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**“DIVINE DEPENDENCY” IN ANCIENT JUDAISM
AND EMERGING CHRISTIANITY –
REFLECTIONS AND CASE STUDIES**

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Abstract

This paper provides insights into the author’s current project, which looks at “divine dependency” in texts of ancient Judaism (from the Second Temple period) and emerging Christianity. The first part identifies aims and research approaches before discussing fundamental aspects of the underlying categories and methodology. There are a number of reasons why the project requires a sophisticated set of tools for textual analysis and interpretation: in particular the fact that our sources are in numerous ancient languages, the multilingual nature of the period being studied, and the distinct, but terminologically and genealogically interconnected, orders of knowledge in antiquity and the present respectively. The second part of the paper will briefly outline three case studies with different but interconnected methodological foci: one semantic, one narrative and one discourse analysis.

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I. On Categories and Methods

I.1. Aims and Approaches

The project investigates in detail the perception (or rather the construction) of the relation(s) of transcendent (or divine) agents to human beings in ancient Judaism and emerging Christianity¹ in their interactions and possible correlations to inter-human relations as conceived or conceptualized in the sources. Prominent examples of non-human agents include God, personifications or aspects of his/her/its properties, character or activities such as the name of God, wisdom, or logos; helpers of God such as throne beings, e.g., the Danielic Son of Man, cherubim, ophanim etc., messengers/angels, but also other other-worldly beings such as spirits, Satan, the devil, demons etc.²

Furthermore, this project, which forms a contribution to the archeology of the semantics of divine–human and inter-human relations can lead to an improved understanding of the formation of Jewish and Christian thought³ in antiquity more generally, which had an immense impact on later ideological developments and social constructions in Mediterranean antiquity and far beyond, reaching regions and societies on the global level that were or are in contact with Jewish and Christian traditions.⁴

¹ The appropriateness of the designation Christianity to groups of Christ-believers in the first and second centuries C.E. has become a matter of ongoing scholarly dispute; for opposing positions, see Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines. The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity*, *Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); Udo Schnelle, *Die getrennten Wege von Römern, Juden und Christen. Religionspolitik im 1. Jahrhundert n. Chr.* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019). My position is that the older image of a “parting of the ways” (James D. G. Dunn, “The New Perspective on Paul,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 65 [1983]: 95–122; James D. G. Dunn, ed., *Jews and Christians. The Parting of the Ways A. D. 70 to 135*, *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament* 66 [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1992]), imagined as a gradual development of the differences between Jewish and Christian thought, is still heuristically sound. In the middle of the second century C.E. at the latest, Judaism and Christianity could be distinguished quite clearly. Another question concerns the use of the term Christianity itself (Greek: *χριστιανισμός/christianismós*) in the extant sources: It occurs for the first time in the letters of Ignatius of Antioch. If Ignatius were historical and these letters his product, this would ground us in the first half of the second century. However, the Ignatian question is open; some scholars consider these a pseudepigraphic collection of letters from the second half of the second century C.E. For an overview, see Hermut Löhr, “Die Briefe des Ignatius von Antiochien,” in *Die Apostolischen Väter. Eine Einleitung*, ed. W. Pratscher (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009): 104–29.

² Recent study of Judaism and emerging Christianity questions the suitability of monotheism as a category to either, see Gideon Bohak, “The Impact of Jewish Monotheism on the Greco-Roman World,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 7 (2000): 1–21; Larry W. Hurtado, “‘Ancient Jewish Monotheism’ in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods,” *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 4 (2013): 379–400; Matthew Novenson, ed., *Monotheism and Christology in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, *Novum Testamentum, Supplements* 180 (Leiden: Brill, 2020). This insight has enormous impact on the issue of divine-human relationships, understood as a (counter-) model, a mirror, an adaptation, or a parody of human-human relations.

³ I avoid the use of attributes such as religious, philosophical, or political, which possibly distort the order of discourse in antiquity.

⁴ With regard both to the regions of their historical origins as well as their impact and reception until the present day, Judaism and Christianity cannot and should not be regarded primarily as Western or European phenomena. This perspective, still quite popular in publications in the humanities, cultural studies, and social sciences, is, I think, itself an example of a rather uncritical Eurocentrism, which does not fully do justice to the cultural and historical facts. At the same time, this view may be an obstacle to perceiving the multiple contacts, convergences, and interactions between cultures, regions, societies, and religions in antiquity and beyond. This is one of the reasons why an answer to the question of “how the distinction of slavery versus freedom became a fundamental

While the notion of a strong asymmetrical dependency, which is favored in the general outlook of the BCDSS research cluster, is, as a heuristic tool, helpful for overcoming simplistic binary categories in the analyses and descriptions of relations between God and human beings or between human individuals and groups, the text-based and historically oriented research that is applied here must take its starting point from the ways in which the sources themselves refer to, designate, or describe the unequal relations between agents, whether human or divine.

In historical analysis, the use of quantitative indicators such as “strong” or “weak” is, as part of our descriptive language, perfectly acceptable, as long as their application produces heuristic, analytical, or theoretical, benefit that can account for the measure applied.⁵ With this, the somewhat mathematically inspired aesthetic markers of symmetry, balance, and harmony must also be qualified further to aid insight and comparison.

At the same time this raises the question whether it can sufficiently take into theoretical and methodological account the mutuality, temporality as finality, and dynamics of the relations that we observe in the sources: Inter-human relations are, by definition, *mutual* in character in multiple ways, and they can develop, change, or reverse over time. This is true, I think, in both individuals and in groups.

To illustrate this further, I provide here two examples from the broader field of my own research:

- a) To begin with, slavery, which explicitly or implicitly frames our common quest in the research cluster, was, in many cases,⁶ temporally limited in Roman society of the epoch in focus.⁷ In other words: If continuity or, more so, life-long permanence were a

element of Western identity formation” (Julia Winnebeck, Ove Sutter, Adrian Hermann, Christoph Antweiler, and Stephan Conermann, “On Asymmetrical Dependency,” BCDSS Concept Paper 1, Bonn: BCDSS, University of Bonn, 2021: 23, <https://www.dependency.uni-bonn.de/en/publications/bcdsss-publishing-series/bcdss-concept-papers>) can be and in fact is only a limited part of the research interest and possible outcome of my project. Let it suffice here to say that, in the formative period (the end of the first and the first half of the second centuries C.E.), Christianity was often regarded as an oriental philosophy in opposition to the classical schools of Greece that were still flourishing at that time in Rome and other cities of the Empire. For emerging Christianity as a (school of) philosophy and/or a religion, see Hermut Löhr, “Von der Religion zur Philosophie? Überlegungen zu Selbstdarstellungen des frühesten Christentums und ihren ‚Wandlungen,“ in *Wandel als Thema religiöser Selbstdeutung. Perspektiven aus Judentum, Christentum und Islam*, Quaestiones disputatae 310, ed. Judith Könemann and Michael Seewald (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2021): 64–71; Geurt H. van Kooten, “Is Early Christianity a Religion or a Philosophy? Reflections on the Importance of ‘Knowledge’ and ‘Truth’ in the Letters of Paul and Peter,” in *Myths, Martyrs, and Modernity. Studies in the History of Religions in Honour of Jan N. Bremmer*, Studies in the History of Religions 127, ed. J.H.F. Dijkstra et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2010): 393–408). For the process of the acculturation of Judaism within the wider context of encounter between civilizations and cultures in the Hellenistic period, see Arnaldo Momigliano, *Sagesses barbares. Les limites de l'hellénisation* (Paris: Gallimard Education, 1991).

⁵ This conceptual lacuna is also indicated by Winnebeck et al., “On Asymmetrical Dependency”: 27.

⁶ It is difficult to estimate numbers. – Legislation under Augustus limited the number of slaves who could be released by testament (*manumissio iusta testamento*) from one household (Lex Fufia Caninia, 2 BCE); some years later, manumission of slaves under the age of thirty was banned (Lex Aelia Sentia, 4 CE). These measures are indicative of the importance and impact of manumission in the late Republic and early Principate.

⁷ The project takes into account sources from the third century B.C.E. to the first half of the second century C.E. approximatively.

criterion for dependence to be considered strong, then slavery in the Roman Empire might *not* qualify as strong asymmetrical dependency: many slaves in Roman antiquity were released, in the legal procedure of manumission, which, while it did not place them on an equal level with people born free, did nevertheless change their legal and societal status significantly.

- b) If, however, strong dependency is understood as a status from which the dependent person cannot escape alone (the exit criterion),⁸ then Roman slavery is a key example of this. At the same time, however, we must then take into account that the master–slave relation is limited, regulated and relativized by legal and/or societal norms (or normative structures) that are beyond the grasp of the individual agents involved in the process. To put it differently, legal and societal norms can be understood, according to the more general understanding of agent applied here, as important agents in the process. A release from slavery could also be obtained through redemption (which in turn became an important expression in a few examples of the earliest Christian soteriology and the history of its reception),⁹ which may or may not have included the initiative of the enslaved person.¹⁰ The application of the criteria of exit and voice in the identification of strong dependency is significantly limited by the sources¹¹ and provokes our historical imagination and inquisitiveness to understand individual cases in more detail.

This example is a reminder of the difference between legal and social status in Roman society. A slave’s or freedperson’s legal status¹² did not exclude their having a career, high social (and political) positions, and functions in Roman imperial society. Social and legal statuses of societal positions and relations may differ significantly from our assumptions. Relationships of dependence may have been perceived differently in different segments of discourse and daily life. A precise and differentiating inquiry into the discursive and historical contexts of relations of dependency is therefore seminal for sober insights in the historical field.

- c) A second example refers more specifically to Jewish law, lore, and society in antiquity: As stipulated in the canonical and normative legal texts Ex 23:10–11; Dtn 15:1–2, *Jewish debt* slaves in the Land of Israel had to be released in the so-called Sabbath year (the seventh year). Whether the regulations in Lev 25:1–7 concerning the Jubilee year have slavery in mind at all or instead refer to land lease¹³ remains a controversial question. We have no indication that the Jubilee year was ever observed in post-exilic

⁸ See Christian G. de Vito, “Five hypotheses on dependency,” unpublished BCDSS paper, Bonn 2021: 9.

⁹ See the repeated use of the Greek noun ἀπολύτρωσις/*apolytrōsis* in the Pauline letters and in Hebrews 9:15; 11:35. In the Greek OT, it is used only in Daniel 4:34, and only once in Josephus (Ant. 12:27), twice in Philo (Congr. 109; Prob. 114). It does not occur in the Apostolic Fathers, but it then re-emerges in Justin’s Dialogue with Trypho (86, referring to the Exodus), and again in Irenaeus of Lyon.

¹⁰ It follows that the relation master/slave(s) is not always limited to two agents (individuals or groups); it may involve, to borrow from narrative analysis, helpers and antagonists.

¹¹ In some cases, the voices of dependents may have simply been lost over time; not every mute agent in history was suppressed in life.

¹² The topic of female slaves and freedwomen in Roman society is specifically addressed by Matthew J. Perry, *Gender, Manumission, and the Roman Freedwoman* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

¹³ See Michael A. Harbin, “The Manumission of Slaves in Jubilee and Sabbath Years,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 63 (2012): 53–74.

times, be it in the Land of Israel or in the Jewish diaspora. The Sabbath year (*shemittah* or *sheviit*), however, is indicated in sources from the Second Temple period onward with regard to the calendar, tax law, documents concerning the repayment of debts, land lease, and specific historical events linked to individual Sabbath years.¹⁴ We can therefore say confidently that the stipulations in the Torah were read and memorized in the period in question. In other words, cultural memory could link debt slavery to a clear and reliable exit option. However, it is much more difficult to say whether the manumission of Jewish slaves was ever common practice in Israel or in the diaspora before or after 70 C.E. We should not confound scribal discussion with historical legal practice when reading the Torah or discussions in the Mishnah or the Tosefta.¹⁵ Passages from Second Temple literature such as Philo, spec. leg. 2:84–85, 122 virt. 121–124, or Josephus, ant. 3:282; ant. 4:273, may point in this direction because these have clear apologetic purposes. At the same time, however, some of these texts seem to (con)fuse the Sabbath year with the Jubilee year. Whether this is the inevitable result of harmonizing the Torah passages or whether it indicates that the authors had no contemporaneous practice in mind is not easy to decide. Manumission inscriptions from the first or second century C.E. in the Bosporan kingdom, which most probably attest to a regular Jewish practice of manumission in the diaspora,¹⁶ cannot be regarded as testifying to a more general practice in Judaism of that period.

Both examples begin with the social institution and practice of slavery in Mediterranean antiquity. They indicate that slavery may have been conceived and practiced differently in different social sub-system even within the Roman empire, let alone neighboring societies and political-military domains.¹⁷ Simultaneously, they show that our focus on social phenomena beyond slavery should not be restricted to phenomena apart from or in contrast to slavery, but also regarding those linked to slavery by partial overlap or consequence.

I.2. Semantic Aspects

The empirical basis of our inquiry consists, in most cases, of texts of different lengths, genres, origins, authorships, literary characters, languages, functions, purposes, times, intended readerships, and so on. We must acknowledge that this testimony is limited and is in the majority of cases generally elitist in character. The path from the texts to insights into everyday experience behind the texts, spirituality or religiosity included,¹⁸ is narrow and hazardous.

¹⁴ See Ben Zwi Wacholder, "The Calendar of Sabbatical Cycles during the Second Temple and the Early Rabbinic Period," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 44 (1973): 153–96 for an overview over the relevant texts. For the literary and fictional character of the texts within their narrative contexts, see Callum Carmichael, "The Three Laws on the Release of Slaves (Ex 21,2–11; Dtn 15,12–18; Lev 25,39–46)," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 112 (2000): 509–25.

¹⁵ The evidence is discussed in some detail by Catherine Heszer, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005): 308–14, but with no clear conclusion with regard to the practice.

¹⁶ For the evidence and its discussion, see Heszer, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*: 314–17.

¹⁷ Avoiding the anachronistic designations state and nation.

¹⁸ With regard to religious experience (and their textual presentation), it seems heuristically helpful to make a distinction between "ordinary religious experience" and "ecstatic states of joy and exaltation"; see Maik Patzelt, "About Servants and Flagellants: Seneca's Capitol Description and the Variety of 'Ordinary' Religious Experience

This is not to deny that in recent decades, the empirical basis of the study of Judaism in antiquity and on emerging Christianity has been enormously enlarged by insights from many new findings and from novel archeological techniques, among them methods of deciphering and reconstructing texts from burnt or scattered scrolls and fragments (e.g., from Khirbet Qumran or Herculaneum). As non-linguistic artefacts and data do not speak for themselves, texts remain our most important witnesses to the concepts of human (or divine–human) relations. Therefore, this study begins from present-day methods of linguistic and literary analysis.

To grasp more precisely the character and the implications of divine–human or inter-human relations expressed in our sources, semantic textual analysis must account for

- a) the designations (and their intensions and extensions) for the positions, functions, and roles attributed to different (human and other) agents in relation to each other;
- b) the different designations and attributes applied to labeling or characterizing these relations;
- c) the narrative constellations and developments, types, and structures which are used to unfold the respective relations;
- d) the imagery and metaphors used and their relation to contemporary social experience;
- e) the discourses and discursive contexts in which relations of divine and/or human agents come into focus, as well as the implicit and explicit value systems involved.

This is, to be sure, not new with respect to textual analysis in this field. A closer look reveals challenges and pitfalls that have to be taken into account and require sophisticated methodology and methods.

I.3. Challenges and Caveats

The interaction between the descriptive language and terminology used in research with that in the sources can be both helpful and challenging, and is in any case a basic precondition and fact. Our analytical and descriptive terminologies and categories have a history of their own that closely links our own orientation to that of the distant past. This is precisely why an *archeology of our categories* is necessary, if not fundamental, in interdisciplinary research in the humanities. We do not have objective and detached tools of analysis at hand, and it follows that we must perform critical examinations both of the witnesses of the past and of our own taxonomy.

I suggest that we create the definitions we want to use for analytical categories (including indications of how to apply the measures and scales), and that these categories be situated within a broader semantic field of related terms, such as dependence, need,¹⁹ weakness,

at Rome,” in *Lived Religion in the Ancient Mediterranean World. Approaching Religious Transformations from Archaeology, History and Classics*, ed. Valentino Gasparini et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110557596-007>.

¹⁹ This and the following four nouns are given in the Collins Online dictionary as synonyms for dependence, while the semantic field of dependency in current English seems to be more limited and specific, see <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english-thesaurus/dependence> [accessed 08.11.2021]. Different approaches to semantics (e.g., frame semantics) may come to different results. For the interdisciplinary BCDSS it would be worth the effort, I think, to investigate this lexical aspect in still more detail.

attachment, subordination, subservience, relation, hierarchy, power, control, inequality, interaction, mediation, support, and so on. Our descriptive and analytic terminology, which is not only part of everyday living language but also implies a long history of semantic development, should be considered critically.

The same operation should, of course, be applied to the language and terminology of the sources. This is not only true for personal designations of position and function, such as master, Lord, sovereign, king, father, serf, servant, slave, people, and so on, but also for *abstracta* referring to relations between different agents, a semantic inventory that appears not to have been begun in my field.

The vocabulary of the sources is that of the distant and dead languages of antiquity – a fact which intensifies the ubiquitous problem of translation in philological, historical, and cultural studies. The languages²⁰ of the sources show considerable semantic differences according to their various literary, regional, and cultural contexts; a, sometimes dynamic, historical development emerges. Lexica that can systematically take into account both the semantic fields of individual lexemes and their historical development and change appear unavailable. A fresh, text-based semantic analysis of important lexemes is imperative. The target language of translation and analysis has a history of its own, and the terms used by us belong to semantic fields that are demarcated in very different ways to those of the source languages. Again, as our disciplines have a long prehistory and history, semantic change and evolving terminology form an important aspect of them.

A further point to be addressed here is the differentiation between the individual and the group. This can be identified further:

Whether and to what extent texts from Mediterranean antiquity and its various cultures imply or make explicit a concept of human²¹ individuality that corresponds to our own, is dubious. The same is true (and this is clearly addressed in scholarship) for the concept of the person, an idea that was likely absent from the philosophical thinking of those who produced the sources we use. If so, this must have had a considerable impact on ideas of inter-human and inter-group relations in these texts. And our tools and categories of analysis must adapt to the challenge. This raises the question of whether we can imagine alternative designations and concepts, not only that of the agent (mentioned above), but also those of the role, function, and so on, which are more suitable for grasping what the texts mean or imply.

We meet a comparable challenge when we speak of groups. Modern concepts of civic society, the nation, or religious groups, do not apply to antiquity; again, this insight has consequences for our understanding of the phenomena we study. So, *if* we wish for sociology to play an integrating role in our interdisciplinary research, it must adopt a historically conscious

²⁰ Any research into the field of Mediterranean antiquity must recognize the multilingual nature of each of its regions. This must be taken into account systematically.

²¹ Regarding divine agents, is it true that, as is commonly held, Jewish and early Christian concepts of God generally think in terms of person or personality while Greek and Roman religions relate to powers (*puissances*; see Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs. Études de psychologie historique* [Paris: F. Maspero, 1965]: 79)? Is the Messiah or the Christ of early Jewish and Christian traditions a person, in our understanding of the category? The issue is taken up by Nicole Belayche, “*Kyrios and despotes: Addresses to Deities and Religious Experiences*,” in *Lived Religion in the Ancient Mediterranean World. Approaching Religious Transformations from Archaeology, History and Classics*, ed. Valentino Gasparini et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020): 87–115.

approach that starts from critical reflection on the terminology and categories applied. Additionally, our sources refer to social generalizations and idealizations such as *oikoumenê*/οἰκουμένη (= inhabited or cultivated world) and *ekklesia*/ἐκκλησία (universal assembly of the people of God, Church), which had an impact on everyday life and its societal structures.

Another important factor relating to the interpretation of texts is the blurring of boundaries between the individual and the group in symbolic (or metaphorical) language. In the Jewish textual tradition, figures of the normative (pre-exilic) legendary past are not only – and often not primarily – historical or literary individuals, but representations or personifications of groups, cities and nations, virtues and vices, hopes and fears. Jacob-Israel, Abraham, Ismael, Saul, David, Job and Daniel come to mind. Some, but not all, aspects of the representation of the Messiah/Christ in early Christian writings can be understood in the same vein. The same phenomenon can be observed in ancient Greek and Roman literature, although perhaps to a lower degree. It is an open question whether the descriptive category of corporate personality, introduced into biblical-exegetical debate by H. W. Robinson,²² is enough to understand this widespread literary phenomenon in antiquity. It will be sufficient here to state that this is an important factor in the interpretation of our texts.

II. Case Studies – Three Sketches

This paragraph unfolds the project into three research sketches which I am currently working out in more detail, partly as part of larger research projects of my own, such as my commentary on Philippians and my studies on the *Shepherd of Hermas*, partly as articles and individual contributions to cooperative projects. My intention here is not only to demonstrate the importance of using different (primarily linguistic) approaches to our sources, but also how these approaches are related to each other.

II.1. Semantics: The Servant of God and the *pais theou*/παῖς θεοῦ

The attributes “slave” and “slave of God” play an important role in Jewish and early Christian literature in antiquity. They are in fact crucial terms regarding divine dependency in these traditions, and any research on the lexicography and semantics of dependency in antiquity must take them into account.

The influence of the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, which began in the early years of the third century B.C.E. and continued at least until the second century C.E., is of special importance here. The Hebrew word for slave or servant (*ebed*/עַבַד) is generally translated by the Greek *doulos*/δοῦλος, which also means either slave or servant, but in some cases also by *pais*/παῖς, which has the meanings of slave, servant, and child. So, in both linguistic traditions, the semantics of the lexemes used is rather broad, and this invites a contextual interpretation of each and every text. At the same time, we must take into account the fact that we have, for the most part, before us a tradition of literature with strong intertextual links (sometimes bridging centuries), so that we must also reckon with a purposeful outmoded use of words. In other words, the use of the terms “servant” and “servant of God” in our texts does not always

²² See Henry Wheeler Robinson, *Corporate Personality in Ancient Israel* (1935; rev. ed., Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1981).

and uniquely mirror the contemporary understanding of these lexemes. Here, a simple either/or is insufficient for interpretation, and present-day (e.g., cognitive, contextual) models of reading and reception must be used to refine our textual interpretation methods.

Great fictional personalities of the biblical traditions, such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob/Israel, and Moses, but all the more perhaps the somewhat historical figures of David, Hiskia, and Serubbabel, are addressed as the *ebed* or *pais* of God, and the terminology can also be applied to a group or to the (idealized) people (of Israel). Text passages from (Deutero-) Isaiah refer to the anonymous figure of a servant of God (*ebed adonai*), a designation that is generally translated in the Septuagint by *pais*/παῖς but in a few cases also by *doulos*/δοῦλος. Later Greek versions of Isaiah, from the first and second centuries C.E., more clearly prefer *doulos*/δοῦλος.²³ The identification, or rather the individual or collective interpretation of this figure within the context of Deutero-Isaiah is a matter of long-standing debate,²⁴ and the reception and impact of the servant of God motif and texts in Second Temple Judaism and emerging Christianity have long been a subject of examination.²⁵ While the older hypothesis that a distinct *pais*-theology was part of earliest Christian messianology cannot be made plausible,²⁶ this does not exclude the possibility that Deutero-Isaiah's servant of God had an impact on the earliest Christ narratives, e.g. the synoptic gospels, or the praise of Christ in Phil 2:5–11. The trope of being a slave or servant of God may also have directly influenced the self-fashioning of the Apostle Paul, the earliest author of emerging Christianity known to us, who presents himself in Rom 1:1 and Phil 1:1 as “slave of the Messiah Christ,” varying the traditional notion considerably.²⁷ This change signals a shift also in the concept of divine-human relations, and, more generally, in the worldview expressed. Is this somehow echoed in the wider literary, cultural, and religious context of early Christianity? Did it have, within short delays, or in the longer perspective of the history of reception, any impact on historical, social, or political reality?

As these questions already signal, my interest in this research focuses on word semantics far beyond the reconstruction of intertextual traditions in Jewish-Christian tradition or the self-understanding and spirituality of a major figure in the early groups of Christ-followers. Analysis of the relevant Jewish and early Christian texts²⁸ (and contemporary theological and non-theological or -philosophical texts and traditions of non-Jewish origin) shows that it is not

²³ The hypothesis that this fact can be understood as a Jewish reaction to early Christian *pais* messianology is unfounded.

²⁴ See, e.g., Berges, Ulrich. *Jesaja 49–54*, Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder 2015): ad loc.

²⁵ For some recent contributions, see Jacob Stromberg and Michael A. Lyons, eds., *Isaiah's Servants in Early Judaism and Christianity. The Isaian Servant and the Exegetical Formation of Community Identity*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2/554 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021).

²⁶ See Hermut Löhr, *Studien zum frühchristlichen und frühjüdischen Gebet. Untersuchungen zu 1 Clem 59 bis 61 in seinem literarischen, historischen und theologischen Kontext*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 160 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003): 308–34.

²⁷ While Rom and Phil may be the latest extant letters by Paul, Phlm, which is probably from the same period, replaces *doulos*/δοῦλος by *desmios*/δέσμιος (= captive). Jewish tradition before Paul does not refer to slaves, servants, or children of the Messiah.

²⁸ It should be mentioned that the motif of the servant before God had considerable impact on the theology of prayer and ritualized prayer in Jewish and Christian traditions of antiquity, see Löhr, *Studien zum frühchristlichen und frühjüdischen Gebet*: 251. This insight, which still awaits systematic exploration, significantly enlarges our understanding of the impact and reception of literary texts.

always easy or even possible to distinguish clearly between the ideas of slave, servant, and child; and in fact, this blurring of social and legal roles and relations may have been the intention of specific authors. More detailed study of relevant texts will help us delimit the semantic field and establish a comparative inventory and taxonomy of literary motifs of dependency to better understand better the conceptual interplay between notions of inter-human and divine–human relations of the period.

II.2. Narratives: The Praise of Christ in Philippians 2:5–11

One of the earliest documents of emerging Christianity is Paul’s Letter to the Philippians, probably composed in the late 50s of the first century C.E. Phil 2:5–11 evokes the way of the Messiah Jesus from a position near to and almost equal with God, through self-humiliation and death on the cross, to exaltation and a divine position with universal acknowledgment as the Lord. Following the influential thesis suggested by Ernst Lohmeyer in 1928,²⁹ the text was regarded as a version of a pre-Pauline Christ hymn sung in the earliest Christian assemblies of the 30s and 40s C.E.³⁰ Most scholars would not accept this thesis anymore. Ralph Brucker showed in several contributions³¹ that neither classification to the genre of hymn nor its isolation as a pre-Pauline text can be justified. In addition, there is, as far as I can see, no indication that the text was ever either mentioned or used as a hymn in the history of interpretation or of liturgy, before Vatican II.

The passage appears in various narrative structures in early Christian texts that are used to describe the way of the Christ in different genres, and which I termed, in an earlier publication,³² as Christ *fabulae*. Several passages in early Christian writings can be understood as individual realizations of this more general narrative structure, which, more broadly contextualized, can also be used with reference to other divine and human beings. The same insight, but from a different perspective and interest, is echoed in classifying the passage as an *enkomyion*, as was suggested by Berger in 1984.³³

In terms of the overall aim of the project, it is important to understand the relationship between this narrative structure, which bridges the gap between the divine and human realms and which can be applied to different fictional or factional figures, and the different purposes

²⁹ See Ernst Lohmeyer, *Kyrios Jesus. Eine Untersuchung zu Phil. 2,5–11* (1928; repr., Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1961).

³⁰ A hypothesis that raises the question whether the Greek text can be traced back to a (Hebrew or) Aramaic original. While Lohmeyer answered this question in the affirmative, Roland Deichgräber, *Gotteshymnus und Christushymnus in der frühen Christenheit*, Studien zur Umwelt des Neuen Testaments 5 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967): 126–31 argued against it.

³¹ For a summary and an update of Brucker’s initial argument, see Ralph Brucker, “‘Songs’, ‘Hymns’, and ‘Encomia’ in the New Testament?,” in *Literature or Liturgy? Early Christian Hymns and Prayers in their Literary and Liturgical Context in Antiquity*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2/236, ed. Clemens Leonhard and Hermut Löhr (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014): 1–14.

³² See Hermut Löhr, “Wahrnehmung und Bedeutung des Todes Jesu nach dem Hebräerbrief. Ein Versuch,” in *Deutungen des Todes Jesu im Neuen Testament*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 181, ed. Jörg Frey et al. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005): 455–76. The suggestion was taken up, e.g., by Heinrich Assel, *Elementare Christologie. Erster Band: Versöhnung und neue Schöpfung* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2020): 191f.

³³ See Klaus Berger, “Hellenistische Gattungen im Neuen Testament,” *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt II* 25.2 (1984): esp. 1150, 1173–94.

it can serve (e.g., repeated ritual praise, formal or individual confession of faith, individual meditation, *paraenesis*, political critique, irony, and praise).

The concept of narrative structure in general allows us to compare different narrative, poetic, or even argumentative texts of the period and cultures in focus. At the same time, it also provides a methodologically sound transition from synchronic and diachronic semantic analyses using lexemes and syntagmata to discourse analysis.

The *fabula* realized in Phil 2:5–11 consists of a sequence of *four* statuses of one originally divine figure. To speak only of social status would not do justice to the notions alluded to. Emotional and legal aspects are also involved, and the text clearly goes beyond social status and dynamics to acceptance, acknowledgment, and the issue of self-empowerment or control. A few remarks should suffice to illustrate this further:

1. One structural feature is that while two principal agents are involved in the narrative, the text is subdivided into two parts, with the first (v. 6–8) presenting the Messiah Jesus in action, and the second (v. 9–11) referring to a multitude of actors, while the agent of part one is still present and crucial to the narrative, but not in an active role. Regarded in its entirety, the agents mentioned blur the lines between human and other actors in the story.

This is true with regard to the Messiah Jesus, who is initially said to be “in the shape of God” (v. 6; *en morfê theou/έν μορφῇ θεοῦ*), and then having taken “the shape of a slave” (*morfên doulou/μορφὴν δούλου*) and so becoming “in likeness to human beings” (*en homoiômati anthrôpôn/έν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων*) and “being found in human form” (*schêmati heuretheis hôs anthrôpos/σχήματι εὑρεθεὶς ὡς ἄνθρωπος*; v. 7), while his exaltation and (new?) name (v. 9), but also universal acknowledgment and praise, bring him close to “God the Father” (v. 11). This has an effect on the understanding of God that is signaled in the text: The narrated story results in a differentiation within the concept of the divine; while it is initially referred to by the noun *theos/θεός* (v. 6), the closing doxology in v. 11b makes a distinction between the Messiah Jesus as Lord and God the Father. This presents the traditional Jewish notions of two agencies (or powers)³⁴ within the divine, and the two most prominent designations for the divine, God and Lord (*kyrios/κύριος*), which refer back to the Greek version of the Torah (third century B.C.E.). The story, we could say, is about the development of the godhead.

The line between the realms of human and super-human beings is also blurred by reference to heavenly, earthly, and underworld beings and their knees and tongues in v. 10f. At first glance, these anthropomorphic references may lead us to assume that only human recognition and praise are in view, but such reading would be erroneous (and any shortcut from v. 11 to the preliterary use of this text in praise and worship is methodologically unsound). The text enacts universal, even cosmic, devotion to the (new?) Lord, and for this, it takes up the Jewish notion of the community of angels and human beings in divine worship. The effect thus created is that the narrative world sketched here is not that of traditional or everyday expectation or experience, but a literary world in which divine and human agents interact. The text thus may influence and change the recipients’ perceptions of their own

³⁴ For this basic concept in Jewish theology in antiquity, see the seminal work by Alan F. Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven. Early Rabbinic Reports about Christianity and Gnosticism* (1977; repr., Leiden: Brill, 2012).

empirical world of actions, decisions, and values. As such, it is plausible that, in its context, the text serves as instruction and exhortation.

2. At the same time, however, the text adopts the terms slave (*doulos*/δοῦλος) and Lord (or master!; *kyrios*/κύριος), and with the father and his implied son, very basic (male) role models of status, social, and legal relations.³⁵ It may therefore evoke not only the recipients' contemporary individual experiences with these roles, but, as already signaled, it also references well-known traditional Jewish and/or Greco-Roman notions and narratives. It will be important to clarify the intertextual relations of this passage and its literary context, with a focus on both religious and political parallels and other narratives constructed in the same elementary structure or *fabula*. In other words, while the idea of Christ *fabulae* is very useful for understanding the development of early Jewish and Christian messianology,³⁶ to understand the connection between human experience and concepts or ideologies of divine dependency, a somewhat more general structure has to be identified and analyzed. The social and legal statuses of slave and master, and of father and son, may be fundamental to the narrative, which can be realized, again, in different ways and literary genres, in different languages and cultural contexts.³⁷ From this, we can go even further and envision the construction of a *generative grammar of dependency narratives*, which could only be the result of truly transdisciplinary work in literary studies. This working paper is an invitation to scholars from other disciplines to work on such a grammar.

3. The semantic markers of action, development, and change are essential in any narrative. Detailed semantic analysis shows that Phil 2:5–11 is composed of lexemes and syntagmata with a variety of semantic connotations, including

- spatial (upward and downward) movement,
- outward appearance,
- inner reflection and intention of the principal agent,
- interaction,
- ontic status and status change,
- virtues and values,

thereby creating a very dense semantic web which encompasses far more than the designation of social roles. The analysis of this semantic web or field would do more than facilitate our understanding of the links between the passage and its literary context, and it would help us to grasp the meaning of dependency in texts from Mediterranean antiquity, whether Jewish, Christian, Greek, or Roman in origin. In this way, we can avoid applying our own categories to texts from distant times and cultures. Instead, we can learn from these

³⁵ With regard to the pair father-son, it is worthwhile to scrutinize more closely the different aspects of this relation in various Mediterranean societies in the first century C.E.

³⁶ I use this designation here in a broader sense, referring to the hopes and concepts of a human or divine savior figure besides God. A narrower understanding would only refer to texts and traditions that speak of an anointed savior.

³⁷ While search for other texts that might realize this constellation has just begun, one may point here, for the sake of illustration, to Luke 15:11–32.

testimonies for our own categories of analysis and theory building, and we will be enabled to transfer them also to other fields of research beyond that of literary analysis.

II.3. Discourses: On Freedom and Liberation

II.3.1. Historical Discourse Analysis

In addition to semantic and narrative approaches, this project uses historical discourse analysis as proposed by Dietrich Busse.³⁸ Busse developed this approach as a response to and critique of Reinhard Koselleck's influential historical semantics, *Begriffsgeschichte*.³⁹ Busse's approach takes, briefly put, texts as elements and collections of communicative interactions that are intended to produce meaning or reality. A *Diskurs* is formed by a plurality or series of communicative interactions focusing on a theme in a given corpus of texts; it can be seen as the fundamental thematic structure⁴⁰ of a set of communicative interactions. Busse's approach has, in my opinion, the great advantage of avoiding semantic reductionism and non-historical concepts of intertextuality. Insofar as historical discourse analysis as proposed by Busse pursues both epistemic implications and the institutional, material, and social contexts of the usage of the *Bedeutungszeichen* (signs of meaning) in a discourse, it can contribute – over the long term – to a historical contextualization of the semantics and pragmatics of a given text. Busse himself speaks of the historical *a priori* of an epoch, in which historical discourse analysis is fundamentally interested.

The other constructive element of historical discourse analysis is the selection of the theme, the semantic field or area of discourse that is represented by one or more linguistic signs and which is to be investigated. Initially, there may be a convergence with other methods of semantic analysis, *Begriffs- und Motivanalyse*, or *Wortfeldforschung*. However, the frame and the aims of investigation are different: semantic analysis in the strict sense remains restricted to the question of significance, whereas discourse analysis is interested in the *representation and specification* of a discourse in a given act of communication. The challenge lies in identifying the theme of a historically existing discourse, or, in other words, whether we are successful in constructing a discourse by starting from the communicative acts of a given text.

II.3.2. Freedom and Liberation in Ancient Judaism and Emerging Christianity

The Greek word *eleutheria/ἐλευθερία*, which has no equivalent in earlier or contemporary Hebrew texts, is found in early Jewish and Christian literature. From word statistics one may conclude that the idea of freedom gained in importance after its first use in texts from the 3rd century B.C.E. onward, and especially in texts from the first century C.E., namely in the writings of Philo of Alexandria, Flavius Josephus, and the Apostle Paul, while (other) early Christian writings from the first and second centuries C.E. do not seem to be much interested in the notion. This project seeks to reconstruct the literary discourse on freedom (and liberation) that can be observed in these texts, and it attempts to identify the contribution of early

³⁸ See Dietrich Busse, *Historische Semantik. Analyse eines Programms*, Sprache und Geschichte 13 (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1987).

³⁹ See Reinhard Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979).

⁴⁰ Busse uses the somewhat misleading expression *Tiefenstruktur*.

Judaism and emerging Christianity to the history of freedom as a political, social, philosophical, and theological ideal. These contributions, one should be aware, are present in various literary texts and genres beyond merely theological, philosophical, and political ones.

One of the most extensive discussions of freedom as a philosophical concept in antiquity was composed by the Jewish Alexandrian philosopher Philo. The treatise, which is known under the Latin name *Quod omnis probus liber sit* ("That every good man is free"), is considered to be an early work of Philo's. It discusses the Stoic paradox that only the sage (i.e., a morally perfect person) is free. In this regard, it invites comparison to Cicero's earlier discussion of the same subject in *Paradoxa Stoicorum*, chapter 5,⁴¹ and in Epictetus/Arrianus, diss. 4.1. As Prob. 1 says, the work was preceded by another one entitled "That every bad man is a slave." Thus, freedom and slavery are taken up in a philosophical diptych to discuss two basic options of human (individual) life. The view that the idea of freedom is alien to biblical and Jewish traditions in antiquity could find some corroboration in the fact that Prob. rarely refers to biblical texts in support of his argument. It should be noted, however, that another Stoic paradox, namely that the wise man is noble, is discussed by Philo in virt. 187–227 (= *De nobilitate*/"On the nobility of birth"), with reference primarily to passages from the biblical Pentateuch, and not to ones taken from Greek or Roman literature.⁴²

The work makes a clear distinction between slavery and freedom of the body and of the soul (Prob. 16f.), and it is programmatically interested in the latter one only. Nevertheless, the text not only provides, for the sake of comparison and illustration, interesting details about the practices and social reality of slavery, as it is perceived by a Jewish diaspora author from the first century C.E., but it also shows conceptual links between the two anthropological spheres or perspectives. As a detailed analysis would show, we can glean much from this text about the order of things implied in the argument it unfolds, a discursive order which differs significantly from our own. In §§ 137–143, the text even turns to the subject of social or political freedom, which it praises as the "origin and source of happiness [*eudaimonia*/εὐδαιμονία]" (Prob. 139).

The relationship between human beings and the divine also comes into focus with regard to the question of the *psychê*/ψυχή. This corroborates the general thesis that for Judaism in antiquity, and even more in for emerging Christianity, theology and demonology are not primarily part of physics and cosmology but more so of moral psychology.⁴³

One of the main examples (and in fact, the only Jewish example in the book) of a virtuous and free life, the description of the lifestyle of the Essenes (Prob. 75–87), is summarized in 88:1:⁴⁴

⁴¹ Here we find a famous definition of freedom: *Quid est enim libertas? potestas vivendi ut velis* (Parad. 34).

⁴² The impact of the text on Christian literature in antiquity is limited, but interesting: Chapters 75–91, which give one of the few extant accounts about the Jewish party (community? group?), the Essenes, is quoted in full by Eusebius, praep. ev. 8,12. And the 37th letter by Ambrose of Milan takes up important parts of Prob., see the introduction by F.H. Colson in *Philo. In ten volumes (and two supplementary volumes). Vol. IX*, trans. F.H. Colson (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1985): 5.

⁴³ In some passages, Philo seems to intentionally blur the lines between human and divine beings – an aspect of his philosophy and theology that needs more attention and investigation.

⁴⁴ The translation is that of F.H. Colson, in vol. 9 of the Loeb edition of Philo, 61.

Such are the athletes of virtue produced by a philosophy free from the pedantry of Greek wordiness, a philosophy which sets its pupils to practice themselves in laudable actions, by which the liberty which can never be enslaved is firmly established.

On the social level, this is echoed by the Essenes' centering of equality (*isotês/ἰσότης*) and community (*koinônia/κοινωνία*), which are thus presented as individual virtues and social values (Prob. 84). This results in shared houses and goods, as well as in hospitality and in the non-existence of slavery (Prob. 79.85f.).⁴⁵ While we have good reason to assume that Philo's description has some historical value with regard to communities of the Essenes in Palestine, for our purposes it is more important to see that the movement is presented in the work as an almost ideal counter-model of communal life in the Land of Israel,⁴⁶ in clear opposition to the common life in the cities. Other political ideals linked include freedom of speech and thought (Prob. 95), exemplified e.g., by stories on Diogenes the Cynic (Prob. 121–124), and illustrated by the license with which slaves speak out in places of sacred asylum (Prob. 148–151). The essential argument, however, is not the reference to reason or divine willing, but to the law(s) of nature (Prob. 30.37).

Philo thus presents an understanding of individual *and* collective freedom that is both political and moral, and that is also meant as a remedy for the fear of death. A comparison with the writings of Flavius Josephus and the Apostle Paul will show in which different ways (and by which different references and arguments) Jewish authors from the first century C.E. contributed to the idea of freedom that became so consequential in the history of ideas.

III. Conclusion

This paper began by considering how and in which way the framework concept of the Cluster, asymmetrical dependency, could be applied and given helpful nuance with regard to the project presented here. Since most research into pre-modern history and society is text-based, scholars primarily employ historically conscious linguistic methods. The specific character of the sources from ancient Judaism and emerging Christianity provokes some methodological reflections and *caveats*. It appears that the established methods of synchronic and diachronic textual analysis must be understood with greater nuance, especially from a reader-centered perspective. Three examples, which focused in turn on the domains of word semantics, narrative analysis, and discourse analysis, showed how the project seeks to contribute to an archeology of dependency, and, more specifically, to a generative grammar of dependency narratives. These goals can only be accomplished by an exchange between several text-based disciplines within the Cluster. More specifically, this project will enlarge our understanding of ancient Judaism and closely connected emerging Christianity within the context of other ancient Mediterranean cultures, especially with regard to experiences and concepts of social and other relations, worldviews, grades of transcendence,⁴⁷ and especially orders of discourse different from our own.

⁴⁵ A similar argument is brought forward with regard to the Argonauts, see Prob. 141f.

⁴⁶ For the diaspora, the Therapeutae presented in *De vita contemplativa* function in a similar way.

⁴⁷ E.g., the fundamental question of whether the realm of the divine is otherworldly in the strict sense, cannot be answered uniformly for antiquity, its philosophies and theologies.

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