


Jesus' Friends in John 15 and the Hellenistic Royal Court

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ABSTRACT: The present contribution utilizes the reference to disciples as Jesus' friends in Jesus' Farewell Talk to the Apostles in John 15 as evidence of the contemporary understanding of the Hellenistic royal in essentially non-Greek circles of the Greco-Roman East. It also argues that this passage may help to explain the very nature of the Hellenistic royal friends (*philoï*) as compared to other possible types of relation to monarchs (servants – *douloi*, companions – *betairoi*) in the earlier Hellenistic Age.

KEYWORDS: hellenistic court, companions, friends, Jesus' disciples as friends

The present contribution starts from an observation that Jesus' Farewell Talk to his disciples (John 15), with an assertion that the disciples were his friends, not – servants, may reflect the awareness of the Hellenistic royal patterns in the circles of the disciples of Christ in the 1st cent. AD (both the times of Jesus and the times of the composition of John are meant here).¹ As primarily an ancient historian, interested in the Hellenistic monarchy, I believe that this piece of evidence may be used to make a difference between the Companions (*betairoi*) and Friends (*philoï*) of Hellenistic kings more nuanced. That is why I decide to delve into a New Testament passage famous for and analyzed mainly owing to its theological content. The idea begins with a conviction that the political consciousness of people of various origin in that period was increasingly influenced by the growth of personal monarchies, which emerged from the division of the empire of Alexander the Great. In fact, the model of kingship elaborated by the Graeco-Macedonian elite appeared to be attractive to non-Greek peoples as well. In some non-Greek cultures the Hellenistic model of monarchy has been fiercely discussed. The Jews, surrounded by (and subject to) two Hellenistic superpowers were not unlike, and gradually the monarchy the Maccabees and of Herod the Great borrowed more and more from the rich language of power of Hellenistic monarchs. It was also the language that heavily impacted the ways of thinking of almost

¹ Any effort to extract Jesus' actual teaching from the gospel's authorial text was not ever accepted more widely in the Bible scholarship, and perhaps never will be. The public teaching of Jesus and the writing down of the Gospel are relatively close each other and both belong to the world of the Principate, very much different from the epoch when the concept of the Hellenistic kingship was shaped. That is why I think it is justified to treat John's allusions to the monarchy integrally as testimonies of the post-Alexandrian Hellenistic kingship's reception in the circle of Jesus.

all circles of the society depicted in the Gospels. Therefore, the Hellenistic loan-terms in New Testament may be utilized as a supplementary context for better understanding of Hellenistic society.

John's account of Jesus' last talk to the disciples before the Passion with its crucial notions of the Hellenistic court terminology is not the only reference to Jesus' kingship in the fourth Gospel as it is generally acknowledged that the issue of Jesus' kingship underlies the whole Passion narrative of John thematically (cf. not only John 18:33–19:3 but also John 19:19–22). John determined to deal with this issue with three different perspectives (Jesus' self-statement as the Lord; Jesus' kingship discussed with Pilate; Pilate's notice to be fixed on the cross), and certainly the vision of God's monarchy in John results from someone's careful reflection and study.

In the last talk to the disciples Jesus names them friends, and not slaves or servants of himself and refers to the relation as *philia* (John 15:14–15).² Admittedly, too, Jesus identifies himself in this passage as the Lord (*kyrios*), not as the king. Indeed, in John Jesus never, except for the descriptions of the Passion, refers to himself as to a king. John, however, uses the notion of Jesus as *basileus* while reporting others' attitude to Jesus. Thus Nathanael confesses his belief in Jesus as the Son of God and the king of Israel (John 1:49), which agrees with a quote from Zecharias (Zech 5:5) in the account of Jesus' ceremonial entry into Jerusalem (John 12:15). The political sense of the kingship, which some supporters had projected for Jesus is clearly implied in John 6:15, too (Ἰησοῦς οὖν γνοὺς ὅτι μέλλουσιν ἔρχεσθαι καὶ ἀρπάξαι αὐτὸν ἵνα ποιήσωσιν βασιλέα, ἀνεχώρησεν πάλιν εἰς τὸ ὄρος αὐτὸς μόνος. – “Therefore when Jesus perceived that they were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king, He departed again to the mountain by Himself alone”).³ Still, the noun *kyrios* had been used for a century at least as a synonym of the royal title in the Greek world,⁴ and one may assume that Jesus (and then Paul, too) used it as a safer, seemingly less obviously political notion than that of *basileus*.

Modern commentaries usually focus on purely moral or theological aspects of the disciples' elevation to the status of the friends. When using the Classical context to explain this passage, they go to Greek philosophical treatises dealing with issues like friendship or slavery, most notably Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Sometimes, they also try to explain the friendship between Jesus (as the Lord) and his disciples in the context of the Old Testament as well as in the conditions of the Church *in statu nascendi*. It was not overlooked that

2 John 15:14: ὑμεῖς φίλοι μου ἐστε ἐὰν ποιῆτε ἃ ἐγὼ ἐντέλλομαι ὑμῖν. 15. οὐκέτι λέγω ὑμᾶς δούλους, ὅτι ὁ δούλος οὐκ οἶδεν τί ποιεῖ αὐτοῦ ὁ κύριος; ὑμᾶς δὲ εἰρηκα φίλους, ὅτι πάντα ἃ ἤκουσα παρὰ τοῦ πατρὸς μου ἐγνώρισα ὑμῖν. – “You are My friends if you do whatever I command you. 15 No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you.” The English Bible translations are NKJV.

3 P. Beskow, *Rex gloriae, the Kingship of Christ in the Early Church* (Stockholm – Goteborg – Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell 1962) 39–44.

4 See: L. Cerfaux, “Le Titre Kyrios et la dignité royale de Jésus,” *RSPT* 11 (1922) 58–59 on usages of Herodes Agrippa; D. Cuss, *Imperial Cult and Honorary Terms in the New Testament* (Fribourg: University Press 1974) 53–59.

the new friends remain servants of the Lord (John 15:20), which at first glance may seem contradictory.⁵ On the other hand, in more recent scholarship students of John do not fail to notice that Jesus' styling of his disciples as friends resembles practices known from the political practice of his age (friends of "Eastern rulers," *amici Caesaris*).⁶ Of course, friendship is not the main theme driving the Gospel of John.⁷ Rather, the language of friendship – *philia*⁸ was the most natural to both the author and the intended readers of the text.⁹ It is clear that in the Hellenistic societies this language was well understood and everyone was aware that the concept of *philia* may have mask many various types of relationships including that of personal dependence.¹⁰

Thus the theme of friendship, being omnipresent in the Ancient, especially Greco-Roman thought for many centuries, has been borrowed and developed by Hellenistic monarchs to explain their relation to their subjects. I think that we should set the words of Jesus in the context of the Hellenistic discourse on the monarchy, kinship, and court societies more firmly as it has been hitherto done. It is well known fact that in the Hellenistic kings (both the ones descending from Macedonian families as well as non-Macedonians) relied in administering their kingdoms on loose structures of *philoï* – Friends (courtiers, administrative officers, advisors, ambassadors).¹¹ In the monarchies of Alexander's Successors

5 R. Kieffer, "John," *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (eds. J. Burton – J. Muddiman) (Oxford: University Press 2001) 989.

6 E.g. J.H. Bernard – A.H. McNeile, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John* (New York: Scribner's Sons 1929) II, 487–488; W. Grundmann, "Das Wort von Jesu Freunden (Joh. XV, 13–16) und das Herrenmahl," *NovT* 3 (1959) 62–69; L.B. Richey, *Roman Imperial Ideology and the Gospel of John* (Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association of America 2007) 167–168.

7 M.M. Culy, *Echoes of Friendship in the Gospel of John* (New Testament Monographs 30; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix 2010) 178–180.

8 Still, the Gospel of John is unique among New Testament writings in its use of φιλῆω (and cognates) which may also be understood as equivalent to ἀγαπάω (to love), see: T. Haraguchi, "Philia as agapē: the Theme of Friendship in the Gospel of John," *AsJT* 28 (2014) 250–262.

9 G.R. O'Day, "Jesus as Friend in the Gospel of John," *Int* 58/2 (2004) 145; Culy, *Echoes* (n. 7), 20 (for the author) and 180–184 (for the readers). Cf. D. Estes, "Echoes of Friendship in the Gospel of John," *JETS* 55/1 (2012) 184–186.

10 See: Z.A. Crook, "Fictive-friendship and the Fourth Gospel," *HTS Theological Studies* 67/3 (2011) 1–7.

11 The literature on the subject is immense, perhaps one cannot omit from the list Christian Habicht ("The Ruling Class in the Hellenistic Monarchies," C. Habicht, *The Hellenistic Monarchies. Selected Papers* [Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan University Press 2006] 32–35) and F.W. Walbank, "Monarchies and Monarchic Ideas," *CAH* VII/1, 68–71. Of the remaining scholarship cf. esp: G. Herman, "The 'Friends' of the Early Hellenistic Rulers: Servants or Officials?," *Talanta* 12–13 (1980–1981) 103–149; S. Le Bohec, "Les *Philoï* des Rois Antigonides," *REG* 98 (1985) 93–124; L. Mooren, "The Ptolemaic Court System," *CdE* 60 (1985) 214–222; G. Herman, "The Court Society of the Hellenistic Age," *Hellenistic Constructs. Essays in Culture, History, and Historiography* (Berkeley, CA – Los Angeles, CA – London: California University Press 1997) 199–224; I. Savalli-Lestrade, "Courtisans et citoyens: le cas des philoi attalides," *Chiron* 26 (1996) 149–181; I. Savalli-Lestrade, *Les philoi royaux dans l'Asie hellénistique* (Genève: Droz 1998) *passim* and esp. 289–290; F. Muccioli, "La scelta delle titolature dei Seleucidi. Il ruolo dei philoi e delle classi dirigenti cittadine," *Simbolos* 3 (2001) 295–318; B. Meißner, "Hofmann und Herrscher. Was es für die Griechen hieß, Freund eines Königs zu sein," *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte* 82 (2000) 1–36; A. Mehl, "Gedanken zur «herrschenden Gesellschaft» und zu den Untertanen im Seleukidenreich," *Historia* 52 (2003) 147–160; T. Brüggemann, "Vom Machtanspruch zur Herrschaft.

the Friends replaced an earlier structure of the *hetairoi* – the Companions of the Argead kings of Macedon (who in the first line were the heavy cavalrymen in royal service). In the court context it is not easy to distinguish between the *hetairoi* and the *philoï*, and indeed some historians prefer to speak about one structure with two names, of which one was preferred in the Classical Age of Greek history, while the other gained more popularity in the Hellenistic Age.¹² It might be argued, however, that the terms *hetairoi* and *philoï* were sometimes utilized by ancient authors in a prejudiced way, and that there was always a lot of space for possible semantic manipulations.¹³

A possible utilization of the contrast between friends and servants in John 15:14 as a piece of evidence on Hellenistic courts was not considered in the literature on St. John Gospel. In the previous scholarship such a possibility was excluded by statements like a one by George Mervyn Lee.¹⁴ I am afraid, however, that his argument that “here we have to do with friends in a private station, more or less on terms of equality” does suggest a misunderstanding of Hellenistic court ideology, rightly corrected by later Biblical scholars – the ostensible (and obviously forged) equality of kings and friends was a trait of Hellenistic monarchies, and Jesus’ stress on his own devotion to his friends perfectly echoes Hellenistic ideals.¹⁵

One may also anchor the possible reference to the Hellenistic court friends in other Greek language usages, reflecting a degree of understanding of Hellenistic monarchies in some circles of Jesus’ disciples. Thus, the authors of the Gospels use the word *προσκυνέω*

Prolegomena zu einer Studie über die Organisation königlicher Herrschaft im Seleukidenreich,” *Studia hellenistica et historiographica. Festschrift für Andreas Mehl* (eds. T. Brüggemann et al.) (Gutenberg: Computus 2010) 19–57; R. Strootman, “Hellenistic Court Society: The Seleukid Imperial Court under Antiochos the Great, 223–187 BCE,” *Royal Courts in Dynastic States and Empires. A Global Perspective* (eds. J. Duindam – T. Artan – M. Kunt) (Leiden: Brill 2011) 69–70.

12 On *hetairoi*, see: R.M. Errington, “Hetairoi,” *ODC* 702; G. Plaumann, “ἑταῖροι,” *PW*, VIII, 1376; H. Berve, *Das Alexanderreich auf prosopographischer Grundlage* (München: Beck 1926) I, 30; G. Stagakis, “Observations on the ἑταῖροι of Alexander the Great,” *Ancient Macedonia* (Thessaloniki: Institute for Balkan Studies 1970) I, 86–102. Helmut Berve (*Das Alexanderreich*, 30–37) included all persons named by the sources as the friends among the *hetairoi*. Eugene Borza (*In the shadow of Olympus. The Emergence of Macedon* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1990] 241) warns that “the distinctions made by our sources between ‘companions’ and ‘friends’ should not be pressed, as there is rather little understanding and consistency in the use of such terms by the ancient writers.” In Savalli-Lestrade, *Les philoi royaux*, 289–290 a switch from the courts of *hetairoi* to those of *philoï* is explained by the fact that the rulers of multi-component Hellenistic states required rather fidelity rather than obeisance.

13 See: J. Rzepka, “Conspirators – Companions – Bodyguards: A Note on the So-Called Mercenaries’ Source and the Conspiracy of Bessus (Curt. 5.8.1–11),” *AHB* 23 (2009) 19–31; J. Rzepka, “How Many Companions Did Philip II Have?,” *Electrum* 19 (2012) 131–135.

14 G.M. Lee, “John XV 14 ‘Ye are My Friends,’” *NovT* 15 (1973) 260.

15 Here one may recall an argument of Gail R. O’Day that Jesus’ stress on his sacrifice of life for his friends in John 15:13 corresponds with Platonic and Aristotelian concepts of friendship up to one’s devotion of life in Plato, *Symp.* 179B or Aristotle, *Eth. nic.* 9.8.9. Additionally O’Day draws attention to equality among friends in the Greek thought resulting in *parrhesia* (equal or frank speech) which is reflected by Jesus’ frankness, boldness or plainness in John 7:4; 13:26; 10:24; 11:14 and 54; 16:25 and 29; 18:20. See: O’Day, “Jesus as Friend,” 149–150.

and its cognates to describe a way, in which the faithful should worship Jesus.¹⁶ Although the exact meaning of the word in the Biblical context (with reference to the Greek Old Testament usages) is fiercely debated as a part of the Trinitarian – anti-Trinitarian argument, one must say that in the Greek cultural background of the Hellenistic kingdoms the word *προσκυνέω* (meaning an act of ritual prostration) was closely linked with the question of the cult of the kings – the first ever demand of *proskynesis* from his friends by a Greek (indeed Macedonian) monarch (Alexander the Great) shocked his subjects, and was almost immediately interpreted as a claim to divine status.¹⁷

It is also well known that Jesus on numerous occasions contrasts his spiritual realm with the earthly kingdoms of his age (as in John 18:36). Most of Jesus' statements about the contemporary kingdoms and kings in the Gospels are not technical and do not allude to particular traits of the monarchies of his times. A notable exception is Luke 22:25 with a criticism of the Gentile monarchs calling themselves benefactors (*ὁ δὲ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς, οἱ βασιλεῖς τῶν ἔθνῶν κυριεύουσιν αὐτῶν καὶ οἱ ἐξουσιάζοντες αὐτῶν εὐεργέται καλοῦνται*).¹⁸ The passage is widely recognized as a polemic with the ubiquitous Hellenistic practice of praising *euergetai*, especially royal ones, by the Greeks.¹⁹

16 See: M.L. Bowen, "They Came and Held Him by the Feet and Worshipped Him': Proskynesis before Jesus in its Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Context," *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* 5 (2013) 63–89.

17 The literature on the subject is again more than immense, so I will restrict quotations to a few more detailed or more recent studies. In contrast to the Greeks the Persians did not treat the ritual prostration as an act of divine worship, and modern scholars wonder whether Alexander's demand of *proskynesis* indeed meant for him a claim to divinity or was a mistaken and misunderstood unifying measure within the Empire – for *status quaestionis*, see: E. Fredricksmeier, "Alexander's Religion and Divinity," *Brill's companion to Alexander the Great* (ed. J. Roisman) (Leiden: Brill 2003) 274–275 with n. 97 and 98. I do not think Alexander's own judgement might be so distant from the views of his people. For convincing arguments that Alexander intended to achieve the divine worship through the introduction of *proskynesis*; see: E. Badian, "The Deification of Alexander the Great," *Ancient Macedonian Studies in Honor of Charles F. Edson* (ed. H.J. Dell) (Thessaloniki: Institute for Balkan Studies 1981) 48–52, 64–65; I. Worthington, *By the Spear: Philip II, Alexander the Great and the Rise and Fall of the Macedonian Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2014) 265–269. The early history and Near Eastern sources of *proskynesis* in C. Materese, "Proskynēsis and the Gesture of the Kiss at Alexander's Court: The Creation of a New Élite," *Palamedes* 8 (2013) 75–86 and H. Bowden "On Kissing and Making Up: Court Protocol and Historiography in Alexander the Great's 'Experiment with Proskynesis,'" *BICS* 56/2 (2013) 55–77.

18 "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those who exercise authority over them are called 'benefactors.'" The parallel passages in Matt 20:25 and Mark 10:44 do not include mention of *euergetai*, but I would still underscore that the stress on the service of the leader towards his people (*ἀλλ' ὅς ἂν θέλῃ ἐν ὑμῖν μέγας γενέσθαι ἔσται ὑμῶν διάκονος* and *ὅς ἂν θέλῃ ἐν ὑμῖν εἶναι πρῶτος, ἔσται πάντων δούλος* respectively) may be a looser, less learned recollection of the words of Jesus about the role of the true leader. On the other hand, Luke 22:24 is the only New Testament occurrence of the noun *φιλονεικία* (*love of strife*, in later Greek thought very much assimilated erroneously to *φιλονικία* *love of victory*), which fits perfectly into the discourse on the Hellenistic monarchy. Apparently, Luke's informer or Luke himself was very sensitive about this discourse, whereas the writers of the two other synoptic gospels did not see it so precisely.

19 The use of the word *εὐεργέτης*, as well as of its cognates *εὐεργετέω* or *εὐεργεσία* in the New Testament was thoroughly analysed by Frederick W. Danker (*Benefactor: Epigraphic Study of a Graeco-Roman and New Testament Semantic Field* [Saint Louis, MO: Clayton 1982] 324–329); on the conceptual relation between salvation and benefaction in Antiquity, see: A.D. Nock, "Soter and Euergetes," *The Joy of Study* (ed. S.E. Johnson) (New York: Macmillan 1951) 136.

The above examples are on the one hand dispersed in gospels written down by four different people, and may look at the first glance casual. On the other hand, once having grouped them together, one cannot easily resist a conclusion that awareness of the Hellenistic monarchy and its peculiar traits was indeed deep in the circle of Jesus' disciples.

Jesus' words on the Hellenistic kingship may be therefore treated also as an additional source of evidence we should take into consideration in our attempts at explaining the Hellenistic court. We should come back to St. John Gospel and Christ's words on disciples as his *philoï*. Jesus inserts in his teaching about friendship a comment on why the disciples may be *philoï*: 15:16 οὐχ ὑμεῖς με ἐξελέξασθε, ἀλλ' ἐγὼ ἐξελεξάμην ὑμᾶς καὶ ἔθηκα ὑμᾶς ἵνα ὑμεῖς ὑπάγητε καὶ καρπὸν φέρητε καὶ ὁ καρπὸς ὑμῶν μένη (“You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you”). Except for the theological content Jesus offers here what could be a dictionary definition of the Hellenistic royal friend. His stress on a personal choice and appointment of friends by the king (ἐγὼ ἐξελεξάμην²⁰ ὑμᾶς), instead of a choice of the king by his people (οὐχ ὑμεῖς με ἐξελέξασθε)²¹ may reflect Hellenistic discussions about monarchy. It may also explain why in the Hellenistic court terminology the *philoï* eventually replaced the *hetairoï*. The structure of the court composed of *philoï* was indeed looser, more flexible, and less rooted in traditional aristocracies (certainly new Hellenistic kingdoms lacked established Greek or Macedonian aristocracies, numerous enough to man the royal administration), and to much lesser a degree linked with the military service (which was crucial for *hetairoï*). The stress on the personal choice of the friends by the sovereign (and perhaps, on the appointment to a particular role as well: ἔθηκα ὑμᾶς ἵνα) in the Gospel reflects well the position of the Hellenistic

20 Nota bene, the verb ἐκλέγω, used by John here, quite commonly denotes a selection of the best people (to a particular mission or as elite units, see: Xenophon, *Hell.* 1.6.19; cf. also: Plato, *Resp.* 535a).

21 A question of the methods of appointment of the Macedonian and Hellenistic monarchs (including a problem of election, assemblies of the friends, of the Companions, of the people) belongs to the most debated issues in the field of ancient history. Numerous scholars argue for some constitutional restrictions of royal power in Macedonia, and especially for the appointment of the kings by the assemblies or the Companions, most notably Nicholas G.L. Hammond, (*The Macedonian State. The Origins, Institutions and History* [Oxford: Oxford University Press 1989]) and Miltiadis B. Hatzopoulos (*Macedonian Institutions under the Kings* [Athens – Paris: De Boccard 1996] I–II) or even in the Successors' states (F. Granier, *Die makedonische Heeresversammlung. Ein Beitrag zum antiken Staatsrecht* [München: Beck 1931], arguing for the exclusive right of assembly to acclaim new kings). Most experts, while acknowledge that one can speak about influence of the people on some royal appointments in Macedonia, do not see any rule in those cases (e.g. Borza, *In the Shadow of Olympus*, 243–244; R.M. Errington, *History of Macedonia* [Berkeley, CA: University of California Press 1990] 220–221); the clearest review of earlier debate in L. Mooren, “The Nature of the Hellenistic Monarchy,” *Egypt and the Hellenistic World* (eds. E. Van't Dack – P. van Dessel – W. van Gucht) (*Studia Hellenistica* 27; Leuven: Peeters 1983) 205–240. Perhaps one can sum up this debate with cautious observations of M.B. Hatzopoulos (*Ancient Macedonia* [Trends in Classics – Key Perspectives on Classical Research 1; Berlin – New York: De Gruyter 2020] 116) that the assessment of the Macedonian monarchy was very much a matter of perception: for enemies and people who grew up in Classical democracies, the kings of Macedon were absolute rulers, while insiders used to be more aware of customary limitations of royal power and tended to see in Macedon a kind of an ideal Homeric kingdom.

court *philos* and his duties – one can guess that this reflects the origins of the institution of the royal *philoi* introduced as a replacement or originally as a task-related supplement of the old-fashioned Macedonian *hetairoi* (Companions). The *hetairoi* were very much a military guard of the king, then his entire heavy cavalry corps, selected routinely from the elites, and their name was very much politicized due to the elevation of the Macedonian infantrymen to the ranks of the *pezhetairoi* – Foot Companions (needless to say that kings' personal influence on the selection of their infantry companions, being multiple thousands in number, was even weaker).

Thus, John 15 helps us to understand that in the Hellenistic age the *philoi* were simply king's men chosen personally by the king himself. More generally, the whole discourse on Jesus' kingship in the Gospels, and particularly in John reminds us that the historians of Antiquity may learn a lot from the reflections of the Classical world and its social practices in the texts from the outer edge of the Classical tradition. Especially, New Testament and other early Christian writing should not escape attention of scholars dealing with the pagan world in the last centuries BC and the very first centuries AD.

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