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What Did Jesus Mean by τὴν ἀρχὴν in John 8:25?

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This nineteen-page long article begins as follows:

“John 8: 25: ἔλεγον οὖν αὐτῷ· σὺ τίς εἶ/ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς ὁ Ἰησοῦς· τὴν ἀρχὴν ὃ τι καὶ λαλῶ ὑμῖν.

The answer which Jesus, according to John 8:25, gave to the Jews has at all times been regarded as problematic.¹ The difficulty centers primarily around the intended meaning of the phrase τὴν ἀρχὴν. Sometimes this has been felt so strongly that not only the thought that the text might be corrupt has been entertained but also the unique reading of P⁶⁶ has on occasion been seen as a possible way out of the dilemma.

Before proceeding to discuss the phrase τὴν ἀρχὴν linguistically and philologically, I shall note briefly the way in which it has been translated in a number of modern translations and interpreted by commentators of John.

...”

Novum Testamentum 49, 2, 2007, pp. 129-47

* Hellenic names are transliterated directly (not via Latin). See my recent work, *The Development of Greek and the New Testament. Morphology, Syntax, Phonology, and Textual Transmission* (WUNT 167), Tübingen: Mohr, 2004, e.g. pp. 12 f. Paperback ed. by Baker 2006.

¹ The Fathers generally understood τὴν ἀρχὴν in the well-known classical sense of “at all”, “to begin with”. Thus, Klemes Alexandrinus, *Commentary on John*, (ed. P.E. Pusey, *Sancti patris nostri Cyrillis archiepiscopi Alexandrini in D. Joannis evangelium*, 3 Vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press 1872) Vol. II, p. 23: ἔδει γὰρ με, φησὶν, οὐχ ὑμῖν ὅλως προσλαλῆσαι κατὰ τὴν ἀρχὴν (“He says, I ought to have not spoken to you at all”), and Chrysostomos, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* (*Ἑλληνες Πατέρες τῆς Ἐκκλησίας: Ἰωάννου Χρυσοστόμου Ἄπαντα τὰ Ἔργα*, Vol. 13 A (ed. Π. Κ. Χρήστου)), p. 470: Τὴν ἀρχὴν ὅ,τι καὶ λαλῶ ὑμῖν. Ὁ δὲ λέγει, τοιοῦτόν ἐστι· τοῦ ὅλως ἀκούειν τῶν λόγων τῶν παρ’ ἐμοῦ ἀνάξιοί ἐστε (“What he says, is the following: To begin with, you are unworthy to hear my words”). It is interesting that the editor, Prof Christou, commits a *non sequitur* by translating into Neohellenic Jesus’ words as “ Ὁ,τι σᾶς λέγω ἀπὸ τὴν ἀρχὴν” (“What I tell you from the beginning”) and then Chrysostomos’ comment as Καὶ ὁ λόγος του σημαίνει· Εἶσθε ὅλως διόλου ἀνάξιοι νὰ ἀκούσετε τὰ λόγια μου (“You are altogether unworthy to hear my words”).