 only, and no heading before 3:1; then another heading before 3:5, but one which explicates the relation of what follows to what precedes. For this purpose, a heading like the TEV’s The Old Life and the New before 3:5 will not do. Perhaps rather Practical realization of your new life in Christ.

6 CONCLUSION

The interpretation of Colossians 3:4 as an eschatological vision of the faithful appearing together with Christ at the parousia seems not to fit into the context of Colossians 2 to 3. This interpretation, however, has been repeated in almost all translations, from the King James Version to those most recently published. The reason, it seems, is that translators tend to follow in the footsteps of their predecessors, rather than critically examine earlier translations with reference to the source texts.

The context in which Colossians 3:4 functions seems to me to require a quite different interpretation: it seems to suggest an exhortation to the readers to realize or ‘act out’ their new identity as people who have both died and been raised to a new life with Christ. The eschatological implication may be present, but it is not foregrounded in this text. The main focus is on a mode of life which makes manifest the Christian’s close association with Christ. This is underlined by the recurrent use of different images, all of which are associated with baptism.

I have suggested some implications of this interpretation—not only for the translation of 3:4, but also for the rest of the pericope. These may be summed up in a simple appeal to translators: Please, read the source text!

WORKS CONSULTED


*Die Bybel. Dit is die Gans Heilige Skrif ...* Kaapstad: Bybelgenootskap van Suid-Afrika 1933 (revised 1954).


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