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ARCHIVES

THE PROBLEMS IN JOHN 8:25

The edition of Eberhard and Erwin Nestle (Stuttgart) contains the following reading for St. John 8:25, 26: ἔλεγον οὖν αὐτῷ· σὺ τίς εἶ; εἶπεν αὐτοῖς ὁ Ἰησοῦς· τὴν ἀρχὴν ὃ τι καὶ λαλῶ ὑμῖν; πολλὰ ἔχω περὶ ὑμῶν λαλεῖν καὶ κρίνειν· ἀλλ' ὁ πέμψας με ἀληθῆς ἐστίν, καὶ γὰρ ἃ ἤκουσα παρ' αὐτοῦ, ταῦτα λαλῶ εἰς τὸν κόσμον. The Oxford text, edited by Alexander Souter, presents one basic variation; the conclusion of verse 25 is a statement instead of a question: Τὴν ἀρχὴν ὃ τι καὶ λαλῶ ὑμῖν.

The challenge which the conclusion of verse 25 presents to translators is evident from the various versions:

"Even the same that I said unto you from the beginning."
(King James)

"Why should I talk to you at all?" (Moffatt)

"Why do I even talk to you at all?" (Goodspeed)

"Even what I have told you from the beginning." A footnote gives the variation: "Why do I talk to you at all?" (Revised Standard Version)

"Principium, quia et loquor vobis." (Vulgate, ed. of Wordsworth and White; Oxford)

"Erstlich der, der ich mit euch rede." (Luther)

"Ce que je vous dis dès le commencement." (Segond; Oxford)

"Ο, τι σᾶς λέγω ἀπ' ἀρχῆς. (Modern Greek; British Bible Society)

Some of the difficulties involved in the passage are noted by A. T. Robertson in *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*: "In John 8:25 both Westcott-Hort and Nestle print as a question, Τὴν ἀρχὴν ὃ τι καὶ λαλῶ ὑμῖν; The Latin versions have *quod* or *quia*. It is a very difficult passage at best. Τὴν ἀρχὴν ὃ τι may be taken to mean 'Why do I speak to you at all?' (Τὴν ἀρχὴν = ὄλωζ.) But there may be ellipsis, 'Why do you reproach me that (ὄτι) I speak to you at all?' If necessary to the sense, ὃ τι may be taken here as interrogative. Moulton admits the New Testament use of ὅστις in a direct question. Recitative ὅτι is even suggested in Winer-Schmiedel, but the occasional interrogative use of ὃ τι is sufficient explanation. But the passage in John 8:25 is more than doubtful. Chrysostom takes ὃ τι there as relative, Cyril as causal" (p. 730).

The variation in the Greek text, the various translations, and the remarks of Robertson point to three problems in the passage. First, should the sentence end with a period (Souter) or question mark (Nestle and Westcott-Hort)? Secondly, is ὅτι to be taken as relative or interrogative? The reading of ὅτι as a conjunction is possible, but not accepted in the better editions. Thirdly, the translation of the phrase τὴν ἀρχήν. There is also a fourth problem: λαλῶ may be indicative or subjunctive.

The first and second problems are interdependent. If ὅτι is relative, the sentence should end with a period; if ὅτι is interrogative, a question mark should be the final punctuation. Although ὅτι, the neuter of ὅστις, is more frequently used as a relative indefinite pronoun, in the context of John 8:25 there is no antecedent for it. The translators, furthermore, who imply or supply an unexpressed antecedent are inclined to translate λαλῶ as having the significance of a past tense, as in the King James and Revised Standard versions. It appears better, then, to regard ὅτι as interrogative. There is no need to resort to the recitative or causal conjunction ὅτι. The indirect interrogative use of ὅστις is common throughout Greek literature beginning with Homer (*Iliad* 3.192; 14.509; *Odyssey* 8.28; 10.110). One example in the New Testament is Acts 9:6. Also the direct interrogative function is found in passages containing dialogue:

- (Charon) . . . οὗτος τί ποιεῖς;
- (Dionysus) ὅτι ποιῶ; (Aristophanes, *Frogs* 198)
- (Lamachus) ἀλλὰ τίς γὰρ εἶ;
- (Dicaeopolis) ὅστις; (Aristophanes, *Acharnians* 594, 595)
- (Poverty) τί δ' ἂν ὑμεῖς ἀγαθὸν ἐξεύροιθ';
- (Chremylus) ὅτι; (Aristophanes, *Wealth* 462)
- (Euthyphro) . . . ἀλλὰ δὴ τίνα γραφήν σε γέγραπται;
- (Socrates) "Ἦντινα; (Plato, *Euthyphro* 2c).

In John 8:25, then, we may interpret ὅτι as interrogative and conclude the sentence with a question mark.

The third problem, the interpretation of τὴν ἀρχήν, has confused the translators. Some render it "from the beginning," as if the text were ἐξ ἀρχῆς; others regard it as equivalent to ὅλως and translate "at all" — not to mention the Latin edition by Wordsworth and White. The confusion seems odd, since the phrase by itself should not be difficult; perhaps the other problems in the passage have caused the translators to stretch the point on τὴν ἀρχήν. The term is interpreted best as an adverbial accusative meaning "to begin with," "at first,"

"in the first place," or "first of all." Both ἀρχὴν and τὴν ἀρχὴν have this signification throughout Greek literature. Examples of ἀρχὴν are:

ἀρχὴν γὰρ ἐγὼ μηχανήσομαι οὕτω ὥστε μηδὲ μαθεῖν μιν ὀφθεῖσαν ὑπὸ σεῦ. (Herodotus 1.9)

Ταῦτα μὲν νυν ἔστω ὡς ἔστι τε καὶ ὡς ἀρχὴν ἐγένετο. (Herodotus 2.28)

ἀρχὴν δὲ θηραῖν οὐ πρόπει τὰμήχανα· (Sophocles, *Antigone* 92)

ἀρχὴν κλύειν ἄν οὐδ' ἅπαξ ἐβουλόμην. (Sophocles, *Philoctetes* 1239)

ἀρχὴν δ' ἄν, εἰ μὴ τλημονεστάτη γυνὴ πασῶν ἐβλαστε, τάσδε δυσμενεῖς χοῶς οὐκ ἄν ποθ' ὄν γ' ἔκτεινε τῷδ', ἐπέστρεφε. (Sophocles, *Electra* 439—441)

Examples of τὴν ἀρχὴν are as follows:

Τὴν ἀρχὴν γὰρ ἐξῆν αὐτῷ μὴ γράφειν . . . (Demosthenes, *Against Aristocrates* 93)

. . . ὅς ἔφη ἢ τὴν ἀρχὴν οὐ δεῖν ἐμὲ δεῦρο εἰσελθεῖν . . . (Plato, *Apology* 29c)

Πῶς οὖν οἱ ἀγαθοὶ τοῖς ἀγαθοῖς ἡμῖν φίλοι ἔσσονται τὴν ἀρχὴν, οἱ μῆτε ἀπόντες ποθεινοὶ ἀλλήλοις . . . (Plato, *Lysis* 215b)

The reading of Herodotus 4.25 is given either with the article or without it: τοῦτο δὲ οὐκ ἐνδέχομαι (τὴν) ἀρχὴν. Plato's *Gorgias* (478c) contains a query of Socrates using ἀρχὴν, followed by τὴν ἀρχὴν in Socrates' next statement:

(Socrates) ἜΑρ' οὖν οὕτως ἄν περὶ σῶμα εὐδαιμονέστατος ἄνθρωπος εἴη, ἰατρευόμενος, ἢ μηδὲ κάμων ἀρχὴν;

(Polus) Δῆλον ὅτι μηδὲ κάμων.

(Socrates) Οὐ γὰρ τοῦτ' ἦν εὐδαιμονία, ὡς ἔοικε, κακοῦ ἀπαλλαγὴ, ἀλλὰ τὴν ἀρχὴν μηδὲ κτῆσις.

The fourth question, the interpretation of λαλῶ, apparently has not impressed the translators as presenting any problem. The verb has been taken as unquestionably present indicative. Yet some scholars have translated it as if it were a past tense, perhaps because they have interpreted ὃ τι as relative and have rendered τὴν ἀρχὴν as "from the beginning." The verb, λαλῶ, however, may be the present subjunctive employed in a deliberative question. Such an interpretation harmonizes with the interrogative use of ὃ τι and the question mark as a final punctuation. The deliberative subjunctive, furthermore, is not foreign to the New Testament, which presents among others the following instances:

τί ποιῶμεν ἵνα ἐργαζώμεθα τὰ ἔργα τοῦ θεοῦ; (John 6:28)

τὸ ποτήριον ὃ δέδωκέν μοι ὁ πατήρ, οὐ μὴ πῖω αὐτό; (John 18:11)

ἔξεστιν δοῦναι κῆνσον Καίσαρι ἢ οὐ; δῶμεν ἢ μὴ δῶμεν;
(Mark 12:14)

Καὶ ἐπηρώτων αὐτὸν οἱ ὄχλοι λέγοντες· τί οὖν ποιήσωμεν;
(Luke 3:10)

μὴ οὖν μεριμνήσητε λέγοντες· τί φάγωμεν; ἢ τί πίωμεν; ἢ
τί περιβαλώμεθα; (Matthew 6:31)

Καὶ τί ἔτι λέγω; (Hebrews 11:32)

According to our solutions of the problems present in the conclusion of John 8:25, we may translate the passage: "What (or, Just what) shall I say to you in the first place (or, to begin with; or, first of all)?" The adverbial use of καί (meaning "just") for emphasis is common in Greek literature; in interrogatives it frequently implies emphasis in intonation. (Cf. Euripides, *Andromache* 906; Plato, *Theaetetus* 166d; *Gorgias* 456a; Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 278; Euripides, *Alcestis* 834; Plato, *Euthyphro* 6b; Demosthenes, *Against Philipp I* 46.) The verb λαλῶ as equivalent to λέγω is a characteristic of later writers and occurs in Acts 3:22; 9:6; Matthew 9:33; John 8:30.

The context, which is a primary text, substantiates the solutions and transition presented above. John 8:25, 26 would read: "Then they said to Him, 'Who are You?' Jesus said to them, 'What shall I say to you in the first place? I have many things to say and to judge concerning you. He who has sent Me is true; and what I have heard from Him I speak to the world.'"

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