Jesus Christ and the Wise Man: Paul and Seneca on Moral Sages

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1 Introduction

The Jewish apostle Paul and the Roman Stoic Seneca were almost exact contemporaries and they lived in a world in which philosophy was considered above all a way of life. Whatever the differences between the ancient philosophical schools, they all shared the basic purpose of trying to establish a bond between philosophical discourse and way of life.1 It was above all Plato, with his highly successful portrait of Socrates, who set the stage for this development in ancient philosophy. According to Plato’s portrait, knowledge was not something purely theoretical; it was first and foremost a virtue, embodied by a certain way of life. The ideal way of life was, in turn, embodied by the ideal moral sage. Traditions about ideal moral sages were rich in the ancient world, especially flourishing where philosophical traditions were prominent, as in Rome, Seneca’s home, and Tarsus, Paul’s original hometown.2 While some philosophical schools seem to have highlighted the figure of the ideal sage more than others, the figure itself was not restricted to any particular school but was rather a common element in all the major philosophical traditions, and despite all doctrinal differences the figure had many common features as well in the various traditions.3 After all, “What more accurate standard or

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3 For a brief overview, see Pierre Hadot, Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault (ed. with an introd. by Arnold I. Davidson; trans. Michael Chase; Malden: Blackwell, 1995), 56-59; idem, What is Ancient Philosophy?, 220-31. On the difference between the sage as the sophos and the sage as the phronimos, see the discussion in George B. Kerferd, “The Sage in Hellenistic Philosophical Literature (399 B.C.E. – 199 C.E.),” in The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East (ed. John G. Gammie and Leo G. Perdue; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 319-28; Benjamin Fiore, “The Sage in Select Hellenistic and Roman Literary Genres (Philosophic Epistles, Political Discourses, History, Comedy, and Romances),” in ibid., 329-41. It should be noted, however, that first- and second-century C.E. philosophers used these concepts interchangeably (see, e.g., Epictetus, Diatr. 2.22.3; 3.13.22).
measure of good things do we have than the sage?” as Aristotle puts it (in his lost work, *Protrepticus*, quoted in Iamblichus, *Protr*. 6.39.18). In other words, wherever there are philosophical ideas there will be philosophical ideals, represented by real or abstract human prototypes.

Proponents of the philosophical schools freely admitted that the goal to become a sage was almost impossible to reach and that actual sages were very hard to find. The Stoics, for instance, whose doctrine of the sage was without doubt the most influential and best known of its kind in Greco-Roman antiquity, claimed that there were only a handful of true sages: “Only the fewest in every age turn out wise” (*Ira* 2.10.6). According to the Stoics, the sage was through and through a rational being who perfectly mirrors universal reason, being in fact the only human being who truly and fully lives in accordance with nature. As Simplicius observed, “What was peculiar to the [Platonic] ideas the Stoics transferred to the sage.” The critics of the Stoics criticized them for being too strict on this point, having developed a whole doctrine around something that was practically impossible to reach. The Stoics replied by emphasizing that the sage was first and foremost a goal, and by underlining the value of the goal as such.

In this essay I wish to examine, first, the way in which Seneca applies the philosophical traditions about the moral sage, second, if and how Paul may have viewed Jesus Christ as moral sage, and, third, how Paul and Seneca would have responded to each other in this respect. In this way an attempt will be made to generate a “dialogue” between the two thinkers.

2 **Seneca on Moral Sages**

Seneca uses the word *sapiens* quite consequently for the sage in his works, whereas the word *philosophus* is occasionally used (e.g., *Ep*. 88.27). According to Seneca, the completely wise man sees the whole framework of philosophy and life and is therefore calm and steadfast in his thinking and way of life (35.4; 85.38-40; 89.2; 120.10-11; *Ben*. 7.19.5). Because he knows his origin and end (*Ep*. 120.15), and he knows that a better one is in store for him (65.18), he accepts his lot in the world (72.8; 120.12). Any adversity he simply counts as training.

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4 Cf. also *Const*. 7.1; *Ep*. 20.2.
5 Quoted in Ulrich Wilckens, “σοφία κτλ.,” in *TDNT* 7:473.
6 Translations of Paul’s texts are mine, unless otherwise noted. Translations of Seneca’s texts are from the Loeb Classical Library.