PAIDAGOGOS: THE SOCIAL SETTING OF A PAULINE METAPHOR

by

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Aristotle, perhaps correctly, observed that "everything said metaphorically is unclear" (πάν γὰρ ἀσαφὲς τὸ κατὰ μεταφορὰν λεγόμενον). If this is true, then it is vital to have a clear understanding of the meaning and background of the terms used in a metaphor. Lack of such knowledge can only exacerbate whatever obscurity is already inherent in such a figure of speech. When Paul declared that ὁ νόμος παιδαγωγὸς ἡμῶν γέγονεν εἰς Χριστόν (Gal. 3:24), he used an image that possessed an ancient and rich background. Though the earliest attested literary example is found in Herodotus, there can be little doubt that the rudiments of the role of a pedagogue go back to the archaic period. By Paul's day this originally Attic custom was still widely employed; not only by the Greeks, but also by the Romans. Indeed, a pedagogue may even have been used by well-to-do Jews, for it is frequent as a loan word in the Jewish sources.

The custom, then, of placing one's child[ren] in the care and oversight of a trusted slave was a continuous (and ever widening) practice from the fifth century B.C. until late into imperial times. There were, of course, changes in aspects of the custom, but the essential details of the role remained virtually unchanged from Plato to Libanius and the Emperor Julian.

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1 Arist. Top. 139b. 34.
2 Hdt. 8.75.
1. The person of the pedagogue

The παιδαγωγός was usually an αὐτέτης. There is, therefore, a note of derision in Plutarch’s words concerning Pericles’ appointment of Zopyrus as Alcibiades’ pedagogue, for Plutarch noted that Zopyrus did not differ in any way from the other slaves (οὐδὲν τι τῶν ἄλλων διαφέροντα δοῦλων). Most of the pedagogues were of foreign origin—the spoils of war, or other means. Plutarch says that Sicinnus, the pedagogue of Themistocles’ children, was Persian by birth and a prisoner of war. Lysimachus, the pedagogue of Alexander, was Acarnanian by race. Alcibiades’ pedagogue, Zopyrus, was a Thracian. Emperor Julian’s was Mardonius, a Scythian. Hieronymus, the Peripatetic, reportedly censured fathers for the way in which they passed their children over βαρβάρους ... παιδαγωγοὺς. Thus, Aristides complained that the majority (οἱ πολλοὶ) of pedagogues gave their admonitions in barbarous Greek (ὑποβαρβαρίζοντες). Plato described their diction in identical terms.

Brothers shared the one pedagogue, though there are exceptions to this, especially amongst the Romans who were inclined to be lavish in their use of slave attendants. It was not unknown for girls to share their brother’s pedagogue. The pedagogue was usually aged (γήρων) and is so depicted in numerous terracotta

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5 Hdt. 8.75; Ps.-Pl. Alcib. I. 122B; Plut. Mor. 94C; Stob. Ecl. 121 (Wachsmuth 2.233).
6 Plut. Lyc. 16.4.
7 Plut. Mor. 4A; Suet. Claud. 5. 2.
8 Them. 12. 3-4.
9 Alex. 5. 8.
10 Ps.-Pl. Alcib. I. 122B.
11 Julian, Mis. 352A.
12 & Stob. Ecl. 121 (Wachsmuth 2.233).
13 Aristid. Or. 2.380 (Behr).
14 Lys. 223A.
16 Plut. Alex. 5. 7; Suet. Nero 6. 6.
17 Sen. De Vita Beata 16. 2; Ep. 123.7.
18 Lys. 32.28; Eur. El. 488; Cic. Ep. 12. 33; Pliny, Ep. 5. 16. 3. P. Oxy. 50.355 (IV/II A.D.) refers to a freed woman accompanying (παιδαγωγούσης) a slave-girl to her lessons. Pedagogues for girls were more common in Roman society than in Greek, and one even finds later mention of the paiedagoga.
19 Eur. El. 287; Ion 725 (πρεσβυς); Plut. Mor. 795F (οἱ τηλίκοιοι); Julian Mis. 353B; Xen. Eph. 1. 14. 4-5; Ps.-Lucian. Ocy. 33 (γῆρων παιδαγωγὸν ἄθλιον).