

ON THE CATAPHORIC REFERENCE OF αὐτόν IN JOHN 1.12

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I think it would be difficult at this point to go back over the myriad of discussions that have gone on between myself and the Internet troll that goes by the moniker of “John Milton” (herein “JM”) on CARM’s forum for biblical languages (calling himself “Isaac Newton” on Textkit’s Greek and Latin forums) and list all of the various times that he has insinuated that I do not know the Greek language as presented in the New Testament (NT). His arguments have generally taken the following form:

1. “You use the Erasmusian pronunciation; therefore, you do not know Greek.”
2. “You cannot have a full fluent conversation about your day-to-day life; therefore, you do not know Greek.”
3. “You think that the phrases *μορφὴ θεοῦ* (in the phrase *ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ ὑπάρχων*) and *μορφὴ δούλου* (in the phrase *μορφὴν δούλου λαβών*) represent *epexegetical genitives* in Philippians 2.6-7; therefore you don’t know Greek.”

And now the latest that he has been kicking around:

4. “You think that αὐτόν in John 1.12 does not find its antecedent in τὸ φῶς in John 1.9; therefore, you don’t know Greek.”

On many different occasions scattered all around these two forums (CARM and Textkit), I have attempted to explain the justifications for my positions, but no justification could possibly break through the dogmatism with which JM holds to his positions. At this point, I am interested in putting together my justification for the fourth of these contentions. My hope is that I will simply be able to link to this PDF from now on to refer forum readers to my position on this verse, as a way of deflecting this absurd argument.

Personal Backgrounds with the Greek Language

I will readily admit that I am not a fluent speaker of the Greek language as it appears at any point in its history. As with the vast majority of students of Greek, it was never my goal to become a

fluent speaker of the language. The *koiné* (ἡ κοινὴ διάλεκτος) first grabbed my interest when I was seventeen years old. During my senior year of high school, the pastor of my local Christian Church stressed to me the importance of getting to know the original language of the New Testament. He lent me his copy of William Mounce's *Basics of Biblical Greek*, of which I memorized the first 20 chapters that year (up to the point of learning the imperfect indicative active, since reduplication clouded my mind while I was trying to finish up my credits for graduation [especially Trigonometry and Calculus studies]). The last couple of months of my senior year, I let Mounce's grammar sit on the desk, since I knew it was my intention of taking up Greek as soon as I began my studies in Bible college.

The following year, I enrolled in Bible classes, tested out of English grammar with a placement exam and began to study Greek. Overall, I took six semesters (three academic years) of Greek study in college. This included complete coverage of Mounce's *Basics of Biblical Greek* along with its companion workbook, full translation of 1 John and the Gospel of John, readings in the Apostolic Fathers, as well as coverage at the intermediate level of J. Harold Greenlee's *A Concise Exegetical Grammar of New Testament Greek* and Bruce Metzger's *Lexical Aid for Students of New Testament Greek*. I took a course in the letters of Paul to the Galatians and to the Philippians that was with the same professor, and the course included heavy memorization work – which I did all in Greek from the beginning to the end of the course. I maintained high grades throughout my studies, and while studying Greek in the second year, I also began my study of the Hebrew language. I'm now a fluent speaker of modern Hebrew and read the narratives of the Hebrew Bible without issue.

All of this to simply confirm two points: (1) I know what it is to learn a language. I eventually completed a B.A. in Spanish language and literature, speaking Spanish daily as a regular form of communication and for translation purposes; I earned a translator's certification for American Sign Language (ASL) from the State of Missouri in 2001; I have studied several languages informally, including German, French and Latin; I now speak Hebrew fluently as my second language in every aspect of my life, from work to home. And, (2) I put in the requisite time and energy to learn Greek for the purpose to which it was to be put: reading. My purpose in Greek was not to become an orator or to compose poetry in iambic pentameter. My purpose was to know how to read and understand the texts of the New Testament. To that purpose I labored, and I achieved a good level of success. Whether I read it with an Erasmian pronunciation or with that of modern Greek, I read the New Testament with *comprehension*, and that is far more important than how one pronounces the letter β (which is *v* in modern Greek and apparently *b* in Attic).

In distinction to my own verified ability with languages generally and the disciplined study that I have put into the Greek language, JM claims to have achieved a level of Greek that is higher than my own while having supposedly skipped through Mounce's grammar – without use of the textbook, without doing any translation exercises either into English from Greek or into Greek from English, without any teacher other than “the Holy Spirit” and in a very short period of time. I have offered him the chance to meet with me on Skype or Google+ to prove that he can truly read the text out loud and answer questions about it (to demonstrate comprehension). Indeed, I

have taken the personal element out of it (since he wants to remain anonymous online) and have asked him to simply record himself reading a text of my own choosing and sent it back to me by email (for which he can create an anonymous Gmail account). He has refused every chance given to him to “put his money where his mouth is,” so to speak. He flaunts and waves his arms in the air, claiming that he has a native grasp of Greek, yet he has never learned any other language to fluency, has demonstrated that he’s delusional at every step and has refused to put up his proof.

We have disparate backgrounds and come to the Greek language from very different perspectives. Honestly, JM has never truly had a desire to know Greek. His desire has ever only been to present himself as an authority so as to (1) refute Trinitarian argumentation and (2) imagine that his “knowledge” of Greek offers support for his hatred of the Trinitarian faith. This is his one and only motivation for claiming to have studied Greek, and in his dogmatic stance he attacks anyone who would disagree with his analyses (even on technical grounds) with the most abusive of terms, calling their character, their knowledge and their very humanity into question. This is the type of troll with which I have found myself engaging for nearly two years, and it behooves you – the forum passerby – to know what type of person this is.

Cataphora: Delaying the Revelation of a Person or Character as a Narrative Device

As to the subject at hand, JM states the following on CARM’s forum:

Well, our statements testify to our knowledge (or lack of) of the Koine of the GNT.
For instance you deny that the antecedent of *αὐτόν* in verse 12 is *τὸ φῶς* in verse 9. I rest my case. ☺

In other words, he states that *αὐτόν* refers directly to *τὸ φῶς* as its antecedent, and anyone who doesn’t see this cannot understand Greek. What we’re really talking about, however, is not limited to verses 9 and 12. It is the entirety of the prologue of John’s gospel, stretching all the way to verse 18 from the very first verse of the book.

The author of this gospel is using a literary device to grab the reader’s attention. He opens up the book by referring to the *Logos* that was in the beginning with God and was itself a divine being (*θεός*). To be fair, even angels were considered divine beings (*θεοί*), so it would not be odd for the writer to state that the *Logos* was as well. The idea of the Trinity probably never entered the author’s mind when he wrote this passage. Yet, this doesn’t change the fact that the *Logos* was an entity, a being, a living thing of some sort. JM tries to state that *Logos* here was just another way to say the *Torah* (*תורה*), yet we see that it was more than that. The *Logos* was “the true light that illuminates every man,” and it “was coming into the world.” John (let’s call the author this for the sake of brevity, though we should all be aware that the author was not John the apostle) was ultimately writing about what he believed about Jesus. Everything that he wrote in the prologue was leading up to “the big reveal” of verse 17 – “grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (*ἡ χάρις καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐγένετο*). Up until that point, Jesus was alluded to but not named.

We see him called the *Logos*, the true light and “the one and only son” and are told that he “was in the world” and that “the world did not recognize him.” He was talking about Jesus, even though he hadn’t yet named him.

We see this often in literature. It is called *cataphora* (καταφορά), from the Greek *κατά-* *down* and *φέρω* *carry*, from the fact that the pronoun carries us “down” the page to find the so-called “antecedent” (really a “postcedent”) rather than “up” the page, which is called *anaphora* (ἀναφορά → ἀνά- *up* and *φέρω* *carry*). It is far more common in all languages to use anaphora, whereby we look for the referent of a pronoun *before* it. Thus, we have the following:

- (1) John_{*i*} sent his_{*i*} son a gift.
- (2) John_{*i*} sent his_{*j*} son a gift.

In (1) John sent a gift to *his own* son (indexed with *i*), while in (2) John sent a gift to *someone else’s* son (indexed with *j*). These may look like the same sentence, but semantically they are very different. In (1) we have an anaphor (*his*) that refers to the subject of the sentence. We can also assume that (2) is using *his* anaphorically, referring to someone that has already been mentioned before this sentence. Perhaps the fuller context would reveal:

- (3) Mike_{*j*} and John_{*i*} are best friends, and although John_{*i*} has no children of his_{*i*} own, he cares for [his_{*i*} friend’s]_{*j*} son_{*k*} and dotes on him_{*k*} as much as possible. In fact, John_{*i*} sent [his_{*j*} son]_{*k*} a gift while he_{*k*} was away at camp.

In this fuller context, it becomes clear (as indexed: John_{*i*}, Mike_{*j*} and Mike’s son_{*k*}) that *his* in our example sentence above is represented by (2) and not (1).

Sometimes, cataphora is used to create suspense in literature, when the pronoun is separated at a longer distance from its postcedent. We have the following in *Personal Pronouns in Present-Day English* by Katie Wales (Cambridge, 1996), in which 3PP is short for “the third-person pronoun” and NP is short for “the noun phrase” (pages 39-40):

The greater the ‘distance,’ so to speak, between 3PP and NP, the greater an effect of suspense and anticipation.... In the following example, the gradual release of information is a deliberate attempt at suspense and surprise over five sentences:

- (29) Every day *he* stops somebody on a motoring offence, and *his heart* sinks / . . . / *He* knows *he’ll* end up giving evidence in court, *he’ll* have to give *his* name first . . . / There are times when *the beat officer at Pinner station* wishes *he* had never been born. / There are times when *PC Moss* just wishes Mr and Mrs Moss had been interested in football . . . back in 1956 when their son *Stirling* was born. (*The Guardian*, 27 October 1993)

In this example, Ms Wales gives a closer example to what we see happening in the prologue of the Gospel of John, in which several terms are used to refer to Jesus – both pronouns (such as

αὐτός and οὗτος) and other phrases and titles (such as ὁ λόγος, ὁ μονογενὴς υἱός, τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινόν, etc.) – before he outright names him in verse 17 for the first time. This is simply a long instance of cataphora, a literary device by which John was seeking to create suspense in the minds of his readers.

Conclusion

My position on the “antecedent” (truly, the “postcedent”) of John 1.12’s masculine pronoun (αὐτόν) is not that it simply *does not refer to* τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινόν. In fact, both of these phrases refer to the same person: Jesus. There is nothing odd here. The author had Jesus in his mind from the very beginning of the book. “In the beginning was the *Logos* (Jesus)...” “All things came into being through him (Jesus)...” “[John] came only as a witness to the light (Jesus)...” “The true light (Jesus) that illuminates every man was coming into the world...” “He (Jesus) came to his own home, yet his own people did not receive him (Jesus)...” “To everyone who received him (Jesus), he (Jesus) gave them the right to become children of God...” “The *Logos* (Jesus) became flesh and dwelt among us...” In semantic terms, they all index to the same referent and get their meaning from the same thing in the real world (or, at least in the world which the author is trying to create for us – a world in which divine beings become human and mankind merits the attention of a loving Creator who wants a relationship with them).

We cannot assume that the author had anyone else in mind the entire time that he was writing. He wanted only one thing: to get to the message of Jesus, to tell us that Jesus wasn’t like all other people, to show that Jesus had a divine origin, to explain how it was that he could later say “if you have seen me, you have seen the Father,” to lay out the message about the divine becoming human and paving the way for mankind to connect with their Creator. He stated as much as the end of the gospel, saying that “these things have been written so that you might believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of God, and that you might have life in his name by believing” (John 20.31).

It certainly is the case that I no longer believe in the claims of the New Testament (or the Bible generally, to be more precise), yet I am interested in the meaning of the text being understood for what it is. I still cannot see what JM thinks is to be gained by holding to the positions that he does. What difference does it make if the author used literary devices such as cataphora to create suspense in his writing? How does this take away from his concept of the unity of God? What difference does it make if the *Logos* is understood to be a rational being before being born as a human being in our world and taking the name Ἰησοῦς? Are the premises of his anti-Trinity position so feeble that he must hold to any and every argument that falls into his hands as if it were the most important piece of information ever gained by the mind of man? Must his suppositions regarding the meaning of the text become the litmus test for other people’s knowledge of the Greek language – that if you don’t agree with his opinions, then you are ignorant and worthless? Should he be allowed to abuse other people with his quips and meaningless slander? Should we not oppose the arrogance of this type of argumentation and put it in its place? Yes, I’m convinced we should

do all in our power to throw down the empty ramblings of those who would do nothing but slander and impugn the character of others simply because they might happen to disagree with them.

My position on the use of the masculine singular pronoun in John 1.12 is nothing but natural and in line with the regular cataphoric use of pronouns. My own representation of JM's character is available for all to see and is consistent with his behavior on the forums on which he participates. His obsession with Trinitarianism and refusal to meet it on a level playing field, his outright lies about what knowledge of Greek he truly has, his rotten character and abusive nature – these things create in him a natural enemy for all who would seek truth and knowledge.