

NEW TESTAMENT AND JUDAISM OF THE N. T. PERIOD

ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTION

THE SLAVE OF TWO MASTERS

by

Prof. Shmuel Safrai and Prof. David Flusser

There are two roots of Jesus's teaching: his basic ethical doctrines stem from the Pharisaic stock, but very often we find Essene influence in his doctrines, primarily in the field of social approach. Jesus's high appreciation of poverty and his concept that wealth is a religious danger can be recognized as being Essene in origin: even the terminology in which he expresses those ideas appears in the Essene Dead Sea Scrolls.¹ When he takes over Essene motifs, he blends them together with rabbinic teachings in one indivisible unity. An outstanding example of such a procedure is Jesus's saying about the slave of two masters (Mt. 6:24, Lk. 16:13): "No servant can be the slave of two masters; for either he will hate the first and love the second, or he will be devoted to the first and think nothing of the second. You cannot serve God and mammon."

Certain scholars have discovered that the phrase "the servant of two masters" appears also in rabbinic sources.² Our task will be to clarify the rabbinic background of the whole logion and its meaning. The source of the parallel rabbinic saying is a sage from the 3rd century CE, Rabbi Shimeon ben Pazzi. Rabbi Shimeon said: "... 'And the slave is free from his master' (Job 3:19). Man, while he lives, is the slave of two masters:³ the slave of his Creator and the slave of his inclination. When he does the will of his Creator, he angers his inclination, and when he does the will of his

¹ See D. Flusser, "Blessed are the Poor in Spirit. . .", *IEJ*, 10, 1960, pp. 1-13.

² E. E. Urbach, "The Slave of Two Masters," *Leshonenu L'Am*, 14, 1963, p. 31 (Hebrew); Sh. Abramson, "Bikkurim," *Sinai*, 58, 1966, pp. 186-188 (Hebrew). See also H. Graetz, *Geschichte*, VIII (2) 1875, note to p. 444; and *Sefer HaQana*, Parizek, 1785/6, fol. 16a.

³ This is the better reading; so in Rabbi Yedaia Habadrashi's commentary on Ruth R. in Ms. Parma 222 and in Majam Ganim Commentar zu Job von Rabbi Samuel ben Nissim Masnuth, ed. Buber (1889) p. 13. The other reading is: "of two inclinations". The variant reading is also the original one, for the word "master" occurs in the verse from Job 3:19, upon which the midrash is based.

inclination, he angers his Creator. When he dies, he is freed, a slave free from his master!"⁴

The midrash of Rabbi Shimeon ben Pazzi is based upon Genesis 2:7, where the word וַיִּצַר, "and he created" (i. e., God created man), is written in an exceptional way with two *yods*. The rabbi saw in this anomaly a suggestion that man is in subjection to two masters, to his Creator (יִצַר) and to his inclination (צַר). "What is the meaning of וַיִּצַר?" Rabbi Shimeon ben Pazzi explained it by saying: "Woe unto me of my inclination (צַר) and woe unto me of my Creator (יִצַר)." ⁵ It is clear that the explanations of both Genesis 2:7 and Job 3:19 were originally a part of the midrash of Rabbi Shimeon ben Pazzi.⁶

We know the rabbinic saying only in its form from the 3rd century CE, and so it is not possible to determine the form of the saying which Jesus knew and adapted. It is possible that originally the saying was not so pessimistic. According to Rabbi Shimeon ben Pazzi, man, while he is alive, is the slave of his inclination, but after his death, his only master is God. There is another, somehow similar saying of Rabbi Yochanan (c. 250 CE): "It is written (Ps. 88:6) 'Free among the dead'; when a man dies, he becomes free from the law and the commandments,"⁸ as Solomon said (Eccl. 4:2): 'And I praise the dead who are already dead.'" According to rabbinic Judaism, the dead are not obliged to perform the commandments of the Law, and Rabbi Yochanan based this concept upon the above two biblical verses. It is possible that Rabbi Shimeon combined a similar idea with an older saying, and came to the conclusion that, in death, man is freed from one master, his inclination, and belongs only to the other master, to God.

But even so, the similarities between Jesus's saying and that of Rabbi Shimeon are great. According to Rabbi Shimeon, man is the slave of two masters, the slave of his Creator and the slave of his inclination. When he does the will of the first master, he makes the second angry, and when he does the will of the second master, he makes the first angry. According to Jesus, a man cannot be the slave of two masters, God and mammon, for

⁴ Ruth R. III. 14, according to Ms. Oxford 164 (see M. B. Lerner, *The Book of Ruth in Aggadic Literature and Midrash Ruth Rabba* (diss. 1971) III p. 25). See b Ber. 61a, b Erubin 18a, Gen. R. XIV. 4 (128), Pseudojonathan Gen. II. 19. For the whole concept see also the beautiful passage in Sifra, beginning at Shemini.

⁵ b Erubin; see also the preceding note.

⁶ According to Rabbi Shimeon, the two masters of man are his Creator and his inclination. From b Ber 61 we learn that it was Rav Nahman who misunderstood this midrash, wrongly identifying the two masters of man as being two inclinations, the good and the evil inclination. As a result, in some manuscripts and in the printed editions of Ruth R. we read that man is a slave of two inclinations. The original text spoke about two masters, of whom one was, as in Jesus's saying, God.

⁷ b. Shabbat 30a and 151b; cf. b Niddah 61b.

⁸ Most variants only: Free from the commandments. So also in b Niddah.

“either he will hate the first and love the second, or he will be devoted to the first and think nothing of the second.” In both cases – the rabbinic saying and the saying of Jesus – the first master is God. Jesus says that “no servant can be the slave of two masters”, and demands from man that he free himself from the wicked master and belong only to God. It is possible that the original rabbinic saying demanded man to subdue the evil inclination and so to free himself from slavery to the second master, in order to have only one master, the Creator.

In Jesus’s saying, the second master is not inclination, but mammon, or wealth. Here we enter the sphere of Essenism, The Essenes praised poverty and suspected wealth; they also preached the dualism of good and evil. “In the hand of the Prince of Light is the rule of all the Sons of Righteousness and in the ways of Light they do walk, and in the hand of the Angel of Darkness is the rule of all the Sons of Evil and in the ways of Darkness they do walk” (1 QS 3:19-22). Thus, according to the Essene view of the world, there are two masters: the Prince of Light is the archangel Michael, and the Angel of Darkness is called Belial. The name Belial occurs only once in the New Testament, in a passage which is very near to the Essene theology; one scholar⁹ even thinks that the passage is an interpolation, a Christian reworking of an Essene pericope which has been introduced into the Pauline letter: “Do not unite yourselves with unbelievers; they are not fit mates for you. What has righteousness to do with wickedness? Can light consort with darkness; can Christ agree with Belial, or a believer join hands with an unbeliever?” (II Cor. 6:14-15). This Essene passage from a Pauline epistle serves as a good illustration of the Essene dualistic background of Jesus’s logion. The two masters exclude one another, and you can serve only one of them: choose God and not wickedness! The Essene sect commanded its members “to love all that (God) has chosen and to hate all that He has despised, to keep far away from all that is evil, to cleave to every good deed” (1 QS I, 3-11; cf. Rom. 12:9-10, I Thess. 5:21-22).

Jesus did not describe the opposite of God as being evil inclination, as the rabbinic saying did, or as being Belial, as the Essenes did, but as being mammon, or wealth. Essenes were champions of poverty, and wealth had for them a negative value. The author of the Thanksgiving Psalms (1 QH 10:20-32) expresses this idea in a beautiful passage: “And Thou hast not placed my support on unjust gain, and wealth (gained by violence) my (heart desireth not). And inclination (יצר) of flesh Thou hast not assigned to me. The stronghold of strength of the mighty ones is in the plenty of pleasures (of the world and in) the plenty of corn, wine and oil, and they

⁹ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “Qumran and the Interpolated Paragraph in 2 Cor. 6:14-17:”, NTS 1970, pp. 279-280.

exalt themselves in cattle and property. And they flourish as a fresh tree by the streams of water, bringing forth leaves and abounding in boughs, because they have cho(sen all good of the sons) of men. . .” The Essene poet contrasts these rich mighty ones with the “Sons of Thy truth” to whom God has granted an eternal joy and has multiplied his inheritance in the knowledge of his truth. “And the soul of Thy servant abhorreth we(alth) and unjust gain, and choicest pleasures (he) did (not desire). My heart rejoiceth in Thy covenant and Thy truth delighteth my soul.”

The connection of the Sons of Darkness with wealth is very well expressed in this passage, as is the abhorrence of wealth by the Sons of Light. A very interesting fact for us is that the Essene author says about himself that his heart does not desire wealth, “and inclination of flesh (יצר בשר) Thou hast not assigned to me.” Thus, the desire for wealth is rooted in the inclination of flesh. We have seen that according to the midrash of Rabbi Shimeon ben Pazzi (evil) inclination is one of the two masters of men. Thus it seems that the nexus between wealth and evil inclination in Essene thought made it possible for Jesus to graft an Essene idea into the rabbinic saying according to which man is “a slave of two masters, a slave of his Creator and a slave of his inclination.” According to Jesus the two masters of man are God and wealth; this concept is clearly Essene. Although the rabbinic saying bears no social implication, it is near in spirit to Essenism. But the saying is also dualistic, in that it speaks of two opposite masters of man – a good master, the Creator, and a wicked master, evil inclination. As we have seen, this kind of dualism is typical of Essene theology. So it was easy for Jesus to combine a rabbinic saying about the slave of two masters with the Essene idea of the danger of wealth.

Our historical and ideological analysis of the saying of Jesus has not simply shown its roots, but has made it possible to identify the rabbinic source of Jesus’s teaching and the Essene impact upon it. We can also see the subtle creativity of Jesus’s thought in the manner in which he succeeded here, as on other occasions, in fusing rabbinic and Essene ideas into one, personal unity.

Professor Shmuel Safrai is professor of Jewish history, and Professor David Flusser is professor of the Second Temple period and of early Christianity, both at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.