

## ONCE MORE ABOUT ΠΑΤΗΡ ΤΩΝ ΦΩΤΩΝ (Jm 1.17)

This short note concerns a phrase from the *Letter of James* (1.17)<sup>1</sup> that is only once attested in the Bible. This nominal phrase is πατήρ τῶν φώτων, which was translated in RSV and NRSV as “the Father of lights”. The whole verse runs as follows: “Every good endowment and every perfect gift<sup>2</sup> is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change”. Plural τῶν φώτων in this passage demands an explanation because the context does not allow us to determine what exactly the author meant.

The English translation of the Bible does not make any difference between two Greek words in plural which seem to be relevant for this context, namely φῶτα (Jm 1. 17; cf. Ps 135/136. 7–9;<sup>3</sup> Ez 32.8;<sup>4</sup> Jer 4.23<sup>5</sup>) and φωστῆρες (Gen 1. 16).<sup>6</sup> As a result we find in all these passages in RSV one and the same ambiguous word “lights”, although for φωστῆρες in Gen 1.16 a suitable English equivalent would be “luminaries”.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This text is one of the most puzzling in the New Testament; in detail s. e.g. A. Meyer, *Das Rätsel des Jakobus Brief* (Gießen 1930).

<sup>2</sup> Concerning the fact that this part of the verse is a hexameter borrowed by the author of the Epistle from an unknown source s. e.g. *Der Jakobusbrief*. Auslegung von Franz Mußner (Freiburg <sup>5</sup>1987) 90.

<sup>3</sup> Hebrew plural אֲרָיִם גְּדֹלִים translated in the LXX as φῶτα μεγάλα; cf. “luminaria magna” (Hieronymus), “die grosse Lichter” (Lüther), “the great lights” (RSV and NRSV), and “grandes lumières” (Segond and Trad. Œcum.).

<sup>4</sup> Hebrew plural כָּל-מְאֹרֵי שָׁמַיִם which definitely means here “planets and stars”; cf. “omnia luminaria coeli” (Hieronymus); “alle leuchtenden Lichter am Himmel” (Lüther); “all the bright lights of heaven” (RSV and NRSV); “tous luminaires des cieux” (Segond and Trad. Œcum.). The phrase is transmitted in the LXX ambiguously: πάντα τὰ φαίνοντα φῶς.

<sup>5</sup> Hebrew singular אֵשׁ which means here “light”; cf. “asperi... caelos. et non erat lux in eis” (Hieronymus); “Licht” (Lüther); “light” (RSV and NRSV); “lumière” (Segond and Trad. Œcum.). The substantive is transmitted in the LXX as plural: ἐπέβλεψα... εἰς τὸν οὐρανόν, καὶ οὐκ ἦν τὰ φῶτα αὐτοῦ; this translation presumes “planets and stars”.

<sup>6</sup> Hebrew plural מְאֹרֹת שָׁמַיִם “planets and stars” is translated by Hieronymus as “luminaria”, by Lüther as “Lichter”, by Segond and Trad. Œcum. as “luminaires”.

<sup>7</sup> This difference was made in all translation, except English: “pater luminum” (Jm 1. 17) and “luminaria” (Gen 1. 16) in Hieronymus; one can mention that there is only a slight stylistic difference between these Latin words and both can mean “the sun” or another

The word φῶς (in plural φῶτα) could be used as synonym for φωστήρ (both can have the meaning “sun” or “other heavenly body which emits illuminating rays”) and to see that it is enough to compare two passages of the same content from the LXX: καὶ ἐποίησεν ὁ θεὸς τοὺς δύο φωστῆρας τοὺς μεγάλους... ἥλιον καὶ... σελήνην (Gen 1. 16) and τῷ ποιήσαντι φῶτα μεγάλα... τὸν ἥλιον... τὴν σελήνην καὶ τὰ ἄστρα (Ps 135/136. 7–9).

Although in the Greek manuscript tradition there are no *variae lectiones* for this phrase, early translations and early Christian authors interpreted it in different ways. Whereas Latin, Coptic and Syrian translations give the *Father of lights*, Armenian and Ethiopian versions have the *Father of light* (cf. *der Vater des Lichts* in Lütther's translation). Some of early commentators thought that what was meant here was the light as the essence of God, who, in turn, is the only source of light;<sup>8</sup> others were of the opinion that here the gifts of the light were meant (knowledge, spiritual joy, wisdom); while others argued that the *lights* meant either *angels*,<sup>9</sup> or *saints*, or even *Christians*.<sup>10</sup> Modern commentators are almost unanimous in their opinion that the author of the *Letter* used the word τὰ φῶτα (“lights”) to mean the *heavenly bodies*.<sup>11</sup> In doing this, they mostly rely, on the one hand,

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“heavenly body”; the most suitable Latin equivalent for Greek φῶς would be *lux*, but this word has no plural. Cf. “Pere des lumières” and “lumières” in Segond and Trad. Œcum.; “der Vater des Lichts” (sing.) and *Lichter* in Lütther; “Отец светов” and “светила” in Russian Synodale.

<sup>8</sup> In the sense that was meant already by Philo: “God is light (...) and not only light, but the image of any other light” (*De Somn.* 1. 75). Origen, commenting on the Gospel of John (1. 18) which says: “He was not light, but was sent as a witness of light”, referred to the verse from the Letter of James, saying that it was concerned with “the true light, which enlightens any man entering the world” (*Caten. Joh. VI*). Origen does not seem to have linked τὰ φῶτα with planets.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Iren. *Haer.* I. 4, 5: τῶν φώτων ... τουτέστιν τῶν ἀγγέλων...

<sup>10</sup> Cf. the gloss to Cod. Vat. 1971 “Lights = saints” or the catena: “By lights he means either wise powers, or those who were enlightened by the Holy Spirit”; for further examples see J. E. Huther, *Kritisch-exegetisches Handbuch über den Brief des Jakobus*. 5. Aufl. neugearbeitete von W. Beyschlag (Göttingen 1988) 73–74; Mußner. *Op. cit.*, 91.

<sup>11</sup> S. e. g. M. Meinerzt, *Der Jakobus Brief* (Berlin 1915) 63: “Gott wird Vater der Lichter, d. h. der Gestirne, genannt”; J. Moffatt, *The General Epistles. James, Peter and Judas* (London 1953) 19: “the Father of heavenly lights”; H. Windisch, *Die katholischen Briefe*. 3. umgearbeitete Aufl. von H. Preisker (Tübingen 1951) 9: “Die φῶτα sind die Gestirne”; Huther. *Op. cit.*, 74: “Unter τὰ φῶτα (...) sind, wie fast sämtliche neuere Ausleger anerkannt haben, ‘die leuchtenden Himmelskörper’ gemeint”; *Der Brief des Jakobus*. Erklärt von Martin Dibelius (Göttingen 1984) 130: “πατήρ τῶν φώτων als Titel Gottes bezieht sich natürlich auf die Sterne”; Mußner. *Op. cit.*, 91: “Gott wird als ‘der Vater der Lichter’

on the parallel use of the word τὰ φῶτα in the LXX (see above), and, on the other hand, on the terminology used in the passage on the whole, i. e. on the words saying that with reference to the Father “there is no variation or shadow due to change” (παρ’ ᾧ οὐκ ἔνι παραλλαγή ἢ τροπῆς ἀποσκίασμα). Indeed, all the three words of this extract are technical astronomical (and, hence, astrological) terms; in the Greek manuscript tradition, unlike the *Father of lights*, this phrase had many *variae lectiones*,<sup>12</sup> that show that even in the oldest times the text was not understood well. The word παραλλαγή (or παράλλαξις, to be more precise) means the change in the position of a heavenly body depending on the change in the position of the observer; τροπή means a revolution (for example, in the combination *revolution of the sun*), ἀποσκίασμα means eclipse or waning of the light at sunset.

Meanwhile, it is quite possible that the author of the *Letter* used the phrase *Father of lights* not in the one special meaning of the word φῶς, but in a whole range of the meanings that are associated with it in Greek. To demonstrate this, one can compare this passage with the text of the prayer which was published recently.<sup>13</sup> In this Greek text the phrase in question is also present, and the context in which it is used is more clear than the one of the *Letter of James*. The prayer contains ten sections, each beginning with “I worship and glorify” (προσκυνέω καὶ δοξάζω), the first of which starts with an appeal to God, who is in this case called the *Father of lights* (ὁ μέγιστος πατήρ τῶν φώτων). This way of addressing God seems to set the main theme, and the word φῶς and its derivatives (φωστήρ, φωτεινός, φωτίζω) are the leitmotif of the whole composition. On the one hand, calling God *the Father of lights* the author explains, that

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bezeichnet, ganz deutlich im Hinblick auf die Erschaffung der Sterne”; *Die “katholischen” Briefe. Die Briefe des Jakobus, Petrus, Johannes und Judas*. Übersetzt und erklärt von Horst Balz und Wolfgang Schrage (Göttingen – Zürich 141983) 20: “Gott als Geber aller guten Gaben wird als ‘Vater der Lichter’, d. h. der Sterne (...) bezeichnet”.

<sup>12</sup> B. M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (Stuttgart 1975) 579–580.

<sup>13</sup> I mean here the prayer written on a board that was found several years ago during the excavations in Dahleh oasis in Upper Egypt (at the site of the Greek-Roman settlement of Kellis). The origin and nature of this small (132 lines) writing is still to be investigated; it is a well-preserved work that according to the paleographic data can be dated by to 3rd c. AD. We can note here that there are no good reasons for considering this text to be Manichean, as all the researchers have done up to now, following the publisher. For the publication of the text with an English translation and comments see R. G. Jenkins, “The Prayer of the Emanations in Greek from Kellis (T. Kellis 22)”, *Le Muséon* 108 (1995) 243–263.

God is the creator of celestial bodies: the sixth section speaks about the two great luminaries, the sun and the moon (προσκυνέω καὶ δοξάζω τοὺς μεγάλους φωστήρας, ἥλιον τε καὶ σελήνην) which enlighten (φωτίζω) the universe; the seventh section deals with the five great lights (προσκυνέω καὶ δοξάζω τὰ μέγαρα πέντα φῶτα), i. e. with the five planets giving beauty to this world.

On the other hand, when explaining the term the *Father of lights*, the author stresses the luminous nature of God: “Glorious are your might and your light (φῶς)”, adding after that, that not only is God “the greatest and most glorious light dominating over everyone”, but that everything created by God has a luminous nature: thus the universe is fed with the light of the Father who separated light from darkness; angels are always endowed with the epithet “light, luminous”; the mind (νοῦς) of the Father, which presumably should be identified with Christ, is also called “light”; the ultimate aim of every true believer is to reach the “Great aeon of Light”.<sup>14</sup>

The question is how this phrase should be understood and translated in the *Letter*? The translation variants suggested in the “Translator’s Manual for the *Letter of James*” (Bratcher, 1984, 13), namely “God who created the sun, the moon and the stars”, or “God who created celestial bodies”, appear to be insufficient. Based on the parallels drawn here, it is possible to presume that the expression πατήρ τῶν φώτων meant to the author something like πατήρ τοῦ φωτός καὶ τῶν φώτων. So, if we would like to express what the author really had in mind, it would be better to say “the Father of light and celestial bodies”.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> That the words *Father of lights* means not only *Father of heavenly bodies*, but rather “Father of everything that belongs to light” is also proved by the Greek text of an anonymous Christian hymn of the III–IV century, where we also come across this combination: “so that you see eternal light, so that [you] accept [Father] of lights” (C. Wesley, “Les plus anciens monuments du Christianisme écrits sur papyrus. 1906”, *PO* 4, 2, line 18). Here, the Greek text should be reconstructed not to [σὺ θε(εδ)ν] φώτων, but to [σὺ π(ατ)ήρ] φώτων, thereby correcting the wrong reference “cf. saint Jean 1. 17” for “Jac 1. 17”. We come across two more similar phrases in another hymn (P. Keller. *Gr.* 92), that was also found in Dahleh oasis (Kellis Literary Texts 1. Ed. by I. Gardner [Oxford 1996] 137, 139 [Dakleh Oasis Project: Monograph. 4]). However, whereas in the first case π(άτ)ερ, ὁ πάντων φώτων πυθμῆ(ν), that is “Oh, Father, foundation of all lights”, the lights can mean only heavenly bodies, in the second case π(άτ)ερ ἀπόκρυφε, ἡ τῶν φώτων σύστασις, that is “Oh, secret Father, accumulation of lights”, the lights definitely mean everything that belongs to the realm of light as such, as well as the heavenly bodies.

<sup>15</sup> It is in this way that I understand the passage from Philo (*Leg. All.* I. 104): ἵνα ἡμῶν ἀνοίξῃ ὁ θεὸς ... ἐγκύμονα θεῶν φώτων λόγον.

Besides that, there is some reason to assume that the author of the *Letter*, a man not unfamiliar with Hellenistic culture,<sup>16</sup> wanted to express some other idea with πατήρ τῶν φώτων. It is known that in Greek the word φως had two meanings: τὸ φῶς (or φαός) φωτός / plur. φώτων (from the verb φαίνω), i. e. light, and the word ὁ φῶς / φῶτος / plur. φωτῶν (origin unknown), i. e. *man* or *mortal*. Thus, as no accents were used in the script of this period, the expression πατήρ τῶν φωτων could be understood both as the *Father of lights* as well as the *Father of men*.<sup>17</sup> The play on these homonyms is attested in Hellenistic pagan and Christian literature. For instance, the alchemist Zosimus of Panopolis (late 3d. century) in his treatise *On the Letter Omega* writes that a spiritual person (ἄνθρωπος ὁ πνευματικός), the one who (unlike a carnal person) is endowed with the luminous principle, is also called φῶς, “from which it followed, that men came to be called φῶτας” (10. 1 sq., Jackson, 28; Mertens 5–6). This play of words occupied a prominent place in the theological speculations of the Gnostics, whose system survived in the works of Irenaeus: Sethians called the God both Man and Light (*Haer.* I. 30, 1). There is one more example, apparently important for the analysis of the passage in question, which we find in a work by Clement of Alexandria. He also derives the word φῶς from φῶς (ὁ δὴ κυρίως κέκληται φῶς... ἐντεῦθεν τὸν ἄνθρωπον ὑπὸ τῶν παλαιῶν ἡγοῦμαι κεκλήθαι φῶτα), commenting that “that man has not got yet the perfect gift (τὴν τελείαν δωρεάν)” that is he has not yet received the Christian truth (*Paed.* I.6; Staehlin, I. 106, 28–30). This last expression reminds us immediately the verse of the *Letter of James*, namely: “every perfect gift (δῶρημα τέλειον) descends from *the Father of Lights*...”, and one can suggest that Clement was familiar with the *Letter of James* and made an allusion to it.<sup>18</sup> This goes against Arnold Meyer’s hypothesis which has been ac-

<sup>16</sup> Besides the *Letter* written in good Greek showing the knowledge of rhetoric (for details see Mußner. *Op. cit.*, 26 sq.) cf. e. g. a phrase such as “the wheel of (re)birth” (τροχὸς τῆς γενέσεως in Jm 3. 6), whose source has been looked for not only in Greek philosophy, but even in Buddhism (see M. Philonenko, “Un écho de la prédication dans l’Épître de Jacques”, *Ex orbe religionum. Studia Geo Widengren* 1 [Leiden 1972] 254–265).

<sup>17</sup> When this paper was already written I came across the article by Amphoux (C.-B. Amphoux, “A propos de Jacques I. 17”, *RHPPhR* 50 [1970] 127–136) who had suggested this variant of the interpretation but he had left the question unresolved as he had not been able to find any textual illustration, supporting his idea.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. C.-M. Edsman, “Schöpferwille und Geburt Jac 1. 18. Eine Studie zur altchristlichen Kosmologie”, *ZNW* 38 (1939) 18 sq. where the author demonstrated in the other example that Clement used the *Letter of James*.

cepted by almost all scholars that Clement of Alexandria did not know the *Letter of James*.<sup>19</sup>

Therefore one can assume that the author of the *Letter* knew the double meaning of the words and when he used the phrase πατήρ τῶν φῶτων he meant not only the Father of light and heavenly bodies but also the Father of men, i. e. the Father of everything.<sup>20</sup>

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Сочетание “Отец светов” (Иак 1.17) лишь однажды засвидетельствовано в Библии. Хотя современные толкователи единодушны в том, что слово “светы” в данном контексте означает “небесные светила”, однако, исходя из сравнительного материала и семантики греческого существительного φῶς, можно предположить, что значение словосочетания здесь шире. С одной стороны, на основе греческого текста, открытого несколько лет назад (так называемая “Молитва эманаций”), в котором встречается то же сочетание, допустимо понимать πατήρ τῶν φῶτων как “отец света и светил”. С другой стороны слово φῶς (свет) имеет в греческом частичный омоним φῶς, который означает “человек”, “смертный”, и ряд текстов свидетельствует о том, что эллинистические авторы охотно прибегали к этой игре слов (например, Clem. Alex. *Paed.* I. 6 Staehlin, I. 106, 28–30). Поэтому нельзя исключать возможность того, что и автор “Послания Иакова”, который был хорошо знаком с расхожей греческой литературной культурой, также имел в виду эту игру слов: Бог был для него *Отцом света и светил* и вместе с тем *Отцом смертных*.

<sup>19</sup> Meyer, *Op. cit.*, 44.

<sup>20</sup> Compare the saying of Pythagoreans: ὁ μὲν θεὸς εἷς... ἐν οὐρανῷ φωστὴρ καὶ πάντων πατήρ (Clem. Alex., *Protr.* VI. 72, 4; Cyr. Alex. *Contra Julianum*: PG 76, col. 541) in which not only the luminous nature of the God is stressed but also that he is the Father of everything and everyone.