CLASSICAL REMINISCENCE
IN
ST PAUL

H.R. Minn

The nature and the extent of St Paul’s knowledge of the Classics have from time to time plunged the learned world into controversy, sometimes of an acrimonious kind. On the one hand have been those prepared to credit the Apostle with an advanced classical culture — thus, the celebrated Bentley\(^1\). At the opposite extreme he is allowed only ‘the most superficial acquaintance with Greek writers’\(^2\). The truth seems to lie somewhere between these mutually exclusive views. ‘There is no evidence that Paul ever received anything in the way of formal education from Greek teachers,’ says a recent authority \(^3\); ‘the knowledge of Greek literature and culture that his letters reflect was part of the common stock of educated people in the Hellenistic world of that time, whether they were Jews or Gentiles.’

What are the facts and what are legitimate inferences?

For our first ‘classical reminiscence’ we shall take 1 Corinthians 15:33. This has the form of a moral warning — *phtheirousin ethe chresta homiliai kakai*: the ‘Evil communications corrupt good manners’ of the A.V. The line in question occurs in the ‘Thais’ of Menander \(^4\), the great poet of the so-called New Comedy. It may be true that its ultimate source is in a lost tragedy of Euripides. Menander was immensely popular in the Hellenistic world, and collections of ‘Menander’s Maxims’ (*gnomai Menandrou*) had a great vogue. The material in them was not necessarily all Menander’s. He may have copied from Euripides\(^5\).

‘It is uncertain whether Menander adopted a popular proverb, or the saying passed from the ‘Thais’ into popular use. St Paul may have got the saying from another source; but the form *chresta* (for the reading *chresth*’ has hardly any authority) points to the proverb rather than the play\(^6\).

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1. 1662-1742. Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, from 1700. ‘St Paul was a great master in all the learning of the Greeks’ (Boyle Lectures).
4. B.C. 342-292.
The African Church Father Tertullian\(^7\) gives a Latin rendition. He exhorts his wife\(^8\) to make the most of Christian contacts and instruction, ‘memor illius versiculi sanctificati per apostolum: *Bonos corrumpunt mores congressus mali.*’ – ‘mindful of that short verse, sanctified by the apostle’s quotation of it, “ill interviews good morals do corrupt”’\(^9\). The translation just given, in common with Tertullian’s Latin, preserves the iambic senarius of the original. Effective renderings of the Greek text are: ‘Bad company is the ruin of a good character’ (N.E.B.); ‘Many a fine nature is ruined by evil companionship’ (Rutherford). Dinna be taen in: ‘Ill company corrupts gude conduct.’ – N.T. in Braid Scots.

Our second ‘classical reminiscence’ is in Titus 1:12\(^10\). In this passage the character of the Cretans is sarcastically limned in the words of ‘one of themselves, a prophet of their own.’ The Greek is in the form of an entire hexameter —

\[
\text{Kretes aei pseiistai, kaka theria, gasteres argai.}
\]

Clever imitations of the metre are ‘Liars the Cretans aye, ill monsters, gluttonous idlers’ (F.W. Farrar); ‘Cretans are always deceivers, evil brutes, bellies inactive’ (Hendriksen).

According to Clement of Alexandria\(^11\), the poet in question here is Epimenides of Cnossos in Crete, a religious teacher and wonder-worker of the sixth century B.C. He was an ancient Rip Van Winkle, and is said to have lived 157 years, and to have been a sleeper for 57 years in a cave\(^12\). Moffatt comments that our excerpt is ‘apparently drawn from the peri Chresmon (or de oraculis) of the local philosopher Epimenides . . . who attacked the Cretan claim that Zeus lay buried in Crete\(^13\). It is interesting to know that the reformer Calvin turned the hexameter of Epimenides into a Latin one of his own —

\[
mendax, venter iners, sempèr mala bestia Cres est;\]

taxing those persons with superstition ‘who do not venture to borrow anything from heathen authors’\(^14\). Many works

7. about 160-230 AD.
11. c, 150-215 AD. *Stromateis* (‘Patchwork’) i. 59.2.
existed in antiquity ascribed to Epimenides both in prose and in verse, but the ravages of time have been severe.

The third 'classical reminiscence' is in Acts 17:28. The words 'In him we live and move and have our being' are conjecturally attributed to the semi-mythical Cretan just mentioned. Paul’s statement is not metrical in form, nor does he indicate that he is quoting. We are on more reliable ground with the half line of hexameter verse embedded in his speech – 'as certain also of your own poets have said, for we are also his offspring' (tōū găr kāi gēnōs ēsmēn). These words are substantially found in two separate writers, Aratus15 and Callimachus16. The most famous composition of Aratus was an astronomical treatise in verse called the 'Phainomena' which became so popular as to be used as a school book. Aratus himself was not an astronomer. He was what was termed a 'metaphrast' or 'versifier of treatises.' Cicero and others translated him into Latin, and the 'Phainomena' was well known in Paul’s day.

Possibly Aratus was using in slightly recast form a line from the great 'Hymn to Zeus' by Cleanthes17 of Lycia, 'a kind of Stoic creed or confession of faith in verse'18 which contains the words ēk soū găr gēnōs ēsmēn – 'for we are thine offspring.' Aratus came from Soli in Cilicia near Paul’s own town of Tarsus. It is a tenable contention that he was himself a Tarsian.

Aratus opens his poem thus:

From Zeus begin we, never nameless we
May leave him. All the streets are full of Zeus,
And market places: full also the sea
And harbours. Ever in the need of Zeus
We stand, for we are also his offspring19

The noble 'Hymn to Zeus' of Cleanthes is little known, even by classical students. It is well worth a perusal20. A version reflecting the original metre commences:

Glory in chief of Immortals, many-named, ever Almighty,
O Zeus, ruler of Nature, by law the whole universe guiding,
Hail! for 'tis proper for mortals all to address thee in homage,
Since 'tis of thee we are born, and endowed with the image of godhead:

15. c.315-240 BC.
16. 3rd. cent, BC. Dates uncertain.
17. about 331-232 BC.
We, and none other of things that are living on earth or are creeping.
Therefore shall I hymn Thee, and sing of Thy might everlasting.\(^\text{21}\).

Both of these poets were Stoics, and as we are expressly given to understand that a considerable number of the Apostle’s hearers belonged to that school of philosophy, the suitability of his phraseology in situ is obvious.

The use of a familiar quotation is no warrant for inferring that the user is personally acquainted with the contents of the work from which it is taken. It would be unwise to credit every one who assures us that ‘All the world’s a stage’ with an intimate knowledge of Shakespeare.

It seems rather unlikely that Paul had actually read Menander or Epimenides. Bon-mots and jests or jibes have a knack of becoming detached from their original moorings. With Aratus and Cleanthes we are on more favourable ground. As has been pointed out, Tarsus was an influential Stoic centre and Paul was no stranger to the main lines of Stoic thought. Furthermore, Aratus hailed from Soli in Cilicia, Paul’s own country.

The influence of Aristotle has been detected in the Pauline corpus. A passage from the Politics or Treatise on Government\(^\text{22}\) has been supposed to have left its mark on two of the New Testament Epistles. In this it is said of men especially eminent for virtue and wisdom: *kata de toioytōn ouk esti nomos* autoi gar eisi nomos (‘Against such there is no law, for they are a law to themselves’). It is somewhat hard to believe that the coincidences are purely accidental when we find in Galatians 5:23, in connection with the ‘fruit of the Spirit’ (RSV), the words with which the passage opens, ‘Against such there is no law’ (*kata τὸν toioytōn ouk esti nomos*), and in Romans 2:14 words which closely resemble the last clause – even though they do not have the law, *they are a law to themselves* (*heautois eisi nomos*). This statement is reminiscent of the Nicomachean Ethics (iv. 8. 10) where we are told that ‘the cultivated gentleman will therefore bear himself thus (i.e. regulate his wit), and will be as it were a law to himself (*hoion nomos ὅν heauto(m)*).

These references to Aristotle are included by Sir Evelyn Howell in his informative and lucid study on ‘St Paul and the Greek World\(^\text{23}\)’. He stakes a


\(^{22}\) *Politics* iii.13,14:1284\(^a\) 14-15.

\(^{23}\) Greece & Rome, 2nd series, vol. 11, March 1964. This paper was read in its original form to the Classical Society of Emmanuel College on October 15, 1959, and in a shortened form appeared in The Expository Times, August 1960. On Feb. 14, 1962, it was read in the expanded version reproduced to the Herodotean Society, University of Cambridge.
much larger claim for Paul’s familiarity with classical literature than is normally allowed, would make him ‘a complete member of the Greek world’ when it suited his purpose to assume that character, finds allusions to Aeschylus, Pindar, Aristophanes and Euripides in his writings, and comes forward with a lengthy series of parallels from Plato.

Among these may be mentioned:

**Theme: Looking Up**

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<td>Col. 3:1-2; Phil. 3:19</td>
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**Theme: The Supreme Good**

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<td>Republic 505a-b</td>
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**Theme: The Inner Man and Self-Control**

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**Theme: The Heavenly City**

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**Theme: Knowledge**

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<td>Apol. 21e-22a</td>
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he had never read, probably never heard of, such works as Plato’s *Republic* or Aristotle’s *Ethics*. His school was the school of practical contact, his teacher the thought environment” 25.