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***'He did not say X but Y':
a Byzantine trope that makes negative theology a figure of speech***

Abstract

A formula permeates Greek patristic literature in the shape of: 'he did not say X but Y'. Even though it is rehearsed hundreds of times and reflects the peculiar apophatic stamp of Byzantine thought, the formula has not hitherto been identified and analysed. Tracing the development and meaning of the formula, the article proposes that the exegetical template 'he did not say X but Y' grammatically embodies the negative impulse in Byzantine theology, building on Jewish tradition in speaking of God by things that God is not. The expression calls upon the expositor to imagine what a sacred text does not say in order to appreciate better what it does say. The article argues that it is more than a technique of emphasis but belongs to a way of thinking where imperfect human understanding triangulates holy perfection.

Keywords: Patristics; Negative theology; Apophatic theology; Byzantium; Philology

In a valuable moment in his *Stories from the Gospels*, Theophylaktos of Ochrid observes a fascinating detail in *Matthew*. The passage refers to the miracle where Peter calls upon Christ to allow him to walk upon the sea as Christ himself had done: 'Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee on the water'¹. Theophylaktos comments:

«Peter, being most ardent in his love for Christ, desires to be near him quickly and before the others. He further believes that Jesus not only walks on water himself but will also give him this ability. He did not say, 'command me to walk' but 'to come to you.' The former would be [merely] a display of evidence, the latter, [a display] of love for Christ. 'And he said, "Come." And Peter, getting down from the boat, walked on the water to come to Jesus»².

This snippet gives us insight into the expression of the *New Testament*, sure enough, but it especially reveals how Byzantine authors themselves formulated their intuitions. The method of analysis hinges on a formula. It runs: 'he did not say X but Y'. Peter did not say 'command me to walk' but 'command me to come to you'.

The reading thus musters two thoughts: one is the Biblical text that is actually in front of us and the other is an imaginative departure by Theophylaktos from what is literally also in front of him. He thinks of something that is not there, a possible expression that would convey almost the same idea but which has been hatched by conjecture. This conjecture is not a gloss, however; it is not a translation or an expansion of scripture: it represents not what the text says but what the text does not say. The invention of this possibility is a deliberately inadequate rendering, a purposeful near-miss: it might have been a fair statement and would have served to record the facts but the expression that Matthew used says something more. And it is only by suggesting this alternative prosaic *expression manquée* that we appreciate the full meaning of the text that Matthew wrote. So when Theophylaktos

1 *Matthew* 14.28.

2 *Enarrationes in evangelia* 1.301.18-26. All translations from Greek are my own, except for the *Bible*, where I use the King James Version.

observes that «he did not say, “command me to walk” but “to come to you”», Theophylaktos explains why this false utterance – this utterance that was not uttered – is useful. To say «command me to walk (κέλευσόν με βαδίσαι)» would deliver only a mechanical image of the miraculous faculty of walking upon the Sea of Galilee; and this focus on the physical image would merely result in a show of evidence; whereas the phrase ‘command me to come to you’ (πρὸς σὲ ἔλθεῖν) is a show of love for Christ. The expression ‘to come to you’ in this circumstance is more personal, as if talking to a beloved child, because ‘to come to you’ means, as Theophylaktos says, that Peter will be closer to Jesus. Jesus echoes the intimate sentiment with the single word: ‘And he said, “Come.”’ Peter does just that and, walking on the water, he approaches Jesus. So for Theophylaktos, the whole episode counts as much more than the demonstration of evidence (ἐπίδειξις) that one could expect from a miracle. Beyond the thaumaturgy that the narrative records, we have a touching image of Peter trying to reach Jesus by walking over the water. Through the analysis of the biblical narration, we see that Matthew’s style creates a scene full of feeling, with hope and especially the love (ἀγάπη) that Theophylaktos specifically mentions. And I confess that without this imaginative substitution of words, it might never have occurred to me that there is a touching dimension in the story, that the phrase ‘come to me’ is emotionally meaningful and that the narrative is affecting in its language.

Writing in the eleventh century, Theophylaktos employs an exegetical artefact that had been used hundreds of times in Byzantine literature and is therefore well-worn by the time that Theophylaktos uses it. He did not say X but Y. It is an ingenious analytical trope. It shows an exceptional conceptual sympathy for a text, because it seems that the author and reader alike can rethink how a thought might have been written. One explores its potential by discussing what the text does not say, almost as if one is in discussion with the original author, commending the writer for a superior turn of phrase. And in figuratively going through the ideas that might have existed in potential at the time the original text was written, the formula demonstrates the peculiar rightness of the chosen expression by means of a substitute that is not so apposite or poignant. Because of its effective focus on lexical choices, the formula became an exegetical meme in early Christian and Byzantine authors.

The formula ‘he did not say X but Y’ does not have pagan origins. One can find examples where classical authors almost use such a device, as when Aspasius comments on Aristotle: ‘both intemperance and evil exist. However, he did not call it simply intemperance but rather evil’³. The point here, though, is not that Aspasius finds a word that Aristotle did not use which would have been inferior to the one that he did use; rather, there are two words in Aristotle’s discussion and Aspasius simply observes the matter of degree that Aristotle intended by using them both. Thus classical expression might contemplate: ‘he did not only say X but Y as well’. It is very different to imagining something that the author did not say. Perhaps the reason why the formula cannot be found in pagan authors is that the indigenous Graeco-Roman cultures had no similar conception of the revealed word that encourages such scrutiny of lexical choices. It is no accident, therefore, that the formula is first attested in a Jewish writer, the eloquent Philo of Alexandria.

In a beautiful book chapter, Almut Bockisch reveals the way that Philo and Origen of Alexandria prefigure apophatic theology through their negating manner of representation (*verneinenden Darstellungsweisen*)⁴. The development of apophatic theology has been thoroughly studied, but Bockisch is interested in its prehistory, where the tendency to talk about God by what God is *not* is already present in apophatic ways of speaking (*Redemodi*), among which is the *alpha privativa*, that is the Greek ‘a’ that translates as our ‘un’ or ‘non’ or ‘in’. This simple negative affordance is already exploited much in Platonic thought, but has peculiar applicability to Philo’s conception of the unnameable (ἀκατονομάστου), ineffable (ἄρρητου) and in every respect

3 *In ethica Nichomachea commentaria* 128.33.

4 BOCKISCH (2021).

inconceivable (ἀκαταλήπτου) God⁵. Bockisch observes Philo's reluctance to accept the word 'God' as God's name, because God is not a name but a conception and reality of the unnameable. Nevertheless, in enumerating the ways that Philo prefigures apophatic thought, Bockisch does not observe that Philo is also the origin of the formula – which is apophatic in its very grammatical structure –: 'he does not say X but Y'.

Combing through the immense corpus of Greek literature of many centuries,⁶ I detect the first instance of the formula in a place where Philo tries to understand why there a replication of the word 'death' in the Greek *Torah* when it says that a person who 'strikes and kills another (πατάξῃ τίς τινα καὶ ἀποθάνῃ) should be put to death with death (θανάτῳ θανατούσθω)'⁷. Given that the author does not indulge in redundancies, why would the text say one who willingly kills should be put to death alone but added 'with death'⁸? Philo's way of countenancing this potential embarrassment is to ask: 'why does it not say... death alone but adds "with death"? For how else does one die except by death?' He then explains the riddle by suggesting a kind of poetic latitude, where 'some people who are alive have died, and some who have died are living'.

The formula 'he does not say X but Y' is thus born – albeit in the inverted form 'why does he say Y and not X instead?' – and it serves a useful purpose. Philo does not believe that the holy text speaks in wasted words. Clearly knowing (σαφῶς εἰδῶς) that it never contains a superfluous noun (περιττὸν ὄνομα οὐδὲν τίθησιν) he feels that the redundancy has to be explained. Why does it not convey such a simple concept more economically? The explanation may not convince you but it gestures to a kind of extension or emphasis of the biblical thought that would not be expressed by the more economical alternative that he proposes. And he proposes it only in order to discredit it, because there can be no alternative. If framed as a question – 'why did he not say X but Y?' – the answer is always that X is inferior to Y. No one from Philo to Theophylaktos is going to criticize the axiomatically perfect Y which is scripture.

There are hundreds of cases of classical authors observing that an earlier authority does not say something⁹. But this observation only means that the earlier source does not handle something that appears relevant now: the ancient authority is silent on a matter that might now be fruitfully investigated. Galen, for example, wonders why Hippocrates does not mention the needs of the spleen and then how one might countenance them¹⁰. There are scores of examples of scholarly authors finding a lacuna in the literature where one searches in vain for some valuable insight, especially in technical answers to scientific questions. But the specifically Judeo-Christian expression does not centre on an absence. Rather, it observes the absence of something hypothetical in order to propose the completeness and absolute pertinence of what has been said.

Sometimes, a Christian author will propose words that would be wrong or theologically inappropriate not as a false substitute for a word that is used in the biblical authority but as a foil to an absence of words, where no words are added in the original. So the formula of what is not said extends to an absence, such as we encounter in Gregory of Nyssa – a key figure in the development of negative theology – when he talks about Christ's declaration that he will be crucified and will rise again¹¹. According to Gregory, Jesus

5 *De somniis* 1.67.

6 I have used the Thesaurus linguae graecae (TLG) whose Latin titles and conventions of citation I have also employed throughout this article. In most instances, the edition and numbers follow the commonly adopted volume, page and line reference of J.-P. MIGNE, *Patrologia graeca* (PG).

7 The *Septuagint*, that is, *Exodus* 21.12

8 *De fuga et inventione* 54.3

9 e.g. Stephanus Medicus, *Scholia in Hippocratis prognosticon* 1.5.22, or *In Hippocratis aphorismos commentaria* 2.34.6

10 *In Hippocratis librum de officina medici commentarii* iii 18.823.5

11 *Luke* 24.7

determined this passion for himself from all aspects according to his own authority. ‘For it is necessary, he says (Δεῖ, γάρ φησι), for the Son of man’, not that the Son of man is to experience this or that (τὰ καὶ τὰ πείσεται) as if someone were simply forecasting the future (προαγορεύων τὸ μέλλον) but that the necessary must come about by some secret reason (τὸ ἀναγκαίως κατὰ τινα λόγον ἀπόρητον γενέσθαι)... [whence the disciples are] obliged to dogmatize in this manner by his statement: ‘It is necessary for the Son of man to suffer many things and be rejected and crucified and rise again on the third day’¹².

The brevity in Christ’s utterance carries a certain foreboding in the baldness of the absolute; and Gregory’s way of demonstrating this stark sense of necessity is to show how the narrative avoids any air of the coincidental. By means of economy, the inevitable is reinforced, where extra words could only have compromised what needs to be conveyed. So he did not say X as well as Y but only Y. Luke therefore makes a fruitful omission, which Gregory elsewhere notes in the phrase: ‘Great is our Lord, and great is his power; his understanding is beyond measure’ (referring to *Psalms* 147.5). ‘So what does this mean?’ he asks. “Great is our Lord”. He did not say how great – for it was not possible to express how much (οὐδὲ γὰρ ἦν δυνατόν εἰπεῖν τὸ πόσον) – but with the indefinite nature of the meaning (τῷ ἀορίστῳ τῆς σημασίας), he guides the mind toward the infinite (ἐπὶ τὸ ἄπειρον ὁδηγεῖ τὴν διάνοιαν).’ Similarly, ‘Great is his power’, just as God’s understanding is beyond measure (τῆς συνέσεως αὐτοῦ οὐκ ἔστιν ἀριθμὸς)¹³.

Structurally speaking, this thoroughly Byzantine formula is apophatic. It follows a logic akin to the belief that we cannot say what God is but only what God is not. We cannot ever sufficiently identify the full virtue of the evangelist’s sentence; but we can make room for its pregnancy by showing what the evangelist does not say. In hatching some inferior locution, the exegete expands the imaginative scope of the reader. The pious listener who might otherwise encounter scripture passively is suddenly invited to build the utterance in his or her mind because an alternative wording has been conjectured – one that was discarded before it was written – that enables the reader to understand better the meaning that mysteriously inheres in the original text.

It is no accident that this apophatic method developed in the epoch when apophatic theology arose and began to be theorized. The way that Gregory speaks is no more coincidental or capricious than the biblical source that he analyses. Writing in the fourth century, the Cappadocian father propounded a belief in the infinity of God; and the consequence of this limitlessness is that divinity is essentially incomprehensible to us as humans created with a necessarily limited mind. In a critical passage in the *Life of Moses*, Gregory reminds us that ‘the divine word forbids (ἀπαγορεύει) humans, first and foremost, to liken (ὁμοιοῦσθαι) the divine to anything known (τῶν γνωσκομένων), since any inkling (ὡς παντὸς νοήματος) that arises by a grasping fantasy within comprehension (κατὰ τινα περιληπτικὴν φαντασίαν ἐν περινοίᾳ) or by guessing at divine nature (στοχασμῷ τῆς θείας φύσεως) forms an idol of God (εἰδωλον Θεοῦ πλάσσοντος) rather than proclaiming the true God (Θεὸν καταγγέλλοντος)’¹⁴.

Accordingly, God should be thought of (and never defined) in terms of what we know God is *not* rather than how we might envisage God with gratuitous speculation. Gregory does not like speculation. It necessarily fails the full extent of divinity. In Gregory’s language, a sense of degree emerges even in thinking of things that seem to be uniquely divine. Invoking grace and the truly blessed – not partly blessed but ‘truly blessed’ (τὸ ὄντως μακάριον) – he considers speculative thought about knowledge idle (ἀργεῖ μὲν ἢ στοχαστικὴ περὶ τὴν γνῶσιν διάνοια). According to Gregory, our hopeful activity is idle (ἀργεῖ... ἢ ἐλπιστικὴ ἡμῶν ἐνέργεια) but he relishes how the ineffable and incomprehensible (ἢ ἄρητος τε καὶ ἀκατανόητος) take over along with the superior state of every

12 *De tridui inter mortem et resurrectionem domini nostri Jesu Christi spatium (vulgo In Christi resurrectionem oratio i)* 9.299.3–9.

13 *De deitate adversus Evagrium (vulgo In suam ordinationem)* 9.339.16–24.

14 *De vita Mosis* 2.165.3–8.

thought (πάσης κρείττων διανοίας κατάστασις), such as ‘neither eye has seen nor ear has heard nor human heart has contained’ (referring to *1 Corinthians* 2.9). For thus the divine apostle defined the good things laid up in holiness (τὰ ἀγαθὰ τὰ ἐν τῷ ἁγιασμῷ ἀποκείμενα)¹⁵. A thought or mentality, then, has a superior state, because whereas we might estimate that a thought is sublime, it is undoubtedly capable of being yet more sublime, way beyond our comprehension, as it approaches divinity.

Perhaps for that reason, Gregory is especially sensitive to imputing redundancies of expression in the *Bible*, which would purport to colour-in what cannot be seen. He considers the thought scandalous: to say that there are empty words (ἀργὸν ῥῆμα) within it is a terrible blasphemy (βλασφημία δεινή) and so he takes delight in proving how grotesque it would be to add descriptions and blight its lexical thrift¹⁶. Poetically enough, Gregory notes that in telling places, the *Bible* does not boast about the creation of language and all its potential for passionate communication; because it says ‘Let us therefore conceive man according to our image and likeness, instead of saying, “We will give him the abundance of speech.”’ Not X but Y. Similarly, Gregory comments: ‘And so, let them be rulers of the fish and the beasts and all. But he did not say, “Let us make man according to our image, and let them be stirred with anger and desire and experience suffering”. For the passions are not embraced in the image of God; rather, [God] is reason, the master of passions, the ruler of all corporeal things, transcending the visible and deceptive (ὑπερανестηκῶς τῶν φαινομένων καὶ ψευδομένων)’¹⁷.

However, when information is lacking in scripture, Gregory feels free to supplement things himself. To the creation narrative, he adds this interpretation: ‘The Lord God...deems it worthy to shape our body with his own hand (ἰδίᾳ χειρὶ διαπλάσαι). He did not command an angel (οὐ προσέταξεν ἀγγέλῳ), nor did the earth spontaneously cast us forth like cicadas; he did not say, “Let this and that be done (τόδε καὶ τόδε ποιῆσαι) by ministering powers (λειτουργικαῖς δυνάμεσιν)” but lovingly crafted [us] with his own hand (ἰδίᾳ χειρὶ φιλοτεχνεῖ)’¹⁸. Of course the phrase ‘with his own hand’ can be metaphorical; but just the same, it is surely worth pointing out – as if we are learning from Gregory’s own method – that *Genesis* does not tell us that God used his hand. We could imagine that God made Adam and Eve ‘single-handedly’ but we cannot accurately know the manual methods and whether they involved agents and various materials of an already animated kind. So when Gregory observes that he did not give instructions to builders, all that we can conclude is that scripture did not record these protocols, not that they did not exist¹⁹. Or if scripture records how God told Adam to eat food produced by trees, it does not necessarily mean, as Gregory assumes, that God did not also authorize other forms of farming and eating, as if God could not have said something to Adam that we do not know about, as if scripture gives a comprehensive record of everything that God ever said to Adam. But even if you can fault the logic in strictly formal terms, Gregory’s point is well made: the text does not say X but Y and there is likely to be a reason which could well be poetic and theologically significant. For instance, when Jesus refers to his name, he does not say his name (οὐκ εἶπε· Τὸ ὄνομά μου) but ‘the name of the Lord (τὸ ὄνομα Κυρίου)’²⁰. In such instances, Christ presents himself as the institution of God rather than just the personal identity of the living man that he was. The observation is sensitive and helpful.

It would be wrong to conclude that this apophatic construction of ‘he did not say X but Y’ is essentially about gaps. It is more the contrary. The formula is often introduced to bolster an argument, not to explore a mystery. Eusebius, for example, uses our construction in an argument for

15 *In inscriptiones Psalmorum* 5.68.23-69.5.

16 *De creatione hominis sermo primus* 28.2.

17 *De creatione hominis sermo primus* (recensio C) 13a.13-14a.4.

18 *De creatione hominis sermo alter* 43.3-7.

19 *De creatione hominis sermo alter* 48.13-49.3.

20 *Testimonia adversus Judaeos* 46.200.23.

zero tolerance, where he feels that views contrary to good doctrine should not be entertained and their professors should be excluded from the conversation:

it is fitting that such a person be rightly treated as a common enemy, like the deceitful dragon in paradise who, speaking against God, tricked Eve. Let us neither speak evil nor give ear to those who speak. ‘Do not receive empty hearing,’ it says; it did not say, ‘Do not believe’ but rather ‘Do not receive.’ Therefore, the Prophet says, ‘I drove away the one who spoke against me.’[*cf. Psalms 100*] He did not say, ‘I did not believe,’ or ‘I did not accept what was said,’ but rather, ‘I also drove them away as an enemy’²¹.

The instructions are not mild and indulgent but arch and exclusive: banish not only the thought but the people who traffic it! The lexical technique sometimes has a practical application. For example, how do we know that the Garden of Eden was on earth rather than in heaven? Check out the wording, we are advised. Epiphanius reveals the directional verbs: ‘As for paradise, it says, “In Eden towards the east,” and “a spring was welling up (ἀνέβαινεν) from Eden,” and it did not say “coming down (κατέβαινεν),” so that we would not think that Eden is in heaven. For if it were in heaven, it would have said that the spring descends (κατέρχεται) from above (ἄνωθεν). But it says, “a river proceeds (ἐκπορεύεται) from Eden,” and it did not say it descends (οὐκ εἶπε κατέρχεται)’²². For Epiphanius, too, it is significant that Christ does not say to the dead Lazarus: “arise (ἀνάστηθι),” nor did he touch the hand of the tomb. Instead, in his ready authority, he called Lazarus thus, “Lazarus, come out (δεῦρο ἔξω)”²³. This sense of direction and agency within a space compares with his observation about the annunciation. ‘That good-news-bearer himself said to Mary: “The Spirit of the Lord will come upon you (ἐπελεύσεται ἐπὶ σέ),” and it did not say, “The Spirit of the Lord will be generated in you (γενήσεται ἐν σοί)”²⁴. If positioning corporal experience in these narratives is important, the diction gives valuable clues. For example, although John said that nobody ever saw God, Epiphanius reminds us that Isaiah saw God visually and not merely that he saw God in his imagination:

But one who perceives this and closely connects the words according to his understanding might say that each person sees God in the mind (ἐν τῷ νῷ... ὁρᾷ τὸν θεόν), for it is not with the eyes (οὐ γὰρ ὀφθαλμοῖς). However, the divine word contradicts this, stating through the prophet Isaiah, ‘...I have seen the Lord of hosts with my eyes (εἶδον τοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς μου).’ And it did not say with the mind or in thought (τῷ νῷ, οὐδὲ ἐν τῇ ἐννοίᾳ) but with the eyes (τοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς), affirming the true and firm foundation of faith. So, what should we say when the *Gospel* says that no one has seen God, while the prophets and apostles declare [that they have seen God], as well as the Lord himself²⁵?

Potentially, therefore, these readings yield embarrassments; and although Epiphanius believes that he can rescue the situation, the apophatic analysis is a powerful tool that could inadvertently support dangerous conclusions. We do not have the texts of the Arians or Sabellians or any other so-called heresy; but they would undoubtedly have drawn upon the same apophatic method to argue in a way divergent from Orthodoxy. Indeed Epiphanius uses our method to underscore an uncomfortable course of last resort, where a presbyter feels the need to challenge a bishop. Paul says that witnesses are called for if someone accuses a presbyter but ‘he did not write that one should not receive accusations (μὴ δέξη κατηγορίαν) of a bishop against a presbyter, nor did he write to any presbyter

21 *Commentaria in Psalmos* 23.1245.12-22.

22 Text in TLG described only as ‘Chapter’ 58.1.2-7.

23 Text in TLG described only as ‘Chapter’ 100.5.3-8.

24 *Panarion* (= *Adversus haereses*) 2.320.13 ‘Ἐἴτά φησι· «καὶ αὐτὸ τὸ εὐαγγέλιον ἔφη τῇ Μαρίας· πνεῦμα κυρίου ἐπελεύσεται ἐπὶ σέ, καὶ οὐκ εἶπε· πνεῦμα κυρίου γενήσεται ἐν σοί»’.

25 *Panarion* (= *Adversus haereses*) 3.239.3-14.

not to rebuke (ἐπιπλήττειν) a bishop²⁶. The protocols do not quite authorize insurgency but they also do not prevent complaints informing the organization of the church when they are just.

The apophatic structure of analysis does not always follow the exact formula ‘he did not say X but Y’. It can vary and still have much the same meaning, as in Athanasios where the rhetorical artefact is cast as a question which is then answered: “She will bear a Son.” Why did it not say, “And she will bear a son for you (τέξεται δέ σοι)?”. Answer: Because he [Jesus] was not destined to be born for him [Joseph] alone but for the whole inhabited world (τῇ οἰκουμένη πάση)²⁷. The logic of the formula allows it to function either as a question or a statement.

In a world where every biblical utterance may be understood allegorically, there is much pressure to interpret scripture for the sake of either dogmatic conclusions or typological matches between *Old* and *New Testament*. A charming example is Basil, Gregory’s famous brother, who creates a nice analogy between Mosaic practice and Christian baptism:

we remember what Moses said about washing (περι λουτροῦ). For he who touches...something unclean and becomes defiled (μιανθεῖς) shall wash his clothes and bathe his body in water and will be clean (καθαρὸς ἔσται). But he did not say ‘wash yourselves for every defilement (ἐφ’ ἐκάστῳ μολυσμῶ)’ but only wash. One baptism, one purification. There, wash the clothes and bathe the body in water; here ‘put away the evil deeds’²⁸...

I think one could suspect this passage as being slightly tendentious insofar as the unique wash for all instances of stain stretches the source²⁹ to parallel the sacrament of baptism; but Basil is in any case not very fond of recurrent washing and despises the aftercare of perfumes: in the same place, he does not want you to busy yourself (περιεργάζου) with frankincense and calamus and myrrh. The *Old Testament* presents many conundrums that the apophatic exegetical method explores in its sympathy for paradox and contrasts. An example is Origen’s discussion of God’s practice of deception, which must be construed as instructional rather than malicious:

These things are due to the deception from God, since the prophet said: ‘You deceived me, Lord, and I was deceived’ [referring to *Jeremiah* 20.7]; let us also consider the ‘I was deceived’ part. Why did he not say only that ‘You deceived me, Lord,’ but also added ‘and I was deceived’? Sometimes it is possible to conceive of someone executing the deception actively, while another is on guard to be deceived and is not deceived³⁰.

God is not shown to be evil in this anecdote, as if the deception is a moral outrage. Rather, the awareness of having been deceived is a way to understand a mistake: the error, for which we humans must be responsible, is revealed, and the episode with its trick is instructional. The lesson of the deception is valuable; and in this admittedly painful humiliation, Jeremiah acknowledges that he was fooled but thereby gains in humility. Origen correctly separates the two moments, one an impulse by God and the other an effect on the prophet. Thus, though the word appears to be repeated, its second instance is not a redundancy. Like Gregory, Origen is puzzled by apparently unnecessary words in scripture and is keen to explain them in a constructive spirit. For instance: ‘Who will reveal the face of his clothing? Why did he not say: “Who will reveal his face?” What does the “clothing” do here? “For who”, he says – referring to *Jeremiah* 41.13 – “will reveal the face of his clothing³¹?”. Again, there is a variation in the formula, which could run ‘he did not say X+Y but only X’. But it reflects

26 *Panarion* 3.337.31.

27 *Quaestiones in evangelia* 28.701.7.

28 *Enarratio in prophetam Isaiam* 1.38.22-30.

29 *Leviticus* 15.13.

30 *In Jeremiam (homiliae 1–20)* 20.4.32-40.

31 *Homiliae in Job* (fragmenta in catenis, typus II) (e codd. Marc. gr. 21, 538) 17.101.22-27.

the same apophatic impulse, where an author observes the diction used in scripture and creates an imaginative alternative expression that is less to the purpose. Thus, by contemplating what the text does not say, the poignancy or accuracy or economy of the original text is better understood.

Some Byzantine patristic authors use the formula more than others. The most profligate in this sense is John Chrysostom. There are something like 400 instances of ‘he did not say X but Y’ throughout his writing; and although he was among the most prolific of Byzantine authors, the high number surely indicates that he found the template sympathetic to his thinking. As you could predict from the analysis so far, the uses that Chrysostom put the apophatic formula to are varied; but they mainly centre either on poetic nuance in religious feeling or argumentative logic in matters of dogma.

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The aim of this paper is not to concentrate on particular authors and their inclination to use the formula in specific ways in the middle Byzantine period. It would be exhausting to cover so many intricate cases. Instead, this paper has concentrated on the origins and meaning of the phrase in their apophatic sympathies; and to this end it is worth observing how keenly the formula arises in theological questions about the Trinity.

Whatever difficulty Philo may have encountered in imagining a positive manifestation of God, the task had become more complicated with Christianity. In one sense, God had become more palpable through the new religion with its incarnation of the second hypostasis in the Trinity. There was a person or version of God who is a man, the man Jesus who is also God; but Jesus is only one person in the Trinity and he is not God the Father, who in turn is not the Holy Spirit, both of whom are hard to figure; and even Jesus, as the Word incarnate, is hard to fathom in his everlasting existence as the Logos who was in the beginning. It should be no surprise, therefore, that questions were constantly asked in the post-Nicaean period about the uniqueness or plurality of God and that these anxieties would invite the use of our formula.

The fear of redundancy that we have observed through the apophatic formula reflects a deeper anxiety of uncomfortable overlap in the Trinity, where one is three and three are one. A theologian might worry about wasted words in the same way that a theologian might worry about redundancies within God who has three persons and yet is not divided: the Son who is also the Logos or causal reason (but what would the Father be without the same reason? and why would he lack something that he himself begat?) and the Holy Spirit who would appear to be nothing but the same animating property that is also in the Father and the Son. It is hard to see a coherent basis for distinguishing these parts or aspects of God, awkwardly named ‘persons’ or substances (hypostases), two concepts themselves in apparent contradiction.

It is remarkable how often Orthodox theologians look for evidence of the plurality of God through our apophatic construction. ‘God did not say I but we’. It occurs in Gregory of Nyssa: ‘Why then did he not say, “I will make a man,” but rather, “Let us make”³²? This is done, he thinks, so that you understand the equal authority (ἴσῃν δεσποτεῖαν) of the persons in the Trinity but he rapidly extrapolates, ‘so that recognizing the Son, you may not be ignorant of the Father; so that you may know that the Father created through the Son (διὰ υἱοῦ), and the Son established things according to the Father’s will (ἔκτισε πατρώῳ θελήματι) and that you may glorify the Father in the Son and the Son in the Holy Spirit.’ Gregory is right, of course, that the first-person verb is not singular (ποιήσω) but plural (ποιήσωμεν) but this use of *pluralis maiestatis* does not necessarily mean what Gregory wishes. Nevertheless, his expression through our formula yields a poetic integrity: we have to be a common worshiper of both (κοινὸς προσκυνητῆς ἀμφοτέρων), not dividing the worship (μὴ σχίζων τὴν προσκύνησιν) but uniting the divinity (ἐνῶν τὴν θεότητα).

32 *Antirrheticus adversus Apollinarium* 3.1.159.4; cf. the same in *De creatione hominis sermo primus* 6.16.

Such thoughts are often rehearsed in patristic writing. Epiphanius directly insists that the verb in *Genesis* ‘does not signify a single person, but the Father speaking to the Son.’ Inverting our formula, he notes that ‘The Father says, “Let us make man in our image and according to our likeness,” and he did not say, “Let me make man in my image”³³. From which he tells us to ‘learn that the Son is always with the Father’. Exploiting these numbers in the conjugation of the verb runs into stress, because the ‘plural of majesty’ is not proof of any literal plurality, just as Epiphanius, for example, stretches logic in drawing any conclusions from the phrase ““And they shall call His name Emmanuel.” It does not say, “I will call his name,” but “they shall call”³⁴. If God predicts or instructs that they shall call his name Emmanuel, it has the same value as saying: he shall be known as Emmanuel, which in turn, given God’s power, is the same as saying ‘I will call him Emmanuel’.

Epiphanius uses our formula to show how the persons of the Trinity are considered separate in scripture. John, for example is cited: ““And the Word became flesh”. He did not say, “The Spirit became flesh,” nor did he say, “Christ, the man, was born”³⁵. Trinitarian debates were explosively divisive and every piece of evidence would be used either to support the distinctness or equality or agreement of the persons. Epiphanius tries to contain those who are ‘led astray, under the deception of Arius’ who might think that ‘only the Father is truly God and that the Son is a god but not truly so’. But his refutation is awkward: Christ, he reminds us, declares ‘I am the true light that enlightens every person coming into the world’, whereas ‘regarding the Father, he says, “God is light,” and he did not say, “true light,” so that from the expressions “God is true” and “light is true,” we may understand the equal divinity of the Father to the Son and the Son to the Father’³⁶. The sentence strains for coherence. The apophatic formula gives the writing a philological air but it does not guarantee a logical case. As if it clinched something very profound, Epiphanius repeats these apparently flimsy distinctions using our formula:

in the Gospel according to John, it says, ‘The true light was (ἦν τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινόν).’ And what true light is there other than the Only Begotten? Again, the scriptures say about God, ‘God is light,’ and it does not say ‘God is the true light.’ But concerning the only begotten Son of God, it says, ‘The only begotten is the true light.’ About the Father, it says, ‘God is the true God,’ and it does not say ‘the true light is God.’ But concerning the Son, it says, ‘He is God,’ and it adds ‘and the Son is true God,’ without appending ‘the true light.’ And wherever it says, ‘God is light,’ it does not add ‘the true light’³⁷.

The stress of finding any conclusive patterns in these fine distinctions is greater than the insights that they afford. With similar obsessiveness, interpreting *John* 17.21, Epiphanius uses our formula to explain that ‘the phrase “we are one” does not signify singularity. For it did not say, “I am one,” but “you and I”’. Epiphanius goes on to suggest that ‘the expression “we are one” is intended to refute Sabellius and his doctrine, which posits that the Son and the Father are mixed together, and similarly, the Father with the Holy Spirit’. Against this motif, Epiphanius reasons that Jesus ‘says “we are one,” and he did not say, “I am one”’. There are indeed two perfect entities, Father and Son, yet [they are also] one due to their equality, through the one divinity, one power, and one likeness’³⁸. Such lines are picked over again and again with the same apophatic formula, demonstrating that Father and Son have a distinct hypostasis each (ἐνυπόστατον)³⁹. Elsewhere the issue is the respective dignity of Father and Son but expressed through the same formula; because when scripture says ‘that all may honour the Son just as they honour the Father’, Epiphanius is quick to add that it ‘did not say some

33 28.1.5.

34 32.10.2.

35 *Panarion* 2.321.8.

36 *Panarion* 2.397.21.

37 *Panarion* 3.181.14.

38 *Panarion* 3.217.30.

39 *Panarion* 2.393.3.

yes and some no (τινὰς ναὶ καὶ τινὰς οὐ) but “so that all may honour the Son, just as they honour the Father”. Therefore, do not dishonour (ἀτίμαζε) the Son, lest you dishonour the Father⁴⁰.

In many ways, the discourse is against nature, because the natural understanding of paternity is to confer congenital characteristics upon offspring that did not exist prior to conception. This motif must be categorically rejected, for which Basil has ready recourse to our formula. Basil seeks to discredit the idea of offspring (γέννημα) as a significant substance (οὐσία...σημαντικόν): Peter, he observed, ‘did not say, “You are the offspring;” but rather, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God”. And Paul, having filled all his writing with the designation of the Son, nowhere appears to have mentioned the offspring (οὐδαμοῦ φανήσεται γεννήματος μνημονεύσας)’⁴¹.

The Church fathers needed precision in their reading of scripture; and the formula ‘he did not say X but Y’ affords an ingenious kind of reflexion in reading, part hermeneutic scrupulosity and part doctrinal straw man. In speculative contexts, this rhetorical object provides a means of imagining interpretations that are less than perfect in order to identify what is instead perfectly written. And in polemical contexts, it seems to provide a way of momentarily taking the adversary’s side, only to deflect the spurious suggestions by returning to what the text actually says. In all cases, the formula adds great authority to the exegesis, adding a philological basis for the insight or dogmatic conviction. As we have seen, it is used for probing subjective moods as well as supporting official doctrine; and although the formula is often invoked for dogmatic purposes, it is by nature apophatic and hence inherently sympathetic to speculation, to a way of imagining what cannot be imagined, the truly unimaginable which is of course the highest quest in the period: to reach toward God in a way that does not diminish the immeasurable superiority of divinity.

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40 *Panarion* 3.227.10.

41 *Adversus Eunomium* 29.584.38.