

Chronos and Kairos

The distinction is commonly made on devotional blogs: *chronos* is mechanical, uniform, clock time while *kairos* is an appointed, specially-charged, relationally-rich, 'ripe' moment. As the biblical scholar James Barr pointed out back in 1969,¹ this is simply not sustainable from biblical or extra-biblical evidence. The two words for time are used interchangeably and mustn't be loaded with theological or philosophical significance without exegetical justification from their context.

Which of the Greek 'time' words would you expect these passages to use in the Greek?

- "Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth" (Luke 1:57)
- "Whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago." (Acts 3:21)
- "But as the time of the promise drew near..." (Acts 7:17)
- "But when the set time had fully come..." (Gal. 4:4)

Now which 'time' word would you expect to find in this next set?

- "But stay awake at all times" (Luke 21:36)
- "Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time" (1 Cor. 7:5)
- "But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time" (1 Thess. 2:17)

The first all use *chronos* while the second set use *kairos*. Ok, I have been selective but I think it makes the point - Barr's point - that these words don't have separate, consistent, technical meanings or theological weight.

If you want to find the extra-biblical mythic sources behind the idea of a god *chronos* and a god *kairos* then the evidence is even smaller. Chronos rarely appears in Greek mythology and the depiction of Karios as a fleeting catch-me-if-you-can figure is based on a few descriptions of a particular statue.² All these sources are 300 years before the New Testament so to draw them into our interpretation of the NT would be a bit like insisting that because William Collins wrote an [Ode to Pity](#) (1746) depicting Pity as a feminine, virginal, nursing, angelic presence, that is the thought-world behind my statement, "What a pity!"

Further reading:

Carson, D. A. *Exegetical Fallacies*. 2nd ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1996

¹ [Barr, Biblical Words for Time, Naperville: 1969](#). Barr is no particular friend of evangelicals but his reasoning and linguistics is sound.

² An entirely lost 'hymn to Kairos'; [Aesops fable book 5 fable 8](#); [Posiddipus](#).