

CHAPTER II

THE CONTEXTUAL PROBLEM

The Problem Of The Immediate Context

As the interpreter reads 1 Timothy 3:15 the greatness and grandeur of the local assembly looms large before his eyes. He sees the church as inhabited by God, indwelt by God's life and displaying God's Truth! And yet, as he comes to verse 16 there is an apparent shift in thought. The Apostle Paul is there revealing a great mystery. Moreover, this mystery obviously relates to the Lord Jesus Christ, His incarnate life and ministry. It was Christ who was manifested in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached among the Gentiles, believed on in the world and received up in glory!

What then is the contextual relationship between these two verses? Why did Paul write verse 16 after he wrote verse 15? Why does Paul's theme seemingly shift from the church to Christ? What is the relationship between the mystery of godliness and the local assembly of believers? In what way does this great mystery apply to the church?

The Problem Of The Textual Variant

Perhaps no textual variant in the New Testament has caused so much dispute as the one in 1 Timothy 3:16. The Authorized Version follows the **Θεός** reading of the majority of Greek manuscripts and has “God was manifest in the flesh”. The oldest extant manuscripts have the masculine relative pronoun **ὃς**, “He who was manifested in the flesh”. The Revised Version of 1885 and almost all of the modern versions reflect this latter reading. Some of the ancient Western manuscripts have the neuter relative pronoun **ὃ** which would agree in gender with **μυστήριον**, “Great is the mystery . . . which was manifested in the flesh”. This is equivalent to saying that the mystery of godliness is Christ.

The reason **Θεός** and **ὃς** could be easily confused by the scribe as the New Testament text was transmitted is readily explained. In the Uncial Manuscripts, the word for God (**Θεός**) was often abbreviated by writing only the first and last letter, and including a dash above the letters to indicate that the word is in abbreviated form. Hence **Θεός** in uncial style would be written as **ΘEOC**, and abbreviated would be **ΘC**. The relative

ὅς would appear as OC in uncial manuscripts. The fact that $\overline{\theta C}$ and OC could be confused one for the other is hardly surprising.

The manuscript evidence seems to favor the ὅς reading. The majority of manuscripts have θεός but they are all late. The earliest manuscripts, though fewer in number, give overwhelming support to the ὅς reading. The evidence favoring ὅς from the Greek manuscripts, the versions, and the Fathers may be summarized as follows:

1. The uncial codices, \aleph , or Sinaitic manuscripts, of the fourth century, A and C, of the fifth, F and G, of the ninth.
2. The important cursive manuscripts 17, 73, 181, which were copies from uncial manuscripts, probably earlier than any now extant.
3. The Gothic, later Syriac, and Coptic Versions; in the Peshito, or earlier Syriac, it is uncertain whether the reading is who (ὅς), or which (ὅ).
4. The citation of the passage in this form by the Fathers, Cyril, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Epiphanius, Macarius, and Jerome.²⁶

The reading θεός is assumed to be inferior because it lacks early support:

No uncial (in the first hand) earlier than the eighth or ninth century (Ψ) supports θεός; all ancient Versions presuppose ὅς or ὅ; and no patristic writer prior to the last third of the fourth century testifies to the reading θεός.²⁷

It is for these reasons that textual critics have almost universally concluded that ὅς is the reading of the original text:

In this result concur all the best critical authorities, as Griesbach, Lachmann, Tischendorf, Tregelles, and Westcott and Hort; with De Wette, Huther, Alford, Ellicott, and Fairbairn among interpreters.²⁸

²⁶ H. Harvey, *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1890), p. 48. see also Alford, pp. 332-33.

²⁷ Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London: United Bible Societies, 1971), p. 641.

²⁸ Harvey, p. 48.

One of the principles of textual criticism is that the original reading is most often the reading that best explains the rise of the other readings. It is not difficult to explain how **Θεός** could have arisen from **ὁς**:

The reading **Θεός** arose either (a) accidentally, through the misreading of **OC** as **ΘC** or (b) deliberately, either to supply a substantive for the following six verbs, or, with less probability, to provide greater dogmatic precision.²⁹

Those who defend the **Θεός** reading argue that the earliest extant manuscripts are corrupt and that the **ὁς** reading was a deliberate and intentional perversion of the text to weaken the doctrine of the deity of Christ.³⁰ If **Θεός** were the correct reading, 1 Timothy 3:16 would certainly be a direct assertion of the deity of Christ. In fact, the Westminster Confession of Faith includes 1 Timothy 3:16 as one of the Scriptural proofs for their statement concerning the Person of Christ.³¹

Assuming that **ὁς** is the correct reading, what is the antecedent of this masculine relative pronoun? Verse 15 provides only one possible antecedent, namely, **θεοῦ**, which is used twice in the verse: “who (namely, God – verse 15) was manifested in the flesh”. Since the church obviously belongs to Christ (Mt. 16:18), the antecedent “God” (1 Tim. 3:15) is most probably a reference to God the Son. If this is indeed the correct identification of the antecedent, then there is no essential difference between the two readings.

It is also possible that the antecedent is not supplied by the text directly, but must be inferred by the content of verse 16. In other words, Paul could have assumed that Timothy would be able to supply the proper antecedent, and certainly, the logical antecedent would be “Christ”. It was Christ who was manifested in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached among the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up in glory. And yet, even if “Christ” were the correct antecedent, the doctrine of the deity of Christ would not be weakened. Could it be said of a mere man that he was manifested in the flesh? Would it not be absurd to assert that the Apostle Paul was manifested in the flesh? No, the deity of Christ is woven into the very fabric of 1 Timothy 3:16 even if the **ὁς** reading is accepted as correct. This verse would be utterly

²⁹ Metzger, p. 641.

³⁰ “God was manifest in the flesh – 1 Timothy 3:16”, Quarterly Record, printed by the Trinitarian Bible Society for April and July, 1965.

³¹ Ibid.

meaningless apart from the truth of the deity of Christ, and if the enemies of the Cross were responsible for the ὅς reading by a deliberate plot to destroy this foundational doctrine of the Christian faith, then they have not been very successful.³²

Though the relative pronoun does not depreciate the doctrine of the deity of Christ, it does present a contextual problem. The ὅς reading gives an abrupt introduction to the six phrases that constitute the “mystery of godliness”. How can this abruptness be explained? “Christ” is clearly the logical antecedent of the relative pronoun, but why did Paul fail to make the subject explicit? He could have easily written, “Christ was manifested in the flesh”. Such an abrupt and ambiguous construction probably caused the early scribes to change ὅς to Θεός which would result in a smoother and more precise reading. Why then did Paul choose to allow such ambiguity?

The Problem Of The Hymn

Most commentators explain the abruptness of the ὅς construction by assuming that Paul was quoting a creed or hymn that was already familiar to the early Christians. It is not difficult to understand how verse 16 could be considered a credal hymn. The mystery of godliness is set forth by Paul in a series of six terse phrases with each phrase containing a passive verb as indicated by the -θη ending. As the verse is examined in the Greek text the lyrical quality of the phrase arrangement is readily recognized. The majesty and depth of this “hymn” is remarkable: “It would be difficult, if not impossible, to condense more interesting and sublime thought into so narrow a compass as this”.³³

There are many who believe that the “hymn” has little or nothing to do with the preceding context (verse 15) and they thus explain this apparent “contextual break” by saying that Paul introduced an early Christian hymn into the text. One of the supposed proofs of the hymnic nature of the passage is “its lack of agreement with the context”.³⁴ Lock believes that the hymn “goes beyond the statements required by the context”.³⁵ Another commentator is surprised by the so-called contextual break: “The sudden ascension of thought expressed in the text takes us by surprise”.³⁶ Another feels that the seeming abrupt shift of thought makes the hymn difficult to understand: “The

³² For a good discussion of this problem, see The Numerical Bible – Hebrews to Revelation, fourth edition (New York: Loizeaux Brothers, Bible Truth Depot, 1932), pp. 90-91.

³³ Albert Barnes, Barnes’ Notes on the New Testament, edited by Ingram Cobbin (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1962), p. 1144.

³⁴ Clifton J. Allen, ed. , The Broadman Bible Commentary, Vol. XI (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1971), p. 321.

³⁵ Lock, pp. 44-45.

meaning of the hymn is difficult because it has been removed from its original context".³⁷ Others have given up all hope of ever determining the exact meaning of the hymn because they feel it has been removed from its contextual setting:

A precise interpretation of the hymn is not possible because it is a fragment and without a context adequate to clarify its meaning.³⁸

Did Paul write this hymn himself, or did he merely quote from a previously written Christian hymn? It is impossible to answer this question with any finality. Plummer assumes that Paul is here quoting from some well-known form of words, but he admits that this is only a "reasonable and attractive conjecture".³⁹ Lenski also believes that Paul is quoting a Christian hymn or psalm but he concedes that such cannot be proved.⁴⁰

Apart from the supposed contextual problem, there is no reason Paul could not have written this hymn. Paul sang hymns himself (Acts 16:25) and he gave written instruction concerning Christ-honoring singing (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16; 1 Cor. 14:15). Harvey thus argues for original Pauline authorship:

It seems, however, far more natural to think that the language here was original with Paul . . . For in Paul, as in all great writers and orators, when treating of subjects in their nature sublime, the tendency is to poetic and rhythmic expression. Compare Rom. 8:38-39; 11:33-36.⁴¹

Alford also attributes the original composition to Paul:

Once written, it would be sure to gain a place among the choice and treasured sayings of the church, and might easily find its way into liturgical use: but I should be most inclined to think that we have here its first expression.⁴²

³⁶ James Hastings, ed., The Great Texts of the Bible – Thessalonians to Hebrews (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1914), p. 101.

³⁷ Charles M. Laymon, ed., The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible (New York: Abingdon Press, 1971), p. 886.

³⁸ George Arthur Buttrick, ed., The Interpreter's Bible, Vol. XI (New York: Abingdon Press, 1955), p. 421.

³⁹ Plummer, p. 420.

⁴⁰ Lenski, p. 607.

⁴¹ Harvey, p. 47.

⁴² Alford, p. 334.

The problem of original composition of this hymn cannot be settled finally. There is no convincing evidence that Paul was quoting from a hymn already in use and there is no reason why Paul could not have written it himself. The expression “without controversy” (ὁμολογουμένως) has been taken by some to argue that Paul was quoting from a familiar hymn which contained truths that were confessed and acknowledged by all believers. But original Pauline composition cannot be denied on the basis of this word alone. Paul, in using this term, probably meant that the greatness of the mystery of godliness will be acknowledged and confessed by all who understand its significance and application.

If Paul were merely quoting a Christian hymn that was already in use, then there is perhaps a reason for the apparent discontinuity between the hymn and the immediate preceding context of verse 15. If Paul himself wrote the hymn, then the interpreter is forced to deal with the contextual problem and to determine what the relationship is between verse 15 and verse 16. On the other hand, even if Paul did not compose the hymn, the contextual problem must still be faced. Would Paul quote a hymn that was unrelated to the content and context of his letter? Assuming that he did make use of an early Christian hymn, would he not select a hymn which would have words that would express his own movement of thought? Writers generally cite other sources to support their argumentation, not to deviate from the subject matter at hand. It would be most unlike Paul to quote a hymn without rhyme or reason for doing so!

As previously mentioned, some commentators believe that the hymn in 1 Timothy 3:16 is impossible to interpret precisely because of its lack of agreement with the context. Actually the opposite is true! It is impossible to interpret the hymn correctly and precisely unless the context is understood. To fail to understand the context is to fail to understand the hymn! The mystery of godliness becomes meaningless apart from the consideration of the immediate, preceding context of verse 15.

The Problem Of Chronology

If the mystery of godliness refers solely to Christ, as almost all commentators believe, then the interpreter is faced with a chronological problem. The six descriptive phrases are slightly out of order. The correct historical order would be as follows:

1. Manifested in the flesh.
2. Justified in the Spirit.
3. Seen of angels.
4. Received up in glory.
5. Preached among the Gentiles.
6. Believed on in the world.

The problem may be stated as follows:

The concluding refrain, taken up in glory, seems chronologically out of place. The phrase naturally refers to the Ascension, but this took place before the mission to the Gentiles, not after. No really satisfactory solution to the problem of arrangement is available.⁴³

Alford seeks to solve this problem by making the phrase, “preached among the Gentiles”, refer to the preaching mission of the twelve as recorded in Matthew 10.⁴⁴ But this is an impossible interpretation because the twelve apostles were not sent to the Gentiles at all, but only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Mt. 10:5-6). Homer Kent Jr. solves the problem by considering the chronological order insignificant. He “does not press any consecutive or chronological order in the series”.⁴⁵ Did Paul not intend to outline a strict chronological order of events or is there possibly another solution to this problem?

⁴³ Buttrick, The Interpreter's Bible, pp. 422-23. See also Lenski, p. 614.

⁴⁴ Alford, p. 334.

⁴⁵ Homer A. Kent, Jr., The Pastoral Epistles (Chicago: Moody Press, 1958), p. 146.

