Jesus’ Friends in John 15 and the Hellenistic Royal Court

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Abstract: The present contribution utilizes the reference to disciples as Jesus’ friends in Jesus’ Farewell Talk to the Apostles in John 15 as evidence of the contemporary understanding of the Hellenistic royal in essentially non-Greek circles of the Greco-Roman East. It also argues that this passage may help to explain the very nature of the Hellenistic royal friends (philoi) as compared to other possible types of relation to monarchs (servants – douloi, companions – betairoi) in the earlier Hellenistic Age.

Keywords: hellenistic court, companions, friends, Jesus’ disciples as friends

The present contribution starts from an observation that Jesus’ Farewell Talk to his disciples (John 15), with an assertion that the disciples were his friends, not – servants, may reflect the awareness of the Hellenistic royal patterns in the circles of the disciples of Christ in the 1st cent. AD (both the times of Jesus and the times of the composition of John are meant here). As primarily an ancient historian, interested in the Hellenistic monarchy, I believe that this piece of evidence may be used to make a difference between the Companions (betairoi) and Friends (philoi) of Hellenistic kings more nuanced. That is why I decide to delve into a New Testament passage famous for and analyzed mainly owing to its theological content. The idea begins with a conviction that the political consciousness of people of various origin in that period was increasingly influenced by the growth of personal monarchies, which emerged from the division of the empire of Alexander the Great. In fact, the model of kingship elaborated by the Graeco-Macedonian elite appeared to be attractive to non-Greek peoples as well. In some non-Greek cultures the Hellenistic model of monarchy has been fiercely discussed. The Jews, surrounded by (and subject to) two Hellenistic superpowers were not unlike, and gradually the monarchy the Maccabees and of Herod the Great borrowed more and more from the rich language of power of Hellenistic monarchs. It was also the language that heavily impacted the ways of thinking of almost

1 Any effort to extract Jesus’ actual teaching from the gospel’s authorial text was not ever accepted more widely in the Bible scholarship, and perhaps never will be. The public teaching of Jesus and the writing down of the Gospel are relatively close each other and both belong to the world of the Principate, very much different from the epoch when the concept of the Hellenistic kingship was shaped. That is why I think it is justified to treat John’s allusions to the monarchy integrally as testimonies of the post-Alexandrian Hellenistic kingship’s reception in the circle of Jesus.
all circles of the society depicted in the Gospels. Therefore, the Hellenistic loan-terms in New Testament may be utilized as a supplementary context for better understanding of Hellenistic society.

John’s account of Jesus’ last talk to the disciples before the Passion with its crucial notions of the Hellenistic court terminology is not the only reference to Jesus’ kingship in the fourth Gospel as it is generally acknowledged that the issue of Jesus’ kingship underlies the whole Passion narrative of John thematically (cf. not only John 18:33–19:3 but also John 19:19–22). John determined to deal with this issue with three different perspectives (Jesus’ self-statement as the Lord; Jesus’ kingship discussed with Pilate; Pilate’s notice to be fixed on the cross), and certainly the vision of God’s monarchy in John results from someone’s careful reflection and study.

In the last talk to the disciples Jesus names them friends, and not slaves or servants of himself and refers to the relation as φίλοι (John 15:14–15). 2 Admittedly, too, Jesus identifies himself in this passage as the Lord (κύριος), not as the king. Indeed, in John Jesus never, except for the descriptions of the Passion, refers to himself as to a king. John, however, uses the notion of Jesus as βασιλεὺς while reporting others’ attitude to Jesus. Thus Nathanael confesses his belief in Jesus as the Son of God and the king of Israel (John 1:49), which agrees with a quote from Zecharias (Zech 5:5) in the account of Jesus’ ceremonial entry into Jerusalem (John 12:15). The political sense of the kingship, which some supporters had projected for Jesus is clearly implied in John 6:15, too (Ἰησοῦς οὖν γνοὺς ὅτι μέλλουσιν ἐρχεσθαι καὶ ἁρπάζειν αὐτὸν ἵνα ποιήσωσιν βασιλέα, ἀνεχώρησεν πάλιν εἰς τὸ ὄρος αὐτὸς μόνος. – “Therefore when Jesus perceived that they were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king, He departed again to the mountain by Himself alone”). 3 Still, the noun κύριος had been used for a century at least as a synonym of the royal title in the Greek world, 4 and one may assume that Jesus (and then Paul, too) used it as a safer, seemingly less obviously political notion than that of βασιλεὺς.

Modern commentaries usually focus on purely moral or theological aspects of the disciples’ elevation to the status of the friends. When using the Classical context to explain this passage, they go to Greek philosophical treatises dealing with issues like friendship or slavery, most notably Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics. Sometimes, they also try to explain the friendship between Jesus (as the Lord) and his disciples in the context of the Old Testament as well as in the conditions of the Church in statu nascendi. It was not overlooked that

2 John 15:14: ὑμεῖς φίλοι μου ἐστε ἐὰν ποιῆτε ἄ ἡ γοὺς ἐντέλλομαι ὑμῖν. 15. οὐκέτι λέγω ὑμᾶς δούλους, ὅτι ὁ δοῦλος οὐκ οἶδεν τι ποιεῖ σὺν κύριος: ὑμᾶς δὲ εἰρήκα φίλους, ὅτι πάντα ἃ ἤκουσα παρὰ τοῦ πατρὸς μου ἐγνώρισα ὑμῖν. – “You are My friends if you do whatever I command you. 15 No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you.” The English Bible translations are NKJV.


the new friends remain servants of the Lord (John 15:20), which at first glance may seem contradictory. On the other hand, in more recent scholarship students of John do not fail to notice that Jesus’ styling of his disciples as friends resembles practices known from the political practice of his age (friends of “Eastern rulers,” amici Caesaris). Of course, friendship is not the main theme driving the Gospel of John. Rather, the language of friendship – philia was the most natural to both the author and the intended readers of the text. It is clear that in the Hellenistic societies this language was well understood and everyone was aware that the concept of philia may have mask many various types of relationships including that of personal dependence.

Thus the theme of friendship, being omnipresent in the Ancient, especially Greco-Roman thought for many centuries, has been borrowed and developed by Hellenistic monarchs to explain their relation to their subjects. I think that we should set the words of Jesus in the context of the Hellenistic discourse on the monarchy, kinship, and court societies more firmly as it has been hitherto done. It is well known fact that in the Hellenistic kings (both the ones descending from Macedonian families as well as non-Macedonians) relied in administering their kingdoms on loose structures of philoi – Friends (courtiers, administrative officers, advisors, ambassadors). In the monarchies of Alexander’s Successors

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the Friends replaced an earlier structure of the *betairoi* – the Companions of the Argead kings of Macedon (who in the first line were the heavy cavalrymen in royal service). In the court context it is not easy to distinguish between the *betairoi* and the *philoi*, and indeed some historians prefer to speak about one structure with two names, of which one was preferred in the Classical Age of Greek history, while the other gained more popularity in the Hellenistic Age. It might be argued, however, that the terms *betairoi* and *philoi* were sometimes utilized by ancient authors in a prejudiced way, and that there was always a lot of space for possible semantic manipulations.

A possible utilization of the contrast between friends and servants in John 15:14 as a piece of evidence on Hellenistic courts was not considered in the literature on St. John Gospel. In the previous scholarship such a possibility was excluded by statements like a one by George Mervyn Lee. I am afraid, however, that his argument that “here we have to do with friends in a private station, more or less on terms of equality” does suggest a misunderstanding of Hellenistic court ideology, rightly corrected by later Biblical scholars – the ostensible (and obviously forged) equality of kings and friends was a trait of Hellenistic monarchies, and Jesus’ stress on his own devotion to his friends perfectly echoes Hellenistic ideals.

One may also anchor the possible reference to the Hellenistic court friends in other Greek language usages, reflecting a degree of understanding of Hellenistic monarchies in some circles of Jesus’ disciples. Thus, the authors of the Gospels use the word προσκυνέω

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and its cognates to describe a way, in which the faithful should worship Jesus.\textsuperscript{16} Although the exact meaning of the word in the Biblical context (with reference to the Greek Old Testament usages) is fiercely debated as a part of the Trinitarian – anti-Trinitarian argument, one must say that in the Greek cultural background of the Hellenistic kingdoms the word προσκυνέω (meaning an act of ritual prostration) was closely linked with the question of the cult of the kings – the first ever demand of \textit{proskynesis} from his friends by a Greek (indeed Macedonian) monarch (Alexander the Great) shocked his subjects, and was almost immediately interpreted as a claim to divine status.\textsuperscript{17}

It is also well known that Jesus on numerous occasions contrasts his spiritual realm with the earthly kingdoms of his age (as in John 18:36). Most of Jesus’ statements about the contemporary kingdoms and kings in the Gospels are not technical and do not allude to particular traits of the monarchies of his times. A notable exception is Luke 22:25 with a criticism of the Gentile monarchs calling themselves benefactors (δὲ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς, οἱ βασιλεῖς τῶν ἐθνῶν κυριεύοντι αὐτῶν καὶ οἱ ἐξουσιάζοντες αὐτῶν εὐεργέται καλοῦντι).\textsuperscript{18} The passage is widely recognized as a polemics with the ubiquitous Hellenistic practice of praising \textit{euergetai}, especially royal ones, by the Greeks.\textsuperscript{19}


\textsuperscript{18} "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those who exercise authority over them are called ‘benefactors.’" The parallel passages in Matt 20:25 and Mark 10:44 do not include mention of \textit{euergetai}, but I would still underscore that the stress on the service of the leader towards his people (ἀλλ’ ἂς ἂν θέλῃ ἐν υἱῶν μέγας γενέσθαι ἐστιν ὑμῖν διάκονος and ὃς ἂν θέλῃ ἐν ὑμῖν εἶναι πρῶτος, ἐσται πάντων δοῦλος respectively) may be a looser, less learned recollection of the words of Jesus about the role of the true leader. On the other hand, Luke 22:24 is the only New Testament occurrence of the noun φιλονεικία (love of strife, in later Greek thought very much assimilated erroneously to φιλονικία love of victory), which fits perfectly into the discourse on the Hellenistic monarchy. Apparently, Luke’s informer or Luke himself was very sensitive about this discourse, whereas the writers of the two other synoptic gospels did not see it so precisely.

The above examples are on the one hand dispersed in gospels written down by four different people, and may look at the first glance casual. On the other hand, once having grouped them together, one cannot easily resist a conclusion that awareness of the Hellenistic monarchy and its peculiar traits was indeed deep in the circle of Jesus’ disciples.

Jesus’ words on the Hellenistic kingship may be therefore treated also as an additional source of evidence we should take into consideration in our attempts at explaining the Hellenistic court. We should come back to St. John Gospel and Christ’s words on disciples as his philoi. Jesus inserts in his teaching about friendship a comment on why the disciples may be philoi. 15:16 οὐχ υμεῖς με ἐξελέξασθε, ἀλλ’ ἐγὼ ἐξελέξαμην υπάγητε καὶ καρπὸν φέρητε καὶ ὁ καρπὸς υμῶν μένῃ (“You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you”). Except for the theological content Jesus offers here what could be a dictionary definition of the Hellenistic royal friend. His stress on a personal choice and appointment of friends by the king (ἐγὼ ἐξελέξαμην), instead of a choice of the king by his people (οὐχ υμεῖς με ἐξελέξασθε) may reflect Hellenistic discussions about monarchy. It may also explain why in the Hellenistic court terminology the philoi eventually replaced the hetairoi. The structure of the court composed of philoi was indeed looser, more flexible, and less rooted in traditional aristocracies (certainly new Hellenistic kingdoms lacked established Greek or Macedonian aristocracies, numerous enough to man the royal administration), and to much lesser a degree linked with the military service (which was crucial for hetairoi). The stress on the personal choice of the friends by the sovereign (and perhaps, on the appointment to a particular role as well: ἐθηκα υμᾶς ἵνα) in the Gospel reflects well the position of the Hellenistic

20 Nota bene, the verb ἐκλέγω, used by John here, quite commonly denotes a selection of the best people (to a particular mission or as elite units, see: Xenophon, Hell. 1.6.19; cf. also: Plato, Rep. 535a).

21 A question of the methods of appointment of the Macedonian and Hellenistic monarchs (including a problem of election, assemblies of the friends, of the Companions, of the people) belongs to the most debated issues in the field of ancient history. Numerous scholars argue for some constitutional restrictions of royal power in Macedonia, and especially for the appointment of the kings by the assemblies or the Companions, most notably Nicholas G.L. Hammond, (The Macedonian State. The Origins, Institutions and History [Oxford: Oxford University Press 1989]) and Miltiadis B. Hatzopoulos (Macedonian Institutions under the Kings [Athens – Paris: De Bocard 1996] I–II) or even in the Successors’ states (F. Granier, Die makedonische Heereversammlung. Ein Beitrag zum antiken Staatsrecht [München: Beck 1931], arguing for the exclusive right of assembly to acclaim new kings). Most experts, while acknowledge that one can speak about influence of the people on some royal appointments in Macedonia, do not see any rule in those cases (e.g. Borza, In the Shadow of Olympus, 243–244; R.M. Errington, History of Macedonia [Berkeley, CA: University of California Press 1990] 220–221); the clearest review of earlier debate in L. Mooren, “The Nature of the Hellenistic Monarchy,” Egypt and the Hellenistic World (eds. E. Van’t Dack – P. van Dessel – W. van Gucht) (Studia Hellenistica 27; Leuven: Peeters 1983) 205–240. Perhaps one can sum up this debate with cautious observations of M.B. Hatzopoulos (Ancient Macedonia [Trends in Classics – Key Perspectives on Classical Research 1; Berlin – New York: De Gruyter 2020] 116) that the assessment of the Macedonian monarchy was very much a matter of perception: for enemies and people who grew up in Classical democracies, the kings of Macedon were absolute rulers, while insiders used to be more aware of customary limitations of royal power and tended to see in Macedon a kind of an ideal Homeric kingdom.
court *philos* and his duties – one can guess that this reflects the origins of the institution of the royal *philoi* introduced as a replacement or originally as a task-related supplement of the old-fashioned Macedonian *betairoi* (Companions). The *betairoi* were very much a military guard of the king, then his entire heavy cavalry corpus, selected routinely from the elites, and their name was very much politicized due to the elevation of the Macedonian infantrymen to the ranks of the *pezbetairoi* – Foot Companions (needless to say that kings’ personal influence on the selection of their infantry companions, being multiple thousands in number, was even weaker).

Thus, John 15 helps us to understand that in the Hellenistic age the *philoi* were simply king’s men chosen personally by the king himself. More generally, the whole discourse on Jesus’ kingship in the Gospels, and particularly in John reminds us that the historians of Antiquity may learn a lot from the reflections of the Classical world and its social practices in the texts from the outer edge of the Classical tradition. Especially, New Testament and other early Christian writing should not escape attention of scholars dealing with the pagan world in the last centuries BC and the very first centuries AD.

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