IS WITTINESS UNCHRISTIAN?

A Note on εὐτραπελία in Eph. v 4

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In order to know why the author of the Epistle to the Ephesians says (v 4) that there is no room for εὐτραπελία in the Christian community, one should try to determine the meaning and semantic associations of that word on a broader basis than is commonly done in the commentaries. Most of them say that the word meant “wittiness, facetiousness” in Greek authors. Very often they confine themselves to a reference to two passages in Aristotle (see below), where it is said that the meaning of εὐτραπελία (pleasantry, urbanity) lies somewhere between βουμολοχία (buffoonery) on the one hand, and ἀγροικία (boorishness) on the other hand; and that εὐτραπελία is πεπαιδευμένη δίβρις (cultivated insolence). Neither of the two statements, which seem to be contradictory, suffices to clarify why εὐτραπελία is forbidden in Eph. v 4. Some commentators say that, whereas in general εὐτραπελία is positively regarded in Greek literature, it is sometimes spoken about there in a bad sense. But these remarks are either not supported by citations from the Greek authors or are illustrated by wrong or dubious instances. Therefore we will try to trace the history of its usage by listing chronologically (as far as possible) a number of texts where εὐτραπελία and the related εὐτράπελος and εὐτραπελεύματομαι occur.¹ An English translation of the texts is given in the footnotes.²

¹ There are some books and articles, though not many, dealing with humour in antiquity, e.g. W. Süss, Das Problem des Komischen im Altertum, NJKA 23 (1920), 28-45 (discussing ancient theories of what is comical); L. RADERMACHER, Weinen und Lachen, Studien über antikes Lebensgefühl, Wien 1947; G. SOYTER, Griechischer Humor von Homers Zeiten bis heute, Berlin 1961² (an anthology of texts with notes); E. DE SAINT-DENIS, Essais sur le rire et le sourire des Latins (PUD 32), Paris 1965; W. SÜSS, Lachen, Komik und Witz in der Antike, Zürich 1969; U. REINHARDT-K. SALLMANN (edd.), Musa Jocosa. Arbeiten über Humor und Witz, Komik und Komödie der Antike (Andreas Thierfelder zum 70. Geburtstag), Hildesheim 1974 (studies of details in individual authors); G. GIANGRANDE, L’humour des Alexandrins, Amsterdam 1975 (was inaccessible to me; it had not yet been published when this article was completed). Unfortunately, all these writings do not help us in determining the exact meaning of εὐτραπελία; only SAINT-DENIS’ discussion of the semantic evolution of urbanitas (o.c.,
Pindar, *Pyth.* I 92 μὴ δολωθης, ὁ φίλε, κέρδεσιν εὐτραπέλους.3

*Pyth.* IV 104f. εἴκοσι δ’ ἐκτελέσταις ἐνιαυτοὺς οὔτε ἐργόν οὔτ’ ἐπος εὐτράπελον κείνοισι εἰπών.4 The first instance is not wholly beyond doubt; some mss. read ἐντραπέλοις (shameful). The second is extremely uncertain; most mss. read ἐντράπελον; a scholion reads ἐκτράπελον (odious; perverse), adopted by some editors; only one ms. has εὐτραπελον, which at least must have had a very negative sense in the eyes of the copyist.5

Aristophanes, *Vesp.* 467-470 τῶν νόμων ἡμᾶς ἀπείρετος ὃν ἔθηκεν ἡ πόλις, οὔτε τιν’ ἔχων πρόφασιν οὔτε λόγον εὐτράπελον, αὐτὸς ἄρχων μόνος.6

Thucydides II 41, 1 ξυνελὼν τε λέγω τὴν τε πᾶσαν πόλιν τῆς Ἐλλάδος παιδευσιν ἦναι καὶ καθ’ ἐκαστὸν δοκεῖν ἣν μοι τὸν αὐτὸν ἄνδρα παρ’ ἡμῶν ἐπὶ πλέοντ’ ἐν εἰδή καὶ μετὰ χαρίτων μάλιστ’ ἀν εὐτράπελος τὸ σῶμα αὐτάρκης παρέχεσθαι.7

Plato, *Resp.* VIII 563a (speaking about the symptoms accompanying the change from democracy to tyranny) καὶ δλας οἱ μὲν νέοι πρεσβυτέροις ἀπεικάζονται καὶ διαμιλλόνται καὶ ἐν λόγοις καὶ ἐν ἔργοις, οἱ δὲ γέροντες συγκαθιέντες τοῖς νέοις εὐτραπελίας τε καὶ χαριν-

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2 If available, the translations in the Loeb Classical Library are used, sometimes slightly modified or corrected.

3 “Be not allured, my friend, by cunning gains”.

4 “I have brought twenty years to an end, and in them have done, nor said, nothing peridious”.

5 Unfortunately, T. K. Abbott, *The Epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians*, Edinburgh 1897, 149, bases his otherwise rather good treatment of ἐὐτραπελία in Eph. v 4 on these two texts from Pindar (and, of course, the two hackneyed quotations from Aristotle, dealt with below).

6 “You debar us from the laws, which the city has enacted, having no pretext, nor any dexterous argument, you solitary aristocrat”.

7 “In a word, then, I say that our city (sc. Athens) as a whole is the school of Hellas, and that, as it seems to me, each individual amongst us could in his own person, with the utmost grace and versatility, prove himself self-sufficient in the most varied forms of activity.”