

“THE OTHER ΛΟΓΟΣ” AT THE END OF HEB. 4:13

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Abstract

The final usage of ὁ λόγος in Heb. 4:12-13, at the very end of the pericope, appears to be closely related to the better-known first occurrence of the term at the beginning of it. Many translations of the phrase πρὸς ὃν ἡμῖν ὁ λόγος do not reflect this continuity of subject matter between the two instances of ὁ λόγος. While some translators opt for the commercial idiom, “to whom we must give account,” study of that idiom throughout the NT shows that it is untenable. The second “word” is one of response, by the hearer, to the first word.

1. *Introduction*

In exegesis of Heb. 4:12-13 the first of the two occurrences of ὁ λόγος in this pericope traditionally receives the lion’s share of attention, and rightfully so. Yet, though the expanded description of ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ and its activity in v. 12 is widely known and interpreted, the second occurrence of ὁ λόγος, with which the author brings the pericope to a close, deserves closer scrutiny. It cannot be mere coincidence that the author opens and closes this little “parenthesis,” as 4:12-13 is often considered to be, with the same word.

2. *An Argument from Poetic Unity*

The two instances of ὁ λόγος (articular both times) form a bracket with which the pericope both begins and ends, suggesting poetic unity between them. Yet “[t]he final phrase, πρὸς ὃν ἡμῖν ὁ λόγος, which forms a neat inclusion for these two verses, is ambiguous.”¹ Many interpreters understand this use of ὁ λόγος as totally separate from the

¹ Harold Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989) 136.

deeper meaning of ὁ λόγος of which the rest of vv. 12-13 is a portrait, seeing it merely as an idiom from the language of the business world: "to whom we must give account." But to attribute two so different meanings to the expression ὁ λόγος in as tightly organized a composition as 4:12-13 is "awkward,"² particularly in an author renowned for his polished poetics. It is uncharacteristic of a writer who demonstrates the literary sensibilities of our author that he would, after carefully delineating the many and various qualities of ὁ λόγος in v. 12, bring the pericope to a close using ὁ λόγος as the very last word in a figurative expression with a meaning having little to do with the principal theme of the discourse. To do so would mar this poetic "jewel fashioned for its own sake," as Vanhoye has called 4:12-13.³

Actually, it is sometimes urged that ὁ λόγος is the inferred subject matter ever since 4:2, or even since 3:7, a gradually developing concept that emerges to prominence as it culminates in vv. 12-13.⁴ If so, this would argue even more against the likelihood of the author concluding with a prosaic final usage of ὁ λόγος. Rather than "cheapening" his own rhetoric at the very conclusion with an anti-climactic banality, it would be more likely that he employs λόγος in some particularly significant way: perhaps concluding with a ringing challenge, for example. A plethora of interpretations have been suggested for the meaning of the λόγος that occupies final position in the pericope, but no consensus obtains.⁵

Much depends on whether ἡμῖν is understood as an indirect object ("concerning whom is the word to us") or dative of means ("to whom is the word by us"). The former expression would conclude the paragraph by reiterating that this word about the Word is God's word to us, a locution a little too contrived and redundant to recommend itself as the author's meaning. The latter reading shows more promise, indicating some sort of reciprocal responsibility towards God on the part of those addressed by his word, a posture that fits the author's observable pattern of exhortation throughout the treatise.

² James Swetnam, "Jesus as Λόγος in Hebrews 4,12-13," *Bib* 62 (1981) 216.

³ Albert Vanhoye, *La structure littéraire de l'Épître aux Hébreux* (2d ed.; Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1976) 102.

⁴ Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 213; William Lane, *Hebrews 1-8* (WBC 47A; Dallas: Word, 1991) 103.

⁵ Probably the most unusual configuration is that of Swetnam who, consistent with his christological understanding of ὁ λόγος in vv. 12-13, translates, "with whom on our behalf is the Word" ("Jesus as Λόγος," 222).

3. *Syntactic Parallels in Hebrews and Elsewhere in NT*

The author uses exactly the same combination of terms, ἡμῖν ὁ λόγος, only a dozen lines later at 5:11, although the syntagme is not without ambiguity there, either. Most translations and commentators take the expression at 5:11 idiomatically, as “we have [much] to say.” The introductory prepositional phrase at 5:11 is περὶ οὗ, “concerning which,” or else “concerning whom,”⁶ while the introductory prepositional phrase at 4:13 is πρὸς ὃν, which may also be “concerning whom,” though it may instead be “to whom.”⁷

A study of all the occurrences of πρὸς with the accusative in Hebrews shows that the syntagme clearly and unambiguously may be translated “to whom . . .” four times (1:13; 5:7; 9:20; 13:13), and clearly ought to be translated “concerning whom or which,” or “pertaining to . . .” four times (1:7; 2:17; 5:1, 14), while five other times it is ambiguous enough to be translated *either* “to” or “concerning,” depending on the interpreter (1:8; 5:5; 7:21; 10:16; 11:18).⁸ So no real preponderance of usage emerges that would indicate whether in 4:13 the author would be more likely to mean “to whom” or “concerning whom” with the syntagme πρὸς ὃν ἡμῖν ὁ λόγος.

The syntagme ἡμῖν ὁ λόγος is used in Acts 13:26 with ἡμῖν as the indirect object to whom the word is addressed: ἡμῖν ὁ λόγος τῆς σωτηρίας ταύτης ἐξαπεστάλη, “to us the word of this salvation is sent out.” On the other hand, only a few lines earlier we find λόγος in the nominative accompanied by πρὸς with the accusative, “Brethren, if you have a λόγος παρακλήσεως πρὸς τὸν λαόν (a word of encouragement for the people). . .” (Acts 13:15). Like the equally-distributed πρὸς with accusative in Hebrews, these examples also tend to cancel one another out as regards interpretation of Heb. 4:13, since the first supports the idea of the word being addressed “to us,” while the second supports the idea of the word being addressed to others, in the πρὸς-plus-accusative construct (as in πρὸς ὃν at Heb. 4:13).

⁶ Deciding the antecedent of περὶ οὗ in 5:11 is an exegetical exercise that, while pertinent, is beyond the scope of this paper.

⁷ Unlike the ambiguity at 5:11 over whether the antecedent of the relative pronoun οὗ is masculine or neuter, ὃν at 4:13 is clearly masculine. So the antecedent is either God or a personified Λόγος.

⁸ The other instances of πρὸς with the accusative are used “towards the end of [doing something]” (6:11; 9:13; 12:4), and “for a short time” or “for the moment,” in the idiom πρὸς ὀλίγας ἡμέρας/πρὸς τὸ παρόν (12:10, 11).

Since so many commentators throughout the ages have decided that the locution at the end of v. 13 must mean “render account,” or more generally, but with the same sense, “with whom we have to do,” it is useful to examine all the places in the NT where λόγος is used in the locution “render account.” They are: Matt. 12:36, “every careless word (ῥῆμα) that they shall speak, they shall render account of it in the day of judgment,” ἀποδώσουσιν περὶ αὐτοῦ λόγον ἐν ἡμέρᾳ κρίσεως; Matt. 18:23, “a certain king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves,” συνᾶραι λόγον μετὰ τῶν δούλων αὐτοῦ; Luke 16:2, “and he said to him, ‘What is this I hear about you? Give the account of your stewardship,’” ἀπόδος τὸν λόγον τῆς οἰκονομίας σου; Acts 19:40, “We shall be unable to account for this [disturbing] assembly,” οὐ δυνασόμεθα ἀποδοῦναι λόγον περὶ τῆς συστροφῆς ταύτης; Rom. 14:12, “So then each one of us shall give account of himself [ἄρα ἕκαστος ἡμῶν περὶ ἑαυτοῦ λόγον δώσει [τῷ θεῷ];⁹ 1 Pet. 4:5, “who will give account to the one who is ready to judge the quick and the dead,” οἱ ἀποδώσουσιν λόγον τῷ ἐτοιμῶς ἔχοντι κρίναι ζῶντας καὶ νεκρούς; and, most proximate and pertinent to the text at hand, Heb. 13:17, “. . . the leaders . . . who watch over your souls as those who give will account,” . . . τοῖς ἡγουμένοις . . . αὐτοὶ . . . ἀγρυπνοῦσιν ὑπὲρ τῶν ψυχῶν ὑμῶν ὡς λόγον ἀποδώσοντες.

The defining characteristics that immediately stand out from this profile are 1) λόγος and the verb ἀποδίδωμι (or simply δίδωμι) are ubiquitously linked when this idiom is intended, 2) λόγος is inevitably anarthous in this idiom,¹⁰ and 3) λόγος is always in the accusative (λόγον). Therefore, it would be difficult to demonstrate that ὁ λόγος at the end of Heb. 4:13 means “render account,” since 1) neither ἀποδίδωμι nor any other verb at all is present, 2) the article ὁ, on the other hand, is, 3) and ὁ λόγος is in the nominative, not the accusative.

Nevertheless, that meaning persists. Owen refers disparagingly to Grotius’ translation, “of whom is our word” (i.e. “of whom we speak”)

⁹ Τῷ θεῷ is strongly supported by a wide variety of witnesses, though UBS 3rd and 4th ed. only give it a [C] reading. For our purposes, the import of the expression is that in this one clear reference to humans “giving account to God” in the NT it is not πρὸς ὄν (or θεόν) that is used but the dative τῷ θεῷ, in the manuscripts that supply the indirect object.

¹⁰ The one exception, ἀπόδος τὸν λόγον in Luke 16:2, is explained by the particularity of the articular τῆς οἰκονομίας σου with which it is joined grammatically: “render the account of *your* stewardship.” Furthermore, in this context, the expression probably means literally “hand over the books of your account,” not just “explain yourself” or “give account of yourself.”

insisting that "with whom we have to do" is the only right interpretation, though he admits the literal translation would be, "with whom [there is] to us a concern."¹¹ Windisch and Michel translate πρὸς with accusative here the same way as πρὸς μὲν τοὺς ἀγγέλους at 1:7 (i.e. "concerning"): "it is of this subject (God) that we are speaking," while M. Barth similarly translates 4:13b "...laid bare before the eyes of him of whom we speak."¹² But Spicq calls such an interpretation a banality. He himself goes with the ancient Greek fathers, "render account," but finds here an additional play on words (that is, a play on "words"): "the Word, to whom we must render our word." He argues that this reminder of the inevitability of one's accounting of oneself to God is a fitting conclusion to the exhortation to vigilant faithfulness since, as the writer has argued in vv. 12-13, nothing escapes his all-seeing perception anyway.¹³

4. "A Word We Must Give in Response to the Word Heard"

Grässer affirms that λόγος at the end of the paragraph is that same living and perspicacious Word, described in v. 12, that has penetrated down into the recesses of the human heart. Yet at the same time he translates the phrase something like "before/to whom we now have a responsibility to answer."¹⁴ He says that to translate it merely "from or before whom we speak" or "from whom to us is the Word" would understate the theological significance of what the author is concluding here at the end of a paraenesis in which apostasy is seen as a real threat. Rather, the author reminds his readers at the conclusion of this paraenesis, as he does on several occasions,¹⁵ to remember that we have an incorruptible and unerring Judge before whom we, and those who teach and guide us in the Christian faith, will some day have to render account of ourselves. As such, the powerful and living Word

¹¹ John Owen, "Appendix R," in John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews* (Calvin's Commentaries, 22 vols.; trans. and ed. John Owen; Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society; reprint Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989) 22.376.

¹² Hans Windisch, *Der Hebräerbrief* (HNT 14; Tübingen: Mohr, 1931) 36-37; Otto Michel, *Der Brief an die Hebräer* (KEK; 13th ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975) 203; Marcus Barth, "The Old Testament in Hebrews," in William Klassen and Graydon Snyder (ed.), *Current Issues in New Testament Interpretation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962) 63.

¹³ Ceslas Spicq, *L'Épître aux Hébreux* (2 vols.; Paris: Librairie LeCoffre, 1952) 2.91.

¹⁴ "Vor dem wir uns zu verantworten haben," taking λόγος as *Verantwortung* (Erich Grässer, *An die Hebräer* [EKK 17; Vol. 1; Zurich: Benziger, 1990] 239).

¹⁵ 10:31, 12:29, 13:17.

that penetrates and uncovers our hearts inevitably provokes a consequent and necessary response,¹⁶ which it is our *respons*-ibility to render.¹⁷ So while, as we saw above, the book-keeping expression ἀποδίδωμι λόγον is not in view here,¹⁸ those who hear a summons to the reader to recognize our accountability to the one who has spoken to us are nevertheless partially right in their interpretation of the sense of πρὸς ὃν ἡμῖν ὁ λόγος.

Grässer's argument complements and reinforces that of Spicq. In modern English idiomatic speech, the expression "Now the ball is in your court" parallels the inherent double meaning that Grässer sees in πρὸς ὃν ἡμῖν ὁ λόγος. "The ball" in this expression represents a reference to a challenging word that has just been posed by the interlocutor and, simultaneously, a tacit reference to the necessity on the part of the person addressed to respond to that verbal challenge with a word of one's own.¹⁹ We suggest that this corresponds to the concept of ὁ λόγος in the concluding words of 4:13. It preserves the intrinsic relationship with the meaning of ὁ λόγος at the beginning of the two verses, and still evokes the necessity of response on the part of the one who has been addressed by that Word which is the subject of the pericope. That verbal response is usually, but, as we have shown, imprecisely, expressed by the idiom "we must give account." The vague-sounding English translation "with whom we have to do" may be better, but still fails to reveal the author's *word*-play on ὁ λόγος that is essential, rhetorically, to making his point. Somehow the interpretation should reflect the author's deliberate allusion to the foregoing elaborate depiction of ὁ λόγος in v. 12. Perhaps the phrase might be understood something like "towards whom the word is [now] up to us." It is colloquial English, but may reflect both the author's meaning and his means of verbalizing it.

¹⁶ Cf. the locution "die aufdeckende Macht des Wortes Gottes" that Harald Hegermann employs to characterize 4:12-13 (*Der Brief an die Hebräer* [THKNT 16; Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1988] 91).

¹⁷ The word-play of this sentence is not intended to be fatuous, but rather is my own response to Grässer's interplay between *verantworten* and *Verantwortung*, an attempt to replicate somewhat, in English, his sense of πρὸς ὃν ἡμῖν ὁ λόγος.

¹⁸ The idiomatic use of λόγος for "render account" in 13:17, ὡς λόγον ἀποδώσοντες, does not weigh into consideration for that meaning in 4:13. At 13:17, as everywhere else when it means "give account," δίδωμι figures into the expression and λόγος is both anarthous and accusative.

¹⁹ In French, the elliptical expression "A vous maintenant la parole" has exactly this same double referent for "la parole" as "the ball" in the idiomatic English expression, and even more closely resembles the meaning of the Greek syntax of πρὸς ὃν ἡμῖν ὁ λόγος.

5. *Lexical and Rhetorical Connection with the Sequential Text*

Actually, such a solution harmonizes well with the very next phrase the writer expresses, in v. 14: “Since, then, we have a great high priest . . . let us hold fast our confession (or profession),” κρατῶμεν τῆς ὁμολογίας. Not only is ὁμολογία cognate with λόγος (from ὁμολογέω, literally “to say together the same words,” hence “con-fession”), but it is also the natural sequence to what the author has just been saying, understood as we are suggesting. Ὁμολογία and ἡμῖν ὁ λόγος, then, are both invitations to affirm or profess the word the readers have heard. At the end of v. 13, the author says in effect, “Now it is our turn to return the word to him”;²⁰ then, in v. 14, he urges the readers to hold fast onto this word they profess.

Such an interpretation of the configuration πρὸς ὃν ἡμῖν ὁ λόγος also ameliorates the confusion that frequently arises about the structure of this section of Hebrews. While preserving the poetic integrity of the pericope contained within the *inclusio* formed by the two occurrences of ὁ λόγος at the beginning and end of vv. 12-13, this understanding of the final clause of v. 13 also recognizes that vv. 12 and 13 flow directly into what follows, advancing a natural development both of the language and the theology (i.e., the form and the content) of chapter four of Hebrews.

²⁰ Graham Hughes captures the sequence of the author’s thought in his paraphrastic aphorism, “He to whom the Word has been given shall be required to give a word in return” (*Hebrews and Hermeneutics: the Epistle to the Hebrews as a New Testament Example of Biblical Interpretation* [SNTSMS 36; Cambridge: University Press, 1979] 11).