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Brief Studies

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BRIEF STUDIES

SOME SOURCES OF GRAECO-ROMAN
FEATURES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

It has been clearly shown that many of the ideas (and much of the vocabulary) of the New Testament have close parallels in contemporary Graeco-Roman writings, particularly the Stoic and Cynic "preachers."¹

Paul, as well as such writers as the authors of the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Epistle of James, may have had an education that introduced them to Greek thought and writing, perhaps more largely through *anthologia*² than through continuous reading of Greek authors.

At the same time, too little attention may have been paid to the mediation of Jewish Greek in this process. The influence of Wisdom literature on James, and of Philo on Hebrews, has been recognized for some time. Further, certain phrases, vocabulary, and smaller elements of style typical of the Graeco-Roman milieu occur in Jewish Greek, representing an assimilation of idea as well as idiom already well advanced by New Testament times. Even a brief survey of Sirach in its Greek dress, the Wisdom of Solomon (to mention but two well-known Wisdom books), Philo, and the Greek Old Testament generally, reveals features sometimes characterized as specifically Graeco-Roman in the New Testament.³ It seems probable that

appearance here provided impetus as well as reinforcement for their use by early Christian writers.⁴ The examples chosen are, of course, illustrative rather than exhaustive.

In Wisdom 2:1 and 2:5 the sayings of the "ungodly" suggest common Stoic observations on human life (ὀλίγος ἐστὶν καὶ λυπηρὸς ὁ βίος ἡμῶν, . . . σκιᾶς γὰρ πάροδος ὁ καιρὸς ἡμῶν), while elsewhere Wisdom espouses the Stoic virtues σωφροσύνην, φρόνησιν, δικαιοσύνην, ἀνδρείαν (8:7; cf. 7:22 f.), of which the first and fourth are seen also, for example, in 4 Maccabees 5:23. A typical Hellenistic vice list in Wisdom 14:25 includes such familiar terms as φόνος, δόλος, φθορά, γάμων ἀταξία, μοιχεία καὶ ἀσέλγεια, especially recalling both the form and content of Rom. 1:29; 13:3; 1 Cor. 5:10; 6:9, 2 Cor. 12:20, Eph. 4:31; 5:5; and Col. 3:5 f. To these may be compared Epictetus ii.6; Dio Chrysostom 8:8; 9:12; etc. Virtue and vice lists are indeed a common feature of Hellenistic literature, Jewish and pagan. Here we may compare Philo, *De virt.* 175 ff. (Περὶ μετανοίας),⁵ which includes σώφρονες, ἐγκρατεῖς, and φιλόανθρωποι, familiar New Testament terms also demonstrable in a variety of Hellenistic Greek sources.

¹ Cf. Bultmann, *Der Stil der Paulinischen Predigt* (1910), J. Weiss, *Beiträge zur Paulinischen Rhetorik*, and an almost continuous stream of literature on this topic to date.

² Cf. R. M. Grant, "Early Christianity and Greek Comic Poetry," *Classical Philology*, 60, pp. 157 f.

³ It is often impossible to characterize thought or language explicitly, although scholars generally attempt to do so. An excellent discussion is found in F. C. Grant, "The Historical Paul," in *Early Christian Origins*, ed. A. P. Wikgren (Chicago: 1961); cf. also R. M.

Grant, "Hellenistic Elements in 1 Corinthians," p. 66: "Sharp distinctions may or may not serve to clarify our thought, but we must beware of assuming that they correspond exactly with realities in antiquity."

⁴ The elements we discuss are by no means limited to the New Testament. But they proliferate in later writers both because of the growing influence of the New Testament books themselves and increasing intercourse with the Hellenistic world (cf. note 2, *supra*).

⁵ Loeb Classical Library, *Philo*, Vol. VIII, ed. F. H. Colson.

Among idiomatic combinations significant in more cultured Greek authors we may notice βέβαιον with ἀσφαλές in Wisdom 7:23 paralleled in Dio Chrysostom 34:17, 37 (cf. 33:17) as well as 3 Maccabees 5:31 and 4 Maccabees 17:4. The combination appears in the literary Greek of Hebrews in 6:19 (cf. 3:14).⁶ The expression πάλιν ἄνωθεν, Wisdom 19:6, is a fairly common Greek idiom, e.g., Galen, *De semine* i, Aphorisms of Hippocrates V.⁷ It appears in the New Testament in Gal. 4:9.

Equally distinctive parallels may be seen in Ben Sirach. The "treasures of wisdom" in Col. 2:3 (οἱ θησαυροὶ τῆς σοφίας) find illustration in Plato and Xenophon (e.g., *Memor.* 4.2.9) but also in Wisdom of Sirach 1:25. The remarkable phrase of Wisdom 9:15,

φθαρτὸν γὰρ σῶμα βαρύνει ψυχὴν καὶ βρῖθει τὸ γεῶδες σκῆνος νοῦν πολυφρόντιδα,
is similar in sentiment to Marcus Aurelius iv. 41 (ψυχάριον εἰ, βασιτάζον νεκρόν . . .), where Marcus refers to an unknown statement of Epictetus.⁸ The idea is found in Christian writings explicitly in Ignatius *Ad Smyrn.* 5 and implicitly, to be sure, in the New Testament.

The evils of the tongue and the virtue of speaking seldom and with discretion occupy most Stoic writers and Hellenistic popular teachings. These are reflected in the New Testament especially at James 3:2 ff., but a particular emphasis is placed on them in Wisdom 4:29; 5:10 f.; 9:18; and 20:6 f. James 3:2 f. may be modeled entirely on Jewish rather than pagan sources at this

⁶ Cf. Allen P. Wikgren, "Some Greek Idioms in the Epistle to the Hebrews," *The Teacher's Yoke: Studies in Honor of Henry Trantsbam*, (Baylor University Press: 1964), pp. 145 f.

⁷ J. J. Wettstein, *Η ΚΑΙΝΗ ΔΙΑΘΗΚΗ*, II (Amsterdam, 1752), p. 227; cf. also ἀνάπαλιν, Wisdom 19:21.

⁸ Cf. also Marcus Aurelius ix. 3.

point. Willingness to listen, rather than to speak, is a part of this sentiment. Interestingly, when the author of Hebrews charges his readers with slowness of hearing (5:11; 6:12) he calls them νοῦθοι — the same term used in this connection in Wisdom 4:29.

(Some thoughts with a clearly Stoic coloring appear in Ben Sirach without real echoes in Christian literature. Thus in 41:3 Ben Sirach interprets a Stoic attitude towards death much as does Marcus Aurelius, e.g., in iii. 3 and ix. 3.)⁹

It is clear from a cursory examination, for instance, of the Greek version of Proverbs¹⁰ that several typical terms of Stoic/popular philosophical currency are featured there, viz. σοφίαν, παιδείαν, φρονήσεως, σήσεις, ἐπίγνωσιν, γνώσις καὶ σύνεσις within the first few paragraphs. (This is true to a lesser extent in other parts of the Greek Old Testament. Though it is well known that this version was an important model for Christian writers, it is most often thought of as a source specifically of Semitic coloring, rather than of the material discussed here.)

It is probably unnecessary to reemphasize the esteem in which Philo of Alexandria was held by early Christian writers. His work is reflected in Origen and Clement of Alexandria, and he is extravagantly praised by Eusebius; in *Historia Ecclesiae* II, 4 Philo's study of Plato and Pythagoras is mentioned — Eusebius might have included Stoic teaching here as well — and in II, 18 he describes Philo as πολὺς . . . τῷ λόγῳ, πλατὺς ταῖς διανοίαις, and "sublime and elevated in his view of Scripture." Philo's influence on the New Testament is less explicit, but

⁹ Seneca's view resembles that of Christians rather more at this point — cf. *Ep.* 54, 102. [In the same category is Wisdom 11:17 . . . κτίσασα τὸν κόσμον ἐξ ἀμόρφου ὕλης, a quasi-Platonic view against which Christian writers argue, e.g., Athanasius, *De incar.* 2.3.]

¹⁰ Alfred Rahlfs, ed., Vol. II, *Παροιμίαι*.

Thomas¹¹ has shown that Old Testament quotations in Heb. 4:4; 8:5; and 13:5 (possibly 9:20 also) follow Philo, and Hebrews generally shows great resemblances to Philo's thought,¹² as do James and the Pauline letters to a lesser extent. This is relevant to our argument because Philo had formed an extensive synthesis with Greek thought and is perhaps the most important mediator of Platonic vocabulary for the earliest of our literature.¹³

Philo's style may also have served to supplement the matrix of better Greek phraseology seen in Hebrews, James, etc., usually explained from Graeco-Roman sources. Even examining a short section suggests this. To return, for example, to *De virt.* 175 ff. (περὶ μετανοίας), discussed above in connection with vice/virtue lists, we find Attic forms such as κρείττους (182) κρείττων (188), the μὲν . . . δὲ construction (176, 180, 183, 186), such particles as καθάπερ (179, 185, 186) and μέντοι (183), and even the construction of χρεῖ with infinitive (179) found in the New Testament only at James 3:10. Τε and τε καί are also frequent. Writers of the New Testament who employ these refinements¹⁴ clearly found them not only in pagan, but also in Jewish, sources. The monumental use of alliteration and assonance in Heb. 1:1 f. also finds parallel in Philo at the

beginning of Περὶ μετανοίας: Φιλάρετος καὶ φιλόκαλος καὶ διαφερόντως φιλόανθρωπος . . . προτρέπει τοὺς πανταχοῦ πάντας . . . This and other passages of Philo are nearer to the extensive alliteration of Heb. 1:1 than most contemporaneous pagan models.

These observations suggest the importance of interrogating the literature of Hellenistic Judaism with systematic care in a period when scholarly interest has emphasized sectarian Judaism on one hand and non-Jewish culture on the other as the chief poles of earliest Christianity. They also demonstrate the legendary difficulty of clearly separating Jewish and Greek influences, even at those points where the material seems almost pristine in its resemblance to one or the other.

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FAITH IN THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

An outstanding literary piece of the New Testament deserving special attention today is the Epistle to the Hebrews. The polished language is acknowledged to be the product of an intellectual. The work is a well reasoned and closely knit argument for faithfulness on the part of the Christian community. But as others have pointed out, one does not find in this work the doctrine of justification through faith in the Pauline sense.

Yet the appreciation for this excellent treatise should be enthusiastic in the Christian community today. This is a time when people are less distressed by the oppression of guilt than they have been in previous eras. Today people are more disturbed by a sense of meaninglessness, of drift, of being cut off. Yet they need faith no less than at any other time. The questions are still the same, "Is God gracious? Is God faithful? Can God be trusted?" Whether man calls out to God from the well of his guilt or from the well of meaninglessness, he needs to know if God can or will hear him.

¹¹ K. J. Thomas, "The Old Testament Citations in Hebrews," *New Testament Studies* 11:4 (July 1965), pp. 303 f.

¹² Cf. Westcott, *Epistle to the Hebrews* (ed. 1; New York, 1889); H. Windisch, *Philo und das Neue Testament* (1919); R. A. Stewart, "Creation and Matter in the Epistle to the Hebrews," *New Testament Studies* 12:3 (April 1966), pp. 284 f.

¹³ Cf. in relation to Hebrews, R. Williamson, "Platonism and Hebrews," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 16:4, pp. 415 f.

¹⁴ These features are especially prominent in Hebrews; cf. the analysis of A. P. Wikgren, note 6, *supra*.

The concept of faith as it is enunciated in the Epistle to the Hebrews is aptly suited to the problem of man's sense of meaninglessness. The treatise is designed especially to deal with the problem of indifference and to warn a Christian community against the problem of drifting from the faith. As such, it is more hortatory than doctrinal. It is a stirring appeal for Christians to remain loyal to the hope of salvation, which they have in Jesus Christ.

The matter of faith is dealt with chiefly in Chapters 11 and 12, although faith is mentioned elsewhere in the work.

In 4:2 the writer speaks of the lack of faith in the hearers who had heard the good news of entering the rest God had prepared for them. Faith here is trust in the promises of God, the λόγος τῆς ἀκοῆς, the "heard word."

In 6:1 the author speaks of "elementary doctrines." While scholars have speculated about these doctrines, it is clear that the author warns against dead works and encourages his readers to move on to maturity that leaves behind the apparently simple "faith toward God," πίστις ἐπὶ θεόν.

In 6:12 faith is the means by which some inherit the promises. Here faith is trust in the promises of God.

The author quotes Hab. 2:3-4 as a part of his argument in 10:36 ff. Paul uses the same quotation in Rom. 1:17 and Gal. 3:11. Paul employs the quotation as a call to faith rather than to works. Here the author quotes the passage in its original sense. One is to endure and remain loyal to the will of God. God's righteous one shall live by faith: ὁ δὲ δίκαιός μου ἐκ πίστεως ζήσεται (10:38). That is to say, he will live by faith in the promises of God. Such faith will keep him from "shrinking back." Thus faith, as in the original sense of the prophet, means trust in God's faithfulness to His promises.

With that the author says, "But we are

not of those who shrink back into destruction but of those who have faith for the preservation of the soul" (ἡμεῖς δὲ οὐκ ἐσμὲν ὑποστολῆς εἰς ἀπώλειαν, ἀλλὰ πίστεως εἰς περιποίησιν ψυχῆς, v. 39). The nature of this faith is that it does not wilt in the heat of persecution but endures as the preservative of the soul that will endure to eternity. This constitutes the author's introduction to his exhortation on faith in Chapter 11.

A unique value of Chapter 11 is that it places the burden of its message on the evidence accumulated in the history of the faithful. The author begins with a definition of faith. Eighteen times he builds up his argument with the word "by faith" (πίστει). In addition he enumerates a host of others who belong to his cloud of witnesses.

The context indicates that what these witnesses affirm is the reliability of God. The concept of faith here is closer to the Pauline concept of hope than the Pauline concept of faith. Here faith is firmness, reliability, and steadfastness. In laying hold of the God who is steadfast, the believer himself is made steadfast.

What is peculiar to faith, however, in the mind of the writer is the conscious opposition that faith offers to sight. Faith is able to exist and function when all the evidence of sight apparently opposes it. Faith can act in spite of contrary evidence. Thus faith confidently acts on the basis of the unseen, intangible, but nevertheless present and real strength of God's love. Existentially, the believer knows and trusts realities that are revealed to him by a God who confronts him in promise.

The author's classic definition of faith is that it is the "assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (ἐλπίζομένων ὑπόστασις, πραγμάτων ἔλεγχος οὐ βλεπομένων [11:1]). The thrust of this definition is not that the believer creates the realities by his faith. Rather the unseen

things of God, which are valid and real in and of themselves, are recognized by the believer through faith. The *ὑπόστασις* is a condition in which the believer is "assured" of their validity and reality.

This is not something new. Men of old received approval through this faith (11:2). By such faith "we understand that the world was created by the word of God." There were no witnesses to God's primeval creative acts. Yet we know the fact of creation by faith.

The author then turns to the citation of the witnesses who accepted the reality of the invisible through faith. While the writer has no evidence from Old Testament Scripture that faith accounted for the behavior of these witnesses, he affirms that faith explains their action. Thus Abel's sacrifice is acceptable to God by faith (11:4). Enoch "was taken up" by faith (11:5). Faith, therefore, is that relationship in which one is acceptable to God. For it is impossible to be acceptable to God without that faith which recognizes that He exists. (11:6)

Noah also acted out of faith and was the recipient of the righteousness which comes by faith (*τῆς κατὰ πίστιν δικαιοσύνης*). This might be a typical Pauline phrase. The nuances which are characteristic of Paul's thought reveal his ability to use righteousness both in an ethical sense and in describing justification (Rom. 10:10). In this context the writer uses righteousness as that inheritance which comes to him who lives by faith as contrasted to those who are condemned by their lack of obedience.

By faith Abraham obeyed (11:8), and by faith he acted (11:9). Likewise, it was by faith that Sarah received the power to conceive (11:11). These all died in the faith (*κατὰ πίστιν*). They saw the realization of their faith in part. But their faith is to see its greater fulfillment in their "heavenly country" (11:13-16). By faith Abraham

offered up Isaac. Under this supreme test Abraham believed God could raise his son from the dead to keep His promise (11:17-19). By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau (11:20). Jacob blessed Joseph's sons by faith (11:21). By faith Joseph was able to anticipate the Exodus. (11:22)

Five instances from the life of Moses are given as clear examples of the nature of faith. He was a child of faith (11:23). By faith he chose to suffer abuses for Christ rather than to enjoy the princely comforts of the king's court (11:24-26). He lived by faith rather than by fear (11:27). His faith is obedience to the command of God (11:28) and trust in God's providence (11:29). By faith the Israelites conquered Jericho (11:30), and by faith the harlot Rahab was spared. (11:30)

The author then observes that he does not have space to enumerate all the heroic witnesses. But there were others — Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, and Samuel. Each of these lived under great stress. Each underwent great trial. Each had his own cross. Each lived in tension with the world about him. Many of them suffered greatly. The writer describes them as people

who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, received promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and scourging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, ill-treated — of whom the world was not worthy — wandering over deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. (11:33-38)

What is significant about these heroes is

that all of them endured their sufferings and afflictions because of their trust in God and His promises. They were committed to suffering and pain with no more than that — the promise of God that He would bring life out of their suffering. They had no assurance of fame, fortune, or earthly reward. Yet they risked themselves in faith on the basis of the promise.

The greatest witness to faith is Jesus, whom the writer calls "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith" (τὸν τῆς πίστεως ἀρχηγὸν καὶ τελειωτὴν [12:2]). "Consider Him who endured from sinners such hostility against Himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted," the writer says. Jesus is the perfect example of heroic faith. In fact, the preeminence of His faith so far surpasses the faith of the heroes of faith that He leads them. Their faith — and ours too — has to be measured by His. His faith makes Him the pioneer of our faith; that is, He takes the lead of faith. He is the predecessor for faith. He breaks the path by His faith. He is also the "perfecter of our faith." That is, in His own faith He has raised faith to its perfection and thereby sets before us His own faith as the very means by which we achieve faith. It is, in fact, His suffering and His victorious endurance which evoke our faith. In the very midst of the worst and the most diabolic treatment by the world, His faith will not let go. He trusts God even on the cross. He remains steadfast and sure. God is His helper when it appears all help is gone.

The writer urges his readers to consider this seriously. They should not run from the cross, in whatever form it may come. They should see this as the very discipline of life. God's children did not run from crosses in the past. They met them head on and were strengthened by them. God's beloved Son did not run from the cross. The very existence of a cross in their lives is an indication that they are being treated as sons of God.

Why should this appear strange? If a father were to remove discipline from the lives of his sons, he would be a poor father indeed. The readers of the epistle have been exposed to these disciplines in the form of the blocks, the hindrances, the restraints that have come into their lives. So also the heavenly Father permits the cross to stand in their lives so that they might develop fully in the life of the spirit. The writer says that his readers have this advantage that the way of the cross has not yet led them to the point of shedding their blood. Do they not therefore have the advantage that by the faith of the crowd of witnesses, that by the victorious suffering of the Lord Jesus, they should be able to see that the cross is a very necessary discipline for them to fight the fight of faith and to run the race? (12:3-9)

Jesus despised the shame of the cross because He hated the sin that shaped the cross; but He saw joy beyond the cross. He could see straight through all the shame of the cross to joy with the Father. He could see through death to life with the Father. He could see through the pain of the cross to the comfort of the Father.

Jesus, then, is the central argument of the writer. For the author, faith gives the believer access to God. It is the Christ who has made such faith possible. He has opened the way to the Father. He has proved the faithfulness of the Father. Therefore, because the readers have access through Him and have His witness to the goodness and faithfulness of the Father, they, too, can live in such faith.

In an age that is characterized by its anxiety about anxiety, its fear of fears, its suffering efforts to remove all suffering, the writer's concept of faith is the call to freedom, hope, and victory. People in our age need to know that God is trustworthy and that He has not abandoned us in a time when the world appears to lack all order, structure, and

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meaning. We can have faith because Jesus has made faith possible.

We read once more of faith in the conclusion, "Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God; consider the outcome of their life, and imitate their faith"

(μμεῖσθε τὴν πίστιν [13:7]). They are dead. But—

Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς ἐχθὲς καὶ σήμερον
ὁ αὐτὸς καὶ εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας. (13.8)

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