

Menander at Corinth

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Among the details which call the authenticity of 1 Cor 15 into question¹ is a seeming quotation from the 04c playwright Menander:

1 Cor 15:33. Be not deceived: Evil companionships corrupt good morals.

This is from Menander's lost play *Thais*.² Was Paul really a man of the Greek literary world, and did he sit down to write 1 Corinthians fresh from a performance of *Thais*?

Perhaps instead, this passage draws on a common stock of contemporary maxims, a part of the culture to which Menander had been an especially prolific contributor.³ But the question remains: Why does 1 Corinthians at this point display acquaintance with the current stock of Graeco-Roman common maxims? What does it gain?

Greek Poets and Other Lore

Greek poets are quoted at only two other places in the NT. One is Deutero-Pauline, probably by Titus, himself a Greek. The subject is the inhabitants of Crete:

Titus 1:12. One of themselves, a prophet of their own, said, "Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, idle gluttons." [13] This testimony is true. For which cause, reprove them sharply . . .

That the poet (Epimenides, 06c) *was a Cretan* is necessary for the argument.

The other is from another Deutero-Pauline text, namely Acts:

Acts 17:28. For in him we live, and more, and have our being, as certain even of your poets have said, "For we are also his offspring." [29] Being then the offspring of God . . .

Paul is here represented as preaching to the Greeks in Athens, and the fact that this poet (Aratus, 03c, again unnamed) *was a Greek* is essential to the story.

Going back now to the quote with which we started: does the Menander quote gain in force if the hearers recognize it as *from* Menander? No. The point of that passage is not the *source* of the saying, but its recognizable wisdom.

¹For a lucid discussion of that passage, see Walker **Legacy** 95-122. For a stylistic analysis including 1 Cor 15 as a whole, see Brooks **1 Corinthians**.

²All Menander's plays are lost, except the almost complete *Dyskolos* ("The Curmudgeon"); OCD2 sv Menander.

³Under the title *Monostichoi* ("One-Liners") were gathered sayings ascribed to Menander, though "only a few originated with him" (OCD2, citing W Görler, *Μενάνδρου Γνώμαι*, 1963). The gift of reducing a principle to a single sentence is not possessed by all writers. Menander obviously had it (as did Shakespeare in a later age), and was known for it.

Popular Culture in Luke. Says “Jesus,”

Lk 4:23. And he said unto them, Doubtless ye will say unto me this parable, Physician, heal thyself: whatsoever we have heard done at Capernaum, do also here in thine own country.

This does not occur in the Markan version of the Nazareth episode, and is thus original in Luke,⁴ himself a physician.⁵ It is out of place in the story, whose point is that Jesus is helpless among those too familiar with him to attribute any special powers to him. It derives from a lost play of Euripides (05c),⁶ but was probably a commonplace in the 1st century, and has slipped in as part of Luke’s personal involvement in the story.

Here is Luke again, from his Sermon on the Plain:

Lk 6:41. And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother’s eye, but considerest not the beam that is thine own eye?

Jacob 4:11f and 5:9 had forbade judging a brother: God will judge (Ja 5:9b). Luke’s mote (a popular saying; it turns up in Horace’s Satires 1/3:25) was taken into Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount (7:3). Reattributed to Rabbi Tarpon (c100), it entered Tannaitic tradition as “the mote between your brother’s eyes” (Moss **Midrash** 260f), an example of Christian influence in the formation of the Jewish lore tradition.

Two Parables. The ending of Luke’s Sermon on the Plain (Lk 9:51-18:14) consists of a pair of parables (Lk 18:1-14) which, uniquely among Synoptic parables, begin with a statement of *what they are to illustrate*, and at the end draw the moral, duplicating the promythium and epimythium of the widely popular Aesop fables.⁷

Conclusion

Tradition, whether popular or learned, *is already familiar*, and need only be invoked to carry conviction. As Christianity moved outside Palestinian Judaism, and came to recognize, and inhabit, traditions not originally its own, it found advantage in displaying acquaintance with those traditions. It seems that the desire to be worldly, *in this contemporary sense*, belongs to the period after Paul.

Works Cited

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⁴For the larger context in that sermon, see Brooks **Way** 178.

⁵A point sometimes disputed, but see Brooks **Physician**.

⁶Fitzmyer 1/535 quotes it as “A physician for others, but himself teeming with sores.”

⁷For the vogue of Aesop in the time of Tiberius, see Perry **Babrius** xi.