‘WITHOUT GOD’: SOME NOTES ON A GREEK EXPRESSION

PIETER W. VAN DER HORST

There is a famous passage in the New Testament where, in the context of a discussion about persecution, Jesus says that not even one sparrow will fall to the ground ‘without your Father’. It is Matthew 10:29–31:

οὐχὶ δύο στροφία ἀσσαρίου πωλεῖται; καὶ ἐν ἐξ αὐτῶν οὐ πεσεῖται ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν ἀνευ τοῦ πατρός ὑμῶν. ὑμῶν δὲ καὶ αἱ τρίχες τῆς κεφαλῆς πάσαι ἠμιθημημέναι εἰσίν. μὴ οὖν φοβεῖσθε: πολλῶν στροφίων διαφέρετε ὑμεῖς.

Many translators and commentators have racked their brains over the precise sense of the apparently simple expression ἀνευ τοῦ πατρός ὑμῶν. One finds, for instance, the following translations: ‘without your Father’ (King James Version), ‘apart from the will of your Father’ (New International Version), ‘without your Father’s knowledge’ (New American Bible; Revised English Bible; Translator’s New Testament), ‘without your Father’s leave’ (New English Bible), ‘without your Father’s leave and notice’ (Amplified Bible), ‘apart from your Father’ (New Revised Standard Version), ‘unrelated to your Father’ (Berkeley Version), ‘unless your Father wills it’ (Moffatt Translation of the Bible), ‘without your Father’s consent’ (Good News Bible), ‘without your Father’s permission’ (God’s Word), and so on.1 These translations can roughly be divided into two categories: ‘without God’s knowledge’ versus ‘without God’s will’ (‘consent’ here being subsumed under ‘will’).2 There is an important distinction here: knowledge does not imply will, but will (and consent) does imply knowledge.

Commentators, who are equally divided over this issue, frequently refer to a couple of passages in early rabbinic literature where one finds a comparable expression, for example,

---

1 Many more translations can be found in the Online Parallel Bible at (http://bible.cc).
2 Cf. e.g. J. Gnilsta, Das Matthäusevangelium, vol. 1 (Freiburg: Herder, 1986), 388: ‘(...) nicht ohne den Vater—sein Wollen oder sein Wissen?’
Not even a bird is caught without (the assent/will/aid/knowledge of) heaven, how much less the soul of a son of man (Genesis Rabba 79.6).³

But, apart from the fact that this rabbinic material dates from several centuries after Matthew, this is a relatively isolated case⁴ and, moreover, we still have the same problem of interpretation (as the variety of clarifications between square brackets clearly shows).⁵ Since Matthew wrote in Greek and there is a long history of expressions meaning ‘without god (or: the gods)’ in Greek literature, it would make sense to review briefly some of the most pertinent passages from Greek authors, ranging over a period of more than a thousand years, in a roughly chronological order. The expressions occur in a wide variety of forms because the prepositions ἄνευ, χωρίς, δία, ὀπέω can be combined with ὦ γὰρ, ὦ γε, ὦ γαν, or other words for god such as δαίμων, with Διός, or any other name of a deity; or with the genitive of a personal pronoun (αὐτῷ, αὐτῇ, αὐτῶν, in prayers especially ὦ γαν).⁶

To begin with Homer, in Iliad 5.185–186 Pandarus says about Diomedes that

he cannot rage like this without a god (ἄνευ θεοῦ), no, one of the immortals stands by him, wrapped in a cloud.⁷

And we are told in Iliad 15.292 that one of the gods protected and saved Hector, who broke the strength of so many Greeks:

I think this will happen again, for without Zeus (οὐ γὰρ ὀπέω γε Ζηνός) who thunders in high heaven, he could not lead this charge so furiously.

In both passages the sense is clearly ‘without the help of a god/Zeus’. In Odyssey 2.372 Telemachus says to his nurse, θάρσει, μαί', ἐπεὶ οὐ τοι

---

³ For ‘without heaven (= God)’ the Aramaic text has mibbal’adey shemayya. For the few parallel passages in rabbinic literature see M. Sokoloff, A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 1990), 289b, and H.L. Strack and P. Billerbeck, Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrash, vol. 1 (Munich: Beck, 1926), 583.

⁴ The same applies to a passage in the Rule of the Community from Qumran, although it is pre-Christian, 1QS 11.1.1: ‘All which is occurring he (God) establishes by his design, and without him (mibbil’adav) nothing shall work’.

⁵ It is widely agreed that the background of Matthew’s bird imagery is Amos 3:5 LXX: εἰ πεσεῖται ἄγνεον ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν ἄνευ ἰγνεοτοῦ (‘Will a bird fall on the earth without a fowler?’).

⁶ More instances than the selection presented here can be found in the Thesaurus Linguae Graecae database.

⁷ Aelius Aristides, Or. 28.105 Behr, quotes this line from Homer to support his claim that his speeches are delivered under divine inspiration.