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### **The Importance of Ancient Greek Texts in the Understanding of the Paul's Teaching**

When studying the New Testament, it can easily be acknowledged that Paul had a huge impact on the early church. Encouraging, chastening, and teaching, his many epistles instructed the members of the early church, and we read these same letters to this day. But at times, the teachings enclosed in the letters are unclear to us. At times, we may even be misled by texts we do not understand. But how can we know the truth? In order to understand what Paul is saying, his words must be examined in context. This can be difficult, as the letters are nearly 2 thousand years old, so what must be done is to carefully examine those resources we have that give glimpses into contemporary life. One of these sources is the ancient Greek novel.

The early church members would have been immersed in the Hellenistic culture, a culture that at the time was a very considerable force. In fact, it is said that the Romans conquered *completely*, by not only occupying the new land, but also by instilling their culture into their conquered areas (Peters 33). One manner by which this culture was transmitted was by literary works. While it may be true that epics by Homer were important, the everyday common man would have read (or listened a reading of) the novel. Novels from any age serve as a reflection of the culture from which it came, and those from the ancient world are no exception. Therefore, by closely examining this resource, we can glean important lessons lending insights into the time in which Paul wrote.

One such example of an ancient text is *An Ephesian Tale of Anthia and Habrocomes*, by Xenophon of Ephesus. This work is dated to somewhere in the second century A.D. and is acknowledged by scholars to be a book “popular in antiquity” rather than academic in nature (Anderson, 125). The book centers on Anthia and Habrocomes, two lovers in ancient Ephesus who encounter countless difficulties with pirates, slavery, execution orders, and angry gods. This book can serve as a window, showing us how cultural values, or how religious worship was conducted. Reading and examining this text can lead one to a better understanding of Paul’s world.

One of the biggest questions that has been asked about the spread of the early church concerns how quickly it spread. This certainly cannot be attributed to a religious vacuum, as gods were present for any and every circumstance. What exactly was the situation in the ancient world? In order to find an accurate answer to the question, we can inspect the tale by Xenophon. In the story there are a myriad of examples where the gods play an integral part in the lives of the people. At the very beginning of the text, we are introduced to a scene at the festival of Artemis, a celebration where the young find spouses. A short time after, the characters go to the Temple of Apollo in Colophon to inquire about strange maladies and meals are sacrificed on Hera’s sacred isle to ensure safe travel (Xenophon 129-135). The examples of religiosity are plentiful. This tells us several things. The abundance of religious activities quickly dissolves any notion of a ‘religious vacuum’, but more importantly, it shows that the people of the Roman world were distinctly pious.

Not only did they believe in many gods and deities, they were careful to satisfy the obligations of each one. When this contract was not fulfilled, bad things tended to

happen. Indeed, the lack of fulfilling this obligation lies at the root of the whole story's conflict, the separation of the two star-crossed lovers. "[Habrocomes] did not even recognize Eros as a god; he rejected him totally and considered him of no importance..."(128). The hubris of Habrocomes inspires the anger of Eros, who then sets into motion those events leading to the major conflict. On the other hand, later in the story when Habrocomes is wrongly accused and sentenced to death, it is his piety that saves him.

But Habrocomes looked straight at the sun, then at the Nile channel, and prayed: 'Kindest of the gods, ruler of Egypt, revealer of land and sea to all men: if I, Habrocomes, have done anything wrong, may I perish miserably and incur an even greater penalty... The god took pity on his prayer. A sudden gust of wind arose and struck the cross, sweeping away the subsoil on the cliff where it had been fixed. Habrocomes fell into the torrent and was swept away; the water did him no harm...(155)

These two passages demonstrate the point quite clearly. When piety is ignored, Habrocomes is punished, but when he is innocent his faithfulness before the gods saves him. From this it can be clearly seen that piety is an important aspect to the people of this time.

Therefore, when Paul came along proclaiming the Good News, his instruction of faithfulness was not a new concept. Instead, the new idea was that of directing the faithfulness towards one God instead of many. Consider what he writes in Galatians 4:8-9: "Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to beings that by nature

are not gods. Now, however... you have come to know God.” When he speaks of the ‘beings that by nature are not gods’ we can understand that he is almost certainly talking about those gods mentioned in the novel: Artemis, Eros, Hera, Isis, Apollo, etc. Therefore, when Paul commands his followers to flee from the worship of idols (1 Corinthians 10:14), he isn’t talking just about a statue made by an artisan in the marketplace. These idols represented gods that were very real entities to their followers, not simply *figurines*, as we may think of them today. For those hearing Paul’s message for the first time, this certainly would have been a revolutionary doctrine. Imagine what the situation for these people would have been: They have grown up their entire lives with the ‘gods’ affecting every aspect of each day. Each person believed deeply in these gods, and would have no reason to think otherwise. Then, suddenly, a newcomer arrives one day, proclaiming that everything they have ever thought was wrong. He states that not only are all their gods false ones, there is in fact only one God, and that he has sent his son to Earth for humans. Paul calls them from what they believed were true gods to a new life with one true God.

The piety of the Roman world can also help to explain another portion of Paul’s epistles. In 1 Corinthians 8, he addresses the believers concerning food that has been offered to idols. While this *was* an important issue, we cannot have an accurate representation of what this actually meant unless we apply our knowledge gained from the novel. The faithfulness inherent in the many religious activities documented in the book sheds light on the situation Paul refers to. When the voyage of Anthia and Habrocomes arrive on Samos, they sacrifice a meal to Hera (135). This means that the meal belongs specifically to her, and not the other gods they believed in. The idea of

eating something that *belonged* to another god (one that you no longer follow) would have been very irreverent to their newfound truth. Any new member of the Church would naturally bring along their piety from previous experiences, which would be reflected by their reaction to sacrificed food. Combined with the incomplete understanding of the existence of false gods would lead to deep concern. When we read this passage, we see it from a Jewish, or Monotheistic, viewpoint. From this point of view, we tend to understand much better the idea of one true God and all other gods being imposters. With the insights gleaned from An Ephesian Tale we can come to terms with the gentile perspective. For them deities were real, and this is why they struggled with this issue. Paul tries to explain that it is not in fact a problem since the ‘gods’ do not actually exist, but we can see how this would be a serious issue for the early converts.

But how would they have responded to the idea of Jesus as a divine being? The idea certainly would not have been a new one for them. Initially it may be believed that the Jewish community would have found this thought extremely radical, but closer study suggests otherwise. The term *theios aner* is the concept of divine man. Many Jews in the Diaspora applied this concept to biblical figures to explain miracles and extraordinary occurrences within biblical history (Pearson). With this foundation one can easily come to the conclusion that the idea of *theios aner* was simply the next step in a logical train of thought. For the Hellenistic Jews, there would be little reason not to believe that Jesus was a divine man. Similarly, for the gentiles involved in polytheistic worship, this idea would have little novelty as well. Examples from the novel illustrate this quite plainly. When Habrocomes and Anthia landed at Rhodes, they were taken to be visiting gods, and in the bridal chamber of the couple, Xenophon writes that Aphrodite, Ares, Eros, and

even cupids were *present* (Xenophon 132-133). The gentiles believed that gods came down and physically inhabited the real world, and participated in their activities. This concept would have been easily transferred to Paul's message about Jesus.

While the citizens of the empire were very concerned with their spiritual lives, their culture also emphasized the physical realm. Within *An Ephesian Tale*, we can see countless references to beauty, and physical attractiveness. The two main characters embody this theme. A description of Habrocomes is given as "his good looks were phenomenal, and neither in Ionia nor anywhere else had there been anything like them. (128)" Anthia was much the same, "her beauty was burgeoning... Often as [the crowd] saw her in the sacred enclosure the Ephesians would worship her as Artemis. (129)." The physical aspect of life was very important to those of the Hellenistic culture. The body was glorified, and people strove for the 'morphe theou,' or 'form of God' in the gymnasiums. The focus on the physical, embodied by the Olympics, races, and wrestling was extremely significant.

This obsession with perfection would have been in major contrast with the ideas of the Jews, specifically on the matter of circumcision. The beauty of Habrocomes is almost certainly not centered upon just his face, but upon his entire body. Again, the idea of 'morphe theou' comes up, the form of god as a perfect body without blemish. What then, might the populace think about the issue of circumcision? Most definitely they would have considered it ghastly. Within the gymnasium all exercising was done naked, and it is here that all would know the desecration done to the body. This is why Paul addresses the subject so very often in his letters. If circumcision was a prerequisite to membership in the church, it is easy to see why this would have deterred many people

from joining the church. Although some religious transference may take place, the larger backdrop of the Hellenistic culture still held much sway. Paul writes of circumcision at least 18 times trying to explain to the gentiles its nuances as a sign of the covenant to the Jews. The majority of the time he writes of it, he refutes the distinction of circumcision at all. 1 Corinthians 7:19 states that “Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing; but obeying the commandments of God is everything.” Paul is trying to impress on the gentiles that the important detail is not whether or not a cut has been made on the body, but instead the state of the heart. It is much more important to obey and have faith.

Paul reflects the emphasis on the body in many of his writings, especially in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27. Here he talks about running the race to receive the prize, running with a purpose, and boxing with precision. It is no accident that he has used this language in his letters. Paul wants to use words that the recipients of the letters can understand, and that is exactly what he has done in this instance. In the course of his journey, Habrocomes meets Hippothous, who befriends him. At one point, Hippothous tells of his past, “There while I was a young man I fell in love with... when I saw his wrestling exploits in the gymnasium and I could not contain myself (147).” From this text we can see what an important role athleticism plays in their culture. With an audience so immersed in a culture that impresses upon the importance of physicality, athleticism, and bodily perfection, Paul accurately decides to use figures of speech that will be familiar to them. Using this strategy, he is better able to help his readers gain understanding.

Understanding this aspect of the gentile culture allows us a unique perspective, one that helps to explain a good deal of what Paul writes. The significance placed on the physical body and athleticism aids the comprehension of Paul’s world, and his letters.

The revelation that circumcision was so shunned clarifies the ‘controversies’ and extensive time Paul invests into the subject. Realizing this significance also explains Paul’s choice of words when he talks in athletic terms when discussing theology.

Since so many years have passed between the writing of the letters until today, it has become extremely important to comprehend as completely as possible the nuances in the text that guides our lives. Because the novel by Xenophon paints such a vivid picture of what life was like in his time period, we can come to a much better comprehension of the Hellenistic world. With this in mind we are able to construct a clearer understanding of Paul’s writings. Using the ancient novel as a frame of reference, we can come to a clearer understanding of what was written long ago, in light of today’s world.

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