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Teachings of Jesus and Popular Hellenistic Stories

Nauki Jezusa i popularne opowiadania hellenistyczne

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Abstract. A very rich material concerning the Hellenistic background of the Gospels has already been collected. However, standard works present most often parallels taken from either Hellenistic Jewish texts or sources later then the Gospels. Studying the remaining texts we find that many parallels happen to be purely verbal, to concern general banal truths, or notions present already in the Old Testament. The remainder, the sifted Greek texts, which could hypothetically influence Jesus, and which are useful for understanding his sayings and parables, consists nearly exclusively of popular stories: anecdotes about the philosophers, proverbial sayings, current ideas, fables and so on. For comparison, books of Qohelet, Ben Sira and Wisdom contain parallels to the Greek literature and philosophy of higher level. It suggests that Jesus, having no formal Greek education, knew quite well the oral and popular Greek traditions and used them to illustrate his teachings. He probably met the Greek stories both directly, speaking Greek, and through the culture of the hellenized Galilee.

Streszczenie. Badacze zebrali już bardzo bogate dane na temat hellenistycznego tła Ewangelii. Dzieła podręczne zawierają jednak w większości paralele wzięte z hellenistycznych tekstów żydowskich oraz z utworów późniejszych niż Ewangelie. Wśród pozostałych, wcześniejszych tekstów greckich spotykamy sporo paralel czysto słownych, banalnych prawd ogólnych i idei skądinąd obecnych także w Starym Testamencie. Reszta, teksty przesiane w ten sposób, to prawie wyłącznie opowiadania popularne: anegdoty o filozofach, powiedzenia przysłowiowe, potoczne opinie, bajki itp. Dla porównania, księgi Koheleta, Syracha i Mądrości zawierają paralele do literatury greckiej i utworów filozoficznych. To sugeruje, że Jezus, nie mając formalnego wykształcenia greckiego, znał jednak dość dobrze ustne, popularne tradycje greckie i ich używał dla zilustrowania swojego nauczania. Przypuszczalnie znał takie tradycje bezpośrednio, gdyż znał grekę, i również za pośrednictwem kultury zhellenizowanej Galilei.

The collections of texts illustrating the background of the New Testament are of considerable dimensions[1]. However, if we ask for the Greek texts which could have possibly influenced the New Testament, the list of prospective parallels seems much shorter. These collections contain a lot of Jewish material, Hellenistic or even rabbinic. If the motives they contain are not proven to belong to the Greek world, we stay inside the ancient Judaism and its influence on the New Testament. Proceeding further, we should eliminate all the superficial, purely verbal, and banal similarities, which dominate many detailed collections of parallels as the valuable series Studia ad Corpus Hellenisticum Novi Testamenti.

Next, many interesting texts are simply later then the life of Jesus and the Gospels. Some of them could be already influenced by the New Testament, as the lectures of Epictetus, or by the monotheistic and moral ideas advanced by the Jews, which are perhaps reflected in some pagan theological writings, as in the Olympic Discourse (*Or*. 12) of Dio Chrysostomus[2]. If we restrict ourselves to the authors earlier than the New Testament books, only a small fraction of texts will remain. However, we may add older traditions in later texts, as stories told by Plutarch, representing the first century lore, and later by Diogenes Laertios. Some Latin authors may draw from the Hellenistic traditions.

Even less will remain if we concentrate on the teachings of Jesus, leaving aside the theology of the early Church and the literary side of the Gospels. The literary genres used in the ancient Judaism and in the early Christianity were profoundly hellenized, it is beyond doubt. We may expect allusions to the Greek culture stemming from the New Testament authors, perceiving the person of Jesus through Greek lenses and Greek models of thought and behavior. Accordingly, they could influence the life and teaching of the New Testament churches. Leaving these interesting questions aside[3], I shall concentrate on some dozens of Jesus' sayings from the Gospels, sifted from the much richer material. I am aware that it is by no means a definitive list, but it could be considered representative. Let us consider these examples.

a) The Sermon on the Mount. The praises of humility (Matt 5.3,5; 11.29) draw from the spirituality of the poor of the Lord in the Old Testament,

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[1] The largest: *Neuer Wettstein*. Shorter: M.E. Boring, K. Berger, C. Colpe, *Hellenistic* (larger than its German original: *Religionsgeschichtliches Textbuch zum Neuen Testament*); C.K. Barrett (ed.), *The New Testament Background*. There are partial collections, as e.g. A.J. Malherbe, *Hellenistic Moralists*.

[2] On his theology M. Wojciechowski, *Views of God*.

[3] I have considered them in my book in Polish on the Greek influences in the Bible (M. Wojciechowski, *Wpływy greckie*); my article is based on a chapter of this work.

even if it could have a parallel Greek inspiration: modesty and humiliation can lead to victory. Odysseus returned as beggar to his own house; Cynic philosophers living in poverty gained authority – even if the renouncement of his own status remained rare[4].

In Matt 5.17–19 Jesus excluded changing anything in the Law. The interdiction of changing the laws was known in Greece. "I would not become a law-giver to enact another set of laws, for the present laws I would make no addition, subtraction or revision" (Plutarch, *Moralia* 214B = *Sayings of the Spartans. Agesilaus* 73). Dio Chrysostomus compared the changes in public documents to a sacrilege (*Or.* 31.86; both from the end of the first century A.D.). Jesus could mean that if the laws of the cities should be durable, the laws of God had to be unchangeable even more. Laws do not depend of the present will of the rulers, they could obey a higher law. It is supposed by the Bible (Deut 17.14–20), but also by Plutarch, saying after Pindar: "Who, then, shall rule the ruler? The Law, the king of all, both mortals and immortals" (*Moralia* 780E = *To an Uneducated Ruler* 3). Next: "The laws should have authority over the men, and not the men over the laws" (*Moralia* 230F = *Sayings of the Spartans. Pausanias* 1). Cf. also Gal 1.6–9.

Matt 5.28: "Every one who looks at a (married) woman to lust her has already committed adultery with her in his heart". Similar situation is supposed in a tradition on Xenocrates, a friend of Plato, who would say: "that it made no difference whether one set one's eyes in a strange house, or placed one's feet there. For one who looks on forbidden places is guilty of the same sin as the one who goes there" (Aelian, *Variae historiae* 14.42, second century CE).

Matt 5.34 against oaths is in accordance with the philosophical tradition. E.g. Diogenes Laertios, *Lives of eminent philosophers* 8.22 on the teaching of Pythagoras: "Not to call the gods to witness, man's duty being rather to strive to make his own word carry conviction". Truthfulness and being univocal should suffice.

There is a complex relation between the commandment of love and the Greek traditions. Matt 5.43–44: "It was said: You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you"[5]. The principle to hate the enemy that Jesus criticized is not known from the ancient Judaism and reflects Greek

[4] G. Guttenberger Ortwein, *Status und Statusverzicht*.

[5] Biblical quotations are from RSV, occasionally modified.

opinions[6]. Meno in Plato described virtue as being good to friends and bad to enemies: *tous men filous eu poiein, tous d'echthrous kakōs* (*Meno* 71E). The necessity of revenge was considered obvious: Sophocles' choir says to Electra not to hate too much, but also not to forgive (*Electra* 177–178).

Socrates, however, opposed to such principles (Plato, *Crito* 49BC; *Republic* 331E–336A). He proclaimed that it is not good to pay with the injustice for injustice. It is better to be honest that to gain the upper hand, it is better to be harmed than to harm (*Gorgias* 472E). To some extent it could flow from his pride and feeling of superiority: "Should I have taken the law of a donkey, supposing he had kicked me?" (Diogenes, *Lives* 2.21).

There are further sources. Ariston of Sparta was credited to say in an argument that it is better "to do good to our friends, and to make friends of our enemies" (Plutarch, *Moralia* 218A = *Sayings of the Spartans. Ariston* 1). These opinions were linked also with Pythagoras, Cleobulos (one of the seven sages) and Socrates. Stoics mentioned forgiving enemies, even if their motive was probably self-control, aimed at personal perfection (Seneca, *De ira* 3.12.2).

The Septuagint adopted the word *plesion*, "the near one" ("neighbour"), more universalistic than its Hebrew counterpart *re'ah*. This word reflects the notion of brotherhood of all the people, stressed in Stoicism which explained it with their natural proximity, *oikeiosis*[7]. Luke 10.25–37 on the parable of Good Samaritan shows that Jesus followed this direction. A Hellenistic textbook of ethics says that friendship towards all the people is to be morally preferred, because everybody saves a human being in danger (Arius Didymus, *Epitome* in Stobaeus 2.7.13 cf. 2.7.3–4).

Further texts on the love of enemies could be influenced by the Gospel tradition (Musonius Rufus 10; Epictetus, *Discourses* 3.22.53–54). Only in Epictetus we meet a statement which seems similarly radical. An itinerant philosopher should love as father and brother someone who beats him with a stick.

Concluding: the saying on the love of enemies fits well with the ancient discussions and probably refers to current opinions, reflected in the sources mentioned above, even if Jeus goes further.

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[6] M. Reiser, *Love of Enemies*.

[7] T. Engberg-Pedersen, *Oikeiosis*.

Comparisons between the Greek and biblical understanding of love often contrast the notions of *eros* and *agape*[8], love desire and self-offering. However, these notions are not used quite univocally. Even in the Gospels *agapao* can refer to evil desires (Luke 11.43; Jn 3.19; 12.43). A differentiation between human and supra-human love, both known in the Greek world and in the Gospels, seems more adequate. Love reflecting the good and the beautiful could be a preparation to Christianity (Plato, *Meno* 77B–78C; *Symposium* 205A-206B)[9]. The difference is that Socrates wished to lead the beloved disciples to wisdom and virtue, whereas Jesus taught them to love above all.

Jesus said: "You must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt 5.48; cf. Luke 6.36) Founding the moral life on the example of God stems from the Old Testament (Lev 19.2; cf. 11.44–45; 20.7; Exod 22.30). This principle is reflected in the New Testament, showing Jesus as divine and human example to follow (Eph 5.1–2; 1 Pet 1.16; 1 Jn 4.7–8; Matt 11.29; Luke 14.27 par.; Jn 15.12; 1 Pet 2.21).

Nevertheless, *imitatio Dei* was known in the Greek philosophy, from the Socrates in Plato on (*Teajtet* 176BC; *Fajdros* 248A; *Prawa* 4, 716ABC et al.; cf. Plutarch, *Moralia* 550D; Epictetus, *Discourses* 1, 12, 8). The same should be said on perfection. This imitation has a moral shape, implies justice and piety. The supposed source would be Pythagoras who taught "follow God", *hepou theō* (Arius Didymus, *Epitome* in Stobajos 2.7.3f and 16)[10]. The last quotation show that this idea belonged to a textbook knowledge. Therefore an influence of the popular Hellenistic philosophy on Jesus is possible, even if not quite certain.

The advice that we should pray for the goods wished to us by God (Matt 6.10; 7.11) has a parallel in Socrates tradition. He taught not to ask gods for the precise goods, but for these they consider proper for us (Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.3.2 etc.).

Matt 6.22 about eye as a lamp of the body reflects a mistaken opinion, frequent among the Greeks, that eyes play an active role in seeing. Such a theory had been formulated by Empedocles[11]. The image of an internal lamp appears in Plutarch (*Moralia* 281D = *Quaestiones Roma-*

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8 A. Nygren, *Agape and Eros*.

9 J.P. Danaher, *Love in Plato*.

10 M. Kosmala, *Nachfolge*. Cf. Russell, *Virtue*.

11 H.-D. Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, p. 437–453.

nae 72). Next, according to a fragment from a presocratic author Epicharmus[12] the internal purity leads to an external one (cf. Mark 7.21 par).

Jesus said that it is not possible to serve God and mammon (money? any earthly support?). A Pythagorean sentence, parallel to Matt 6.24, says it is not possible to love success, body and god. Already Plato noted the conflict between the riches and the virtue (*Republic* 550E; cf. *Laws* 743A). It looks as a popular motive. Next words of Jesus, Matt 6.25–34, resemble the Cynic teaching on poverty, although with a different reason. The description of the sources of happiness in Matt 5–6 harmonizes with the principles of Stoicism and popular philosophy[13].

The example of birds, happy without nothing (Matt 6.26), can be found in Dio Chrysostomus (*Or.* 10.16) and in Musonius Rufus (*Discourses* 15). It looks as the next current motive.

Remarks of Jesus on the log and a speck in an eye (Matt 7.3–5); more exactly sawdust, could also stem from a popular saying. There is a similarly built comparison in Petronius (*Satyricon* 57.7): someone sees a louse on someone else, without feeling a May-bug (cockchafer) on his own body.

Matt 7.12 (Luke 6.31) contains the "Golden Rule"[14]: "Whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them". In its negative form it was current (e.g. Herodotus, *History* 3.142; Isocrates, *To Demonicus* 1.17 and 21; Hierocles in Stobaus 4.27.20; Tob 4.15; Hillel in Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat* 30b). According to Diogenes Laertios (*Lives* 1.36) it was known already to Tales. It seems that Jesus adapted or transformed a saying of Greek origin.

Comparing good and wrong way (Matt 7.13–14) occurs often in the Bible, but in an undeveloped form (Deut 11.26; 30.15,19; Jer 21.8; Ps 1.6; cf. Sir 21.10; Ps 34.19). In Greece this motive was developed into stories, since Hesiod (*Works and days* 287–292); Xenophon in *Memorabilia* (2.21.21–34) talks about Heracles, who met two women, Virtue and Vice; the first showed to him a difficult way up, and the second one an easy way down. *Life of Aesop* 94 contains a political fable on the ways of slavery and freedom; the first one is smooth but leads into a precipice, the second one is harsh but leads towards beautiful gardens. Jesus followed a popular motive in its Greek form.

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12 G.L. Rodríguez-Noriega, *Epicarmo*.

13 W.S. Vorster, *Stoics*.

14 A. Dihle, *Die goldene Regel*; du Roy, *La Règle d'or* (classical antiquity and the Bible: 93–164).

The rhetorical question from Matt 7.16–17 (cf. Jas 3.12) runs as follows: "Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? So every sound tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears evil fruit". It is quite close to some expressions from Seneca (*Letter* 87.25; *De ira* 2.10.6), Plutarch (*Moralia* 472F) and Epictetus (*Discourses* 2.20.18), where grapes, olives and figs are mentioned. It is a popular motive, perhaps associated in the Gospels with Isa 5.2,4.

b) Parables. Now some examples from the parables. As a literary form they should be discerned from the Greek counterparts, animal fables, examples, allegories. On the other hand there are virtually no Jewish motives in the parables. Jesus based them on the observations of the Mediterranean life, and they had to be understandable also for pagan hearers.

The parable of the rich fool (Luke 12.16–21) fits well, however, with the Greek story-telling[15]. This example from the everyday life shows that the choices of the rich fool are dangerous for himself. It reflects the Greek notion that the morality serves primarily to make humans perfect; the subject and not his neighbour is in the focus. The internal attitude, wisdom and virtue, are more important than the social usefulness.

Further, the goods of the soul are more important than the external ones. Polemic with the egoistic possessing is proper to the Cynic school. The loss of the goods owned by the dead can be illustrated by a later satire of Lucian, *A Voyage to the Lower World*. The gospel story begins, as in rhetoric, from an announcement (*promythion*) and ends with a moral (*epimythion*). The internal dialogue also scents Greek. Jesus probably followed Hellenistic patterns here. A redactional intervention of the author of the Gospel is possible, but less probable, because it would have implied profound changes of the supposed original and has no parallels elsewhere in Luke.

The way of presenting the life after death in the parables seems closer to the popular Hellenistic opinions than to the Old Testament or to the ancient Judaism[16]. It would mean that such elements of the parables were not intended to have a doctrinal value but remained a raw material for the story. It applies to the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16.19–31), where the dead have parts of the body and feel as the living ones. The rich man remains in Hades; we should not retranslate it too easily as Sheol. His destiny resembles the popular images of the otherworld in Homer (*Odyssey* 11) or Virgil (*Aeneid* 6). Other parables

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15 R.F. Hock, *The Parable of the Foolish*.

16 O. Lehtipuu, *The Imagery*.

attribute to the dead "gnashing the teeth" and life in the external darkness (i.e. space, the empty place beyond the astral sphere of the Greek cosmology).

Sowing words as the seed (known from the parables from Mark 4.8,14,30–32) appears also in Seneca (*Moral Letters* 4.38.2) and in Plutarch (*Moralia* 394E). This image could be used by the teachers of philosophy. The Gospel explains allegorically the thorns from the parable: "but the cares of the world, and the delight in riches, and the desire for other things, enter it end choke the word, and it proves unfruitful" (Mark 4.19). "Desire" (*epithymia*), a frequent term of the Greek moral teaching, refers to an attitude of mind, which loses peace because of avid desires. The same was meant by Paul when he identified the desire as the significant mark of any sin (Rom 7.7–8).

In the parable of the hidden treasure (Matt 13.44) Jesus could follow stories about finding treasures. Aesopic fable on a gold treasure, hidden and useless, and subsequently stolen (Perry edition 225) furnishes a parallel. The same story could have inspired the parable of the talents (Matt 25.14–30). Buying the field with a hidden treasure was described by Horace (*Satires* 2.6.10–13); the story could belong to popular lore.

The parable of the unjust judge (Luke 18.1–8) was associated by some commentators with a story on the king Philip. When he answered to a poor old woman that he had no time to spare, she burst out: "then give up being king!" And he heard her case (*Plutarch*, *Moralia* 179CD = *Sayings of kings and commanders. Philip the father of Alexander* 31).

An Aesopic fable[17] on fishing (Perry 282) presents a fisherman who selects the captured fish. A similar motive appears in the parable of the net (Matt 13.47–48).

The divine king and judge in the parable of the last judgement was accepted or rejected under the form of the needy (Matt 25, 31–46). It recalls the popular motive of "theoxenia", inviting gods in disguise, known from the Bible from Gen 18–19[18]. It could serve as a loose inspiration of this parable. Cf. also Acts 14.8–20.

The parable of the great supper (Matt 22.1–13; Luke 14.16–24) shows that everybody can be invited to the table of God. In an inscription about Zeus we read: "God invites all human beings to a banquet, and sets the table for all in common and equally, no matter where they come from" (2 cent. CE). Cf. also Gal 3.28. The stress on equality reveals the influence

[17] More in my article: M. Wojciechowski, *Aesopic Tradition*.

[18] B. Louden, *Homer's Odyssey*, pp. 54–56.

of mystery cults. A slightly earlier inscription offers many parallels to Gal 3.28; 5.13–6.10[19].

c) Other sayings. Further examples stem from other teachings of Jesus. One of the famous Aesopic fables (Perry 11) presents a fisherman playing his pipes to attract fish. Being unsuccessful, he caught them in the net and said they were dancing on the shore. The fable refers to a situation of a person who has neglected a proper moment for doing something and later has to submit unwillingly. Herodotus (*Histories* 1.141) put this fable in the mouth of the Persian king, Cyrus, who told it to the envoys of the Greek cities which had delayed their capitulation.

Jesus alluded to this fable in Matt 11.16 par.: "But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market place and calling to their playmates, 'We piped to you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn'". The fable explains this difficult saying. Jesus warns the hearers that the refusal to hear the voice of 'fishermen' (Jesus and John as prophets) will bring the fate of the fish from the fable.

The Aesopic collection contains also a story on the supposed behaviour of beavers (Perry 118). They would get rid of their testicles, looked for by the hunters, in order to save their lives (also Claudius Aelianus, *De natura animalium* 6.34; Plinius, *Natural history* 8.109). It is a metaphor of getting rid of something to save something more important.

Two sayings of Jesus seem to reflect this legend. Mark 9.43–47 says: "And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better to you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go to hell" etc. (cf. Matt 5.29–30; 18.8–9). The common point is saving one's life through self-maiming. Matt 19.12 mentions those "who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven". The same motive appears in both texts: self-inflicted castration conceived metaphorically.

Mark 9.43–47 etc. is founded also on the observation that it is better to lose one part of the body than to perish. This observation, applied metaphorically, repeats in the philosophical tradition. It can be found in Xenophon (*Memorabilia* 1.54 on Socrates), Plato (*Symposium* 204CE), and Aristotle (*Eudemian ethics* 7.1). Loss of the money is better than the loss of life.

Hypnos and Thanatos were twins for Homer, sons of the Night. "Eternal sleep" is a Greek expression (e.g. Diogenes Laertios, *Lives* 1.5). It may explain the synonimity of sleep and death in the Gospels (Mark

[19] M.E. Boring et al., *Hellenistic Commentary*, pp. 467–469.

5.39 par.; Jn 11.11). In the Bible, sleep as euphemism for death appears late, in the Septuagint (Dan 12.7; Ps 87.6); cf. 1 Thess 5.10.

Now some proverbial sayings. The words on the wolves in the sheepskin (Matt 7.15; cf. Acts 20.29) has a parallel in a fable (Perry 451); the Aesopic collection contains a dozen fables on wolves and sheep. It looks as a popular motive. The saying that the last will be the first (Matt 19.30 etc.) could have been a moral of the popular fable on the turtle and the hare (Perry 226). The Gospel directly appeals to a proverb in Luke 4.23: *Physician, heal yourself*. This motive appears in a fable (Perry 289).

In Mark 2.17 etc. Jesus answers the accusation of associating with sinners: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick". A similar answer was given in the same situation by Antisthenes (Diogenes Laertios, *Lives* 6.6): "Physicians are in attendance on their patients without getting the fever themselves". Stobaeus associated a similar saying with Diogenes (3.462.14). It looks as a popular anecdote.

Living stones (Mat 3.9; Luke 3.8; 19.40; cf. 1 Pet 2.4–5) can be associated with mythical traditions[20]. A famous myth described the re-creation of humanity from the stones thrown behind by Deucalion and Pyrrha. Such associations could be known to the hearers of Jesus and the readers of the New Testament.

The advice to limit one's material needs was an important element of the Cynic philosophy, assimilated by the popular, eclectic philosophy of the New Testament period (e.g. Dio Chrysostomus, *Or*. 10, praising the condition of being without property). The self-limitation of clothes to one cloak and one pair of shoes can be found in Musonius Rufus, probably referring to an earlier tradition (*On Clothing and Shelter = Discourse* 19). Recommendations given by Jesus in Mark 6.8–9 could have stemmed from such a popular model.

Mysterious way of speaking commented on in Mark 4.11–12 could reveal another sort of influence. Religious mysteries could have been its general inspiration; they include explaining symbols unknown to the people from outside. Speaking through symbols known only to them was practiced by Pythagoreans (Iamblichus, *Life of Pythagoras* 23.104–105).

The rejection of a thinker in his own country (cf. Mark 6.4 par.) was noted by some writers from the end of the first century AD: Plutarch, *Moralia* 605CD et al. [*De exilio*]; Dio Chrisostomos, *Or.* 47, 6; Apollonios of Tyana, *Letter* 44. They suggest that one can find a better place and hearers, traveling; it was done by Jesus and Christians. Next, philosophy

[20] C.S. Keener, *Human Stones*.

is a better choice than the will of earthly father (cf. Mark 10.29–30 par.): Musonius Rufus, *Discourse* 16; Isocrates, chreia 41 (quoted in Theon): "Isocrates the rhetor used to advice his students to honor their teachers above their parents, because the latter are the cause only of living, while teachers are the cause of living nobly"[21].

The answer of the Syrophoenician woman to the comparison of pagans to dogs (Mark 7.24–30 etc.), accepted by Jesus, could reflect not only her humility, but also erudition. Philostrates in his *Life of Apollonios* (1.19) preserved such a story: a fan of Apollonios, Damis, noted everything about him. A critic compared it to collecting crumbs by dogs. Damis anwered that servants should collect every piece of ambrosia falling from the table of gods. Could the woman communicate with Jesus with the help of this comparison, used perhaps to describe good students of their masters?

The idea that the destruction of soul and body is worse than the destruction of the body only (Matt 10.28) can be found in Musonius Rufus (*Discourse* 20). It looks as a popular Greek motive – because it presupposes the dualistic anthropology. Socrates says in Plato that because the soul is worthier than the body, after the destruction of the soul, one's life is worthless (Plato, *Crito* 47E).

The proverb of Jesus, translated: "the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" (*pneuma – sarx*; Mark 14.38; Matt 26.41), could have been taken from Hellenism. It also mentions spirit and flesh to denote two parallel parts of the human being, what is nearer to the Greek notions than to the Bible. Weak body and the powerful spirit correspond roughly to the Platonic negative vision of the body. Similar comparisons appear in Greek texts[22].

A reed shaking on the wind, which is not like John the Baptist (Matt 11.7–9 par.), can be associated with the use of this image in an Aesopic fable (Perry 70). A strong wind torn up the oak, but the reed avoided being uprooted by bending. John was not a conformist aiming at his own survival.

We may suppose a wider use of proverbs evoked in Matt 12.30 (Luke 11.23): "He who is not with me is against me", and its reversal in Mark 9.40 (Luke 9.50): "He that is not against us is for us". Caesar alluded to both of them, saying that the Pompeian party considered enemy every-

21 M.E. Boring et al., *Hellenistic Commentary*, p. 222.

22 Cf. D.E. Aune, *The Spirit is Willing*, p. 131.

body who is not with them, while he, Caesar, has for allies all who are not against him (Cicero, *Pro Ligario* 11.33).

Reprimanding a sinner "between you and him alone" first (Matt 18.15) looks as a common sense advice stemming from the Greek opinions on friendship (e.g. Plutarch, *Moralia* 71B–D). In this context we find also mentions about sacrificing one's life for a friend; it seems the background for Jn 15.13 (Aristotle, *Nicomachaean ethics* 1169a; Demetrius Lacon, *Life of Philonides*; Epicurus after Diogenes Laertios, *Lives* 10.121; Seneca, *Moral Letters* 1.9.10)[23].

Matt 22.14: "Many are called, but few are chosen", alludes probably to a proverb. Other versions of the same construction can be found e.g. in Plato (*Phaedrus* 69c); in 2 Esdras 8.3.

Sharp criticisms against the Pharisees in Matt 23 are understandable against the background of the ancient polemic, with its rhetorical exaggeration. Some examples: Socrates ridiculed sophists; Dio Cocceianus, *Discourse* 13 against sophists; Aelius Aristides, *Platonic discourse 307* ("they pretend to virtue without practicing it")[24]. Such a rhetoric reflected the general practice.

d) John. These examples have been found in the Synoptic Gospels. The sayings of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel could also be quoted, but even if they reflect the teaching of Jesus, they were more or less reformulated by the author of the Gospel. It seems that the Synoptic Gospels follow the example of the ancient biographies of philosophers, collecting their sayings, while the Fourth Gospel follows (as the Acts) the ancient historical works where the speeches were written by the author, although in relation to the things which had been actually said. With this reservation I shall quote same sayings. Jn 15.13 has been already mentioned.

The new birth in the dialogue with Nicodemus (Jn 3.3) is associated with the Hermetic doctrines. However, "born of gods" in the moral sense appears in pseudo-Platonic dialogue *Axiochos* (first century BC). The saying on the wind from Jn 3.8: "The wind blow where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes", can be compared to the saying of Socrates: "winds (anemoi) are themselves invisible, yet their deeds are manifest to us, and we perceive their approach" (Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 4.3.14). These winds are *gods' ministers*, and accordingly in the Gospel the same word *pneuma* refers to the wind and to the spirit. It could have been a popular comparison.

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[23] Cf. D. Konstan, *Friendship.*

[24] L.T. Johnson, *The New Testament's.*

In Jn 8.12 Jesus says: "I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life". It seems at the first glance as an example of Johannine dualism, comparable to the dualism of Qumran. Nevertheless the Platonic allegory of the world as the dark cave (*Republic* 7.1–11) was very popular in the antiquity, as it is today. Jesus could refer to this allegory as the one who enters the dark cave with the light.

The construction of the speech on freedom (Jn 8.31–36) recalls the arguments of popular philosophy. The true freedom results from the knowledge of truth and good, as well from an independence of vices, fears and defeats. This tradition is well summarized in Epictetus (*Discourses* 4.1): free are those who live consciously, controlling impulses, good, fearless. "There is no bad man who lives as he wills, and accordingly no bad man is free (4.1.3), no one who lives in error [=sins] is free" (2.1.23); with a possibility of Christian influence. Nevertheless, for Greeks freedom results from the state of mind, and for Christians from the liberation by Christ (Rom 6.15–23; Gal 5.1).

In Jn 12.24 Jesus compares his death to a grain, which falls into the earth and dies, but later brings much fruit. Such an illustration of the resurrection could have been just an example from the everyday life, but it is also close to the cult of Adonis (Tammuz), symbol of vegetation, including laments after his death and his return to life. This analogy was observed long before the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, because the Fathers of the Church, interpreting Adonis as the god of vegetation used terminology related to the resurrection (Origen, *Commentary to Ezekiel* 8.14)[25]. The Easter celebrations included elements of spring festivals.

The last quotation: a saying of Jesus from Acts 20.35: "It is more blessed to give than to receive"[26]. Many commentators see a current proverb here. And indeed, we find a similar idea in Dio Chrysostomus (*Or*. 7.103: poverty leads free man to work and to good and useful actions). This aphorism could have been of Greek origin, because it refers to the philosophical ideal of internal order and being modest in one's requirements.

e) Concluding remarks. Collecting Greek parallels which could possibly influence the teachings of Jesus we find virtually no examples from Greek

[25] The rituals honouring these gods are know only from late sources; the model of dying and rising god looks as a construct of modern scholars. Cf. J.Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, pp. 100–107 (this book deals with many unfounded comparisons of this kind).

[26] Codex D: *Blessed is rather who gives than who takes; makarios* instead of *makarion*.

higher literature and philosophy, but popular stories and sayings, or such elements of philosophy which became current. All this stuff could circulate orally in the first century. The Gospels differ significantly under this respect from some later books of the Old Testament. In Ecclesiastes allusions to the Greek thought abound[27]. In the Wisdom of Ben-Sirach we can find a quotation of *Iliad* (6, 143–146 in Sir 14.18), and possible allusions to many Greek authors, including Theognis and Euripides, and to Stoic ideas[28]. The Wisdom of Solomon refers in form and contents to the Hellenistic philosophical literature[29].

Jesus took as a starting point stories repeated orally and popular imagination, which only sometimes have literary and philosophical sources. It proves he lacked closer contact with a formal Greek education, but also a considerable knowledge of popular elements of the Greek culture: fables, sayings, anecdotes, anonymous aphorisms, Socratic traditions etc. (There was no boundary between the oral traditions and the fixed written form as represented in the collections brought together by Plutarch and others.) This influence was not extensive. Only sometimes parallels suggest borrowings, more often the Greek influence seems secondary.

We do not know whether Jesus met the Greek traditions speaking Greek with hellenized neigbours or drawing from the already hellenized culture of Galilee. Both ways are likely. The Gospels do not say directly that Jesus spoke Greek, but it is highly probable. It is implied in his activity as recognized teacher, in his travels, in his contacts with pagans (his travels in the Greek speaking countries: Mark 5.1; 7.24,31; 8.27; 10.1; cf. Jn 7.35; contacts with pagans: Mark 7.24–30 par.; 5.1–20 par.; Jn 12.20–22; conversations with Samaritans and Pilate).

It is beyond doubt that the basic foundation for the teaching of Jesus was the Old Testament and the contemporary Judaism. On this foundation Jesus built his own original teaching. The forms of the teaching also draw from the biblical teachings (wisdom and prophets) and from the activity of Jewish teachers (legal discussions, maxims, parables), even though it has relations to the Greek 'small literature'.

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[27] R. Braun, *Kohelet*; supplemented by later research, e.g. Rudman, *Determinism*.

[28] Th. Middendorp, *Stellung*. Cf. J. Corley, *Ben Sira's*; Winston, *Theodicy*; O. Kaiser, *Rezeption*; U. Wicke-Reuter, *Göttliche Providenz*.

[29] J.M. Reese, *Hellenistic Influence*; Winston, *Wisdom*; in: Polish B. Poniży, *Księga Mądrości*.

Nevertheless, the Judaism of his age was already hellenized, including the land of Israel and Galilee[30], a Jewish country circled by hellenized areas[31]. Greeks could be met everywhere, including markets in Capernaum and Bethsaida[32]. Therefore, even if the religious thought of Jesus is not dependent of the Greek thinkers, many data from the Greek world illustrate the background of the teaching of Jesus, and in some cases Jesus made appeal to the popular sayings, comparisons and images stemming from the Greek culture.

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30 E.g. M. Hengel, *Judentum*.

31 E.g. S. Freyne, *Galilee*. Critically about the degree of hellenization in Galilee: M. Chancey, *Greco-Roman*.

32 The town of Sephoris, not far from Nazareth, had a Greek theatre. However, other typical Hellenistic buildings are lacking and the date of the theatre is discussed: M. Chancey, *Cultural Milieu*. Nevertheless, Jesus made a reference to the Greek theatre, calling Pharisees "actors", *hypokrites* in Greek, whence our "hypocrites". They only played piety (e.g. Matt 6.5). Greek actors played in masks!

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