

ὑποταγῆσεται IN 1 CORINTHIANS 15:28b

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In the second clause in 1 Cor 15:28, the verb ὑποταγῆσεται can be translated in two major ways, which alter the translation a great deal.¹ The options in English are (a) Christ *is subjected* (by God, in this case—the passive voice) or (b), Christ *subjects himself* (to God—the middle voice). The clause containing the verb reads in the critical editions as well as in the TR:² τότε [καὶ] αὐτὸς ὁ υἱὸς ὑποταγῆσεται τῷ ὑποτάξαντι αὐτῷ τὰ πάντα. “When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself *will also be subjected* to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all” (NRSV, emphasis supplied).

My attention was drawn to these distinctly different options when I was doing my own translation for the commentary on 1 Corinthians for the Bible Amplifier Series (Pacific Press). Without hesitation, when I came to this verb I chose the middle voice of the Greek verb, which has Christ initiating the act of subjection, rather than the passive voice that has God initiating Christ’s subjection.

This presented a problem. The Bible Amplifier Series uses the NIV as the base text, and the NIV uses the passive voice for this verb. When I turned to my own favorite English versions, the RSV and NRSV, to see what they had done, I found that both versions, along with the KJV and NKJV, had chosen the passive voice. Why, I asked, do the major translations choose the passive voice rather than the middle voice—the one that seemed so natural to me?³

¹Our concern in this paper is with the English translations. See n. 5 below regarding non-English translations.

²The only difference between the two critical editions (UBS 4 and Nestle-Aland 27) and the TR is that the TR does not have the bracketed καὶ. In the UBS text the brackets indicate uncertainty about the authenticity of the word. This difference does not materially affect the issue.

³The issue here is not over the question as to whether a future “middle” even exists. The uncertain status of this question is reflected in the following comments: Robertson argues that “fundamentally these so-called second future passives are really future middles” (356-357). G. G. Findlay writes that “in 1 Cor. 15:28, ὑποταγῆσεται, the passive may bear middle force” (*St. Paul’s First Epistle to the Corinthians*, *The Expositor’s Greek New Testament*, ed. W. R. Nicoll, [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961], 809). Moulton avers that “the future passive form takes over the uses of the vanishing future middle forms” (819). And Blass and DeBrunner further state, “The conjugation -σομαι, etc. is no longer used in a passive sense, only

An examination of the major lexicons shows that the verb in 1 Cor 15:28b is cited both as an example of a passive voice and an example of the middle voice.⁴

In checking thirty-six English translations of the verse⁵ I found the following: fourteen translate ὑποταγήσεται as an obvious passive (“the Son himself will be subjected” / “will be made subject”) or similar⁶; twelve translate it as an ambiguous passive, that is, the act of subjection is not specifically tied to Christ as initiator or to God as initiator of the act of submission (“the Son himself will be subject) or similar.⁷ Ten translate the verb as a middle voice, in which Christ himself acts rather than being acted upon.⁸

The flow of Paul’s argument throughout 1 Corinthians seems to favor the middle voice. Paul is confronting opponents who are arrogant and

(θ)ησομαι” (*A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961], 43). Bauer gives the following option: “sich unterordnen” and then cites 1 Cor. 15:28b as an example (*Griechisch-deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der frühchristlichen Literatur*, 6th ed. [New York: W. de Gruyter, 1988]).

⁴Arndt and Gingrich (*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 1957); Walter Bauer; Henry George Liddell, et. al. (*A Greek-English Lexicon* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973]); and George Abbott-Smith (*A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*, 3d ed. [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1937]).

⁵A random check of non-English translations shows that many of these translations use the middle voice in 1 Cor 15:28b. For example, I found the following non-English translations of the middle voice: two German Bibles: *The German Einheitsübersetzung der Heiligen Schrift* (1980), *The German Schlachter Version* (1951); two Dutch: *The Dutch Revised Leidse Vertaling* (1912/1994), *The Dutch Nederlands Bijbelgenootschap Vertaling* (1951); one Italian: *Nuovissima Versione della Bibbia San Paolo Edizione* (1995-1996); three Spanish: *La Biblia de Las Americas* (1986), *The Spanish Reina-Valera Bible* (1909), *Spanish Reina Valera Revised* (1960 and 1995); one Russian: *The Russian Synodal Text of the Bible* (Orthodox Synodal Edition, 1917); one Ukrainian: *The Ukrainian Version of the Bible* (1996); two Danish: *The Danish Bible—Bibelen—Den hellige skrifs kanoniske bøger* (NT 1907) and *De Hellige Skrifter* (1933); two French: *French Bible de Jérusalem* (1973), *French Bible “en français courant”* (1997); one Norwegian: *Norwegian Norsk Bibel Konkordant* (3d ed., 1994); and three Brazilian Portuguese: *João Ferreira de Almeida, Revista e Atualizada* (2d ed., 1993), *João Ferreira de Almeida, Revista e Corrigida* (1969), *João Ferreira de Almeida, Corrigida Fiel* (1994/1995).

⁶NIV, ASV, RSV, NRSV, NEB, Confraternity, Revised English, New Jerusalem Bible, New American Bible (1986), The Bible in Living English, Moffatt, The Modern Reader’s Bible, The Emphasized Bible, English Version for the Deaf.

⁷KJV, NKJV, Douay Version, Geneva, Lamsa’s Translation, Tyndale Version, Illuminated Bible, Clear Word, Jerusalem Bible, Knox’s Translation, Young’s Translation, Basic English Version.

⁸New American Bible (1970), Amplified Bible, Berkeley Version, New Berkeley Version, Contemporary English Version, Modern Language, Living Bible, New Living Translation, TEV, and Phillips.

boastful, even puffed up about their immoral behavior, and who are defiant toward Paul's apostleship. Therefore, it seems to be a natural conclusion to see Paul citing Christ's own act of submission as an argument against his opponents' lack of such an attitude. To argue that *God subjects Christ* (the passive voice) would make the comment completely irrelevant to the case that Paul wishes to make.

An obvious question to ask here is: Does the middle voice not only make sense in 15:28, where the immediate context seems to call for it,⁹ but does it coincide with Paul's theology elsewhere? Furthermore, do the translators of the NRSV lend support to a translation in the middle voice in 15:28 by what they did with a similar verb elsewhere?¹⁰

Considering the latter question first, the same verb with the same voice-form occurs in two places in 1 Corinthians. We noted above the obvious passive in the NRSV translation of 15:28. In 16:16, however, the same translators made the same verb, with a middle/passive form, read the middle option: "I urge you to *put yourselves* (ὑποτάσσηθε—present passive) at the service of such people, and of everyone who works and toils with them." Thus the translators had no problem in seeing the middle voice ("yourselves") in the very next chapter of 1 Corinthians.¹¹

This information led me to make a quick check of the translations of

⁹Just a few verses earlier (v. 24), Paul explicitly states that *Christ himself* is responsible for a key act at the end, namely, "*he hands over the kingdom to God the Father*" (emphasis supplied). It seems incongruous to suggest that Paul has Christ initiate the act of handing over the kingdom to God at the end and then suggests a few verses later that the same Christ who initiates an act in 15:24 needs to be subjected (passive) in 15:28b.

¹⁰A note about commentaries and scholarly articles. Commentaries on 1 Corinthians either do not discuss this issue or they offer a passive voice translation and/or comment. Out of fifty-four commentaries I found the following: Sixteen neither have a translation or a comment on the issue. Thirty-six translate it as passive and/or comment on the clause as passive. The remaining two, John Calvin's and R.C.H. Lenski's commentaries, held that the voice was middle. Lenski observed that "here the thought calls for the middle sense" (*The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, Commentary on the New Testament [Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1963], 683).

With rare exceptions, scholarly articles on the passage do not address this specific issue. Although Lambrecht in a 1982 *NTS* study (28:502-527) wrote that the verb is passive, he modified his position in a 1990 article in *Novum Testamentum* (32:143-151) in which he wrote, "The idea of v. 28b clearly refers to that of v. 24b: to be subjected (or to subject himself)" (151). In another essay, Jansen wrote the following words in support of the continuation of the Incarnation at the end: "The glory of God—surely the climax of 1 Cor 15:24-28—includes Jesus Christ and finds its fullest expression in his willing subjection rather than his disappearance" (*SJT* 40:570).

¹¹A comparison between the verses revealed a key similarity. Both 1 Cor 15:28b and 16:16 contain the personal pronoun in front of the verb. In 15:28, the pronoun is "αυτος" and in 16:16 the pronoun is "υμεις," but both pronouns are used in the same way.

ὑποτασσω in all NT passages. This information was very helpful. The verb occurs thirty-seven times in the NT in thirty-one verses. Of these thirty-seven instances, eight are active voice and, therefore, not relevant. Of the twenty-nine remaining references in which the translation may show a middle voice or a passive voice, the NRSV translates twenty of them as middle, six of them as passive, and three as ambiguous, meaning that they may be understood as either!¹²

Of even greater significance, however, is the fact that we have a similar attitude of submission and humility on Christ's part, which is cited by Paul in his letter to the Philippians, where he also faced the problem of church members selfishly promoting themselves. Notice both the setting and the message from Phil 2:3-8:

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. *Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.*

We have, therefore, Paul facing difficult situations at both Corinth and Philippi in which church members were exalting themselves at the expense of fellow believers. In addressing the instance at Philippi, Paul cites the remarkable attitude of Christ as a means of getting the message of unselfish love across.

There is no dispute over Christ *initiating the act* of humbling himself in Phil 2:7-8. It seems, therefore, that with reference to 1 Cor 15:28b, where there is a question over translation, both the Corinthian setting and the Philippian setting offer persuasive evidence that Paul uses Christ as an example of *initiating the act* of humbling (Philippians) and submission (Corinthians) to make his case for a changed attitude and behavior on the part of the church members.

Based on these considerations, therefore, the English translation of ὑποταγήσεται in 1 Cor 15:28b should reflect the middle voice and read, "When all things are subjected to him, then the Son *will also subject himself* to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all."

¹²The twenty passages with a middle-voice translation are: Luke 2:51; 10:17, 20; Rom 8:7, 20; 10:3; 1 Cor 14:34, 16:16; Eph 5:21, 24; Col 3:18; Titus 2:5, 9; 3:1; Heb 12:9; Jas 4:7; 1 Pet 2:13, 18; and 1 Pet 3:1, 5. Blass and Debrunner indicate that the future passive is the only form of this verb in the NT and should be translated with the middle force (43).