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St. John Chrysostom and the Woman: A Crisis of Understanding in the Fourth Century?*

Abstract: Referring to a story told by Cosmas Vestitor in his *Life of St. John Chrysostom*, Robert Browning, as well as a number of authors before him, inferred the existence of diglossia in the fourth century. We examine the story, and its predecessors to see what exactly they say.

Keywords: Hagiography, St. John Chrysostom, Late Antique Greek, diglossia.

In a memorable and influential quotation BROWNING (1969: 49 – 50) says:

There is a story that woman once interrupted one of John Chrysostom's sermons to complain that she could not understand half of what he was saying, so remote was his language from that of the mass of the people the preacher obligingly delivered the rest of his sermon, we are told, in the vulgar tongue.

This story, he informs us, is found in Cosmas Vestitor's *Life of St. John Chrysostom* (433). But, as he says, the same story can be found in MULLACH (1856:68 – 9), who wrote long before this work was first published. It could be added that Mullach is not alone in this. At almost the same time, but with a rather different moral, a similar story is told in STEINTHAL (1863:409), where he takes it as a proof that Syria was not sufficiently hellenized in the fourth century. Unfortunately, neither Mullach nor Steintal reveal their source.

First, let us see what Cosmas says:

Ἐν μιᾷ τοίνυν διδάσκοντος αὐτοῦ καὶ προσομιλοῦντος τὰ πρὸς σωτηρίαν τῷ λαῷ καὶ τῇ τῆς λέξεως ὑψηλοτέρᾳ θεωρίᾳ τὸν λόγον προχέοντος, ἐπάρασά τις γυνὴ φωνὴν ἐκ τοῦ ὄχλου εἶπεν· Μακαρία μὲν, πάτερ, ἡ τοῦ στόματός σου φωνὴ καὶ νοῦς ὃν ἐξήσκησας· μενοῦνγε πάλιν μακάριοι καὶ οἱ τοὺς σοὺς ἐξισχύοντες νοῆσαι λόγους· Ἀλλὰ γνώρισον καὶ ταῖς ἡμετέραις τῶν ἀσθενῶν διανοίαις τὴν δύναμιν τῶν σῶν θεοχαρίτων διδαγμάτων· ἰδοὺ γὰρ ἐγὼ καταλιπούσα πάντα μου τῶν οἰκιακῶν τὰ ἔργα, ἔδραμον ὡς εἷτις ἔκδιψος ἔλαφος ἐπὶ τὸν χειμάρρουν τῆς τρυφῆς σου τῶν λόγων· καὶ ἀπὸ μὲν φωνῶν ῥημάτων ὡς ὑδάτων πολλῶν τοὺς μετεωρισμοὺς τῆς διδασκαλίας σου ἀκούω· στάγονα δὲ ἐξ αὐτῶν λαβεῖν μὴ ἐπιγνοῦσα ἀπέρχομαι, πρὸς τῇ τῆς ψυχικῆς δίψης ζημίᾳ καὶ τὸ πολὺ τῆς ἡμέρας τοῦ οἴκου μου φροντίσιν ἀνωφελῶς προσκτησαμένη. Τούτων ἀκούσας ὁ θεόφρων μετέτρεψεν τὴν ἀκρότο-

* This paper was created as a part of the research project *Humans and Society in Times of Crisis*.

μον τοῦ στόματος αὐτοῦ πέτραι εἰς λίμνας ἐξαντλουμένης σοφίας. Καί λοιπὸν μετὰ πλείονος τῆς παρρησίας τὸν τῆς διδασκαλίας σπόρον κατέβαλλεν, κατὰλληλα φάρμακα τοῖς τραύμασιν ἐπιτιθεῖς.

Cosmas Vestitor, 433

One day, while he was teaching and lecturing the people on things pertaining to salvation and pouring out a speech in a lofty mode, a woman from the crowd raised her voice and said: 'Blessed, father, the voice of your mouth, and the intellect you have so adorned. Blessed also those able to understand your speech. But disclose the meaning of your god-graced teaching to the understanding of us, who are weak. Lo, I have set aside all my house-chores, and ran as an exceeding thirsty doe to the luxurious stream of your words. And in the sound of your words, which is as the sound of many waters, I hear the exaltedness of your teaching. But I am leaving without recognizing a drop I could take away with me, and having, beside the torture of spiritual thirst, gained only useless worries to add to my household chores.' The godly man heard that and turned the steep rock of his mouth into lakes filled with waters of wisdom. And after that he sowed the seed of teaching more freely, applying suitable salves to wounds.

We have attempted to keep the turgid style and incongruous metaphors of the original as much as we could. The irony of the passage was probably lost on Cosmas. But Cosmas is not the only hagiographer to tell this tale.

Between 1610 and 1630 Henry Saville published at a considerable expanse the complete works of St. John Chrysostom in eight volumes. In the last volume he printed several *vitae* of the saint. He had scholars travel Europe and the Ottoman Empire and transcribe texts for publication. We only rarely know the provenance of the individual texts. Among these *vitae*, this episode is told in at least two and, since all *vitae* after the one written by George, patriarch of Alexandria (621 – 630), share the same general arrangement of episodes in Chrysostom's life, this episode is at the same place in each one. One of these is the version of Symeon Metaphrastes, which we cite as it appeared in Migne's Patrology:

Ἦθεν γοῦν καὶ τοῦ τῆς σοφίας πνεύματος δαψιλέστερον αὐτῷ προσρυέντος πυκνότερας, μὲν ἦν ὄρα ἅς συνάξεις καὶ τὸν λαὸν συνιόντα πρὸς τὴν ἀκρόασιν, συνεχέστερον δὲ αὐτῷ κινουμένην τὴν γλώτταν καὶ τῷ τῶν λόγων ῥέυματι πελαγίζουσαν. Ὅτε καὶ μεῖζον ἢ κατὰ τὴν πολλῶν διάνοιαν τὸν λόγον ἐπαίροντος, γυνὴ προθύμως μὲν συνδραμοῦσα, τοῦ ὕψους δὲ τῶν λεγομένων ἐκπίπτουσα, φανερώς ἐμέμφετο τῷ λόγῳ, καὶ ἀνωφελῆ τοῦτον ἀπεκάλει καὶ ἄκαρπον. Τοῦτο ἐκείνων εἰς ὧτα (sic! latine: ad aures illius) ἐλθόν, πρὸς τὸ μάλλον σαφές καὶ εὐσύνοπτον τὸν λόγον συντάττειν παρασκευάζει. Τότε δὴ καὶ τῶν φιλολόγων τινὲς τῷ μέλιτι τῆς ἐκείνου γλώττης διαφερόντως ἠδόμενοι καὶ τοὺς λόγους ὡς μὲν ἐπωφελείς, ὡς δὲ ἀληθεῖς... Χρυσόστομον αὐτὸν ἀπεκάλουν.

Symeon Metaphrastes, 12, 1076BC

Since the flow of wisdom flowed from him abundantly, you could see the congregations being more frequented, and the people gathering to listen to him, and his tongue was more often inspired and exuberant with the stream of words, but when he raised the mode of his speech more than the majority could understand, a woman who came to the gathering willingly, and failed to understand him for the sublimity of his words, loudly found fault with his speech, and pronounced it useless and fruitless. When this came to his ears, he got ready to compose his speeches in a more clear and concise way. It was then that some lovers of literature started exceedingly enjoying his speeches as both useful and true and... gave him the name Goldmouth.

The other version is anonymous, prefaced by a short note about its provenance from a very ancient manuscript from Padua.

...ἔστι δὲ ὅτε καὶ αὐτοσχεδίως ἐκ τῶν προσπιπτόντων κατὰ καιρὸν πραγμάτων ἀφορμῆς δρασσόμενος ὁ θαυμασιώτατος, θεοσοφίας ἐξέχεε τῷ λαῷ ποταμούς. ὅτε δὴ καὶ ὑψαγόρῳ τῇ τοῦ λόγου συντάξει, καὶ περιοδικοτέρῃ καὶ συνεστραμμένῃ τῇ φράσει τοῦ σοφοῦ διδασκάλου κεχρημένου, γυνή τις ἐκ τοῦ ὄχλου ἀποτολμήσασα, καὶ τὴν φωνὴν ἐπάρασα, ὡς ἀνωφελὴ τὸν λόγον κατητιᾶτο, τῷ μὴ δύνασθαι τὴν τῶν πολλῶν ἀκοὴν τὰ ὑπ' αὐτοῦ συνιέναι λεγόμενα. ὅθεν ἔκτοτε τὰς ὁμιλίας ἐπὶ τὸ σαφέστερον αὐτοῖς διέθετο.

Anonymous, 309.

And sometimes this wondrous man, would improvise, starting with the things that were happening at the moment, and he would be pouring out rivers of divine wisdom for the people. The wise teacher sometimes composed his speech in a lofty manner, divided into periods and concise, so a woman from the crowd presumptuously raised her voice and accused his speech of being useless, for the majority could not understand what he was saying. That is why after that he composed his homilies in a way more easily understandable for his audience.

The relative chronology of these three works is unclear. St. Symeon Metaphrastes wrote somewhere in the 10th century,¹ Cosmas probably between 730 and 850.² About the anonymous writer nothing can be said with any certainty. The kinship between Cosmas' account and that of the anonymous author is obvious, but the influence could go either way; either Anonymous epitomized Cosmas, or Cosmas amplified the text of Anonymous. It seems more probable, however, that Cosmas' account is a rhetorical amplification of an episode from the more complete version. Of course, both could depend upon a third, unknown, work. The fact that no one before Browning names the author who reported the incident might suggest that they were all referring to the anonymous *vita*. Much more importantly, however, Browning's version depends on Cosmas, and thus gets one important detail

¹ BECK (1959:571)

² BECK (1959:502)

wrong. His λοιπόν is imprecise, and means simply ‘afterward’, the account of the anonymous author is much clearer with his ἔκτοτε, which is better understood as ‘thereafter’, ‘thence forward’. The moral of the story is then very different, as most of Chrysostom’s work was yet to be written, this is rather meant as an explanation of Chrysostom’s simple style, not as a just a simple episode showing the saint’s meekness. As the result of the complaint, he was to write more clearly, so he could be readily understood by his flock and not because he was unable to write in a more lofty and convoluted style. At any rate, no writer before these two tells quite the same story, so that it must be understood as reflecting views of a time much later than Chrysostom. If anything, it implies that his homilies, as they were written down, were exactly what *could* be easily understood by the public familiar to Cosmas and Anonymous.

But where does the story come from? As we already said, every *vita* of St. John since Gregory of Alexandria generally follows the same order of episodes. This episode stands between Chrysostom’s ordination as a priest, and the wish of his bishop, Flavian, to make him his successor. In Gregory’s *vita*, this is the place where John starts expounding the Scripture to the delight and excitement of the whole people of Antioch.³ Not a word about his exegesis being difficult to understand, quite the opposite. George mentions that his speeches were being written down and preserved by some in the flock. This motif was, therefore, inserted some time after George, perhaps suggested by the fact that John was explaining difficult passages in the Scripture.

The story as told by Cosmas and other biographers of St. John Chrysostom cannot tell us anything about the state of Greek diglossia in the late fourth century. No early account mentions anything of the sort. It cannot be used for proving its existence in the eighth or ninth century either, because, on examination, it doesn’t say anything about Chrysostom’s language being too difficult for his public to follow. Its point is to explain why his style was so easy to follow. And a comparison between Chrysostom himself and Cosmas underlines the need for this explanation admirably.

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Свети Јован Златоусти и жена: криза разумевања у четвртом веку?

Айспиракџи: Говорећи о причи коју је у *Живицију св. Јована Златоустог* испричао Козма Веститор, Роберт Браунинг, као и немали број аутора пре њега, закључио је да она указује на постојање диглосије у грчком четвртом века. Испитали смо ову причу, као и њене претходнике да бисмо видели шта се у њима тачно каже.

Кључне речи: агиографија, Св. Јован Златоусти, позноантички грчки, диглосија.