

“PERFECTING KNOWLEDGE AND PIETY” (PHILO, *CONTEMPL.* 3,25): INTERTEXTUAL SIMILARITIES BETWEEN PHILO’S THERAPEUTAE AND LUKAN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

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Abstract

After briefly noting the similarities between the Essenes and Therapeutae, both of which are groups described by Philo, this study compares some of the most striking features of the Therapeutae in Philo’s *De Vita Contemplativa* with similar features in New Testament early Christianity. The focus is particularly, though not exclusively, focused on the Lukan literature. Without assuming any explicit links between the Therapeutae and Lukan Christianity, the comparison highlights commonalities with Jewish religious groups such as the Therapeutae and provides a glimpse of Luke’s understanding and presentation of the Jesus-movement.

1. Introduction

Philo of Alexandria (ca.25 BC—40 AD) writes about the Therapeutae,¹ a peculiar Jewish group of ascetics, in his book *De Vita Contemplativa*. In his description of this group there seem to be close resemblances with two other early 1st century AD groups, namely with the Qumran community (Essenes?²) and with the early Christians.³ The connection between the Therapeutae and early Christian communities in Egypt must have been so

1 Cf. *Contempl.* 2; *Ebr.* 210; *Decal.* 66; *Spec.* (lib.i-iv) 1; *Praem & Exsecr.* 108; *Legat.* 97 and *Prob.* 75.

2 It is questionable whether the community at Qumran was indeed an Essene community.

3 Cf. Brownlee (1950): “The Jewish sect of the Essenes, which produced the Dead Sea Scrolls, has striking resemblances to the Damascene Covenanters, the Therapeutae of Egypt, the John-the-Baptist movement in the time of Jesus and primitive Christianity.”

close for Eusebius (the only other ancient source that makes reference to the Therapeutae, cf. *Hist. eccl* II 17) that he actually confused the Therapeutae to be ascetic Christians. Ferguson aptly summarises Eusebius’ confusion, saying that the Therapeutic “... community life, asceticism, and worship practices seemed so familiar to the Christian monastic communities in Egypt with which he was familiar that Eusebius considered them to have been Christians ... but if the treatise is genuinely by Philo this is chronologically impossible” (Ferguson 1993, 497). Later historians also pursued this connection and similarly confused the Therapeutae with Christian monks. Because of this confusion, some scholars are disputing the authority of *De Vita Contemplativa* and treat it as the most conspicuous of eight similar contentious works that are ascribed to Philo (Hunter 1930). They saw in it an apology of Christian ascetism written at the close of the third century under the name of Philo. Others again agree with the fact that it might have been a post-Philonic work, but ascribe it to Jewish origins rather than to Christian apologetics. However, evidence against Philonic authorship does not convince (cf. Vermes 1959-1960, 107; Geoltrain 1959, 49; Gärtner 1965, 11). Assuming then that *De Vita Contemplativa* is a genuine Philonic document, Eusebius’ assumption is indeed chronologically impossible as Ferguson and others assume. One should probably rather understand Eusebius’ confusion in the light of the fact that there were not only very close similarities between the Therapeutae and the early Christians due to a common Jewish tradition, but also that converts to Christianity came from groups such as the Therapeutae. It is the intention of this study to explore such possible similarities between Philo’s Therapeutae and the basic characteristics of the early Christian movement—with emphasis on the Lukan writings. But before this is done, a brief comparison between the Therapeutae and the Qumran community would be in order.

2. Some Similarities between the Qumran community and the Therapeutae

Scholars have noted in the past some similarities between the Qumran community and the Therapeutae (cf. Taylor & Davies 1998, 24).⁴ Without

4 Porton (1986, 66) correctly pointed out that “Geoltrain’s view that the Therapeutae and the Essenes are related but not identical, seems to be the most widely accepted opinion”. Also E. Schürer (1973-1987): “The Therapeutae were in many ways similar to, and are closely associated with, the Essenes as far as their aims and inspirations went”.

discussing or debating the validity of their findings, a summary of some of the prominent similarities that were pointed out, are the following:

Name	If the Qumran community was an Essene community, then there might be an etymological connection via the Aramaic between the names ‘Essene’ and ‘Therapeutae’. There is a possibility that the Therapeutae were probably an Egyptian branch of the Essenes.
Property	The Damascus Document allows some private property along with common sharing, and the Qumran community follows a similar pattern. The Therapeutae renounced all their goods (Bammel 1985, 971).
Ascetism	Both were ascetic groups of ‘worshippers’ or ‘healers’ who lived separated—by their own choice—from the main community.
Celibacy	Both groups practiced celibacy.
Membership	Both groups adhered to strict rules of membership and probation.
Discipline	Both groups had strict discipline and adhered to silence.
Structure	They were well organised and hierarchical in terms of their social structure.
Housing	Individuals occupied separate housing and only came together for worship or feasts.
Women	There were parallel societies for men and for women, but women were an integral part of the worship and community amongst the Therapeutae.
Worship	Both practiced communal worship. A reading of the ancient sacred books and an exposition of the passage that was read took place during communal worship. The Qumran community was active, combining prayer and study with manual work. The Therapeutae were contemplative, spending all their life in meditation and worship (Vermes 1977, 136; cf. also Vermes 1960, 97-115).
Scripture	Both groups put a high emphasis on the study of Scripture. They meditated allegorically on the laws, prophetic oracles and psalms (Mason 2000). Josephus wrote that they “display an extraordinary interest in the ancient writings, particularly those for the welfare of the soul and body”

	(<i>B.J. 2.8.6</i> §136).
CD	Fragments of the Damascus Document were found in both Egypt and at Qumran (Evans 2000).
Hymns	Both composed hymns. Regarding the purpose of a collection of individual hymns, such as 1QH amongst the Dead Sea Scrolls, Vermes (1977, 57) wrote that one can only speculate “assuming that they were recited by the Guardian and the new members of the Community during the Feast of the Renewal of the Covenant on the Feast of Weeks.” So also the Therapeutae “each chanted hymns, one after the other, during their Pentecostal vigil”.
Sabbath	Both groups observed the <i>sabbath</i> , which took a central theological place in their thinking and calendar.
Pentecod calendar	Both groups divided the year into seven fifty-day periods. Each of these seven periods was introduced by an agricultural festival. According to Vermes (1977, 177-178), “One of these festivals, the Feast of the New Wheat, coincided with the Feast of Weeks and was for the Essenes/Therapeutae also the principal holy day of the year, that of the Renewal of the Covenant”.

3. Similarities between the Therapeutae and New Testament Early Christianity

It must be stated unequivocally from the outset that it is not the intention of this study to imply that the features shared by early Christianity and the Therapeutae had their origin within the Therapeutae, but merely to look at intertextual, social and theological similarities between both groupings. Philo’s *De Vita Contemplativa* is simply used as an ancient source for understanding the background of converted early Christians from groups such as the Therapeutae. Similarities are thus compared on a socio-historical and a religious level.

3.1 Orientation and lifestyle

The art of healing

Philo calls the group that he writes about, “*Therapeutae* and *Therapeutrides*, a name derived from θεραπεύω either in the sense of ‘cure’ (ιατρικήν) because they professed an art of healing better than that current in the cities which cures only the bodies (σώματα θεραπεύει μόνον), while theirs treats also souls oppressed with grievous and well-nigh incurable diseases (ψυχὰς νόσοις κεκρατημένας χαλεπαῖς τε καὶ δυσιάτοις), inflicted by pleasures and desires and griefs and fears, by acts of covetousness, folly and injustice and the countless host of the other passions and vices: or else in the sense of ‘worship’ (θεραπεύειν), because nature and the sacred laws have schooled them to worship the Self-existent who is better than the good, purer than the One (τὸ ὄν) and more primordial than the Monad”⁵ (*Contempl.* 1,2)⁶. According to some scholars, the word *Therapeutae* probably owes much to the common usage associated with Egyptian cult (Taylor & Davies 1998, 7).

Turning to the NT, the verb θεραπεύω occurs 43 times there: 5 times in Mark, 16 times in Matthew, 19 times in Luke-Acts, and once in John—thus almost exclusively in the Gospels and Acts. (The remaining two instances are to be found in Rev 13:3,12). The term is mainly used in the Gospels in relation to Jesus’ ministry of healing: καὶ θεραπεύων πᾶσαν νόσον καὶ πᾶσαν μαλακίαν ἐν τῷ λαῷ (cf. Matt 4:23; 9:35; 10:1; Luke 7:21; etc). The focus on Jesus’ healings, which are specifically combined with the Sabbath, is striking against the backdrop of the *Therapeutae* (cf. Matt 12:10; Mark 3:2; Luke 6:7; 13:14; 14:3; John 5:10). The first time that the verb is used in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus calls himself a “Healer”: ἰατρέ, θεράπευσον σεαυτὸν (Luke 4:23). An integral part of his ministry is to heal the sick (καὶ τοὺς χρεῖαν ἔχοντας θεραπείας ἴατο Luke 9:11). He therefore did not come for those who do not need the doctor, but for those who are ill: οὐ χρεῖαν ἔχουσιν οἱ ἰσχύοντες (ὕγιαίνοντες, Luke 5:31) ἰατροῦ ἀλλ’ οἱ κακῶς ἔχοντες (Matt 9:12). Jesus not only gave his disciples the might and the power to exorcise all demons, but also to heal illnesses (ἔδωκεν αὐτοῖς δύναμιν καὶ ἐξουσίαν ἐπὶ πάντα τὰ δαιμόνια καὶ νόσους θεραπεύειν, Luke 9:1). They

5 Cf. the distinction in Pythagoreanism.

6 All translations of the *De Vita Contemplativa* in this study are taken from F.H. Colson, *Philo*, Vol IX. (Loeb Classical Series), London 1965.

were, however, soon afterwards unable to cast out the demons (Luke 9:40; Matt 17:16). Later, though, after Pentecost, Peter and John were able to heal the lame man at the temple (Acts 3:7-8; 4:14). The apostles continued with this healing ministry during the beginning of the early Church (Acts 5:16; 8:7). Paul apparently shared in these abilities according to Luke (cf. Acts 28:9).

Abandonment of property

According to Kittel, “apart from the Pythagoreans, the Greeks only theorize about common ownership, but Jewish groups like the Essenes practiced it, sharing both meals and property. The Therapeutae also live communally and in ascetic isolation for a more focused study of Scripture” (Hauck 1985, 448). Those who joined the Therapeutae movement “gave away their possessions instead of wasting them” (*Contempl. 2,16*). It seemed as if the members of the Therapeutae came from the upper classes rather than the poor (cf. Kravitz 1972, 104). They abandoned “their property (χαρισάμενοι τὰς οὐσίας (to their sons and daughters or to other kinsfolk. It was seen that they “voluntarily were advancing the time of their inheritance”. Those with no kinsfolk gave their belongings to comrades and friends. According to them, they “surrendered their property to those who were still ‘blind in mind’” (*Contempl. 2,13*).

The Lukan Jesus encourages his disciples to sell their possessions and to give alms (πωλήσατε τὰ ὑπάρχοντα ὑμῶν, Luke 12:33). Those who want to become his disciples should be prepared to give up all their possessions (ἀποτάσσεται πᾶσιν τοῖς ἑαυτοῦ ὑπάρχουσιν οὐ δύναται εἶναι μου μαθητής, Luke 14:33). In the parable of the prodigal son, described only in Luke’s Gospel, this son ironically does exactly the opposite. He cannot wait until his father dies in order to get his inheritance and asks it unashamedly in advance: πᾶτερ, δός μοι τὸ ἐπιβάλλον μέρος τῆς οὐσίας (Luke 15:12). When the rich young man approached Jesus with the question about what he should do to receive eternal life, Jesus replied that the one thing that remains is to sell everything that he has (πάντα ὅσα ἔχεις πώλησον) and to give the money to the poor. Thereafter he should come and follow Jesus (ἀκολούθει μοι; Luke 18:22; par. Mark 10:21; Matt 19:21). Similarly, according to Luke, the first Christians did not keep their belongings to themselves but shared everything with each other (ἦν αὐτοῖς ἅπαντα κοινά, Acts 4:32; 2:45).

Jesus takes a strong position against the importance of property and belongings. He told those who want to follow him that there is no sense in gaining the whole world but losing oneself (Luke 9:23-25). He warns “against all kinds of greed because a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions” (Luke 12:15; par. Matt 16:24-26). In Matthew, Jesus also warns that treasures should not be stored up on earth, for where your treasure is there your heart will also be (Matt 6:19-21).

Abandonment of family and friends

According to Philo, the Therapeutae “... flee without a backward glance and leave their brothers, their children, their wives, their parents, the wide circle of their kinsfolk, the groups of friends around them, the fatherlands in which they were born and reared, since strong is the attraction of familiarity and very great its power to ensnare” (καταλιπόντες ἀδελφούς, τέκνα, γυναῖκας, γονεῖς, πολυανθρώπους συγγενείας, φιλικὰς ἑταιρείας, τὰς πατρίδας..., *Contempl.* 2,18).

Jesus expects a similar attitude from those who intend to follow him: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple” (οὐ μισεῖ τὸν πατέρα ἑαυτοῦ καὶ τὴν μητέρα καὶ τὴν γυναῖκα καὶ τὰ τέκνα καὶ τοὺς ἀδελφούς καὶ τὰς ἀδελφὰς ἔτι τε καὶ τὴν ψυχὴν ἑαυτοῦ..., Luke 14:26). There is a sense of urgency and immediateness in Luke’s Gospel when the appeal is made to people to become Jesus’ disciples and to follow him. Even the opportunity to properly greet their loved ones when departing, must be waived. To the man who first wants to bury his father, Jesus says that the dead should bury their own dead (Luke 9:60) and to the person who first want to say goodbye to his family, Jesus replies that no one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God (Luke 9:61-62). His disciples are pictured to indeed have left everything immediately and to have followed him. James and John are classic examples in Matthew’s Gospel of how they left their boat and their father Zebedee whilst still being busy preparing their nets when they stop and immediately follow Jesus (Matt 4:18-22). Jesus not only expected this attitude from his followers, but he confirmed that his newly formed group of followers is his new “family”. When they told him that his mother and brothers came and are waiting to speak to him, he pointed to his disciples

and declared that his disciples are his mother and brothers (Matt 12:46-50, par. Luke 8:19-21).

Some scholars are of the opinion that the chosen solitary lifestyle of the Therapeutae formed the basis for later monasticism.⁷

Contemplative lifestyle

In the parable of the prodigal son, the younger son left his home for a far off country (Luke 15:13). But the Therapeutae did not “migrate into another city like the unfortunate or worthless slaves” (*Contempl. 2,19*). “Instead of this, they pass their days outside the walls pursuing solitude in gardens or lonely bits of country (ἀλλὰ τειχῶν ἔξω ποιοῦνται τὰς διατριβὰς ἐν κήποις ἢ μοναγρίαις ἐρημίαν μεταδιώκοντες), not from any acquired habit of misanthropical bitterness but because they know how unprofitable and mischievous are associations with persons of dissimilar character” (*Contempl. 2,20*). Kravitz (1972, 104) aptly captures the gist of this lifestyle: “They turned to mysticism and a contemplative way of life because they could not find gratification in the social and political turmoil of the times. Weary and discontented, they retired into the seclusion where they hoped to find a cure for their souls”.

Jesus often displays similar behaviour when he retreats into solitary places, such as the desert where he stayed for forty days and where he was tempted (Luke 4:1-13; Matt 4:1-11). Often he withdrew in order to pray (ἦν ὑποχωρῶν ἐν ταῖς ἐρήμοις, Luke 5:16). He went out to a solitary place at daybreak (ἔξελθὼν ἐπορεύθη εἰς ἔρημον τόπον, Luke 4:42), or to the mountain to pray and spent the whole night in prayer (Luke 6:12). He prayed in private (Luke 9:18; Matt 14:23) and took Peter, John and James with him to the mountain where he prayed and where the transfiguration took place (Luke 9:29). Once he reached Jerusalem he would preach at the temple during the day, but would go out to the Mount of Olives for the night (ἔξερχόμενος ἠυλίζετο εἰς τὸ ὄρος τὸ καλούμενον Ἐλαιῶν, Luke 21:37)—which he did likewise that fateful night of his capture when he withdrew “a stone’s throw away” (Luke 22:41) at the garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:32-42; Matt 26:36-46).

The Therapeutae existed in many places in the inhabited world, even in Greece, but “abounds in Egypt in each of the nomes as they are called

7 Cf., for instance, Daumas (1967, 347-358).

(ἐπικαλουμένων νόμων) and especially round Alexandria” (*Contempl.* 3,21). Most of them were found “above the Mareotic lake on a somewhat low-lying hill very happily placed because of its security and the pleasantly tempered air”—a place which they regarded as their “fatherland” (πατρίδα, *Contempl.* 3,22) and a term that reminds strongly of its similar use in Heb 11:14. An interesting connection is also made by Luke in Luke 4:23 between Jesus’ healing ministry (ἰατρέ, θεράπευσον) and his “fatherland” (ἐν τῇ πατρίδι σου).

The houses of the Therapeutae were exceedingly simple, providing protection against the fiery heat of the sun and the icy cold of the air. “They are neither near together as in towns, since living at close quarters is troublesome and displeasing to people who are seeking to satisfy their desire for solitude, nor yet at a great distance because of the sense of fellowship which they cherish, and to render help to each other if robbers attack them” (*Contempl.* 3,24).

The interval between early morning and evening is spent entirely in spiritual exercise (*Contempl.* 3,28). They dedicated their own life and themselves to knowledge and the contemplation of the verities of nature (*Contempl.* 8,64). During their services, they have “their eyes and hands lifted up to Heaven, eyes because they have been trained to fix their gaze on things worthy of contemplation, hands in token that they are clean from gain-taking and not defiled through any cause of the profit-making kind” (*Contempl.* 8,66-67). No wonder that, against this backdrop, the behaviour of Ananias and Sapphira in the Acts of the Apostles was completely unacceptable—having sold a piece of property and secretly keeping back part of the money under the pretension that they gave all the money to the apostles (Acts 5:1-11).

3.2 *Approach to Scripture and hermeneutics*

Studying the Scriptures and seeking wisdom

According to Josephus, the Essenes held Moses in reverence second only to God (*B.J.* 2.8.9, 145). However, in Heb 3:5 Moses is called a θεράπων—a term which is a *hapax legomenon* in the NT and which might have some commonality with the term used by Philo to describe the Therapeutae in the sense of “attendants”. The term resurfaces again later in 1 Clement (43,1) and Justin (*Dial.* 56,1). Josephus also mentions that the Essenes displayed an

extraordinary interest in the writings of the ancients (*B.J.* 2.8.6 §136). Philo’s descriptions of the Essene assembly and that of the Therapeutae do not differ much. The Therapeutae are said to have studied wisdom (πρὸς φιλοσοφίαν ὀρμαίς) (*Contempl. 2,16*). In each of their houses “there is a consecrated room which is called a sanctuary or closet (ἐν ἐκάστη δὲ ἔστιν οἴκημα ἱερον, ὃ καλεῖται σεμνεῖον καὶ μοναστήριον) and closeted in this they are initiated into the mysteries of the sanctified life (ἐν ᾧ μονούμενοι τὰ τοῦ σεμνοῦ βίου μυστήρια τελοῦνται). They take nothing into it, either drink or food or any other of the things necessary for the needs of the body, but laws and oracles delivered through the mouth of the prophets, and psalms and anything else which fosters and perfects knowledge and piety” (νόμους καὶ λόγια θεοπισθέντα δια προφητῶν καὶ ὕμνους καὶ τὰ ἄλλα οἷς ἐπιστήμη καὶ εὐσέβεια συναύξονται καὶ τελειοῦνται, *Contempl. 3,25*). They read the Holy Scriptures and sought wisdom from their ancestral philosophy by taking it as an allegory (*Contempl. 3,28*). The writings of men of old they took as a kind of archetype and imitated the method (3,29).⁸ They followed the truly sacred instructions of the prophet Moses (*Contempl. 8,64*). During the banquet of the “chief feast of the fifty”, the “President of the company” “discusses some question arising in the Holy Scriptures or solves one that has been propounded by someone else” (*Contempl. 10,76*).

In Luke’s Gospel, at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, soon after he returned from his temptations in the desert, he read from the Scroll of Isaiah in his local synagogue in Nazareth and explained to the listeners that what had been written there, applied to him and is fulfilled in him (Luke 4:16-30). Jesus again carefully explains the Scriptures to his disciples after his resurrection at the end of his ministry, indicating how these Scriptures applied to him, “beginning with Moses and all the Prophets” (Luke 24:27). He “opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures” (Luke 24:45). Scripture is again quoted and interpreted in Acts in the speeches of Peter, Paul, Stephen and James—thus being authoritative figures who are entrusted with the interpretation of Scripture (Steyn 1995, 25). Philip takes a similar role as interpreter when he explains the passage from Isaiah to the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-35). Also when the unknown author of Hebrews quotes from Scripture, he not only quotes from all three sections of

8 There is a strong case to be made that Luke used the technique of *mimesis* when he wrote his Gospel. A comparison between LXX 3 Kings 17 and Luke 7 is a particular case in point. Cf. Steyn (1997, 551-558).

the Scriptures (Torah, Prophets, Scriptures) but also places the quotations in the mouths of God, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (cf. Steyn 2009, 409). However, for this unknown author of Hebrews, the Son is definitely and clearly greater than Moses.

Philo recorded the situation regarding the Therapeutae as follows: “The exposition of the sacred Scriptures (ἐξηγήσεις τῶν ἱερῶν γραμμάτων) treats the inner meaning conveyed in allegory (δι’ ὑπονοιῶν ἐν ἀλληγορίαις). For to these people the whole law book⁹ seems to resemble a living creature with the literal ordinances, for its body and for its soul the invisible mind (ἀόρατον νοῦν) laid up in its wording. It is in this mind especially that the rational soul begins to contemplate the things akin to itself and looking through the words as through a mirror (ὡσπερ διὰ κατόπτρου) beholds the marvellous beauties of the concepts, unfolds and removes the symbolic coverings (τὰ μὲν σύμβολα διαπτύξασα καὶ διακαλύψασα) and brings forth the thoughts and sets them bare to the light of day for those who need but a little reminding to enable them to discern the inward and hidden through the outward and visible” (ἐκ μικρᾶς ὑπομνήσεως τὰ ἀφανῆ διὰ τῶν φανερῶν θεωρεῖν) (*Contempl.* 10,78).

The sense of a deeper meaning contained in the written texts, as perceived by early Christians, can be seen clearly in the New Testament writers’ understanding of Scripture. In Gal 4:22-26, Paul makes use of allegory when he compares the two women of Abraham as symbols (allegories, ἐστὶν ἀλληγορούμενα, v.24) of two covenants. In 1 Cor 13:12 Paul also uses the image of the mirror in which they see a reflection (δι’ ἐσόπτρου ἐν αἰνίγματι), but they would one day see from face to face. According to Luke, Jesus praised his Father as he has ‘hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children’ (Luke 10:21, par. Matt 11:25). The fulfillment citations in Matthew and Luke’s manner of using and interpreting Scripture, resembles a similar hermeneutic.

3.3 *Worship*

Style of the sermons

In the communities of Therapeutae, on the Sabbath, a senior member delivered a “well-reasoned and wise discourse after which followed a

9 Philo of Alexandria quotes 1 161 times from Scripture of which only 41 quotations are not from the Pentateuch. See Burkhardt (1988, 134).

careful examination by careful expression of the exact meaning of the meanings”. “He does this with visage and voice alike quiet and composed. He does not make an exhibition of clever rhetoric like the orators or sophists of today”, writes Philo, “but follows careful examination by careful expression of the exact meaning of the thoughts, and this does not lodge just outside the ears of the audience but passes through the hearing into the soul and stays there securely” (*Contempl.* 3,31). A similar thought is found in Heb 4:12: “The word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword; it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.”

In rendering his speech during the “chief feast of the fifty” (ἔστι δὲ προέορτος μεγίστης ἑορτῆς, ἣν πεντηκοντὰς ἔλαχεν, *Contempl.* 8,65), the “President” (ὁ πρόεδρος, *Contempl.* 10,75) of the Therapeutae “has no thought of making a display, for he has no ambition to get a reputation for clever oratory but desires to gain a closer insight into some particular matters and having gained it not to withhold it selfishly from those who if not so clear-sighted as he have at least a similar desire to learn. His instruction proceeds in a leisurely manner; he lingers over it and spins it out with repetitions, thus permanently imprinting the thoughts in the souls of the hearers, since if the speaker goes on descanting with breathless rapidity the mind of the hearers is unable to follow his language, loses ground and fails to arrive at apprehension of what is said” (*Contempl.* 10,76).

Turning to the NT, in Peter’s speech in Acts 2, he states that he “should explain to those bystanders what happened” (v.14). He does so by quoting two lengthy passages from Scripture, one from Joel 2:28-32 and another from Ps 16:8-11.¹⁰ After quoting the first, he puts the events of Jesus’ life and death into perspective. After the second, he indicates how this applies to Jesus because David died and was buried, but Christ raised from death. The same trend is found elsewhere in Acts in the speeches of Stephen, Peter and James, as well as in Hebrews—a trend already to be found with Jesus’ sermon in the synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4:16-27). It is in this sermon in Nazareth where Jesus used the phrase: “Healer, heal yourself” (Luke 4:23).

10 For an exposition of these quotations, see G.J. Steyn, *Septuagint Quotations*, 64-128.

Attentive listening

The audience sat still on the gathering of the Sabbath, according to seniority, their hands inside their robes—their right hand between their breast and chin and the left hand withdrawn along the flank (*Contempl.* 3,30) and listened, showing approval by their looks and nods (*Contempl.* 3,31).

The audience at the “chief feast of the fifty” listened attentively, “with ears pricked up and eyes fixed on the speaker” (τὰ ὄτια καὶ τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς ἀνατετακότες, *Contempl.* 10:77)—as happened in Nazareth with Jesus’ sermon according to Luke when “the eyes of all those in the synagogue were fixed on him” (καὶ πάντων οἱ ὀφθαλμοὶ ἐν τῇ συναγωγῇ ἦσαν ἀτενίζοντες αὐτῷ, Luke 4:20). In listening, the Therapeutae were “always exactly in the same posture, signifying comprehension and understanding by nods and glances (cf. also *Contempl.* 3,31), praise of the speaker by the cheerful change of expression which steals over the face, difficulty by a gentler movement of the head and by pointing with a finger-tip of the right hand” (*Contempl.* 10,77). Universal applause arose after the speaker effectively carried out his aims in his discourse (*Contempl.* 10,79).

After Jesus read from the scroll of Isaiah and after his first opening line, Luke mentions that, “all spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips” (Luke 4:22). Similar positive reactions follow after Peter’s speech when the people who heard this “were cut to the heart” (Acts 2:37) and when those who attended Paul’s sermon in Antioch, asked him to tell them more about these things on the following Sabbath (Luke 13:42).

Composed hymns and psalms

A typical characteristic of the Therapeutae was that they composed hymns and psalms to God in all sorts of metres and melodies (*Contempl.* 3,29). Philo calls all Psalms “hymns”.¹¹ After his speech on the “high feast of the fifty”, the President “rises and sings a hymn composed as an address to God, either a new one of his own composition or an old one by poets of an earlier day who have left behind them, hymns in many measures and melodies, hexameters and iambs, lyrics suitable for processions or in libations and at the altars, or for the chorus whilst standing or dancing, with careful metrical

11 So also M. Hengel (1994, 254): “...bei Philo selbst ist ὕμνοι Bezeichnung für die kanonischen Psalmen”.

arrangements to fit the various evolutions. After him all the others take their turn as they are arranged and in the proper order while all the rest listen in complete silence except when they have to chant the closing lines or refrains, for then they all lift up their voices, men and women alike” (*Contempl. 10,80*).

“After the supper” during the occasion of the “high feast of the fifty”, they hold the sacred vigil which is conducted in the following way. They rise up all together and standing in the middle of the refectory, form themselves first into two choirs, one of men and one of women, the leader and presenter chosen for each being the most honoured amongst them and also the most musical. Then they sing hymns to God composed of many measures and set to many melodies, sometimes chanting together, sometimes taking up the harmony antiphonally, hands and feet keeping time in accompaniment, and rapt with enthusiasm reproduce sometimes the lyrics of the procession, sometimes of the halt and of the wheeling and counter-wheeling of a choric dance. Then when each choir has separately done its own part in the feast, having drunk as in the Bacchic rites of the strong wine of God’s love they mix and both together become a single choir...” (*Contempl. 10,83-84*).

It was on the model of choirs led by Moses and Miriam “that the choir of the Therapeutae of either gender, note in response to note and voice to voice, the treble of the women blending with the bass of the men, create an harmonious consent, music in the truest sense. Lovely are the thoughts, lovely the words and worthy of reverence the choristers alike is piety” (*Contempl. 10,88-89*).

The presence of hymns, sometimes newly composed by their writers, surfaces a few times in the NT. Luke’s composition of new hymns as found in the *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-55), the *Benedictus* (Luke 1:68-79) and *Nunc Dimittis* (Luke 2:29-32) follows a similar point of departure. The same applies to “the Ode of Moses, which is the Ode of the Lamb” in Rev 15:3-4—but being a new composition there. Also 1 Cor 14:26 might refer to a new composition of a “psalm” by a gifted member of the community. The traces of other early Christian hymns, such as that of Phil 2:5-11, or Jewish hymns such as other occurrences of the Song of Moses (Heb 1:6 and 10:30), or—what is either the traces of a possible existing “Melchizedek hymn” (Heb 7:1-3) or a new composition by Hebrews—are probably all indications of similar practices amongst early Christians.

According to Porter and Evans (2000), “Philo’s detailed description of an evening gathering of the Therapeutae is often considered an indication of musical practices in religious gatherings of the time of the NT and is thought to shed light on early Christian gatherings”.

Role of prayers

The Therapeutae prayed twice every day, at dawn and at eventide (*Contempl.* 3,27). At the beginning of the chief feast of the fifty, they prayed to God that their feasting may be acceptable and proceed as He would have it (*Contempl.* 8,66). Prayers occupy a prominent place in particularly Luke’s Gospel and in Acts. The disciples ask only in Luke’s Gospel that Jesus should teach them how to pray (Luke 11:1). He teaches his disciples the “our Father” (Luke 11:2-4; Matt 6:9-13) and also prays for them in John 17. Most of the time when Jesus withdraws he does so in order to pray. It is within this custom that the apostles continue their own ministry. It was one afternoon at the time of prayer as Peter and John were on their way to the temple that they encountered the lame man on the steps in front of the temple (Acts 3:1-2). The role that the Jewish *shemah* still played in the early Christian tradition becomes clear in the number of places where it is quoted—such as in the Epistle of James, where prayer is one of the topics being dealt with (Jas 5:13-18). The instruction on prayer is also addressed in 1 Tim 2:1-8.

During the final stages of their “high feast of the fifty”, they sung hymns and “continue till dawn, drunk with this drunkenness in which there is no shame (μεθυσθέντες ... τὴν καλὴν ταύτην μέθην), then not with heavy heads or drowsy eyes but more alert and wakeful than when they came to the banquet, they stand with their faces and whole body turned to the east and when they see the sun rising they stretch their hands up to the heaven and pray for bright days and knowledge of the truth and the power of keen sighted thinking. And after the prayers they depart each to his private sanctuary once more to ply the trade and till the field of their wonted philosophy” (*Contempl.* 10,88-89).

The motif of alertness and being awake during Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane is striking against this background (Mark 14:37-41; Matt 26:40-46—three times; Luke 22:45-46). In Luke’s description of the events at Pentecost, some people thought that the apostles were drunk (μεμεστῶμένοι εἰσίν, Acts 2:13), but Peter tells them that they are not drunk

(οὐ γὰρ ... μεθύουσιν), explaining the situation with the quotation from Joel which deals with the coming of the Spirit upon the people (Acts 2:15).

Importance of the Sabbath

The Therapeutae revered the number seven (*Contempl.* 8,65). For six days they “seek wisdom” (φιλοσοφοῦσι). The seventh day they had a general assembly. They gathered and sat according to their age (*Contempl.* 3,30). The seventh day was considered sacred and festal in the highest degree. They refreshed the body and released the cattle from their continuous labour (*Contempl.* 4,36). Jesus and Paul’s connection with the synogogue as the place from where they conducted their ministry is particularly striking in Luke and Acts. Jesus’ ministry in Luke begins here—“as was his habit to attend” (Luke 4:16) and it is on the Sabbaths that he teaches from the synagogues (Luke 4:31; 6:6; 13:10), exorcises evil spirits (Luke 4:33) and heals the sick (Luke 6:6, 9). But he also walks on the Sabbath through the fields (Luke 6:1). The Lukan Paul follows the same strategy in Acts, starting his ministry at the local synagogues on the Sabbath (Acts 13:14b; 14:1; 16:13).

The “Chief Feast of the Fifty”: “Pentecost”

The Therapeutae also revered the square of seven, “since they know its chastity and perpetual virginity”. The importance of the number seven probably found its way via the seven Persian beings in the presence of the central godhead, Mazda, into early Jewish apocalypticism and from there into early Christian apocalypticism. Apart from its symbolic role in Revelation, it is also found at places such as Heb 1 where seven quotations are presented to indicate the Son’s different status in comparison to that of the angels.

But much more important to the Therapeutae was the number fifty—“the most sacred of numbers and the most deeply rooted in nature, being formed from the square of the right-angled triangle which is the source from which the universe springs” (*Contempl.* 8,67). They assembled on the eve of the fiftieth day during which they observed an all-night festival, with a sermon, hymn singing, and a meal, followed by a sacred vigil. Then they “assembled, white-robed (cf. Rev 3:18) and with faces in which cheerfulness is combined with the utmost seriousness, but before they recline, at a signal

from a member of the Rota (τινος τῶν ἐφημερευτῶν),¹² which is the name commonly given to those who perform these services, they take their stand in a regular line in an orderly way, their eyes and hands lifted up to Heaven (cf. 1 Tim 2:8: “I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer”): their eyes because they have been trained to fix their gaze on things worthy of contemplation (cf. Luke 11:34-36 and Matt 6:22-23 on the eye as the lamp of the body. “If the eye is good, then the whole body will have light”). Their hands as a token that they are clean from gain-taking and not defiled through any cause of the profit-making kind. So standing they pray to God that their feasting may be acceptable and proceed as He would have it. After the prayers the seniors recline according to the order of their admission (*Contempl.* 8,66-67). Men sat on the right and women on the left. They sat on “plank beds of common wood, covered with quite cheap strewings of native papyrus, raised slightly at the arms to give something to lean on” (*Contempl.* 9,69).

Is there probably a connection here between the chief feast of the fifty and with the Pentecost event that also took place on the fiftieth day after Easter as described by Luke in Acts 2?¹³ Furthermore, when looking at the book of Hebrews, Markus Barth (1962, 71-72) drew attention to the fact that “If the ‘Hebrews’ addressed in this epistle (*sic!*, *GJS*) were (in part) Qumranites or a group similar to these sectarians, or if they behaved like Paul, who (according to Acts) even as a Christian took pains to participate in the temple festivals, then imitations concerning the relationship between Jesus Christ’s person and work, on the one hand, and central features of Jewish festivals, on the other hand, do not look artificial or superfluous”.

3.4 Social structure

Position on age and seniority

Seniority was not connected with chronological age. “By senior they did not understand the aged and grey headed who are regarded as still mere *children* if they have only in late years come to love this rule of life, but those who

12 According to F.H. Colson (1965, 153), “the word in itself merely suggests duties performed in rotation”.

13 Against J.E.H. Thomson (cf. 1930, 997-1005), who stated that “The feast of the 50th day has no parallel in Christianity”.

from their earliest years have grown to manhood and spent their prime in pursuing the contemplative branch of philosophy, which indeed is the noblest and most god-like part” (*Contempl. 8,67*).

Jesus calls his disciples “children” (Mark 10:24; John 13:33). So also does the author of 1 John with regard to the believers to whom he writes (1 John 2:1, 12, 14, 18, 28 etc) Timothy is called “my own child in faith” (1 Tim 1:2) and “child” (1 Tim 1:18) by the author of this late first century AD letter, and being told that nobody should look down upon him because he is young (1 Tim 4:12). Those who are still babies or young in the faith, are encouraged to grow up or move on (1 Pet 2:2; Heb 6:1).

Position of women

Women in Egypt enjoyed legal and economic rights that were not common elsewhere (cf. McDonald 1998, 166). It is thus not strange that women would have in general a better place in religious groupings, such as within the group of Therapeutae. The seventh day sanctuary consisted of a double enclosure—one for men and the other for women. Women too could join the movement having the same ardour and the same sense of their calling (*Contempl. 3,32*). The chief feast of the fifty was also shared by women, “most of them aged virgins, who have kept their chastity not under compulsion, like some of the Greek priestesses, but of their own free will in their ardent yearning for wisdom (διὰ ζῆλον καὶ πόθον σοφίας). Eager to have her for their life mate they have spurned the pleasures of the body and desire no mortal offspring but those immortal children which only the soul that is dear to God can bring to the earth unaided because the Father has sown in her spiritual rays enabling her to behold the verities of wisdom” (θεωρεῖν τὰ σοφίας δόγματα, *Contempl. 8,68*). Szesnat, however, questions the issue whether the Therapeutrides were positively valued by Philo. Contrary to what is usually assumed, he argues “that the reality of the presence of women at the Mareotic Lake forced Philo to find a positive role for them in the form of ascribing the status of the permanent virgins to them: they are a *concession*, not the ideal” (Szesnat 1998, 198).

The Lukan literature allocates a very special place to women alongside that of men. Whereas the angel appears to Joseph in a dream during the annunciation in Matthew, it is Mary in Luke’s Gospel who receives this message (Luke 1:26). Alongside Zachariah is also Elizabeth (Luke 1:5), alongside Simeon is also Anna (Luke 2:25-38), alongside Aquila is also

Priscilla (Acts 18:2). A unique reference is made regarding the role of the women in looking after Jesus (Luke 8:1-3). It is also the women who are the witnesses of the empty tomb and the appearances of Jesus.

Position on slavery

The Therapeutae did not have any slave “to wait upon them as they considered that the ownership of servants is entirely against nature. For nature has borne all men to be free, but the wrongful and covetous acts of some who pursued that source of evil, inequality, have imposed their yoke and invested the stronger with power over the weaker” (*Contempl.* 9,70).

Paul writes in Gal 3:26-28: “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”. About Onesimus, Paul writes to Philemon (vv.15-16): “Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good—no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord”.

Role of attendants (deacons)

The services at the feast of the fifty “are rendered by free men who perform their tasks as attendants not under compulsion nor yet waiting for orders, but with deliberate goodwill anticipating eagerly and zealously the demands that may be made” (*Contempl.* 9,71). Not just any free men were appointed to these positions, but young members of the association. They were chosen ‘with all care for their special merit who as becomes their good character and nobility are pressing on to reach the summit of virtue. They give their services gladly and proudly like sons to their real fathers and mothers, judging them to be the parents of them all in common, in a closer affinity than that of blood, since to the right minded there is no closer tie than noble living. And they came in to do their office ungirt and with tunics hanging down, that in their appearance there may be no shadow of anything to suggest the slave” (*Contempl.* 9,72). The attendants (τοὺς διακόνους) took their stand at the banquet with everything in order ready for their ministry (*Contempl.* 10,75).

Luke writes about the election of the first seven deacons (ἐν τῇ διακονίᾳ)—“who are full of the Spirit and wisdom” (πλήρεις πνεύματος καὶ

σοφίας, Acts 6:3) in order to assist with the distribution of the daily food to the widows of the Greek speaking Jews (Acts 6:1). The qualities required from the early Christian deacons (διακόνου) are described later in 1 Tim 3:8-13.

3.5 *Orientation and lifestyle*

Food and drink

Philo pictures the Therapeutae in a way that self-control was seen as the foundation of the soul. They had no food or drink during the day. They did “philosophy in the light” and attended to the “needs of the body in the darkness” (cf. the motif of the light and darkness in John’s Gospel as well as in the Dead Sea Scrolls). Some only remembered after three days to take food! Others hold out for twice the time and only ate after six days.

When Jesus spent the “forty days” in the desert, he also did not eat anything (Luke 4:2). Being tempted then by the devil to transform the stones into bread, he replied with a quotation from Deut 8:3 that “man will not live from bread alone” (Luke 4:4).

According to Philo, the Therapeutae were “like the grasshoppers who are said to live on air because”, in Philo’s opinion, “their singing makes their lack of food a light matter” (*Contempl.* 4,34-35). They ate “nothing costly, only common bread with salt for a relish flavoured further by the dainter with hyssop, and their drink was spring water”. They ate “enough to kept them from hunger and drank enough to kept them from thirst, but abhor surfeiting as a malignant enemy both to soul and body” (*Contempl.* 4,37). There was a cheerfulness of their convivial meals (*Contempl.* 5,40).

The people approached Jesus and compared the behaviour of Jesus’ disciples with that of the disciples of John and of the Pharisees. They pointed out that those disciples are fasting often and that they maintain regular prayer times, whereas Jesus’ disciples “go on eating and drinking” (Luke 5:33). According to Matthew’s version, it is John’s disciples who came and asked Jesus why they and the Pharisees are fasting, but not Jesus’ disciples (Matt 9:14). Jesus later compared himself with John the Baptist, saying: “John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘he has a demon.’ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Here is a glutton and a drunkard...’” (Matt 11:18-19). However, Jesus also cautioned them not “to worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body,

what you will wear. Life is more than food, and the body more than clothes” (Luke 12:22-23; Matt 6:25). Typical to the nature of the Sermon on the Mount, it is not so much the fact of fasting that concerns Jesus, but the attitude: “When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting” (Matt 6:16).

The tables of the Therapeutae that were brought in with the truly purified meal, consisting of leavened bread seasoned with salt mixed with hyssop, reminded them of the “holy table enshrined in the vestibule of the temple on which lie the loaves and salt unmixed. For it was meet that the simplest and purest food should be assigned to the highest caste, namely the priests, as a reward for their ministry, and that the others while aspiring to similar privileges should abstain from seeking the same as they and allow their superiors to retain their precedence” (*Contempl.* 10,81-82).

The salt-motif is used in the New Testament as a metaphor for being good and having peace with each other (Mark 9:50, par. Matt 5:13; Luke 14:34-35).

Abstinence from wine and meat

No wine is served during meals or the “fifty days” banquet amongst the Therapeutae. They used only “water of the brightest and clearest, cold for most of the guests (cf. Matt 10:42) but warm for such of the older men as live delicately. The table too is kept pure from the flesh of animals;¹⁴ the food laid on it is loaves of bread with salt as a seasoning, sometimes also flavoured with hyssop as a relish for the dainter appetites. Abstinence from wine is enjoyed by right reason as for the priest when sacrificing, so to these for their lifetime. For wine acts like a drug producing folly, and costly dishes stir up that most insatiable of animals, desire” (*Contempl.* 9,73-74).

The Gospels’ picture of early Christianity differ from that of Philo’s Therapeutae on the issue of abstinence from wine and meat—except for Luke’s statement that John the Baptist would not “take wine or any other fermented drink” (Luke 1:15).

14 On vegetarianism amongst the Therapeutae and Early Christianity, cf. Beckwith (1988, 407-410).

The two forms of shelter

Housing and clothes were seen as “two forms of shelter” by Philo. He described the housing of the Therapeutae to be “unembellished, a makeshift constructed for utility only”. Jesus is even worse off. He states that the “foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head” (Matt 8:20). The clothing of the Therapeutae was “inexpensive (cf. Matt 11:8: “What did you go out into the desert to see? A man dressed in fine clothes?”). It consisted of a thick coat of shaggy skin in winter (cf. John the Baptist, Mark 1:6; Matt 3:4) and in summer a vest or linen shirt” (*Contempl.* 4,38).

5. Conclusion

Within the framework of intertextuality, a comparison between aspects of the community of Philo’s Therapeutae in his *De Vita Contemplativa* and the beginnings of early Christianity, we are led to a few conclusions:

1. There are striking intertextual similarities between both groups at a number of points, particularly regarding the depiction of Jesus’ lifestyle, the beginnings of the church within the NT literature in aspects relating to social structure, style of worship and the importance of interpreting Scripture. Not all of these were, of course, unique only to the Therapeutae and can be found to a greater or lesser extent in other Jewish groups too. However, theoretically at least, it can be assumed that most likely a number of early Christians were converts from the Therapeutae too, who also carried some of the same sentiments, practices and philosophies into their new religion.¹⁵
2. The socio-historical value of *De Vita Contemplativa* is of importance for a better understanding of the underlying ideological and philosophical undertones in the Greek speaking Jewish world during the beginnings of the Jesus-movement.
3. Although Luke particularly portrays Jesus very similar to those characteristics of the Therapeutae in Philo’s description, it is clear that there are also a number of differences—such as their viewpoint on fasting and abstinence of meat and wine, or the daily regular gatherings instead of individual reflection.

¹⁵ An interesting perspective, yet unconvincing, is that of C.J. Allen (1972, 8).

4. A more thorough and careful comparison between the *Vita Contemplativa* and a number of individual books in the NT *corpus* within the context and theology of each book and on different aspects ought to be conducted in future research.

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