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Autor: Ross, John M.
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Pánta synergeî, Rom.VIII.28

In Ghana, where many vans and lorries have a motto painted on them, a favourite choice is the bare reference *Rom. 8.28*, as if the meaning of the text were common knowledge. But recent commentators and translations show great diversity in the understanding of this verse. The principal competitors are:

(a) “All things work together for good to those that love God” (AV, RV, RSV alternative, NEB alternative, W. L. Knox,¹ Michel, Käsemann, Barrett, Cranfield).

(b) “God makes all things work together for good to those who love him” (Sanday and Headlam).

(c) “God cooperates in all things for good for (or with) those who love him” (RSV, JB, TEV, Goodspeed, Moffatt).

(d) “The Spirit cooperates in all things for good for those who love God” (NEB, J. P. Wilson,² Dodd, Black,³ Best).

(e) “For those who love God the Spirit makes everything work harmoniously for good” (Translators’ New Testament).

Must the meaning of this much-quoted verse be left uncertain, or does one solution stand out as the probable one?

1.

It will be convenient to consider first the *textual* problem, because if that can be settled, the choice of interpretations is narrowed down.

In most of the manuscripts, versions, and patristic quotations the reading is *toîs agapôsin tôn theôn pánta synergeî eis agathón*, but a few weighty authorities, P⁴⁶ A B 81 sa (eth) Origen (partim), have *ho theós* after *synergeî*. Modern editions of the Greek text hesitate between these two. Nestle-Aland prints the longer version but encloses *ho theós* within square brackets (Westcott and Hort had done the same); the UBS Greek Testament prints the shorter version but indicates considerable doubt (it appears from their Textual Commentary that the editors were divided); the NEB translators favoured the shorter version but regarded the longer as worth mentioning in a footnote and their choice needed explanation in the Appendix to Tasker’s Greek text. The issue cannot be settled by weight of manuscript authority, for the four most reliable authorities for the text of Romans are equally divided: Sin. 1739 have the shorter version, P⁴⁶ B the longer, and Origen sometimes quotes one, sometimes the other. The UBS Textual Commentary says that a majority of the editors deemed the longer reading “too

¹ W. L. Knox, *St. Paul and the Church of the Gentiles* (1939), p. 105 note 2. – The references in the present study to other authors are to their commentaries on Romans ad loc., except as mentioned in footnotes.

² J. P. Wilson: *Exp. Tim. 60* (1948–49), pp. 110–111.

³ See also M. Black’s contribution to *Neotestamentica et Patristica*. *Freundesgabe O. Cullmann* (1962), pp. 166–172.

narrowly supported to be admitted into the text”, but it is difficult to see why they regarded this consideration as decisive, since at verse 24 they preferred *tís* to *tis*, *tí* or *tis*, (*tí*) *kaí*, although supported only by a similar narrow range of weighty authorities, P⁴⁶ B* 1739^{mg} bo Or (partim). Perhaps the difference is to be explained by the unspoken assumption that where the best manuscripts are equally divided, the shorter reading should be preferred, but this is not a safe principle to work on, for first and second century copyists were just as likely to make mistakes of omission as of insertion.⁴ In this case therefore the textual question has to be decided solely by intrinsic probability.

The best way of testing intrinsic probability is to consider which of the two readings is more likely to have been derived from the other.

Let us therefore first suppose that the longer version was in the autograph. If so, a primitive copyist would have been under strong temptation to omit *ho theós*. He might have done so under either or both of two different inducements. (1) The words seem inelegant so closely following *tòn theón* (*ho theós* is similarly omitted by a few good manuscripts at Rom. i. 28). (2) The presence of the additional words makes the sentence difficult to construe, for either one has to understand *synergeî* transitively (“causes all things to work together”), a usage unknown in the N.T. and indeed in all extant Greek literature,⁵ or one has to understand *pánta* in the sense of “in all respects”, which might well have seemed odd to an early copyist, even though the same usage is to be found at Acts xx. 35,⁶ Cor. ix. 25, x. 33, and Eph. iv. 15. If *ho theós* is omitted, all these difficulties disappear and *pánta* comes readily to hand as the subject of *synergeî*.

If on the other hand *ho theós* was not in the original, there would have been no strong inducement to an early copyist to insert it. The majority of the UBS editors, according to their Textual Commentary, deeming the extra words to have inadequate textual support, supposed that they must have been an explanatory addition by an Alexandrian editor who thought *synergeî* ought to have a personal subject; but that would only have removed one difficulty by importing the others mentioned at (1) and (2) above. Of course if it is certain on external grounds that *ho theós* was not in the original, this is a possible explanation of how they got into such good manuscripts as P⁴⁶ and B and were known to Origen by the end of the second century; but if we are to be guided, as it seems we must, purely by internal considerations, then the likelihood of the words having been inserted in a text that did not contain them would seem to be much smaller than the likelihood that they were omitted from a text that did contain them. As Sanday and Headlam ob-

⁴ For expansion of this point reference may be made to my article on the UBS Greek Testament in *Journ. Bibl. Lit.* 95 (1976), p. 120.

⁵ Moulton and Milligan in their *Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* draw attention to Test. XII Patr. *Isaach iii* and *Gad iv* which had been adduced by Sanday and Headlam as examples of transitive use of *synergeîn*, but in both these cases the word plainly means “gives help to”.

⁶ Here also a copyist seems to have found difficulty over *pánta*, for the easier *pâsin* is read in D and m.

served (though they erred in giving a transitive sense to *synergeî*), “the insertion lay so much less near at hand than the omission that it must be allowed to have the greater appearance of originality”. Kirk similarly thought it “almost certain” that Paul wrote *ho theós*.

2.

The case for the longer reading, and the consequent acceptance of *alternative (c)* above as the only probable interpretation, is further strengthened by consideration of (i) the meaning of *synergeî* and (ii) the movement of thought in verses 26–29.

(i) It is evident from the dictionaries that the word *synergeîn* was in common use in Greek writings of all kinds about the beginning of the Christian era, and that it had a rather narrow range of meaning. As pointed out above, it was never used transitively, but always meant “cooperate with” or “help”, with a dative for the person helped. It normally has a personal subject, though twice in *Test. XII Patr.* the subject is a virtue or vice (at *Reub. iii. 6* righteousness helps the other spirits and at *Gad iv. 5* and *7* hatred lends force to envy and cooperates with Satan for the destruction of men, whereas the spirit of love cooperates with the law of God for their salvation). It would therefore have been a quite exceptional use of the word if Paul had meant “all things work together”, and even if he had meant “all things help those who love God”, this would have been an extended use of the word without parallel elsewhere. Paul could of course use words in unusual senses, but it is a sound principle not to assume he did so unless the context clearly requires it or the passage is not otherwise intelligible. In the present case it is not necessary to strain the meaning of *synergeî* because the sentence makes perfectly good sense if God is taken as the subject and the word is given its normal meaning of “helps”. Besides, if the sentence was to mean “all things help those who love God”, the order of words is unnatural; we would have expected *pánta synergeî eis agathòn toîs agapôsin tôn theón*. For these reasons, apart from the textual point, alternatives (a) and (b) above must be set aside as improbable.⁷

(ii) The authenticity of the longer reading becomes clear when verses 26–29 are considered as a whole. Some recent commentators have been attracted by the suggestion that the true subject of verse 28 is the Spirit, and this alternative (d) above) has found its way into the New English Bible. This solution was first put forward in recent times by J. P. Wilson,⁸ who argued that in this chapter God is represented as the transcendent Sovereign, whom Paul would not have been so

⁷ This accords with the conclusion reached in G. Bertram’s article in *Theol. Wört. z. N.T.*, Eng. tr. ed. Bromiley, 10 (1971), p. 875, after review of all the linguistic evidence: “God must be supplied as the subject of *synergeî*. Many ancient manuscripts . . . did in fact supply this subject. *pánta* thus becomes an accusative object. God is a helper for good in all things.” As alternative (a) can be rejected on textual and linguistic grounds it is unnecessary here to argue the question, discussed by Dodd, Barrett, and Cranfield, whether the idea that all things work together is consonant with Paul’s thought.

⁸ See note 2 above.

irreverent as to describe as cooperating with men; it is the Spirit who in this chapter assists our weakness, pleads for the saints, and cooperates with them for good. He even suggested that *tò pneûma* may have stood in the original text where we now have the “unnecessary” *pánta*; but it is inconceivable that any scribe in his senses would have altered the easy *tò pneûma* to the difficult *pánta* – unless of course he also added *ho theós* to make the meaning clear, which we believe the Apostle himself did. This attractive suggestion becomes less likely on a close examination of the structure of verses 26–29. It is difficult to prescribe what Paul must have thought or said about the different persons of the Trinity, but we can with some certainty follow his argument from verse to verse. It is true that verses 26 and 27 are about the Spirit, but the grammatical subject of verse 27 is God. We do not know, says Paul, what to ask for, but (because we have hope and the foretaste of the Spirit) the Spirit makes up for our ignorance and powerlessness by making to God on our behalf the prayers which we are unable to make ourselves. His prayers are groanings like our groanings, and we cannot understand his language; but God understands the meaning of the Spirit’s utterances, because his intercessions for the saints are in accordance with God’s will and intention. Verse 27 was about God’s relation to the Spirit’s intercessions, and we are now ready for another statement about God, and especially about his will and intention for the saints. The fact that verse 28 begins with *oídamen* (a word often used in N.T. to mean “it is common knowledge that”; cf. e.g. Rom. vii. 14, viii. 22, II Cor. v. 1, I Thim. i. 8, John iii. 2, xxi. 24) indicates that Paul, as elsewhere, is introducing a fresh line of thought; instead of telling his readers paradoxes about the Holy Spirit he appeals to their common stock of knowledge (possibly, as has been suggested,⁹ quoting a traditional Jewish saying). Verse 28 is not just an appendage to the previous verses but is itself explained by 29; this is evident from the use of the word *hóti* at the beginning of 29. Therefore the subject of 28 must be the same as of 29, i.e. God the Father of Christ, and not either the Spirit or “all things”. But without the explicit *ho theós* this would not have been very clear because of the occurrence of *theón* in the accusative twice in the immediately preceding context. Therefore it was natural for Paul, even at the cost of some inelegance of style,¹⁰ to put the necessary *ho theós* into 28.

What, therefore, the Apostle is saying in these verses is that God hears the Spirit because his prayers are in accordance with God’s intentions for the saints – that eternal purpose by which he cooperates with his lovers for their good at all points in the whole marvellous series from foreknowledge and predestination through calling and justification to everlasting glory.

John M. Ross, London

⁹ E.g. by J. B. Bauer in *Zeits. neut. Wiss.* 50 (1959), p. 106. Cf. Black *ad loc.*

¹⁰ Black (n. 3) thought that “St Paul was not so poor a stylist as to write *ho theós* immediately after the words *toîs agapôsin tôn theón*”. For St Paul, however, clarity always had to prevail over considerations of style.