

Lights from the Ancient Near East

Illumination of exterior and interior space in the New Testament

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Hesiod, in *Opera et Dies* (Works and Days), chants that the gods kept the means of life hidden from humans.¹ Because Prometheus craftily deceived him, Zeus, in the anger of his heart, hid the fire, but Prometheus (“that noble son of Iapetus”) stole it for the humans, hiding the flame from Zeus “in a hollow fennel-stalk” (in a narthex stem – ἐν κοίλῳ νάρθηκι).²

We know how Zeus punished Prometheus – the long winged eagle devouring his ever growing liver – until Heracles freed him; but mankind was not left unpunished either. Obeying Zeus’s orders, Hephaestus made Pandora in sweet lovely maiden-shape, Athena taught her “to weave richly worked cloth”, Aphrodite “to shed grace and painful desire and limb-devouring cares around her head” and Hermes “to put a dog’s mind and a thievish character into her” – “all those who have their mansions on Olympus had given her a gift”.³ Ignoring Prometheus’ warnings, for all mortal men, Epimetheus accepted

“the sheer, hopeless snare” Zeus had set for him. The rest is known: Pandora “removed the great lid from the storage jar with her hands and scattered all its contents abroad – she wrought baneful evils for human beings.” She scattered ills and hard toil and heavy sicknesses, causing sorrow and mischief to men, leaving them hope, stuck under the jar’s lid. But there was more than hope, men and women still had the fire.⁴

Watch or beacon fires (τὰ πυρά)

Until Thomas Edison, there was only one other source of light than sun, moon and stars – fire. This can be seen in the simple fact that in the plural, the Greek word *πυρά* can designate watch, or beacon fires.⁵ Luke uses the word with this meaning in *Acts* 28:2. The ship which took Paul to Rome was run aground and wrecked. The local inhabitants of Malta showed Paul and all the others who safely reached the shore their philanthropia. “By lighting a fire they led all of us to them (ἄψαντες γὰρ πυρὰν προσελάβοντο πάντας ἡμᾶς).”⁶ The beacon fire was necessary, for rain set in and because it was cold. Through

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² Hesiod, *Works and Days* 52, 64-65 (trans. LCL 57, 93 and 91).

³ Hesiod, *Works and Days* 94-96 (trans. LCL 57, 95)

⁴ Cf. also Hesiod, *Theogony* 561–614.

⁵ Cf. LSJ, s.v.

⁶ For this meaning of *προσλαμβάνομαι* (med.) and the accusative of the person, cf. BDAG, s.v. 3; LSJ, s.v. 2.

the rain the shipwrecked who made it to the shore saw the light of the fire and were led to its warmth.

Fire is the source of light, but of course you cannot simply pick of a fire and carry it around to light up your way at night. In antiquity there were several devices in which fire was used for lighting. What were they called? The names the Greeks gave for what we would call torches, lamps and lanterns differed greatly, as can be seen from the discussion by the 2nd century Sophist Athenaeus.⁷ For our occasion though, it might suffice to note the different types of lights referred to in the New Testament. A treatment of the use of fire for other purposes than lighting falls beyond the scope of this essay.

The mobile torch (ὁ φανός)

The mobile torch (ὁ φανός)⁸ could be made from burning vine branches,⁹ the bark (φλοιός) of trees or a stick of the kermes- (δρύινος) or the common-oak (πρῖνος). The wood, being pounded and split, was set on fire.¹⁰ One could even carry chips of wood in a faggot (φάκελος)¹¹ or in a metal grid.¹² According to *John 18:3*, a cohort of soldiers together with servants from the chief priests and the Pharisees, came to the garden of Gethsemane “with torches and λαμπάδες” (μετὰ φανῶν καὶ λαμπάδων), to arrest Jesus. The word λαμπάς was also used in the λαμπα-δηδρομία, the ancient torch races, referring to a lighter type of torch, as one can see on several ancient vases.¹³ Torches mounted on long shafts to keep the

burning flame from the bearer are depicted on various monuments from the late Hellenistic and early imperial period.¹⁴ This is probably the meaning of μετὰ φανῶν καὶ λαμπάδων in *John 18:3* too. A Roman cohort could have been issued with both types of torches.¹⁵ Those arresting Jesus came with torches of both types, heavier burning wood and the lighter burning pieces of wood carried in a faggot.¹⁶ The torches depicted on a first century Roman coin with Antonia Augusta on the recto side,¹⁷ help us to imagine the torches that could have been meant by the author of the forth gospel in his narrative on the arrest of Jesus.¹⁸

The torch (ἡ λαμπάς)

The use of the word λαμπάς, the mother of our word *lamp*, is particularly interesting. The word does not mean lamp. It designates a burning fire, a torch. *Rev 4:5* is quite clear. In front of the heavenly throne of God the seer sees “seven burning torches of fire, which are the seven Spirits of God (λαμπάδες πυρὸς καιόμεναι ..., ἃ εἰσὶν τὰ ἑπτὰ πνεύματα τοῦ θεοῦ).” The word

¹⁴ Cf. I. Jucker, “Hahnenopfer auf einem späthellenistischen Relief,” *Archäologischer Anzeiger* (1980) 440-476, esp. 444, 454 and 467 (fig. 6, 16 and 29); O. Däger, *Religionem Significare. Studien zu reich verzierten römischen Ältern und Basen aus Marmor* (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 1994), 220-221 and 240-241 (plates 9.1 and 23).

¹⁵ Cf. Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant. rom.* 11,40,2: ξέτρεχον δ' ἐκ τῶν σκηνῶν ἅς διεπορεύετο μεταξύ δειποῦντες ἅπαντες ἄθροοι φανούς ἔχοντες καὶ λαμπάδας, ἀγωνίας πλήρεις καὶ θορύβου περιεχόμενοι περὶ αὐτὸν ἠκολούθουν. Noted by R. Bultmann, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes* (11th ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1950), 494.

¹⁶ The wax torch (*cereus*) emerged in the 2nd cent. BCE and was predominantly used by the Romans for nightly outings.

¹⁷ 37 BC Caligula exalted his grandmother Antonia Minor to Augusta.

¹⁸ Cf. the *verso* of two coins struck under Claudius (*recto*: Antonia Auguste): R. Mattingly, *Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum*. Vol. I (London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1965), plate 33, nos. 21 and 22.

⁷ Athenaeus, *Deipn.* 15,57–60 (cf. [epitome] 2,2, p. 161 [Pepink]).

⁸ Cf. Xenophon, *Lac.* 5,7.

⁹ Cf. Aristophanes, *Lys.* 308.

¹⁰ Cf. Athenaeus, *Deipn.* 15,57.

¹¹ Cf. Thucydides, *Historiae* 2,77,3; Plutarch, *Fab.* 6,6. Suda, *Lexicon* δ 75: Δάς: λαμπάς. πῦρ τε ἐν δασι καὶ φακέλους πίση κερχρισμένους κομίζοντες τὴν πλάτην ἀνάπτουσιν.

¹² Cf. the Dionysiac frieze in the villa of mysteries in Pompei. When the torch is dropped, the metal grid comes off.

¹³ Cf. W. Rudolph, “Antike Sportgeräte,” *Klio* 48 (1967), 81-92.

can also designate the light of a meteor,¹⁹ but λαμπάς still means “torch” as one can see from its use in *Rev 8:10*:

The third angel blew his trumpet, and a great star fell from heaven, blazing like a torch (καίόμενος ὡς λαμπάς), and it fell on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water. (NRSV)

The idea that λαμπάς can denote a “light made by burning a wick saturated with oil contained in a relatively small vessel – ‘lamp’” is wrong,²⁰ but still perpetuated by standard lexica for New Testament Greek.²¹ LSJ however notes this as a later use, referring only to *Matt 25:1*.²² Normally English translators of *Matt 25:1* follow the KJV and translate the λαμπάδας of the ten virgins with “lamps”²³ or even “clay lamps.”²⁴ How did this translation originate? Hardly from the LXX, where the word λαμπάς also refers to a torch.²⁵

¹⁹ Cf. LSJ, s.v. I 4 with reference to Pseudo-Aristoteles, *De mundo* 495b11; Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca historica* 16,66,3; Cassius Dio, *Historiae Romanae* 37,25,2.

²⁰ Cf. J. Jeremias, “ΛΑΜΠΑΔΕΣ in Mt 25,1.3f.7f.,” *ZNW* 56 (1965), 196–201.

²¹ Cf. BDAG, s.v.; LN 6.104. Cf. the discussion of U. Luz, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus (Mt 18–25)* (EKK 1/3; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1997), 469–470.

²² Before Matthew, the word λαμπάς is used rarely together with παρθένος, the Greek word for “virgin” or “maiden” in Greek texts (cf. Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca historica* 4,52,3–5: μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα τὴν Μήδειαν φασί, ... προσποιησαμένην δὲ δεῖν πρότερον εὐχὰς ποιήσασθαι τῇ σελήνῃ, τὰς μὲν παρθένους ἀναβιβάσαι μετὰ λαμπάδων ἐπὶ τὸ μετεωρότατον τέγος τῶν βασιλείων ... “After this, Medea, they say, ... pretending that she must first offer prayers to the moon, caused the maidens to ascend with torches to the highest part of the roof of the palace”), and hardly together with ἔλαιον, the word for olive oil.

²³ Cf. i.a. ASV, ESV, NAB, NET, NIV, NRSV.

²⁴ *Matt 25:1 (MacDonald Idiomatic Translation)*: “The kingdom of heaven will be comparable to ten pure unmarried young women who took their small clay lamps and departed to meet the bridegroom.” *The Bible in Basic English* translates with “lights.”

²⁵ Cf. e.g. Judg 7:16, 20; 15:4–5; Jdt 10:22; 1 Macc 6:39; Job 41:11; Sir 48:1; Isa 62:1; Zech 12:6; Nah 2:4. This also applies for the Greek pseudepigrapha;

The Vetus Latina and the Vulgata merely transliterated the Greek word with *lampades (-as)*, leading to Luther’s translation “Lampen” and “lampes” in the Tyndale, and “lamps” in the King James version. Older Swedish translations use “lampor”, newer ones correctly “facklor”.

From Pausanias Atticus in the 2nd century BCE we know that on the second day of the wedding, the day when the bride would spend the first night in the house of the groom, after dawn of the day of the wedlock, gifts from the father of the groom were brought to bride and groom in the form of a procession. A slave, wearing a white woollen garment, carrying a burning torch (λαμπάδα καιομένην), led the way.²⁶ The procession took place before dawn and there is ample archeological and literary evidence, that torch bearers lit the way.²⁷ Christian depictions of the parable from the 4th century in the catacombs of Rome confirm that up to late antiquity people understood that the virgins carried torches. A fourth century painting from the Coemeterium Ostrianum on the Via Nomenta depicts four of the five wise virgins on the right carrying the torches in their right hands, they had small vessels for extra oil in the left.²⁸ Wilpert’s drawing of another painting, from a catacomb of the holy Cyriaca in Agro Verano, shows the five wise bridesmaids on the left, the burning torches in their right hands.²⁹

Torches were used outside. The strong flames of the burning wood or soaked cloth could withstand wind, as those of the large torches lighting the surroundings of watchtowers of Trajan’s camp, as depicted on the first scenes on his column in Rome. But there are cases where torches

cf. *Sib. Or.* 3:673; *T. Job* 43:6; *T. Sol.* 10:8; *4 Bar.* 3:2.

²⁶ Cf. Pausanias Atticus, *Ἀττικῶν ὀνομάτων συναγωγή* ε 49: παῖς γὰρ ἠγεῖται χλανίδα λευκὴν ἔχων καὶ λαμπάδα καιομένην ...

²⁷ Cf. Y. Seidel, *Künstliches Licht im individuellen, familiären und öffentlichen Lebensbereich* (Wien: Phoibos, 2009) 74–82.

²⁸ Cf. J. Wilpert, *Die Malereien der Katakomben Roms* (Freiburg: Herder, 1903) 69–70; *ibid.*, *Tafelband*, 427–429 and plate 241.

²⁹ Cf. Wilpert, *Malereien* 72–74.

are used inside to illuminate large rooms.³⁰ In the LXX version of Dan 5:5 we read that the hand wrote on the plaster κατέναντι τοῦ φωτός, “opposite the light”. Theodotion interprets the source of the light as a torch and translates κατέναντι τῆς λαμπάδος, “opposite the torch”.³¹ The gathering was in a large room, lit up by burning torches, put in iron mounts on the walls. This is probably how we should understand *Acts* 20:8. Paul and his audience gathered in an upper room in Miletus. Since Paul wanted to leave the next morning, he extended his speech till after midnight. It was already late and thus dark. Luke adds an explanatory note: “but there were enough torches in the upper room, where we were being gathered (ἦσαν δὲ λαμπάδες ἱκαναὶ ἐν τῷ ὑπερώῳ οὗ ἦμεν συνηγμένοι).” One could see, although it was close to midnight. Most probably torches were on the outer staircase leading to the upper rooms. Inside they could be fitted on the walls of the building, but it is also possible that torches were fitted on long candelabra as depicted on the wall of the south portico of the Isis-temple in Pompei. This method of lighting was not confined to sanctuaries. Archaeologists documented candelabra in the assembly rooms of several associations during the imperial period.³²

The lamp (ὁ λύχνος)

Torches attached to walls were not the only way to light up interior rooms. One could rely on the light from the hearth fire, but the lamp, in Greek called a λύχνος, was the usual way of lighting. The light of the lamp, the λύχνος, was given by the flame of burning (olive) oil. One used a torch or another source of fire to light the lamp and put it in a stand (λυχνοῦχος).³³ At night everything was dark. In the houses it was dark. A

burning lamp was a good sign.³⁴ Even during the day since windows were small and in the 1st century CE the use of larger glassed windows was still a luxury, mainly confined to the affluent in Rome and Italy.³⁵ The type of houses the narrators of the gospel stories presumed had single rooms and small windows towards the courtyards.³⁶ There was thus a continuous need to light up lamps and to keep them burning (cf. Luke 12:35).

In *Luke* 15:8 we read that the widow looking for her lost silver coin lights up a lamp (λύχνος) in order to see where it could be. Even during the day it was too dark to see properly inside. Against this background the saying of Jesus recorded in *Mark* 4:21 makes sense: “Is a lamp brought in to be put under the bushel, or under the bed, and not on the lamp stand?” (NRSV). If you put the lamp under the bushel, the flame would go out for lack of oxygen, if you put it under the bed, you could start a fire. However on the λυχνία, on the lamp stand, it will light up the room for all who enter (Luke 8:16).

Can we have a perception of the lamp mentioned in *Mark* 4:21 or of the one the widow of *Luke* 15:8 used for her search? In Yodfat in the upper Galilee three types of oil lamps had been found that were in use during the 1st century CE. The first is the “discus” lamp. This type of lamp is the most used type in the non Jewish cities, for example in Dor,³⁷ but only 1,7 percent of all lamps found in Yodfat represented this type. The second type was manufactured locally and also found elsewhere in the Galilee.³⁸ “[I]t ac-

³⁰ On the different types of torches, cf. Seidel, *Künstliches Licht*, 82-84.

³¹ If one follows KB, s.v., who glosses the Aramaic word נְרִיָּה with “Leuchter”, the LXX renders the Aramaic phrase נְרִיָּה לְקַבְּלֵי quite precisely.

³² Cf. Seidel, *Künstliches Licht*, 157.

³³ For the carrying of lamps there is an extra word, λυχνοφορέω.

³⁴ Cf. Artemidorus, *Onirocriticon* 2.9.119-125.

³⁵ Cf. D. Sperl, „Glas und Licht in Architektur und Kunst,“ in *Licht und Architektur* (ed. W.-D. Heilmeyer and W. Hoepfner; Tübingen: Wasmuth, 1990, 61-71), 65-68.

³⁶ Cf. K. Galor, “Wohnkultur im römisch-byzantinischen Palästina,” in *Zeichen aus Text und Stein. Studien auf dem Weg zu einer Archäologie des Neuen Testaments* (ed. S. Alkier and J. Zangenberg; Tübingen: Francke, 2003), 183-208.

³⁷ R. Rosenthal-Heginbottom, “Imported Hellenistic and Roman Pottery,” in *Excavations at Dor, Final Report IB* (ed. E. Stern; Quedem Reports 2; Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1995), 183-250, 243.

³⁸ e.g. in the 1st cent. CE in Kinneret. Cf. V. Sussman, “The Lamp,” *Atiqot* 19 (1990), 97-98.

counts for 19.6 percent of all Yodefata lamps.”³⁹ The third type is well known in Judea, Samaria, the Galilee, the Golan and in the Transjordan during the Herodian rule and called the “knife-*pared*” or “Herodian” oil lamp. It was made in Jerusalem.⁴⁰ The excavator of Yodefata, Mordechai Aviam, writes, “the oil lamps in the ‘Jerusalem’ group amounted to 78 percent of all lamps, which is similar to the situation at Gamla!”⁴¹ The potters at Yodefata and Gamla could produce oil lamps, but the population clearly preferred those imported from Jerusalem. Chemical tests show that the large majority of other specimens of the Herodian type of lamp found elsewhere in the Galilee also came from Jerusalem.⁴² Most probably there were religious reasons for importing the lamps from Jerusalem. Aviam suggests “that there was a mystical, emotional, and spiritual connection between the holiness of Jerusalem and light. For Jews, Jerusalem and the temple at its centre were the light of life and were symbolized by the flame rising from the candle’s spout; it could even represent the light from the menorah in the temple.”⁴³ Light has divine connotations. We shall come back to this in a moment, but the high frequency of the Herodian type of lamp can also be accepted for other villages of the Galilee and we have thus enough reason to imagine that Mark 4:21 and Luke 15:8 refer to such a lamp type.

In the Gospel according to Mark it is noteworthy how the saying about the lamp in *Mark 4:21* is introduced. Jesus says to his disciples, who have been entrusted with the mystery of the reign of God: μήτι ἔρχεται ὁ λύχνος (a lamp

does not come) ἵνα ὑπὸ τὸν μῶδιον τεθῆ ἢ ὑπὸ τὴν κλίνην (in order to be put under a bushel or under a bed). Lamps do not move.⁴⁴ The use of the word ἔρχεται signals the metaphoric use of ὁ λύχνος. The lamp, which is in the context of Mark 4 a metaphor for the mystery of the reign of God, does not come to be hidden. Would the advent of God’s kingdom only be to be hidden, then it would be as senseless as “bringing” a lamp and hiding it. God’s reign is coming in order to be seen, just like the lamp ought to be put on the lamp stand. Mark explains this by adding another saying in 4:22: οὐ γὰρ ἔστιν κρυπτόν ἐὰν μὴ ἵνα φανερωθῆ (nothing is hidden, unless with the purpose to be revealed), οὐδὲ ἐγένετο ἀπόκρυφον ἀλλ’ ἵνα ἔλθῃ εἰς φανερόν (and nothing happens concealed, but except to come into the open). According to Mark’s narrative, which is about Jesus, the Son of God who keeps his identity secret, so that God will reveal the mystery of the messenger of the kingdom in the light of Easter. At the end (Mark 13), Jesus’ concealed identity will come to the light for everyone to see. Like the lamp, the harbinger of God’s reign does not come to be concealed, but is hidden in order to be revealed when he returns as Son of Man.

A lamp is meant to be on the lamp stand, illuminating the whole room for every one entering. If the lamp does not burn, the room is dark. In the Sayings Source Q, the metaphor of the lamp is transferred to the body. The proverb *Matt 6:22/Luke 11:34* follows the aphorism on the lamp (cf. Luke 11:33):⁴⁵ “The lamp of the body is the eye. If therefore your eye is straight, your whole body will be full of light” (NKJ). The eye is the source of light, illuminating the body. If the eye, as in the case of a lamp, is ἀπλοῦς, i.e. open and aboveboard, sincere and without guile,⁴⁶ then the body is illuminated and can be seen. If it is πονηρός, i.e. morally corrupt

³⁹ M. Aviam, “People, Land, Economy, and Belief in First-Century Galilee and Its Origins: A Comprehensive Archaeological Synthesis,” in *The Galilean Economy in the Time of Jesus* (ed. D.A. Fiensy and R.K. Hawkins: Atlanta: SBL, 2013), 34.

⁴⁰ Cf. J. Gunneweg and I. Perlman, “The Origin of the Herodian Lamp,” *BAIAS* 3 (1984/85), 79–83; Aviam, “People, Land, Economy,” 34.

⁴¹ Aviam, “People, Land, Economy,” 34.

⁴² Cf. D. Adan-Bayewitz, F. Asaro, M. Wieder, and R. Giauque, “Preferential Distribution of Lamps from the Jerusalem Area in the Late Second Temple Period (Late First Century B.C.E.–70 C.E.),” *BASOR* 350 (2008), 37–85, 72.

⁴³ Aviam, “People, Land, Economy,” 35.

⁴⁴ For the semantic arguments underpinning the following interpretation, cf. C. Breytenbach, *Nachfolge und Zukunftserwartung nach Markus* (ATHANT 71; Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1984) 151–154, 171–172.

⁴⁵ Cf. M. Wolter, *Das Lukasevangelium* (HNT 5; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 426.

⁴⁶ Cf. BDAG, s.v.

and evil,⁴⁷ then it is like a lamp which does not burn. Like the room,⁴⁸ the body is dark inside.⁴⁹ This is why the Lukan Jesus warns his audience to take care that the light in them is no darkness. Those who look and judge sincere and sound are lightened, others can see who they are. Those whose eyes beguile are the dark horses. John the Baptist must have had sound judgement. In John 5:35 Jesus says about him: “He was a lamp, burning and shining.”

The light (τὸ φῶς)⁵⁰

In the ancient world, light (τὸ φῶς)⁵¹ is, as can be seen from various passages in the New Testament, the opposite of darkness.⁵² For the first Christians light was no mundane phenomenon, but belonged to the heavenly realm. Sun, moon and stars were created by God, who is called “Father of the lights” (πατήρ τῶν φώτων) in *James 1:17*. The face of the transfigured Jesus shines like the sun and his white clothes - for Mark (9:3) radiant white as no cloth refiner (γναφεύς) on earth could make it - “became as white as light (ιμάτια αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο λευκὰ ὡς τὸ φῶς)” in to *Matt 17:2*. The author of Luke-Acts tells that during his conversion light from heaven (φῶς ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ) shone around Paul, who was blinded by its brightness.⁵³

For earliest Christianity, light did not belong to this world, but to the world to come. The Apocalypse envisages a New Jerusalem which

would not need the light of a lamp or the sun or the moon, “for the glory of God illuminates it, its lamp (λύχνος) is the Lamb.”⁵⁴ Presupposing that darkness is bad and light is good, the conversion from pagan beliefs and ethos to Christianity is expressed with the metaphor of change from darkness to light: “For once you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.”⁵⁵ God called his people “out of darkness into his marvelous light.”⁵⁶ They should walk in the light of the Lord, put on the armor of the light.⁵⁷ When Paul calls the Thessalonians “sons of light,” he clearly means that in future, they are due to live with the risen Christ.⁵⁸ For the author of Colossians (1:12) they are already among the “holy in the light” (ἅγιοι ἐν τῷ φωτί), for Ephesians (5:8) they are “light in the Lord” (φῶς ἐν κυρίῳ). Light overcomes darkness, which is why in the Sermon on the Mount Matthew’s Jesus uses it as a metaphor, telling his disciples: “You are the light of the world” (Matt 5:14). This probably draws on the tradition from Isaiah (49:6) that Israel is the light for the nations, a role which the Lukan Paul takes unto himself.⁵⁹

The Light (τὸ φῶς)

Light belongs to the realm of the divine. That is why the word light is used to refer to Jesus, especially when it is expressed that he comes from God. In the words of Isaiah 8:24, which are quoted with some alteration in *Matt 8:16*: “the people residing in darkness saw a great light, and for those who settled in the region and shadow of death light has risen (ὁ λαὸς ὁ καθημένος ἐν σκότει φῶς εἶδεν μέγα, καὶ τοῖς καθημένοις ἐν χώρα καὶ σκιᾷ θανάτου φῶς ἀνέτειλεν αὐτοῖς).”⁶⁰ According to Luke, Jesus was presented at the temple after his circumcision. Al-

⁴⁷ Cf. LN, 88.110.

⁴⁸ The inner room (ταμεῖον) is dark, on the flat house-top (δῶμα) the sun or moon shines. Cf. Luke 12:3.

⁴⁹ Matt 6:22–23 also focuses on human behaviour; cf. U. Luz, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus (Mt 1–7)* (EKK 1/1; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1985), 361. *1 Clem.* 21:2 presupposes that the body is dark: “The Spirit of the Lord is a lamp (λύχνος), searching the secret rooms of the belly.”

⁵⁰ Cf. also H.H. Malmede, *Die Lichtsymbolik im Neuen Testament* (Studies in Oriental Religions 15; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1986) 61–135.

⁵¹ In Attic declension φῶς, φάος, contracts to φῶς. The word could also designate the glow of a fire. Cf. Mark 14:54; Luke 22:56 and BDAG, s.v. 3.

⁵² Cf. e.g. Matt 6:23; 10:27; Luke 11:35; 12:3; John 3:19–20; 2 Cor 6:14; Eph 5:8.

⁵³ Cf. Acts 9:3; 22:6, 9, 11; 26:13.

⁵⁴ Rev 21:23; cf. 22:5.

⁵⁵ Eph 5:8.

⁵⁶ 1 Pet 2:9.

⁵⁷ Cf. Eph 5:9; Rom 13:12.

⁵⁸ 1 Thess 5:5. Cf. also Rom 13:12 and Col 1:12.

⁵⁹ Acts 13:47; cf. Rom 2:19. On the allusion to Isa 49:6 in Luke 2:32, see below.

⁶⁰ Isa^{LXX} 9:1: ὁ λαὸς ὁ πορευόμενος ἐν σκότει ἴδετε φῶς μέγα οἱ κατοικοῦντες ἐν χώρα καὶ σκιᾷ θανάτου φῶς λάμπει ἐφ’ ὑμᾶς

cluding to Isaiah, Simon calls the little boy “a light for revelation to the nations (φῶς εἰς ἀποκάλυψιν ἔθνῶν).”⁶¹

Paul regarded the resurrection of the Son as the revelation of heavenly light. He is followed by other early Christian writers. Remember the clothes of transfigured Jesus became as white as light (Matthew 17:2) and that the coming Son of Man will be as the lightning flashes which lights up the sky from one side to the other (Luke 17:24). Light accompanies the divine (cf. Acts 12:7). In biblical tradition, God cannot be seen. To put it the words of 1 Timothy 6:16, it is God alone who “dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see.” This is why the author of the Acts of the Apostles depicts the presence of the risen Christ at Paul’s conversion as light, light so bright that Paul was temporarily blinded. In *2 Corinthians 4:6* Paul himself refers to this decisive incident in his life. He talks about what happened to him. In *2 Corinthians 4:5* Paul says that he is not preaching himself, but Christ as Lord and himself as servant to the Corinthians for Jesus’s sake (Οὐ γὰρ ἑαυτοῦς κηρύσσομεν ἀλλὰ Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν κύριον, ἑαυτοῦς δὲ δούλους ὑμῶν διὰ Ἰησοῦν). The reason he gives for this in the next sentence is illuminating. He starts with theology: “For the God that said, let light shine from darkness (ὅτι ὁ θεὸς ὁ εἰπὼν ἐκ σκοτῶν φῶς λάμπει).” Paul alludes to Gen 1:3. He describes his calling as mediator of the gospel as being created anew. At the beginning it was dark and God gave light, This God (ὁς),⁶² who created the light, also lit up Paul’s heart⁶³ (ἐλάμψεν ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις ἡμῶν), banning the darkness. This was done with a purpose, as indicated by the Greek preposition πρὸς.⁶⁴ The goal is πρὸς φωτισμόν, in order to

reflect light.⁶⁵ Which light Paul reflects is clear: “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God (τῆς γνώσεως τῆς δόξης τοῦ θεοῦ).” But from where does this light shine? It is in the face of Jesus Christ (ἐν προσώπῳ [Ἰησοῦ] Χριστοῦ). Paul refers to the resurrected Christ who is an image of God (cf. *2 Cor 4:4*). Later he would formulate that Christ was resurrected from the dead by the glory of the Father (ἠγέρθη Χριστὸς ἐκ νεκρῶν διὰ τῆς δόξης τοῦ πατρὸς (Rom 6:4). Paul’s heart was illuminated by when he saw the resurrected Christ. The glory of God reflects in his proclamation the Jesus Christ is Lord. God, the creator of light illuminated Paul by revealing his Son to Paul (cf. *Gal 1:14*). Paul then could reflect the radiant light, the glory of God on the face of the risen Christ. For Paul, light re-entered the world when God resurrected the crucified Jesus from the dead.

Essentially the *Gospel of John* expresses a similar from the perspective of the Christology of pre-existence. “No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.” (*Joh 1:18*). John uses the imagery of light to express the incarnation of the pre-existent Son.⁶⁶ In typical Johannine fashion the opposition between light and darkness still presupposed and transferred on a metaphorical level to express the message of the Gospel. On this theological level the opposition is finally overcome (11:9–10). In the prologue of the Gospel it is stated that the life, eternal life, is in the Son and that this life is the light for humans (1:4), for the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it (1:5). The Johannine Jesus thus says: “I am the light for the world. He who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (8:12); and “as long as I am in the world, am I the light for the world” (9:5).

Shortly before Passover the Greeks are told:

The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you

⁶¹ Cf. Isa^{LXX} 49:6: ἰδοὺ τέθεικά σε εἰς διαθήκην γένους εἰς φῶς ἔθνῶν τοῦ εἶναί σε εἰς σωτηρίαν ἕως ἐσχάτου τῆς γῆς.

⁶² The relativum ὅς should be read as demonstrativum οὗτος; cf. BDR § 293.3 (c) and T. Schmeller, *Der zweite Brief an die Korinther (2 Kor 1,1-7,4)* (EKK VIII/1; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchner Verlag, 2010), 247.

⁶³ Here the verb λάμπω is used transitively; cf. LSJ, s.v. „to make to shine, light up“.

⁶⁴ Cf. BDR § 239.7; BDAG, s.v. 3c.

⁶⁵ Cf. BDAG, s.v. 2, for the transitive meaning of the noun, which is often used to designate the light the moon reflects; cf. Spicq, *Lexicon*, 3.490.

⁶⁶ Cf. H. Conzelmann, φῶς κτλ., *TWNT* 9 (1973), 302–349, 340–347.

do not know where you are going. (John 12:35, NRSV)

It is clear that the Light will return to the heavenly realm, back to God, who has sent him, from whom he came. God himself is Light and in him there is no darkness at all (1 John 1:5).

But this does not mean that after the Son went back to God, the world turned dark again and that darkness overcame light. The Son came as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in him, the Light (John 12:36), should not remain in the darkness (cf. 12:46). The advent of the Light forced men and women to decide. Who loves darkness more than light, stays in the darkness (cf. 3:19–21), but for him or her who

believes in the Son, darkness has passed and the true light already shines (1 John 2:8). To recognize if one is living in the light, there is a simple test:

Whoever says, 'I am in the light,' while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness. Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light, and in such a person there is no cause for stumbling. (1 John 2:9–10, NRSV)

Conclusion

In Christian tradition there is no need for Prometheus. God gave the light to the world.

Summary

In this essay fire as a source of light in antiquity is discussed: e.g. beacon fires (τὰ πυρά), torches (ὁ φανός/ ἡ λαμπάς) and lamps (ὁ λύχνος). In Greek the names for these objects differed greatly and in the New Testament the expressions are used literally and metaphorically. In Christian Tradition 'light' (ὁ φῶς) belongs to the heavenly realm and is the opposite of darkness. 'The Light' also symbolizes Jesus.