

COMMENTATIONES AD LITTERAS GRAECAS SPECTANTES

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OLD MAN'S SPEECH AND MUSIC. SIR 32:3 INTERPRETED BY CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA AND JOHN CHRYSOSTOM*

ABSTRACT. Szymański Mikołaj, *Old Man's Speech and Music. Sir 32:3 Interpreted by Clement of Alexandria and John Chrysostom* (Mowa starca a muzyka. Syr. 32, 3 w interpretacji Klemensa Aleksandryjskiego i Jana Chryzostoma).

The article tries to answer the question why Clement of Alexandria (*Paed.* II 58, 1–2) and John Chrysostom (*De Eleazaro et septem pueris*, *PG*, vol. 63, coll. 523–4) propose peculiar interpretations of Sir 32:3. At first sight it might seem that the writers used texts of that verse in the Septuagint that were different from its present shape, but the real causes of the discrepancies were, in Clement's case, his abhorrence of music, and in John Chrysostom's case, the situation in which his speech was delivered.

Keywords: Book of Sirach, Clement of Alexandria, John Chrysostom, old age, music, rules of behaviour.

The deuterocanonical (or, as Jews and Protestants prefer, apocryphal) Book of Sirach seems less severe than most books of the Bible. It praises joy of life¹, friendship² and moderate use of wine³, and contains even such convivial precepts as that one should ease one's stomach by vomiting if compelled to eat too much⁴. Although it claims that love of wisdom and suavity of speech give more

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¹ Sir 30:22–3.

² Sir 37:1–6.

³ Sir 31:36–7.

⁴ Sir 31:25.

pleasure than wine and sweet melodies⁵, it advises old men to speak in such a way as to avoid disturbing music: *λάλησον, πρεσβύτερε, πρέπει γάρ σοι, ἐν ἀκριβεῖ ἐπιστήμῃ, καὶ μὴ ἐμποδίσῃς μουσικά* (in King James Bible: “Speak, thou that art the elder, for it becometh thee, but with sound judgment; and hinder not musick”)⁶.

This sentence received a peculiar treatment from two Church Fathers, Clement of Alexandria and John Chrysostom. Their interpretations evidently disagree with our text of the Septuagint.

Clement paraphrases Sirach in his *Paedagogus* to confirm his claim that reason, and therefore, wise speech, is an asset of the experienced age (*λόγος δὲ ἀγαθὸν ἡλικίας δεδοκιμασμένης*): *λάλησον, πρεσβύτερε, ἐν συμποσίῳ, πρέπει γάρ σοι· ἀλλ’ ἀπαραποδίστως λάλησον καὶ ἐν ἀκριβεῖ ἐπιστήμῃς* (in William Wilson’s translation: “Speak, old man, at a banquet, for it is becoming to you. But speak without embarrassment, and with accuracy of knowledge”)⁷. It is easy to notice that Sirach’s mention of music was eliminated from the paraphrase. Its trace remains in the adverb *ἀπαραποδίστως* which echoes the words *μὴ ἐμποδίσῃς*. In the Biblical text, however, the negated verb instructs the old man not to interfere with music, while in Clement’s version the cognate adverb means that he should be free from embarrassment, as if the object of *μὴ ἐμποδίσῃς* were not music, but the old man himself.

John Chrysostom does not omit music in his interpretation, but its relation to an old man’s speech is quite different than in the Book of Sirach. In his speech *De Eleazaro et septem pueris*, he quotes Sirach’s sentence, entirely changing the syntax of the last words, namely, omitting *μὴ* and changing the aorist subjunctive *ἐμποδίσῃς* to future indicative: *λάλησον, πρεσβύτερε, πρέπει γάρ σοι, ἐν ἀκριβεῖ δὲ ἐπιστήμῃ, καὶ ἐμποδίσεις μουσικά* (in Wendy Mayer’s translation: “Speak, old man, for it is proper that you do, but in precise understanding, and you will interfere with music”), and he proceeds to analyse the misquoted phrase: *τί ἐστίν, ‘καὶ ἐμποδίσεις μουσικά’; δείκνυσιν ἐκ τούτου, ὅτι οὐχ οὕτως αὐλὸς καὶ κιθάρα καὶ σύριγγες ἤδὸν τοῖς ἀκούουσιν, ὡς πρεσβύτου διδασκαλία μετὰ ἀκριβοῦς ἐπιστήμης προφερομένη. ἡδονὴ γὰρ ἡδονὴν παραβάλλουσα, πολὺν ταύτην ἐκείνης τυραννικωτέραν εἶναί φησι, καὶ τὴν μὲν κρατεῖν, τὴν δὲ αὐτῇ παραχωρεῖν· διὸ καὶ φησιν· ‘ἐμποδίσεις μουσικά’, τουτέστιν· οὐκ ἐάσεις αὐτὰ φαίνεσθαι, ἐπισκοπήσεις αὐτοῖς, συσκιάζεις αὐτὰ* (in the same translation: “What is ‘and you will interfere with music’? Scripture shows by this that flute and cithara and pipes are not so pleasurable to the audience as an old man’s preaching presented with precise understanding. For it compares pleasure to pleasure and says that this pleasure

⁵ Sir 40:20–21.

⁶ Sir 32:3.

⁷ Clem. Alex. *Paed.* II 58, 1–2.

is much more commanding for that one exerts control, while the other yields to it. For this reason scripture also says ‘you will interfere with music’; that is, you won’t allow it to be apparent, you will obscure it, you will cast it in the shade”⁸.

In John Chrysostom’s version the meaning of the sentence has changed, and this is quite natural since the negative particle has been omitted. The resulting sense is not absurd: elsewhere Sirach says that it is more pleasant to listen to a good speaker than to music⁹, but the immediate context shows that our text of the Septuagint is sound¹⁰. Just after the phrase in question we read: ὅπου ἀκρόαμα, μὴ ἐκχέης λαλιὰν καὶ ἀκαίρως μὴ σοφίζου. σφραγὶς ἄνθρακος ἐπὶ κόσμῳ χρυσῷ σύγκριμα μουσικῶν ἐν συμποσίῳ οἴνου. ἐν κατασκευάσματι χρυσῷ σφραγὶς σμαράγδου μέλος μουσικῶν ἐφ’ ἥδει οἴνω (in King James Bible: “Pour not out words where there is a musician, and shew not forth wisdom out of time. A concert of musick in a banquet of wine is as a signet of carbuncle set in gold. As a signet of an emerald set in a work of gold, so is the melody of music with pleasant wine”)¹¹.

Thus, although John Chrysostom’s version merits a mention in the apparatus to the Septuagint, it should not be taken seriously into account as a possible reading.

Now we are left with the question why this sentence was distorted by two Greek Christian writers. As far as Clement goes, the explanation seems easy. That Church Father, so open-minded in regard to pagan heritage, had a strong prejudice against music¹². In the very same *Paedagogus*, he writes that music should be banned from human gatherings: “Let the pipe be resigned to the shepherds, and the flute to the superstitious who are engrossed in idolatry. For, in truth, such instruments are to be banished from the temperate banquet, being more suitable to beasts than men, and the more irrational portion of mankind. For we have heard of stags being charmed by the pipe, and seduced by music into the toils, when hunted by the huntsmen. And when mares are being covered, a tune is played on the flute – a nuptial song, as it were”¹³. He cannot deny that the Bible is full of appeals to praise God with use of various musical instruments, but he claims that all such injunctions should be treated as metaphors: “The Spirit, distinguishing from such revelry the divine service, sings, ‘Praise

⁸ Ioan. Chrys. *De Eleazaro et septem pueris*, PG, vol. 63, coll. 523–4.

⁹ See: above, n. 5.

¹⁰ It is also confirmed by the Hebrew original (discovered in the Cairo Genizah) which means: “and do not get in the way of the singing” (translation of B.H. Parker and M.G. Abegg, <http://www.bensira.org/navigator.php?Manuscript=F&PageNum=1>, access: 9 December 2015). See: P.C. Beentjes, *The Book of Ben Sira in Hebrew*, Leiden 1997, p. 58, 109.

¹¹ Sir 32:4–6.

¹² See: C.H. Cosgrove, *Clement of Alexandria and Early Christian Music*, “Journal of Early Christian Studies” 14, fasc. 3, 2006, p. 255–282.

¹³ Clem. Alex. *Paed.* II 41, 1–2 in Wilson’s translation.

Him with the sound of trumpet' [Ps 150:3] for with sound of trumpet He shall raise the dead. 'Praise Him on the psaltery' [ibid.] for the tongue is the psaltery of the Lord. 'And praise Him on the lyre'. [ibid.] By the lyre is meant the mouth struck by the Spirit, as it were by a plectrum. 'Praise with the timbrel and the dance' [Ps 150:4] refers to the Church meditating on the resurrection of the dead in the resounding skin. 'Praise Him on the chords and organ'. [ibid.] Our body He calls an organ, and its nerves are the strings, by which it has received harmonious tension, and when struck by the Spirit, it gives forth human voices. 'Praise Him on the clashing cymbals'. [Ps 150:5] He calls the tongue the cymbal of the mouth, which resounds with the pulsation of the lips"¹⁴. No wonder then that Clement would never ask a speaker to keep silence when the music starts to play and that he erased the word "music" altogether from Sirach's sentence.

In the case of John Chrysostom, we should take into consideration the circumstances in which he gave his sermon. Being young, he spoke just after a venerable old man. The introduction of his speech aims at showing his esteem and shyness in regard to his predecessor. In this I would look for the source of his distortion of Sirach's words: the compliment resulting from it perfectly fits the situation. We need not suspect that John Chrysostom used a copy of the Book of Sirach with a corrupted text of that sentence. His memory, fallible even in his young age, supplied him with a version that was inaccurate, but proper for the occasion.

Some Church Fathers, first of all, of course, Jerome, were philologists; but neither Clement of Alexandria nor John Chrysostom can be counted among them. Their Biblical interpretations do not aim at precise analysis of a text, but rather at drawing valuable moral teachings from it.

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¹⁴Ibidem, II 41, 4–5 in the same translation.

MOWA STARCA A MUZYKA.
SYR. 32,3 W INTERPRETACJI KLEMENSA ALEKSANDRYJSKIEGO I JANA
CHRYZOSTOMA

Streszczenie

Artykuł jest próbą odpowiedzi na pytanie, dlaczego Klemens Aleksandryjski (*Paed.* II 58, 1–2) i Jan Chryzostom (*De Eleazaro et septem pueris*, *PG*, t. 63, szp. 523–4) w osobliwy sposób interpretują jeden z wersetów Księgi Syracha (32,3). Na pierwszy rzut oka mogłoby się wydawać, że korzystają oni z innych wersji tego wersetu niż ta, którą znajdujemy w rękopisach i wydaniach Septuaginty, analiza prowadzi jednak do wniosku, że Klemens zmienił sens tekstu biblijnego wskutek swej niechęci do muzyki, a Jan Chryzostom – ponieważ starał się go przystosować do sytuacji, w której wygłaszał mowę.