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“All One in Christ Jesus:” Physical and Moral Equality in Galatians 3:28

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In the midst of Paul's scathing rebuke of the churches in Galatia comes what many have interpreted as the quintessential Christian slogan of egalitarianism. As Galatians 3:28 reads in the NRSV: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”¹ This verse has been especially useful for modern scholars interested in evidence of socio-political equality in Paul's letters. While I share the socio-political values reflected in such interpretations, I believe these readings are shaped more by their authors' modern political values and not by the type of equality that Paul was writing about. Instead, I argue that Galatians 3:28 is better understood in the broader context of Hellenistic moral philosophy. Using this as our starting point for analyzing Paul's argument in Galatians suggests an alternative reading, namely that Paul is claiming an equality among all human beings for a capacity to live virtuously, a capacity that comes from the interpenetration of the self with the divine *pneuma* which comes as a result of baptism. Such moral equality does not require a call for complete political and social equality, an end to slavery, or a mystical transcendence of gendered bodies; it just means that everyone who is baptized into Christ, regardless of their position in society, is capable of living virtuously.

The competitive aspect of Paul's letter to the Galatians has to do with whether or not gentile men need to be circumcised in order to be incorporated into God's saved people. Without rehashing all the literature on Galatians and the situation that led to this letter from Paul, I accept the basic claim that Paul is arguing that gentiles do not need to follow the Jewish law in order to be incorporated into Israel, and that baptism is sufficient for them.² The competition is not in question here, but the relevance of this particular line to the overall argument that Paul is making about baptism, gentiles, and the irrelevance of the Jewish law. Wayne Meeks influentially

¹ Gal 3:28. Although we cannot be certain that Paul really authored this letter, or that it was ever actually sent to any Galatian communities, none of that matters for my argument regarding how this verse might have been understood in a first-century context. I will proceed as though I accept that Paul authored the letter and that it was in response to an actual situation going on in Galatian *ekklesiai*, but if I am wrong about either of those points, my argument still stands.

²² For a good discussion, see Mark D. Nanos *The Irony of Galatians: Paul's Letter in First-Century Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002).

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argued that in Galatians 3:28 Paul is quoting a baptismal formula that predated Paul's letter to the Galatians and perhaps even Paul's conversion.³ This assertion has proven to be hugely influential; we see it repeated by the likes of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Hans Dieter Betz, Sheila Briggs, Daniel Boyarin, Gerald Downing, and Elizabeth Castelli, not to mention in the footnotes of *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* and, though less forcefully, in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*.⁴ Meeks based his argument on the irrelevance of social status and gender to Paul's primary interest in Galatians in the relationship between Jews and Gentiles. From this perspective, Gal 3:28 is both indicative of the early Christian movement as a whole and also is disconnected from the rest of the argument in Galatians. Troy Martin disagrees with the claim that the other categories are irrelevant, arguing that, while baptismal formulas varied in their verbiage, in fact *because* they could, there would be no reason for Paul to include pairings that did not fit his overall goal in the letter.⁵ For this particular letter, Paul chose to reference these three categories, he argues, because they all relate to people who could be circumcised, a ritual of inclusion and identification that was at the center of the controversy in the Galatian churches. Martin thus sees Gal 3:28 as being a sensible thing for Paul to say. As others have, Esau McCauley rejects the claim that this is a baptismal formula altogether on the grounds that such claims “maintain that Paul makes a radical statement of equality that few passages of the New Testament can rival, but does so by means of a baptismal liturgy that was widespread in early Christianity. It was either radical or commonplace. It cannot be both.”⁶ There is simply no evidence that Gal 3:28, or similar passages in 1 Cor 12:13 and Col 3:11, were

³ Wayne A. Meeks, “The Myth of the Androgyne: Some Uses of a Symbol in Earliest Christianity,” *HTR* 13 (1974): 165-208. Meeks bases this argument largely on the disconnect he sees between 3:28, especially the inclusion of “male and female”, and the content of the rest of the letter.

⁴ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, Tenth Anniversary Edition (New York: Crossroads, 1994), 208; Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Churches in Galatia*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 181; Sheila Briggs, “Galatians,” in *Searching the Scriptures, Vol. 2*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroads, 1994), 218; Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity*, *Contraventions: Critical Studies in Jewish Literature, Culture, and Society* 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 5; F. Gerald Downing, *Cynics, Paul and the Pauline Churches*, *Cynics and Christian Origins* 2 (London: Routledge, 1998), 11-12; Elizabeth Castelli, “Paul on Women and Gender,” in *Women & Christian Origins*, ed. Ross Shepard Kraemer and Mary Rose D'Angelo (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 230.

⁵ Troy W. Martin, “The Covenant of Circumcision (Genesis 17:9-14) and the Situational Antitheses in Galatians 3:28,” *JBL* 122:1 (2003): 111-125, 113. Pauline Nigh Hogan, “No Longer Male and Female”: *Interpreting Galatians 3:28 in Early Christianity*, *Library of New Testament Studies* 380 (London: T&T Clark), 2008, 194, also notes that the earliest extant liturgies from the fourth century, while varying in wording, are not at all similar to the pairings in Gal 3:28.

⁶ Esau McCauley, *Sharing in the Son's Inheritance: Davidic Messianism and Paul's Worldwide Interpretation of the Abrahamic Land Promise in Galatians*, *Library of New Testament Studies* 608 (London: T&T Clark, 2019).

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baptismal formulae. It is related to the ritual in terms of the purported efficacy of baptism, but that does not mean that it was a formula.

Whether scholars have accepted Meeks' identification of Gal 3:28 as a baptismal formula or not, most have seen some sort of political egalitarianism in it. It has often been the case that scholars have divided Gal 3:28 in order to focus on whatever form of political equality they are most interested in.⁷ It has, of course, been a key verse for feminist scholars of early Christianity.⁸ Sheilla Briggs, for example, calls Gal 3:28 "the clearest statement of women's equality to be found in the Christian scriptures."⁹ Key to this reading is the notion that 3:28 somehow abolishes these social categories.¹⁰ Schussler-Fiorenza's influential reading suggests that 3:28 does not erase genders, but gendered relationships, specifically that of "patriarchal marriage - and sexual relationships between male and female" as no longer being "constitutive of the new community in Christ."¹¹ Of course, not everyone has read Paul so optimistically. Dennis MacDonald perhaps puts it most bluntly: "Paul was no feminist," and points to the omission of the gender pairing in a similar passage in 1 Corinthians to suggest that gender may have been the *least* important category for Paul.¹² Isolating just one category may advance contemporary arguments about equality among men and women or people of different races *today*, but it does not help us understand 3:28 in the context in which it was written.

Of course, not all scholars isolate a third of the passage to focus on just one type of equality. Most often, scholars looking at all three categories consider 3:28 to be an assertion about the abolition of social differences in some sort of egalitarian community. David Aune, for example, focuses "on the evidence for the theoretical and practical conceptions of *equality* in early Christianity, with emphasis on equality in the three areas of nationality, social status and gender, under the assumption that

⁷ Karin B. Neutel, *A Cosmopolitan Ideal: Paul's Declaration 'Neither Jew Nor Greek, Neither Slave Nor Free, Nor Male and Female' in the Context of First-Century Thought* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 5.

⁸ Hogan ("No Longer Male and Female," 7-8), notes that this development began in 1958 with Krister Stendahl's article which led to a "flurry of discussion about the egalitarian potential in Gal. 3:28."

⁹ Briggs, "Galatians," 218.

¹⁰ Meeks ("The Myth of the Androgyne"), for example, claims that 3:28 is a speech-act that creates the reality it describes. Betz (*Galatians*, 189) likewise states that 3:28 abolishes these statuses and makes these statements "not as utopian ideals or as ethical demands, but as accomplished facts."

¹¹ Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 211. Neutel, *A Cosmopolitan Ideal*, also follows Schüssler Fiorenza's lead even though she interprets it in a very different context of Greek philosophical utopianism.

¹² Dennis Ronald MacDonald, *There is No Male and Female: The Fate of a Dominical Saying in Paul and Gnosticism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 130. The passage is 1 Cor 12:13.

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equality is a basic constituent of human rights everywhere.”¹³ Accordingly, Gal 3:28 abolishes these inequalities, not ontologically, as Wayne Meeks might have us believe in suggesting that Paul is referencing a return to a primal androgyne, but at least in terms of social hierarchies.¹⁴ Aune's claim that Gal 3:28 abolishes these inequalities, though, raises the important question of whether anyone in antiquity conceptualized political equality the way many do today. Some scholars, at least, do not see Paul in such an anachronistic perspective, and point to evidence in other passages accepted as authentically Pauline in which there is a clear example of his acceptance of social hierarchies as proof that he had no such political goals in mind.¹⁵

More convincing arguments have been made about Paul claiming here that salvation is open to all people.¹⁶ Rodrigo Morales, for example, links Paul's focus on the spirit in Galatians with Jewish eschatological beliefs about the inclusion of Gentiles into God's chosen people before the final judgment.¹⁷ Gal 3:28 is thus a summative statement about the acceptance of everyone into a saved Israel. Troy Martin likewise argues that Paul is only talking about inclusion and not at all about social or political equality. In his view, Paul chooses these three pairings - ethnicity, social status, and gender - because they are representative of groups that would not be able to participate in the covenant through the traditional ritual of circumcision—that was something only available to male Jews.¹⁸ The replacement of circumcision with baptism opens up the possibility of inclusion to all people.¹⁹ Karin Neutel also sees Paul as talking about inclusion, but within the context of Greek philosophical utopian literature.²⁰ As Neutel says, “The main characteristic of ancient cosmopolitanism, which was popular especially among Stoics and Cynics, was the notion that all humans share in reason.”²¹ The inclusion of people regardless of the ethnicity, social status, and gender is surely

¹³ Aune, “Galatians 3:28 and the Problem of Equality in the Church and Society,” in *From Judaism to Christianity: Tradition and Transition: A Festschrift for Thomas H. Tobin, S.J., on the Occasion of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, ed. Patricia Walters, Novum Testamentum Supplements (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 162.

¹⁴ Aune, “Galatians 3:28,” 162. See also, Boyarin, *A Radical Jew*, 8-99; Downing, *Cynics, Paul and the Pauline Churches*, 18-19; and Hogan, “No Longer Male and Female,” 27.

¹⁵ J. Albert Harrill, “Paul and Slavery,” in *Paul in the Greco-Roman World: A Handbook*, ed. J. Paul Sampley (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003), 598; Craig L. Blomberg, “Neither Hierarchicalist nor Egalitarian: Gender Roles in Paul,” in *Paul and His Theology*, ed. Stanley E. Porter (Boston: Brill, 2006), 294, 324-326; Martin, “The Covenant of Circumcision,” 124.

¹⁶ See for example Pheme Perkins, *Abraham's Divided Children: Galatians and the Politics of Faith*, *The New Testament in Context* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001), 76; Hogan, “No Longer Male and Female,” 27; Neutel, *A Cosmopolitan Ideal*; Martin, “The Covenant of Circumcision.”

¹⁷ Rodrigo J. Morales, *The Spirit and the Restoration: New Exodus and New Creation Motifs in Galatians*, *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2, Reihe 282* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010).

¹⁸ Martin, “The Covenant of Circumcision,” 121.

¹⁹ Martin, “The Covenant of Circumcision,” 121-122.

²⁰ Neutel, *A Cosmopolitan Ideal*.

²¹ Neutel, *A Cosmopolitan Ideal*, 163.

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significant for understanding Paul, and Gal 3:28 in particular, but inclusion is not enough to understand why Paul uses this phrase here in the letter - in the midst of a discussion about Abraham's offspring, education, adoption, and coming of age.

Neutel's point about Stoic and Cynic cosmopolitanism being based on the belief that everyone was capable of reason, and thus of living virtuously, is more important for understanding Paul's use of these anthropological binaries. In order to see how such a list might be used to make arguments about what people are capable of in terms of virtue, we can turn to Paul's contemporary Seneca the Younger and his *De Consolatione ad Marciam*. Written around 40 C.E., *De Consolatione* is Seneca's appeal to Marcia to stop mourning the death of her son Metilius, who had died some three years earlier. Grieving for a lost child, he says, is acceptable, but excessive grief, which results from false opinions, is not acceptable. Seneca begins his appeal by claiming that he would not bother to try to correct her if he did not know that she was "as far removed from womanish weakness of mind as from all other vices."²² The gendered descriptions of vices and virtues was common in Greek philosophy, so this alone is not helpful. However, when Seneca argues that extended grief is unnatural he makes distinctions among how human beings differ in their grieving - and these differences are meant to show us that it is not inherently natural for humans to grieve excessively.

Moreover, in order that you may know that it is not by the will of Nature that we are crushed by sorrow, observe, in the first place, that, though they suffer the same bereavement, women are wounded more deeply than men, savage people more deeply than the peaceful and civilized, the uneducated, than the educated. But the passions that derive their power from Nature maintain the same hold upon all; therefore it is clear that a passion of variable power is not ordered by Nature.²³

Seneca uses these categories to argue that succumbing to emotion is not natural for anyone even if women, barbarians, and the uneducated are all known to be less rational in general. Such stereotypes were pervasive in antiquity, sometimes based on beliefs about the inherent nature of different groups of people and at other times recognized as something accidental to these groups.²⁴ Musonius Rufus, a Stoic philosopher and near contemporary of Seneca, also acknowledged these differences, but, like Seneca, he also did not see them as inherent characteristics. According to Musonius, women

²² Seneca, *De Consolatione ad Marciam*, 1.

²³ Seneca, *De Consolatione ad Marciam*, 24.

²⁴ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1252a-1255b, famously claims that such differences are natural.

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are just as capable of achieving self-mastery as men given the proper philosophical training.²⁵

The suggestion that Paul might be understood as using anthropological binaries in a way similar to Seneca is dependent on a rich body of scholarship that reads Paul in light of Hellenistic philosophy, especially contemporary Platonism, Stoicism, and Cynicism. Stanley Stowers makes a point that is particularly relevant to my reading of Gal 3:28 as an expression of who is capable of self-mastery. In his article, “Does Pauline Christianity Resemble a Hellenistic Philosophy?” Stowers asserts:

Paul’s basic teaching began with the call to turn from idols to a true God and included the idea that worship of the false gods entailed bondage to passions and desire...Turning to the true God meant a dramatic reorientation and mastery of passions and desire, but also a continuing struggle for self-mastery.²⁶

Emma Wasserman similarly focuses on self-mastery, specifically in the contexts of baptism. Though based on her reading of Romans, Wasserman’s analysis is helpful for understanding Gal 3:28 and its connection to baptism. “Rom. 6.1-11,” she says, “construes baptism as an analogy for a moral-psychological transformation brought about by God’s work in Christ, and 6.12-23 explains how the transformation restores the capacity for self-mastery, obedience to God, and acquittal at the coming judgment.”²⁷ These studies suggest that not only does Paul have a philosophically-informed interest in moral psychology, but also that it is tied to baptism, which is central to Paul’s argument in his letter to the Galatians.

In order to understand why Paul would link baptism with self-control one must understand the Stoic teachings about the *pneuma*, which seem to be analogous to Paul’s teachings. There is a *pneuma* that pervades all physical matter, which the Stoics considered to be the physical aspect of the divine that exists in everything, and each individual person has a *pneuma*. The primary goal of Stoicism is to learn how to align one’s own *pneuma* with the divine *pneuma* that pervades all things, a goal they described as living in accordance with nature.²⁸ For a Stoic, this results from years of study and

²⁵ Musonius Rufus, 3.3-3.4.

²⁶ Stanley K. Stowers, “Does Pauline Christianity Resemble a Hellenistic Philosophy?” in *Paul Beyond the Judaism/Hellenism Divide*, ed. Troels Engberg-Pedersen (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 92. See also Stanley K. Stowers, “Paul and Self-Mastery,” in *Paul in the Greco-Roman World: A Handbook*, ed. J. Paul Sampley (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003)

²⁷ Emma Wasserman, “Paul among the Philosophers: The Case of Sin in Romans 6-8,” *JSNNT* 30:4 (2008): 403.

²⁸ On cognition and emotions in Stoicism see: Richard Sorabji, *Emotion and Peace of Mind: From Stoic Agitation to Christian Temptation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Margaret R. Graver, *Stoicism and Emotion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Håvard Løkke, *Knowledge and Virtue in Early Stoicism*, Studies in the History of Philosophy of Mind 10 (New York: Springer, 2015).

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of practicing in day-to-day life what one learned. A benefit of achieving self-mastery was freedom from negative emotions like fear and grief. According to the Stoics, emotions are determined by the judgments people make about things that happen to them, and making proper judgments is dependent on alignment of one's own *pneuma* with the divine *pneuma* in way that was physical but with psychological and social implications.

As Stowers points out, according to Paul, members of the church who are baptized receive the divine *pneuma* which “comes in via possession by a god, Christ, in order to strengthen the mind in its struggle with the appetites and emotions of the body.”²⁹ The claim is not a metaphorical one about the symbolism of baptism, but an ontological one about the physical change that occurs at baptism thus aligning the baptized with Christ. This alignment results in cognitive and thus moral maturity.³⁰

Understanding this connection between baptism and cognition helps us to understand why Paul makes this claim about equality at this point in his letter to the Galatians. The chief metaphor Paul uses for discussing the transformation one undergoes in the act of baptism is adoption. Paul starts with this metaphor at 3:15 with a description of who inherits the promises made to Abraham—his offspring, Christ. Galatians 3:28 make it clear that his Galatian recipients are all one in Christ, so this really refers to them as he makes explicit in 3:29: “And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.” As the offspring, they have been placed under the protection of guardians and pedagogues—they have no rights and are barely better than slaves. But now, with the return of Christ the Son, they “receive adoption as children.”³¹ The adoption metaphor communicates incorporation into a new family and suggests that there is a moral responsibility that is

For the use of this Stoic conception of the relationship between cognition specifically as it pertains to Paul see: Samuli Siikavirta, *Baptism and Cognition in Romans 6-8*, *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament* 2, Reihe 407 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015).

²⁹ Stanley K. Stowers, “Paul and the Terrain of Philosophy,” *Early Christianity* 2:6 (2015), 152.

³⁰ See also Troels Engberg-Pedersen, *Cosmology and the Self in the Apostle Paul: The Material Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 68; John M. Barclay, *Obedying the Truth: Paul's Ethics in Galatians* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1988), esp. 56-57; Paul Robertson, “De-Spiritualizing *Pneuma*,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 26 (2014), 365-383; Giovanni B. Bazzana *Having the Spirit of Christ: Spirit Possession and Exorcism in the Early Christian Groups*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), esp. 117-121 and 135-136.

³¹ Gal 4:5. J. Albert Harrill, “Coming of Age and Putting on Christ: The *Toga Virilis* Ceremony, Its Paraenesis, and Paul's Interpretation of Baptism in Galatians,” *NovT* 44:3 (2001): 252-277, explains that the metaphor of adoption works well with the notion of putting on Christ and also explains why paraenesis is appropriate for the moment when a youth reaches adulthood and is capable of receiving their due. See also Barclay, *Obedying the Truth*, 106-7, on why the freedom of no longer being under a pedagogue might lead to a situation of moral insecurity.

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commensurate with membership in that family.³² That moral responsibility becomes possible, even without the philosophical training the Stoics would expect, thanks to the power of Christ's *pneuma* to transform individuals. Baptism provides one with the *pneuma* and the *pneuma*, in Barclay's words: "provides sufficient moral direction and protection against 'the flesh.'"³³ When paired with Troy Martin's insight about these three binaries as being ones that were differentiated within Judaism by the ritual of circumcision, we can see that Paul is linking these binaries with his rejection of gentile circumcision as an unnecessary, even potentially dangerous, step for gentiles being incorporated into Israel.

The equality referenced in Gal 3:28 was not a call for the end of differentiation in everyday life, as many scholars have claimed. There is plenty of evidence in 1 Corinthians and Philemon to demonstrate that Paul was not looking to overturn all such social distinctions. In this way, Paul was again similar to his Stoic contemporaries Seneca and Musonius Rufus. In their eyes, you could achieve self-mastery and still live a life reflective of traditional social differences.³⁴ Rufus, for example, despite claiming complete equality of women and men when it comes to the possibility of achieving virtue, can also say of virtuous women: "Therefore it is likely that this woman would be both self-motivated and persevering, the kind of woman to nurse at her own breast the children whom she brings forth, to serve her husband with her own hands, and to do without hesitation tasks which some consider appropriate for slaves."³⁵ Equality, then, in moral virtue does not necessitate equality in roles, responsibilities, or political power.

This reading of Galatians 3:28 explains its content and its place in this specific context. It is not a disconnected formula. It may resemble a formula or a commonly used slogan, but it fits perfectly in this context as it is. It is also not a call for political equality. Paul is saying that baptism is the superior ritual for incorporation into Israel. It is available to everyone and endows them with the *pneuma*, which is the only sure path to self-mastery, virtue, and salvation. The ways in which humans differ do not naturally lead to a differentiation in such abilities; in fact, these differences are, to use

³² Trevor J. Burke, "Adopted as Sons (UIOQESIA): The Missing Piece in Pauline Soteriology," in *Pauline Studies: Paul: Jew, Greek, and Roman*, ed. Stanley E. Porter (Boston: Brill, 2008), 287.

³³ Barclay, *Obeying the Truth*, 102-3. Stowers, "Paul and Self-Mastery," 540 likewise connects the Spirit with self-mastery.

³⁴ Jennifer A. Glancy (*Slavery in Early Christianity* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006], 7) points out that Stoics encouraged slaves to be okay with their situation.

³⁵ Musonius Rufus, 3.5.

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another Stoic concept, indifferent.³⁶ This shortcut of baptism allows one to live by the *pneuma*, which leads to “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”³⁷ Baptism is not a symbolic act, but one that imbues the individual with the very *pneuma* of Christ, empowering them to make proper judgments and live virtuously. In fact, in Paul's view, it is the only way for gentiles to achieve this.

³⁶ James L. Jaquette, *Discerning What Counts: The Function of the Adiaphora Topos in Paul's Letters*, Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 146 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 155.

³⁷ Gal. 5:22-23.