

HERACLITUS FRAGMENTS #55

Greek Translations Series

Heraclitus, a native of Ephesus, lived approximately 500 BC. Too little is known of his life to conjecture with any specificity—but he was supposedly of good birth¹. However Aristotle and Cicero both refer to him as “obscure”. It was believed by some that he never completed a number of literary works because he allegedly suffered from melancholy. So he is mentioned as “the weeping philosopher”. The few remains we possess of Heraclitus’ original compositions are succinct fragments. Since the New Testament world is built upon the ideas and proverbial wisdom of many persons, in this short note we defer to one snippet left by this pre-Socratic scholar. Early church theologians sought to refute many of his linguistic innovations, particularly the “logos” phenomenon. Therefore a lively interpretation of his views may be helpful in situating Greek imagery contained in New Testament writings.

ὄσων ὄψις ἀκοή μάθησις, ταῦτα ἐγὼ προτιμέω.²

The obscurities of Heraclitus’ language confront the reader the moment s/he engages the Greek text. Every line of his is like an encrypted code: the meaning and message is there but it must be wrested from its mysterious syntactical scheme. At all points, he pours massive amounts of imagery into short phrases, and these extended definitions do reach forward in time unto the New Testament age. With fragments comprising so many genres³ it is no surprise that the Heraclitus’ verbiage—common to all in his day, is potpourri of style. His compact sentences carry messages through time like a steady stream, whose source is unknown, which refreshes each generation of users.

Words are in some sense architectonic. In the sense that they are “creations” they are monuments whose longevity relates to their construction. We continue to speak of the painted pictographs of Mesopotamia and beautifully illustrated hieroglyphs of Egypt. Their reputations are known worldwide. Greatness is a result of arbitrary evaluation. Certainly, fame and lore may attach itself to carefully scripted words, the glory of their meanings then might even be carried on the lips of men and women throughout the ages. All of what we now have of Heraclitus is partly because of the value placed on his aphorisms by later readers. Therein you find a broad data-base and none of the loaded prepositional baggage suffused in late Hellenistic idiom: Heraclitus’ verbal wit echoes the inflections of a much older Greek custom.

¹ Diogenes Laertius has given us our most reliable source for his life: *Lives and Opinions*, Book ix 1.

² Translation: “Such things as sight, hearing, instruction..These I esteem highly.”

³ Wisdom-32,35,41,108; sleep-21,73,89; god(s)-15,67,92,93,102; sun-3,6,99; soul-12,45,115; Greek scholars-40,42,56,57. *Die Fragmente der.. Diels-Kranz*, 1934.

By the end of the first century AD, The Temple in Jerusalem had been utterly destroyed. After its destruction the Jewish Diaspora fanned far and wide. Among those early new immigrants to gentile cities were Christians who also found themselves under the watchful eye of Roman authorities. Christian historians assert that the Apostle John is supposed to have resided in Ephesus along with Andrew and Philip.⁴ Remember, Ephesus was the former residence of Heraclitus and remnants of his dictums were still in circulation. In later times Bishop Hippolytus (170AD-236AD) attacked the doctrinal positions—as pantheistic--proffered in the maxims of Heraclitus. John's abode there in the city was exegetically profitable and he took full advantage of how a Greek reader of Asia Minor would have read and interpreted his words.

When the author of the epistle I John (1.1-3) began to formulate his thoughts he rejuvenated the significance—in language—of the visual and auditory. John exploited an ancient Greek leitmotif: the sense of 'the power of the visual'; the eyes being the primary organs for discerning.⁵ So the euphony embedded in the Greek Text pushes forward a thought, extant in John's day, but retrieved from its semantic past. {If} Heraclitus magnified (above all) "seeing, hearing and learning" through *autopsis* or *direct experience*, John elevates and expands their rhetorical meanings by linking them to an eyewitness account of what he 'saw and heard' in Jesus' presence: the μάθησις/*discipleship* he received was hands-on!

Philological note: The epistle--*First John*, lacks a salutation, and epistolary closing remarks are nil. John's opening statements are a series of parallelisms written in a Heraclitus' style. The absence of connectives demonstrates his mastery of inflections and the older scales of grammatical codes. Thus he writes with ancient winds blowing behind him. With respect to usage, various forms of the Greek <τιμέω> appear 71 times in the New Testament. As a common language property of Greeks around the Roman Empire, Hellenistic applications are extant in each of the synoptic Gospels, as well as in the Gospel of John, and in as wide a range of authorship as Paul, Peter, James and John. This idea of *esteeming/valuing and dignifying* (a thing's worth) is consonant with semantic presentations in Greek Epic and tragedy⁶; it can also be found in the corpora of writings of the Church Fathers too.

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⁴ Cf. Eus. H.E. iii. 31, v. 24.

⁵ Idem Aristotle, *Met. 1. 980(a)* who writes that men regard sight as the best of all sensory perceptions.

⁶ Homer, Sophocles and Pindar develop this use for "estimation" in regard to judgments made on persons, places and things.