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Mark 13:32 and Christ's Supposed Ignorance:

Four Patristic Solutions¹

THE PROBLEM OF CHRIST'S SUPPOSED IGNORANCE

Referring to the time of His Second Coming, Jesus is recorded as saying, “But of that day or hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone” (Mark 13:32, NASB. The word alone is italicized because it was supplied by the translator). The church fathers spilled much ink explaining this statement of the Lord, most often because of its import regarding Christology.² Since the passage allegedly presents Christ as ignorant, the Arians of the early church, who denied that the Son was consubstantial with the Father, used it as a proof-text for their belief in a less-than-divine Son of God.³ On the other hand, those who held to Nicene orthodoxy and believed that Jesus was fully God and possessed all the attributes of divinity, including omniscience, responded to the Arians with Colossians 3:2, “In Him are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” The adherents of Nicene orthodoxy, besides asserting Christ's omniscience, also had to make sense out of Mark 13:32, which seemed to teach that Jesus was ignorant of at least one detail concerning the future, i.e. the time of His return. To solve the theological dilemma of the omniscient Son of God not knowing the time of His own Second Coming, the church fathers proposed a variety of explanations. This article presents and evaluates four of their solutions—the philological solution of Basil of

Caesarea, two “figures of speech” solutions offered by Augustine of Hippo and Gregory of Tours respectively, and the anthropological solution of Athanasius of Alexandria.

THE PHILOLOGICAL SOLUTION

In the fourth century, Basil of Caesarea (d. 379) offered a philological solution to the problem. He argued that the Greek words in Mark 13:32 do not teach that the Son was ignorant. He noted that a literal, word for word translation of the verse reads, “But of that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, if not (ei me) the Father.” From this philology Basil reasoned that Jesus was in effect saying: If I were not one with the Father, even I would not know the time of my Second Coming. Basil commented, “But the saying of Mark...we understand in this way: that no one knows, neither the angels of God, but not even the Son would have known, unless the Father had known, that is, the cause of the Son’s knowledge is from the Father.”⁴ According to this interpretation, Mark 13:32 is not a statement about the Lord’s ignorance, but the exact opposite. It is a statement about Christ’s divinity and omniscience.

Basil’s argument has several positive qualities. First, it is based on the Greek text itself. Ei me in Greek can mean “if not.”⁵ In fact, the words ei and me are often translated “if” and “not”, as in the NASB and NIV translations of John 9:33 which both read: “If this man were not from God, He could do nothing” (italics mine). Basil’s interpretation also entirely erases the problem of Christ’s supposed ignorance.

On the other hand, Basil’s interpretation has the problem of the words Pater monos (the Father alone) in the synoptic parallel of Matthew 24:36: “But of that day or hour, no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone.”

Basil explains this by saying that the phrase the Father alone is used in contradistinction from the angels, not in contradistinction from the Son.⁶ In other words, according to Basil, the contrast in the passage is not: Humans, angels, and the Son do not know; the Father does know. Rather, it is: Humans and angels do not know; the Son and Father do know. Although Basil's understanding of the passage springs from the language of the biblical text itself, to me it seems like he is forcing a theological presupposition into a biblical text for polemical reasons, rather than accepting the "natural reading" of the text.

TWO "FIGURES OF SPEECH" SOLUTIONS

Augustine: To Know is To Reveal

Several patristic authors attempted to solve the problem of Christ's supposed ignorance by saying that Jesus was speaking figuratively when He said that the Son did not know the time of the Second Coming. Augustine of Hippo (d. 430), for example, wrote that many times in Scripture the statement "God knows" means "God reveals." When it says in Mark 13:32 that the Son does not know the day or hour, according to Augustine, it really means that the Son does not reveal the day or hour.

For support, Augustine gave the example of Genesis 22:12, where God said to Abraham after his test of obedience in sacrificing Isaac: "Now I know that you fear Me." In reality, Augustine argued, the omniscient God did not increase in knowledge. It was a figurative way of saying, "Now it is revealed that you fear Me." Augustine cited Deuteronomy 13:3 as another biblical example of this kind of figure of speech. Here Moses said that God would test the love of His people by means of false prophets. He wrote: "For the Lord your God is testing you that He may know whether you love the

Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.” According to Augustine, the phrase “that He may know” does not mean that God would increase in knowledge once the Israelites were tested, but that at that time it would be revealed whether the children of Israel loved God.⁷

These cross-references help lend weight to Augustine’s interpretation. Furthermore, Augustine’s interpretation coincides well with the context in which Mark 13:32 is found. The main point of the section of the Olivet Discourse in which the passage is found is to warn humans to be ready at all times, because the day and hour has not been revealed. Jesus’ words about people being taken unaware in the Deluge of Noah, and Christ’s parables of the faithful servant, the ten virgins, and the talents, all teach this (cf. Matt 24:37-25:30).

Augustine’s view also has problems. If his definition of “not knowing” as “not revealing” is applied throughout the whole verse, the meaning of the passage significantly changes from what Augustine claimed it meant. For, the scripture passage not only says that the Son does not know the day or the hour of His coming; it also says that humans and angels do not know. When, therefore, the definition of “not knowing” as “not revealing” is applied throughout the verse, the meaning becomes: But of that day or hour, no one, e.g. prophet, has revealed, neither have the angels in heaven revealed it, nor has the Son revealed it, but only the Father will reveal it in His good time. While this interpretation is consistent with New Testament theology as a whole, that is, with other passages that speak of Christ’s coming as a thief in the night and of its time being concealed by the Father’s authority (1 Thess 5:2; Rev 3:3; Acts 1:7), I have doubts about

whether Augustine's reading of the passage is really what Jesus meant when he preached it.

Gregory of Tours: The "Son" is Metaphoric of the Church

Another "figure of speech" interpretation is found in the writing of Gregory of Tours (d. 594). He said that the words "son" and "father" in Mark 13:32 are not speaking of persons of the Trinity, but are figures of the church and Christ. Since these words do not represent the Father and Son, in his view the passage would read without the words "Father" and "Son" capitalized: "But of that day or hour, no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the son, but only the father." For Gregory, the church, made up of the adopted children of Christ and designated by the word "son," does not know the time of the Lord's Second Coming. Designated by the word "father" is Jesus, the Lord and presiding judge at the Last Judgment; and He does know its time.⁸

For support, Gregory and others cited biblical cross-references in which the relationship between Christ and His people is presented figuratively as one of father and children. For example, in John 13:33, Jesus said: "Little children, I am with you a little while longer." Similarly, Hebrews 2:13 has Christ saying, "Behold, I and the children whom God has given Me."⁹

One strength of Gregory's interpretation is that in the Olivet Discourse Jesus used other relationships to symbolically represent His relationship with His followers, figures like bridegroom/virgin (Matt 25:1-13), master/servant (Matt 25:14-30), and thief/servant (Matt 24:43-51). Therefore, it would be rhetorically consistent for Jesus also to employ father/son relational imagery in the discourse. Secondly, while today we often capitalize

the first letter of Father and Son if we are speaking of the persons of the Trinity, and use lower case letters if we employ the terms father and son as common nouns, the original manuscripts of the Greek New Testament were probably written in all majuscules or capital letters. Therefore, there is nothing in the orthography that demands that the persons of the Trinity be understood in the passage or that prohibits one from understanding the son and father in the passage as common nouns. This interpretation also entirely removes the Christological problem of the Son's supposed ignorance.¹⁰ Jesus, who is represented in the passage under the figure of the father, does know the day and hour of the eschaton. The only question that remains is whether this is what Jesus had in mind when He was delivering the Olivet Discourse.

THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL SOLUTION OF ATHANASIUS

Athanasius of Alexandria (d. 373) proposed still another solution to the problem of Christ's supposed ignorance. For him, Mark 13:32 does not detract from the Son's consubstantial omniscience, it simply speaks of the limited knowledge of Christ's humanity. He writes that Jesus

made this [statement] as those other declarations as man by reason of the flesh. For this as before is not the Word's deficiency, but of that human nature whose property it is to be ignorant...For it is proper to the Word to know what was made, nor be ignorant either of the beginning or of the end of these...Certainly when he says in the Gospel concerning Himself in His human character, 'Father, the hour is come, glorify Thy Son,' it is plain that He knows also the hour of the end of all things, as the Word, though as man He is ignorant of it, for ignorance is

proper to man...for since He was made man, He is not ashamed, because of the flesh which is ignorant to say, 'I know not,' that He may show that knowing as God, He is but ignorant according to the flesh.¹¹

Similarly, Gregory of Nazianzus (d. 390) wrote about Christ that "everyone must see that He knows as God, and knows not as Man...[W]e are to understand the ignorance in the most reverent sense, by attributing it to the Manhood, and not to the Godhead."¹² And later that century, Rufinus the Syrian (c. 399) anathematized anyone who would interpret Mark 13:32 "in accordance with the blasphemy of the Arians, rather than understand that the passage concerns the dispensation of His assumed flesh."¹³

The main strength of Athanasius' anthropological interpretation is that it harmonizes with Luke's Gospel, which assigns to Christ a growth in wisdom. Since the Gospel writer claims that the Christ-child "grew in wisdom and stature" (Luke 2:52), it is inferred that Christ was ignorant of certain things.

Another strength of the anthropological solution is that, by assigning the ignorance to Christ's human nature, one can still retain Christ's full divinity. For, as the creeds state, the incarnation is not an exchange of deity for humanity, but a joining of deity with humanity in one person.¹⁴ With the anthropological solution one can have true divinity and true humanity with all of their properties intact without a theory of kenosis in which the Son loses the divine attribute of omniscience. The two natures of Christ with all of the properties can be maintained.

However, this solution, which assigns ignorance to Christ's human mind, is also beset with weakness. The main weakness is the difficulty of stating the position in a

manner that avoids the error of the Nestorians condemned at the ecumenical council of Ephesus in 431— that of too greatly separating the natures of Christ. Two-nature Christology which joins all of the properties of divinity and all of the properties of humanity engenders these questions: When full divinity and perfect humanity are joined in one person, how are the attributes of each nature communicated or shared by the one person? What effect does the unity of Christ's person have on each nature? In answer to these questions the Eutychians erroneously blended Christ's two natures in such a way that their Christ was one person, but neither fully divine nor fully human. The Nestorians articulated a two-nature Christology that erred in the other extreme. By assigning certain acts to Christ's humanity and certain acts to His divinity, they weakened the unity of His person and were accused of creating two persons, a human Jesus and a divine Son joined together through indwelling or participation.¹⁵

When Athanasius and Gregory stated Christ's ignorance, it was in the polemical context of the Arian controversy. But when theologians like Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. 428), Theodoret of Cyrus (d. 466), and Leporius of Gaul (fl. c. 430) asserted that Jesus was ignorant of the day and the hour of His return, they were accused of Nestorianism. The reason for their censure was that they allegedly taught that Jesus could only know as much as the divine nature would communicate to Him at specific times. They saw Jesus as receiving divine knowledge incrementally from the Word, as if the latter were dwelling in the former.¹⁶ To their opponents this implied that Jesus was not the God-man, but only a man participating in divinity.

The orthodox position, articulated in reaction to Nestorianism, was that because of the unity of the two natures in the incarnation, the Lord's human mind was fully

enriched with the fullness of divine knowledge. For example, Fulgentius of Ruspe (d. 533) wrote that because of the hypostatic union, the human soul of Christ possesses “the full knowledge of the infinite divinity,” since the Scripture says that was given the Spirit without measure.¹⁷ That same century, Pope Vigilius wrote against the Nestorians on Christ’s supposed ignorance of the day and the hour: “If anyone says that the one Jesus Christ who is both true Son of God and true Son of man did not know the future or the day of the Last Judgment and that He could only know as much as the divinity, dwelling in Him as in another, revealed to Him, anathema sit.”¹⁸ Thus, viewing Jesus as an ignorant man, knowing only as much as the divine nature would permit Him to know at a given time, was judged in the early Christological debates to be Nestorian. Instead of the two natures united in one person, it hinted at a mere man sharing in divinity. It nullified not only Paul’s statement that in Christ were “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col 3:2), but also Jesus’ own words: “Everything which the Father has is mine.” (John 16:15). In addition, the opponents of Nestorianism reasoned that if the Father had committed to the Son of Man all of the details of the Last Judgment (John 5:22-27), including the knowledge of the thoughts, words, and actions of every human that ever lived, certainly the knowledge of the time of the appointed judgment was entrusted to Him.

Shortly after the reaction of the orthodox against Nestorian views of Christ’s ignorance, a sect called the Agnotae arose within the monophysite community in Egypt. Asserting ignorance in Christ based in large part upon Mark 13:32, the Agnotae met with similar reactions by the orthodox.¹⁹ In the West, Gregory the Great (d. 604) responded saying:

[T]he Only-begotten, being incarnate and made for us a perfect man, knew indeed in the nature of His humanity the day and the hour of the judgment, but still it was not from the nature of His humanity that He knew it. What then He knew in it [His human nature] He knew not from it, because God, made man, knew the day and the hour of the judgment through the power of His Deity...The day, then, and the hour of the judgment He knows as God and man, but for this reason, that God is man. It is moreover a thing quite manifest, that whoso is not a Nestorian cannot in any wise be an Agnoite. (*italics mine*)²⁰

John of Damascus (d. c.750), representing Eastern orthodoxy, wrote similarly: “One must know that the Word assumed the ignorant and subjected nature,” but “thanks to the identity of the hypostasis and the indissoluble union, the Lord’s soul was enriched with the knowledge of things to come...”²¹

Some contemporary theologians like N. T. Wright believe these later anti-Nestorian, anti-Agnotae articulations have lost sight of the Lord’s true humanity.²² On the other hand, theologians who value these affirmations are faced with the challenge of articulating the true humanity of Christ—the fact that He “grew in wisdom” (Luke 2:52) and “learned obedience” (Heb 5:8)—without falling into the condemned Nestorian tenet that has Christ’s human nature receiving divine knowledge in increments. This is no easy task, but it can be done. As we have seen, Athanasius and Gregory of Nazianzus affirmed the anthropological solution to Mark 13:32 before the Nestorian heresy arose, and Gregory the Great and John of Damascus articulated it, albeit in a guarded form, afterward.²³

EXEGETICAL OPTIONS FROM PATRISTIC SOURCES

The anthropological solution to the problem of Christ's supposed ignorance, advocated by Athanasius and others in the early church, is probably the most popular today. But unless it is articulated very carefully, one's explanation can easily convey that the Lord's human mind received divine knowledge gradually, a belief condemned as Nestorian by sixth-century theologians. Fortunately, the anthropological interpretation was not the only solution that early Christian interpreters proposed. Patristic exegetes offered a variety of perspectives on Mark 13:32 from which today's pastors and theologians may glean.

Focusing on the Greek words that can be translated if not the Father, Basil of Caesarea offered a philological interpretation. The phrase "nor the Son, if not the Father," he argued, meant that even the Son would not have known the day or hour, if it were not for His substantial union with the Father. Other patristic writers solved the problem of Christ's supposed ignorance in Mark 13:32 by saying that Jesus was using a figure of speech. Augustine of Hippo interpreted the Son's not knowing the day or the hour to mean that the Son had not revealed the time of His Second Coming. Gregory of Tours, on the other hand, held that the Son and Father in the passage do not refer to the persons of the Trinity, but to the church and Christ. The "son" or church does not know the time of the Second Coming, but Christ under the figure of "father" does in fact know.

I am fully convinced that on the day when our faith becomes sight the problem of the Son not knowing the day and hour will be permanently solved. But for the church militant on this side of glory, laboring diligently to understand God's inspired Word, the church fathers provide at least four reasonable alternatives.

¹ An early draft of this article was delivered as a paper at the 55th Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in Atlanta in November 2003.

² Some of the fathers used the passage to teach the folly of predicting the time of Christ's Second Coming. See my The Day and the Hour: Christianity's Perennial Fascination with Predicting the End of the World (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 2000), 26, 31, 40, 86, 88.

³ Arius of Alexandria, Thalia, fragments. In R. P. H. Hanson, The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy, 318-381 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), 107, 448, 453, 558; and Rowan Williams, Arius: Heresy and Tradition (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1987), 100-3; and Robert C. Gregg and Dennis E. Groh, Early Arianism—A View of Salvation (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 7-10; Altercation Between Heraclianus and Germinius, Bishop of Sirmium, PLS 1:347; Anonymous Arian, Opus imperfectum in Matthaem, Homily 50 on Matt 24. In Franz Mali, Das "Opus imperfectum in Matthaem" (Wien: Tyrolia, 1991), 299; and PG 56:921.

⁴ Basil of Caesarea, Letter 236 to Amphilochius. FC 28:168; Homily Concerning the End of the World, preserved in Coptic in E. A. Wallis Budge, Coptic Homilies in the Dialect of Upper Egypt (London: Longmans, 1910), 249.

⁵ Euthymius Zigabenus in the twelfth century adopted this solution. Euthymius Zigabenus, Commentary on Matthew, On Matt 24:36: "But it is more fitting that it [Matt 24:36] be interpreted in this manner: Nor does the Son know unless the Father should clearly know. Since the Father indeed knows, certainly also the Son knows. 'For I,' He

said, ‘and the Father are one’ (John 10:30).” PG 129:623. More contemporary, the Greek scholar and archbishop of Dublin, Richard Trench (d. 1886) (Cited in John Ankerberg and John Weldon, One World: Biblical Prophecy and the New World Order [Chicago: Moody, 1991], 127) and Sidney Collett (All About the Bible [New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1934]) held this view.

⁶ Basil, Letter 236. FC 28:167. Earlier in the letter (FC 28:165), Basil points out that the word “alone” is not always used in Scripture in such an absolute manner that it excludes every person. For Jesus also said, “No one is good but God alone” (Mark 10:18), but He did not thereby exclude Himself as good.

⁷ Augustine, On Eighty-three Diverse Questions, 60. Cited in Charles s. Kraszewski, trans., The Gospel of Matthew with Patristic Commentaries. Studies in Bible and Early Christianity 40 (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1999), 355; Annotations on the Psalms, On Psalms 6 and 37. NPNF 8:15, 91; Sermon 97.1. Edmund Hill, trans., The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century. Sermons II/4 (94A-147A) on the New Testament (Brooklyn, NY: New City, 1992), 36; On the Trinity, 1.12. FC 45:35.

⁸ Gregory of Tours, History of the Franks, Prologue. PL 71:162-3.

⁹ Isho’dad of Merv (c. 850), Commentary on Matthew, On Matt 24:36, also knew of this interpretation. Margaret Dunlop Gibson, ed. and trans., The Commentaries of Isho’dad of Merv, Vol. 1. Horae Semeticae 5 (Cambridge, England: University Press, 1911), 95. Isho’dad referred to a certain Timotheus as one who held this interpretation. He writes, “Timotheus says that our Lord does not here call Himself the Son, but believers, who are many times calls *sons*...and He calls Himself the Father; he says he is the Father of the world to come, and Him hath God as Father sealed; and Children, yet a little while I am

with you; and Behold I and the children whom the Lord hath given Me. Therefore because the name of the Father falls on both the Father and the Son; on the Father, on the one hand, by nature, on the Son, on the other hand, by Providence; because of this, our Lord here used the equality of the name with His disciples; for so many times also, as in the parables, He uses the equality of the names...”

¹⁰ Because of these strengths, Gregory’s interpretation received honorable mention in later biblical commentaries, such as those of Rhabanus Maurus (d. 856), Ralph of Laon (d. 1136), Alexander of Hales (d. 1245), and Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274). Rhabanus Maurus, Commentary on Matthew, On Matt 24:36. CCCM 174A:637; Ralph of Laon, Glossa Ordinaria, On Matt 24:36. PL 114:162; Alexander of Hales, Quaestiones Disputatae ‘Antequam esset frater’, Question 42: De Scientia Christi, 33. Bibliotheca Franciscana Scholastica 19-21 (Quaracchi: Typographia Collegii S. Bonaventurae, 1960), 724; Thomas Aquinas, Light of Faith: The Compendium of Theology (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 1993), 320; Catena Aurea: Commentary on the Four Gospels Collected Out of the Works of the Father by St. Thomas Aquinas, Vol. 1: St. Matthew. John Henry Newman, trans. (London: Saint Austin, 1999), 833; Summa Theologica, Third Part, Question 10, Article 2. Robert M. Hutchins, ed., Great Books of the Western World 20: Thomas Aquinas: II (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952), 769.

¹¹ Athanasius, Four Discourses Against the Arians, Discourse 3.43. NPNF, 2nd series, 4:417.

¹² Gregory of Nazianzus, Oration 30.15. NPNF, 2nd series, 7:315.

¹³ Rufinus the Syrian, Libellus de Fide, 4. E. Schwartz, ed., Acta Conciliorum Oecumenicorum, I.5 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1924), 4-5.

¹⁴ See especially the definition of the Council of Chalcedon (451). John H. Leith, ed., Creeds of the Churches, Rev. ed. (Atlanta: John Knox, 1973), 36.

¹⁵ Cyril of Alexandria led the battle for the condemnation of Nestorius at the Council of Ephesus in 431. The fourth of his twelve anathemas reads, “If anyone takes the words found in the writings of the Gospels and of the apostles, whether they are said of Christ by the saints or of Christ by himself, and distributes them between two persons or hypostases, attributing some of them as to a man, properly understood in contrast to the Word of God, and the rest to the Word of God the Father exclusively, on the grounds that they are proper to God alone: let him be anathema.” Cited in John F. Clarkson, John H. Edwards, William J. Kelly, and John J. Welch, trans., The Church Teaches (St. Louis: Herder, 1955), 168. On Nestorian views of the joining of Christ’s two natures, see the anathemas of the Council of Constantinople of 553 in J. Neuner and J. Dupuis, eds., The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church, Revised ed. (New York: Alba House, 1982), 159.

¹⁶ On Theodore and Theodoret’s views, see NPNF, 2nd series, 4:417, note 10. In a tract correcting his errors, Leporius anathematized his former opinion that “our Lord Jesus Christ was ignorant according to His humanity.” Leporius, Libellus Emendationis, 10. PL 31:1229.

¹⁷ Fulgentius of Ruspe, Letter 14 to Ferrandus, 29-30. FC 95:539-41.

¹⁸ Pope Vigilius, Constitutum I. Cited in Neuner and Dupuis, Christian Faith, 157.

¹⁹ The leader of the Agnotae sect was a deacon at Alexandria named Themistius, who also called himself Calonymus. Theodore of Alexandria wrote Against Themistius answering his four arguments intended to prove ignorance in Christ; and Sophronius, patriarch of Jerusalem, pronounced an anathema against Themistius. See Photius Bibliotheca, 108. http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/photius_03bibliotheca.htm and NPNF, 2nd series, 13:45, note 7.

²⁰ Gregory the Great, Epistle 39 to Eulogius. NPNF, 2nd series, 13:48.

²¹ Cited in John Meyendorff, Christ in Eastern Christian Thought (Washington, D.C.: Corpus, 1969), 168-9.

²² N. T. Wright, The Challenge of Jesus (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 123-4.

²³ In contemporary evangelicalism, Millard Erickson (The Word Became Flesh [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991], 555-60) and Wayne Grudem (Systematic Theology [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994], 558-61) hold to a form of the anthropological interpretation. They say that while all knowledge resided in Christ by virtue of His divinity, He was not “conscious” of all that He knew. For a survey of evangelical views, Ronald T. Clutter, “Omniscient But Not Knowing: A Selective Historical Survey in Interpretation,” paper presented at the 55th Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Atlanta, November 2003.