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WOULD JESUS EXAGGERATE? Rethinking Matthew 26.38/Mark 14.34

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In today's world, precise communication tends to be highly valued, and even expected, while exaggeration is associated with children who have not yet learned to be more careful with their speech.¹ Readers of Scripture naturally bring such expectations to the biblical text. Would *Jesus* exaggerate? Not if his mother trained him well, many would assume! We need not look beyond texts like Matt 5.29 ("If your right eye offends you, pluck it out!"), however, to be driven to the conclusion that Jesus, like speakers of most languages, made ready use of hyperbole.

Failure to recognize the presence of such literary devices will inevitably lead to misreading the text—or perhaps even, in the case of Matt 5.29, self-mutilation. Despite this fact, the tendency to overlook figurative language in some passages of Scripture has been a hard habit for biblical scholars to break. A case in point is the standard analysis of Jesus' words recorded in Matt 26.38/Mark 14.34.

In this passage, we find Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane exclaiming, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death" (RSV; Περίλυπός ἐστίν ἡ ψυχὴ μου ἕως θανάτου). Bible translators attempting to determine the meaning of this statement will find that commentaries and other scholarly treatments of the passage invariably perceive a link between Jesus' sorrow and the notion of death. Commenting on Matt 26.38, France rightly points out that *even to death* "probably

1 With great exasperation, we remind our children: "I've told you a million times not to exaggerate!"

indicates the scale of his grief,” but then goes on to claim that it may “also define its cause—it is grief as he approaches death.”¹ Morris appropriately notes that it was “no normal perturbation, but something that goes very deep,”² but then also goes on to quote with apparent approval Hill’s claim that it is “anguish that threatens life itself.”³ Grudem states that “So great was the sorrow he felt that it seemed as though, if it were to become any stronger, it would take his very life.”⁴ Similarly, Carson claims that “it suggests a sorrow so deep that it almost kills.”⁵ Even Newman and Stine state in the UBS translator’s handbook that “the meaning is that it (the sorrow) is so great it could bring on the death of the person.”⁶

When we survey commentaries on Mark 14.34 we find an analogous state of affairs. Swete describes Jesus’ sadness as “a sorrow which well-nigh kills.”⁷ Lane describes Jesus’ emotional state as reflecting “a depth of sorrow which threatened life itself.”⁸ Anderson maintains that “the added phrase **even to death** implies an agony that knows the threat of extinction.”⁹ France continues to argue for the same interpretation he proposed earlier in his commentary on Matthew, maintaining that the reference to “even to death” “more likely in this context, refers explicitly to the cause of that emotion.”¹⁰ Once again, the UBS translator’s handbook follows this trend, quoting Swete’s comment with approval.¹¹

Brown provides further details on the history of interpretation of this passage and summarizes the possible ways of interpreting the phrase “unto death” (ἕως θανάτου) as follows:

- (a) **Degree:** sorrow on a level of that produced by an awareness of imminent death, i.e., “so very sorrowful that I could die.” Ps 55.5 is interesting in the light of the whole saying of the Marcan Jesus: “My heart was disturbed [*tarassein*] within me, and the horror of death fell upon me.”
- (b) **Consecutive:** sorrow bringing him close to death, i.e., “so very sorrowful that it is killing me.”
- (c) **Final:** sorrow leading to a desire of death, i.e., “so very sorrowful that I want to die.” In 1 Kgs 19.4 Elijah leaves his servant behind, goes into the wilderness, and states, “It is enough . . . take away my life.”
- (d) **Temporal:** sorrow lasting till death, i.e., “very sorrowful until at last I shall die.” This is reflected in the Vulgate.¹²

1 R.T. France, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (TNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 373.

2 Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 667.

3 David Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew* (NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 341.

4 Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 533.

5 Donald A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (vol. 8; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 543.

6 Barclay M. Newman and Philip Stine, *A Handbook on the Gospel of Matthew* (N.Y.: United Bible Societies, 1988), 813.

7 Henry Barclay Swete, *Commentary on Mark: The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes, and Indexes* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1977; repr. of the 1913 Macmillan edition), 342.

8 William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 516.

9 Hugh Anderson, *The Gospel of Mark* (NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 319.

10 R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 583.

11 Robert G. Bratcher and Eugene A. Nida, *A Translator’s Handbook on the Gospel of Mark* (N.Y.: Brill, 1961), 447; cf. Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 867.

12 Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave. A Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels* (N.Y.: Doubleday, 1994), 1:155.

In every case, the interpretation represents an attempt to squeeze a literal sense out of Jesus' reference to "death." While it is clear theologically that Jesus' sorrow in Gethsemane was more than simple sadness, it is very questionable whether the phrase, *Περίλυπός ἐστιν ἡ ψυχὴ μου ἕως θανάτου* ("my soul is sorrowful unto death") tells us this or in any way alludes to the literal notion of "death." So why do scholarly treatments of this passage consistently suggest otherwise?

The context of Scripture clearly reveals that what Jesus suffered on the cross was unlike anything anyone had ever suffered before, or would ever suffer in the future. His suffering went far beyond the physical torture and humiliation that he was subjected to, as he suffered under the weight of the sin of the entire world and the resultant separation from his Father. Because this unique suffering is clear in Scripture and Jesus makes use of the term "death" in his statement of anguish, scholars have naturally tended to draw a link between the two. It is highly unlikely, however, that Jesus' statement here reflects thoughts of death, either with regard to a potential outcome of his sorrow or as the cause of his grief.

Indeed, in spite of the broad consensus on how the passage should be interpreted, both linguistic and contextual evidence point to a non-literal understanding of Jesus' words. Many languages use structures, such as we find on the lips of Jesus, to indicate extreme feeling. In Thai, for example, one could say, "I am hungry to death" or "I am tired to death." Neither of these statements would have anything to do with the possibility that the speaker might die either from lack of food or from lack of sleep. Instead, they represent hyperbolic expressions used to emphasize the extreme nature of the speaker's state. "I am extremely hungry!" or "I am incredibly tired!" would work quite well as equivalents in English. Similarly, in French, one could say, "C'est plate à mort" (lit. "It is boring to death"), without implying in any way the speaker's imminent demise. Dutch has a similar idiom with the same meaning, "Ik verveel me dood" (lit. "I am bored to death"), as well as other analogous constructions, such as "Ik schaam me dood" (lit. "I am ashamed to death"). In each case, the expression is hyperbolic in nature and conveys the intensity of the speaker's feelings, i.e., "I am utterly bored" or "I am terribly ashamed," with no literal reference to death intended.¹

English makes use of analogous hyperbolic expressions to express extreme feeling, such as, "I'm starving to death," "I'm bored to death," or, "I was scared to death!" In these common expressions, the life of the individual is not in question. The speaker is simply using hyperbole to express strong feelings and to evoke an appropriate response from the hearer. This is the way that *Περίλυπός . . . ἕως θανάτου* should be understood in Matt 26.38//Mark 14.34. Jesus is simply using a common linguistic form to express the depth of his sorrow.

This analysis is supported not only by cross-linguistic phenomena but also by analogous examples in biblical and extra-biblical literature. In Jonah 4.9, which is cited by many of the commentators mentioned above, we read that Jonah was "angry/grieved unto death" (*λελύπημαι . . . ἕως θανάτου*; LXX). Here, we have the same prepositional phrase, "unto death" (*ἕως θανάτου*), being combined with another emotional state ("angry/grieved"; *λελύπημαι*) to indicate the extremity

1 I am grateful to Michelle Josefson and Laura Chavady for providing the French and Dutch examples respectively. Ernst Wendland has informed me that similar expressions occur in the south-central Bantu languages, such as Chinyanja: *ndafa ndi njala* (lit. "I have died with hunger").

of the emotion. There was no chance of Jonah dying from his anger. His anger was not of a sort that was “so deep that it almost kills”; it was not anger as he approached death or anger that “threatens life itself”; nor was his anger indicative of “an agony that knows the threat of extinction.” Rather, God had asked him if it was right for him to be angry because of what had happened to the plant, and Jonah replied in hyperbolic terms in an effort to make crystal clear just how angry he was. His answer could be paraphrased, “You bet! I have every right to be *furiosus* with that plant!” The intensity of the expression is made doubly clear by combining the adverb “exceedingly” (σφόδρα) with the hyperbolic expression “unto death.”

A second example that is even closer to Matt 26.38, occurs in Sirach 37.2, “Is it not a grief to the death when a companion and friend turns to enmity?” (RSV; οὐχὶ λύπη ἐνὶ ἔως θανάτου ἐταίρος καὶ φίλος τρεπόμενος εἰς ἔχθραν). Sirach is clearly not implying that the sorrow “is so great it could bring on the death of the person.” Instead, he is saying that it is extremely sad when a friend becomes an enemy. “It breaks your heart” would be a roughly equivalent modern English idiom.

Another likely example is found in Judg 16.16 (LXX), where Samson responds to Delilah’s nagging by being “annoyed” or “faint-hearted” ἔως τοῦ ἀποθανεῖν (“unto death”). Here, a substantival infinitive replaces the typical noun θανάτου (“death”), making it a more literal rendering of the MT’s מוֹתָהּ (infinitive construct).¹ Once again, though, the idiomatic expression, “unto death,” is used in conjunction with an emotional state to emphasize the intensity of the feeling.

Finally, we may note that taking the phrase “Περίλυπος . . . ἔως θανάτου” in Matt 26.38//Mark 14.34 in a hyperbolic sense fits the context of the passage much better than the more literal interpretation. If Jesus’ comment to the disciples had implied in any way that there was even a remote chance of his sorrow resulting in death, we would have expected a far different reaction. To believe that a group of followers would nod off, or fail to respond in any way, when their leader had just told them that he was in danger of dying at any moment from his intense sorrow stretches the imagination to the breaking point (not ignoring the limited mental capacity with which the disciples are frequently portrayed!). On the contrary, the exhausted disciples did not understand what was about to take place, and thus did not take his statement of extreme sorrow as seriously as they should have. Consequently, they fell asleep repeatedly.

It is important when interpreting Scripture that we avoid the temptation to milk the words of the biblical text for more than is there. If we keep in mind the fact that Jesus made use of figurative language just like any other native speaker of his language would have done, and look carefully at the context in which such

1 The Hebrew construction used in this passage contrasts with the prepositional phrase עַד מוֹתָהּ used in Jonah 4.9. For an early treatment of the “superlative” use of מוֹתָהּ (“to die”) and מוֹתָהּ (“death”) in Hebrew, see D. Winton Thomas, “A Consideration of Some Unusual Ways of Expressing the Superlative in Hebrew,” *VT* 3 (1953): 209-24. Thomas is one of the few to note that the passages mentioned above, including Matt 26.38, use figurative language. He refers (222) to ἔως θανάτου as the Greek equivalent of a “superlative” construction in Hebrew. Indeed, though the limited data makes certainty impossible, it appears that the Greek account of Jesus’ words and the LXX examples simply reflect a literal translation of a Hebrew hyperbolic idiom. The phrase ἔως θανάτου is extremely rare in Hellenistic Greek literature, with no unambiguous examples of it being used to form such an idiom.

language is found, we can avoid the types of over-interpretation that have prevailed for Matt 26.38//Mark 14.34. In modern English, Jesus did not suffer from a “sorrow unto death,” i.e., a sorrow that could lead to death, but rather he was “dying of sorrow,” in the same sense that the extremely thirsty person can say, “I’m dying of thirst!”

DAVID J. CLARK

DISCOURSE STRUCTURE IN 3 JOHN

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Introduction

The third letter of John is a fascinating text. It is short enough for the reader to take in the whole discourse, and it is clearly structured in that the major breaks in the discourse are easily identified. Yet there remain tantalizing problems in assessing the relative importance of these breaks, and thus in discerning the main purpose of the letter. This article presents an analysis of the letter depending on structural criteria.¹ The article arises from using 3 John as a class assignment in master’s degree courses both at Trinity Theological College, Singapore, in October 2002, and in the University of Birmingham, England, in December 2002. In both cases, the class members provided stimulating and provocative observations, and deserve warm thanks.

Where Greek words are glossed in English, the wording of the RSV is followed as far as possible. Other glosses are sometimes used in order to reflect the Greek more literally, and are the author’s own.

Criteria for the division of the discourse

Verses 1 and 15 separate themselves off almost automatically as the opening and closing of the letter. They fall within the bounds of the conventional format for letters of the period, with each introduced by a verbless clause. From a structural perspective, they are not of major interest.

Within the rest of the letter (vv. 2-14), the most striking structural feature is the repetition of the vocative Ἀγαπητέ “beloved,” in vv. 2, 5, and 11 (the last one reinforced by an imperative verb). Vocatives often mark the beginning of a new unit, and there is no reason why they should not be understood to do so here also. The occurrence of the connectives γὰρ (“for,” vv. 3 and 7) and οὖν (“so,” v. 8), and the anaphoric τούτων (“these things,” v. 4) support this analysis, and strongly suggest that vv. 2-4 and 5-8 form clearly marked units, which we may label paragraphs. Such an analysis is reinforced by the observation that the dominant main verbs in 2-4 are first person singular (εὐχόμεθαί, ἐχάρην, ἔχω, “I pray,” “I rejoiced,” and “I have”), whereas those in 5-8 are second person singular (ποιεῖς, ἐργάσῃ, ποιήσεις, “you do,” “you render,” and “you will do”).

A second notable structural feature is the asyndeton, or lack of any connective particle, at the beginning of vv. 9, 12, and 13. This may support the identification

¹ For an alternative approach to this letter that considers also its information structure and rhetorical strategy, see Sebastiaan Floor, “A Discourse Analysis of 3 John,” *Notes on Translation* 4.4 (1990): 1-17.