

THE FUNCTION OF ‘LIKEWISE’ (ὩΣΑΥΤΩΣ) IN ROMANS 8:26

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Paul uses the comparative adverb ὡσαύτως in Romans 8:26 to compare the Spirit’s ministry of helping Christians in their weakness to something he had written previously. Interpreters of this text, however, have not been able to reach a consensus in their attempts to identify the antecedent subject of the comparison. This article proposes a fresh consideration of the view that Paul is comparing the Spirit’s ministry in 8:26 to the Spirit’s ministry in 8:16.

I. Introduction

Students familiar with Paul’s letter to the Christians at Rome are well aware that 8:26 presents the interpreter with a handful of exegetical challenges. What is ‘our weakness’? Who is interceding, the Spirit or the believer assisted by the Spirit? Is the ‘groaning’ a reference to glossolalia or something else?

One exegetical difficulty that has not received the attention it deserves is the function of the comparative adverb ‘likewise’ (hereafter: ὡσαύτως). This is rather surprising given the fact that, by using it as he does here, Paul is saying that 8:26 is logically connected to—and thus dependent upon—something he has previously said. A satisfactory solution to this problem might also help to pry open other exegetical doors in this verse.

Frequently scholars have a tendency simply to state their views on the function of ὡσαύτως. This has the effect of allowing them to pass over the difficulties attached to their views. In this study, I hope to demonstrate two things: first, that the standard interpretations of the function of ὡσαύτως in Romans 8:26 are burdened by difficulties and thus remain unsatisfying; and, second, that the function of ὡσαύτως can be established with reasonable certainty.

II. Some Common Interpretations

The RSV translates Romans 8:26 in the following manner: ‘Likewise (lit. ‘in the same way also’ [ὡσαύτως δὲ καί]¹), the Spirit helps us in our weakness.’ In this verse, the Spirit’s ministry of assisting believers is being compared to something Paul has just written. Our task is to identify that ‘something’. If the Spirit helps the believers’ weakness ‘in the same way also’, then we must answer the question: ‘In the same way *as what?*’

The adverb ὡσαύτως most often links propositions that are in close proximity to one another, which may have prompted some scholars to suggest that Paul is comparing ‘the Spirit’ in 8:26 to ‘the hope’ of 8:25. John Murray is a representative of this view: ‘In the preceding verses the accent falls upon the *sufferings* and the *support* afforded in these; in verses 26, 27 the accent falls upon our *infirmary* and the *help* given for its relief. As hope sustains us in suffering, so the Spirit helps our infirmity.’²

C.E.B. Cranfield, for one, rejects this connection and suggests, in its place, that the comparison is to be found in the ‘groanings’ which creation, believers and the Spirit all share in common. ‘The intended comparison (ὡσαύτως) can hardly be “as we wait patiently, so the Spirit helps”, nor yet “as hope sustains us, so the Spirit also sustains us”, but must surely be between the creation’s and our groaning (8:22, 23) and the Spirit’s groaning, in spite of the fact that the keyword στεναγμός is not introduced in the first part of the verse, but only at the very end.’³

¹ The Same construction appears in Mk. 14:31 and Lk. 10:31.

² *The Epistle of the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965) 310-11 (italics original). Cf. C. Hodge: ‘As hope sustains, so, in the same manner, the Spirit does also’ (*A Commentary on Romans* [London: Banner of Truth, 1972] 278.). Recently, D. Moo has adopted this view: ‘Now he [Paul] says, ‘In the same way [as the hope sustains us; ὡσαύτως ...], the Spirit comes to our aid also’ (*Romans 1-8* [WEC; 2 vols.; Chicago: Moody Press, 1991] 1.559).

³ *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (ICC; 2vols.; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975-79) 1.421. Cf. also W. Sanday and A.C. Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1902) 213; A. Nygren, *Commentary on*

Cranfield is correct to reject the view represented by Murray. It is awkward to compare 'the Spirit', who is described in 8:26 as actively sustaining believers, to 'hope' in 8:25. Paul does say that we hope, but he does not say here that this hope sustains us. Indeed, the 'weakness' of 8:26 certainly suggests otherwise, implying that the believers' hope is neither strong nor steady enough, especially in the face of the intense tribulation described in 8:31-39. This interpretation also suffers by not taking into account the probability that Paul is comparing two works of the Spirit. However, Cranfield's alternative, that the link is being made to the previously mentioned 'groaning', does not account for what appears to be the *primary* point of comparison. Again, Paul is comparing the Spirit's ministry of bearing up the believers' weakness to something he has referred to before; the Spirit's groaning (as Cranfield admits) is not even mentioned until *later* in 8:26. Why would Paul use a comparative adverb here at all unless he wanted to compare the work of the Spirit (bearing up weakness), which immediately follows it, to something alike or similar— in the preceding context?

More recently, James D.G. Dunn has suggested that the antecedent reference of ὡσαύτως is to be found in 8:23: 'The reference back is clearly to 8:23, πνεῦμα being the immediate link word.'⁵ Dunn's proposal demonstrates an awareness that the subject of the comparison is, in fact, the Spirit and his work. Thus, by simply identifying the most recent occurrence of 'Spirit', he is able to make what he considers to be the logical connection.

Romans (trans by C.C. Rasmussen; Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1949) 336.

⁴ The adverb ὡσαύτως may function as a 'mild comparative', translated 'similarly' (i.e., alike, but not exactly the same), or as a stronger comparative, translated 'likewise' or 'in the same way'. Cf. W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, revised and augmented by F.W. Gingrich and F.W. Danker from W. Bauer's fifth edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979) criticism by adopting one nuance of the word over the other.

⁵ *Romans* (WBC; 2 vols.; Dallas: Word, 1988) 1.476.

Dunn's proposal has problems, however. It is true that there is a specific reference to the Spirit in 8:23, but in that verse πνεῦμα occurs in the genitive case, serving to modify 'first fruits'. The Spirit is not *actively* working. Rather, he is described (passively) as the believers' unique possession. This stretches the comparative of 8:26 to the point of snapping. 'We have the first fruits of the Spirit' does not easily correspond to 'the Spirit assists us in our weakness', especially in light of the fact that another antecedent reference in Romans 8 corresponds quite naturally, as will be shown below.

Leon Morris' view shares elements both of Dunn and Murray. Like Dunn, Morris sees correspondence between two works of the Spirit. Like Murray (and unlike Dunn, who sought for an *explicit* antecedent reference to the Spirit), Morris thinks ὡσαύτως refers back to the verse which immediately precedes it. Unlike Murray, Morris does not perceive a comparison between 'hope' and 'the Spirit' at this point; instead, he envisions the Spirit to be found *implicitly* within sustaining hope. He writes: 'It is possible to take [the correspondence indicated by ὡσαύτως] in the sense, "Just as hope sustains them, so also does the Spirit". But as the Spirit is at work in the time of hope, it is better to see the meaning as joining one work of the Spirit to another.'⁶ Due to its commonalities with the views of Dunn and Murray, Morris' view suffers from the same weaknesses as theirs, as identified above.

III. A Better Solution

If the interpreter is to find the antecedent reference which closes the link opened by ὡσαύτως in 8:26, he or she must jump all the way back to 8:16, the most recent verse that *explicitly* describes the work of the Spirit in and for the believer. In other words, Paul is saying: 'Just as the Spirit is at work within our hearts to confirm to us our adoption (8:16), so *in the same way also* the Spirit is at work within our hearts to bear up our weakness (8:26).' To support this interpretation, I offer three exegetical observations.

⁶ *The Epistle of the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 326, n. 109.

First, this function of ὡσαύτως is consistent with other uses of it in the Greek Bible: the linking of a single subject to the performance of two different actions. For example, in Tobit 12:12, the angel Raphael reveals to Tobit and Sarah how he acted on their behalf in two ways: ‘So now, when you and Sarah prayed, it was I who brought and read the record of your prayer before the glory of the Lord, and likewise (ὡσαύτως), whenever you buried the dead, I was with you.’ Here the adverb ὡσαύτως connects two related but not identical works of assistance performed by a single subject, Raphael.

Another example of this function of ὡσαύτως is in Ecclesiasticus 49:7, which describes the ministry of the prophet Jeremiah: ‘For they had maltreated him, who even in the womb had been consecrated a prophet, to pluck up and ruin and destroy, and likewise (ὡσαύτως) to build and to plant.’ Once again we observe a single subject, Jeremiah, performing two related but not identical activities, which are connected by ὡσαύτως. Though at first glance, Jeremiah’s activities appear not to be similar but to be the opposite of each other, they are, in fact, related by being two effects of a singular prophetic ministry.

To be sure, this is not the *only* way ὡσαύτως functions in a sentence. In other contexts it connects one subject performing an identical action on two separate objects (*e.g.*, Dt. 15:17) or two subjects performing a similar action on the same object (Ep. Jer. 28). At this point all we are noting is that there is ample precedent for this specific function of ὡσαύτως in Romans 8:26: connecting two similar actions to a single subject.

The second exegetical observation for the view we are defending strengthens the first one. Romans 8:16 and 8:26 share an obvious common syntactical structure: the same subject operates in relation to a compound verb, a dative substantive, and a first person plural possessive pronoun:

8:16: τὸ πνεῦμα συμμαρτυρεῖ τῷ πνεύματι ἡμῶν

8:26: τὸ πνεῦμα συναντιλαμβάνεται τῇ ἀσθεναίᾳ ἡμῶν

When these two sentences are drawn close together in this way, ὡσαύτως neatly and naturally joins them together. The one subject, the Spirit, performs two similar but not identical actions, ‘testifying with’

and ‘bearing-up with’, in behalf of the same object (the believer).⁷ The rival interpretations surveyed above lack this grammatical precision. Their advocates seem to be uncertain as to whether or not ὡσαύτως has a discernible function in Romans 8:26. In fact, this vagueness may explain why, despite its exegetical importance, a few of the more recent commentaries on Romans have avoided the question altogether.⁸

If only the solution was simply a matter of syntactical structure! The major problem remains the sheer length of material separating 8:16 and 8:26, a rather large gap to be spanned by ὡσαύτως. Compounding this problem is a lack of any example of ὡσαύτως bridging such a gap anywhere else in the Greek Bible. To many interpreters, therefore, the large distance between 8:16 and 8:26 almost automatically disqualifies this interpretation without further consideration.

For the third exegetical observation, then, we need to consider the adverb ‘similarly’ (hereafter: ὁμοίως), which BAGD seems to treat as a virtual synonym for ὡσαύτως.⁹ That the two adverbs may function synonymously is demonstrated by their interchangeable usage in the Septuagint of I Chronicles 28:16-17, for example. This passage, which is part of a description of the plans David gave to Solomon for the temple, reads:

ἔδωκεν αὐτῷ ὁμοίως τὸν σταθμὸν τῶν τραπεζῶν τῆς
προθέσεως, ἐκάστης τραπέζης χρυσεῆς, καὶ ὡσαύτως τῶν
ἀργυρῶν, καὶ τῶν κρεαγρῶν καὶ σπονδείων καὶ τῶν φιαλῶν
τῶν χρυσῶν

Luke 13:1-5 is another, particularly striking, example. Note how 13:5 is a verbatim duplicate of 13:3, except that ὡσαύτως replaces ὁμοίως:

⁷ The argument for connecting 8:26 back to 8:16 is further strengthened by the parallel structure between 8:16 and 8:26c, represented by τὸ αὐτὸ πνεῦμα συμμαρτυρεῖ (8:16) and τὸ αὐτὸ πνεῦμα ὑπερεντυχάνει (8:26c).

⁸ E.g., J. Fitzmeyer, *Romans* (AB, 33; New York: Doubleday, 1992), P. Stuhlmacher, *Paul's Letter to the Romans* (trans. S. Hafemann; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), and J. Ziesler, *Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1989).

⁹ Under ὡσαύτως, BAGD instructs the reader to consult ὁμοίως, and vice versa.

13:3: λέγω ὑμῖν, ἀλλ’ ἐὰν μὴ μετανοῆτε πάντες ὁμοίως ἀπολεισθε

13:5: λέγω ὑμῖν, ἀλλ’ ἐὰν μὴ μετανοῆτε πάντες ὡσαύτως ἀπολεισθε

If it is true that ὡσαύτως and ὁμοίως, as synonyms, may be employed interchangeably, then the outstanding problem of connecting Romans 8:26 to 8:16 (that is, the lack of any clear precedent of ὡσαύτως bridging such an extended gap of material) may be solved. For though we lack such a precedent for ὡσαύτως, we do have one for ὁμοίως: 1 Peter 3:1, which is grammatically dependent on 2:18.

In 1 Peter 2:13, the Apostle issues an exhortation to the churches generally: ‘Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution.’ He then proceeds to apply this specifically to sub-groups within the churches, beginning with the relationship of household servants to their masters (2:18): ‘Servants, be submissive to your masters with all respect.’ Yet beneath this command lurks a difficult and sensitive issue: are household slaves to submit themselves to unjust masters? Indeed, they are to submit to their masters whether they be ‘kind and gentle’ or ‘overbearing’ (2:12b). The obligation of household slaves to submit to their masters does not depend on the character of their masters or whether working conditions are pleasant or harsh, but on the authority of the Lord who commands them (2:13).

The obvious hardship this would have brought to those household slaves who were enduring cruel treatment prompts Peter to digress on the matters of humility and suffering in the Christian life. He encourages the household slaves by reminding them that the same Lord who calls them to endure injustice from the hands of men himself endured such injustice. The pattern of patience in the face of cruelty was established by the (now risen and glorified) Lord. During his earthly life, Jesus ‘passively’ received insult and abuse from wicked men, yet all the while he ‘actively’ entrusted himself to God (2:23), anticipating his eventual vindication. None of Jesus’ sufferings were accidental, but were a part of God’s redemptive plan, rooted in Isaiah’s prophecies of the Suffering Servant (8:22-25).

At the end of this digression, Peter makes a second application of the general theme that he introduced in 2:13. In 3:1 he raises the matter of how Christian wives are to relate to unbelieving husbands. In a

way similar to (but not the same as) the case of Christian household slaves and unjust masters in 2:18, Christian wives must submit to their husbands, even if their husbands are not Christians. For our purposes, it is important to note that 2:18 and 3:1 are linked by the comparative adverb ὁμοίως: Servants be submissive to your masters (2:18); similarly (ὁμοίως), wives be submissive to your husbands (3:1).

It is clear, therefore, that on grammatical, structural and conceptual grounds, ὁμοίως functions to connect 1 Peter 3:1 to 2:18 in a comparative fashion, bridging a lengthy section of material in the process. Further, if ὁμοίως is a synonym for ὡσαύτως, allowing the adverbs to function interchangeably, then it is reasonable to suggest that ὡσαύτως could do elsewhere what ὁμοίως does here: grammatically connect two propositions that are not in close proximity to one another (*i.e.*, in adjoining clauses or sentences). Accordingly, the use of ὁμοίως in 1 Peter 3:1 is a precedent for the specific use of ὡσαύτως that we have been arguing for in Romans 8:26.

IV. Further Considerations

A few other considerations further strengthen the case for the function of ὡσαύτως presented here. First, it is worth noting that the spontaneous digressions in both 1 Peter 2 and Romans 8 are prompted by the sensitive issue of Christian suffering. It is almost as if the subject calls for some elaboration. In Romans 8:16-17, the topic at hand is ‘suffering as sons’, an essential component of the Spirit-witnessed adoption introduced by Paul in 8:16. Despite the digression in 8:18-25, the Spirit of 8:16 remains at the centre of Paul’s argument. Thus, by using ὡσαύτως, he easily returns to his main theme in 8:26: the ministry of the indwelling Spirit to and for believers. It seems, then, that the broader structure of Romans 8:12-30 consists of two main paragraphs (8:12-17 and 8:26-30), with one parenthetical paragraph (8:18-25) inserted between them.¹⁰ The opening

¹⁰ Nestle-Aland, of course, starts a new paragraph at 8:18. However, if my suggestion that 8:26 picks up where 8:16-17 leaves off is correct, then the

words of 8:18 ('For I consider that') do not begin a new paragraph *per se*. Rather, they introduce an apology of sorts, in which Paul interrupts his main line of reasoning in order to put one element of their adoption, present suffering, into proper perspective by weighing it against another element of that same adoption, future glory.¹¹

Second, I understand the 'weakness' of 8:26 to be the believers' uncertainty, confusion and nagging unbelief in the face of suffering (8:18-25, 33-39), which stand as formidable obstacles between them and the fulfilment of God's promise.— The immediate menace of severe suffering looms so large before the Christians that the future inheritance may appear unreachable ('How will I, so weak and feeble, ever persevere to the end?'). Paul reassures the believers by reminding them of the Spirit who dwells in them, who unites them to Christ, even while they continue living in their mortal bodies. By dwelling within them, the same Spirit who guarantees their inheritance as adopted sons and daughters also, ironically, 'guarantees' their present suffering! Far from being strange,

addition of some type of marker in the text, such as a pair of dashes to mark off 8:18-25 as distinctive (so Mk. 7:3-4, also introduced by γάρ), might be appropriate.

¹¹ Viewing the structure this way may also have the added advantage of accounting for the 'lexical thread' that unites the 'groaning' of creation (8:22, στενεάζω) and the 'groaning' of the believers (8:23, στενεάζω) with the 'groaning' of the Spirit (8:26, στεναγμός). It may be possible that two themes, one major and one minor, converge in 8:26. In other words, the major theme, the comparison between the two ministries of the Spirit, is complemented by a minor theme, the common 'groaning' of creation, believers and the Spirit, who together yearn for the culmination of redemption. O. Michel (*Der Brief die Römer* [KKNT; Göttingen: 1955]) and D.H. Lietzmann (*An die Römer* [HNT: Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1933] 86), who both hold to the view represented by Cranfield (above), still recognise an 'intimate connection' (Michel, 272) between 8:26-27 and 8:16. (I wish to express my gratitude to Mrs. Erika Lavender, who kindly assisted me with the German at various points.) For the purposes of this article, it may be enough to suggest that the believers' 'groaning' is, itself, evidence of the Spirit's dwelling within them and, by extension, interceding for them.

¹² Cf. Rom. 4:19-20, where Paul says Abraham did not grow weak in his faith; his own infirmity could have been a grave threat to his hope, but his confidence in God's promise did not waver.

the two are inseparably joined together in the life of ‘sons’, just as they were in the life of *the* Son (8:17). Yet this same Spirit, who confirms the truth of the believers’ adoption in their hearts, also infallibly intercedes¹³ for them to insure their safe arrival in heaven. The one who is present within the believers¹⁴ is the earnest of their future glorification.¹⁵

V. Conclusions

As has been shown above, the function of the adverb ὡσαύτως in 8:26 is to link, by way of comparison, the active ministries of the indwelling Spirit described by Paul in 8:16 and 8:26. Not only is this proposal exegetically sound, it is theologically enriching, for it reinforces the dominant theme of the entire epistle: salvation is the exclusive work of the triune God.

¹³ The view presented in this article adds weight to the argument that it is the Spirit who is interceding in 8:26, not the believer with the Spirit’s assistance. So, R. Gaffin: ‘the assistance of the Spirit is not an indwelling power which offsets the weakness of believers and enables them to pray as they should (καθὸ δέϊ). It is, rather, an intercessory activity of the Spirit which does not have an activity of believers as a component or even a counterpart’ (*The Centrality of the Resurrection: A Study in Paul’s Soteriology* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980] 72).

¹⁴ And, we might add, whose presence may be indicated by ‘groaning’ (cf. n. 11 above).

¹⁵ For a similar view, see D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: An Exposition of Chapter 8:17-39; The Final Perseverance of the Saints* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975) 121.