Title – Insight into the Community: Bee Similes in the Iliad and the Aeneid

Program of Study – Classical Literature

Presentation Type – PowerPoint

Mentor and Mentor Email – Dr. Carl Curtis (ccurtis@liberty.edu)

Student Name and Email – Sara Heist (sheist@liberty.edu)

Category – Textual

Abstract: Although much attention has been given to Homeric and Virgilian similes as separate entities, few analyses address the relationship between the two. This paper offers a comparative analysis of the bee similes in Homer’s Iliad and Virgil’s Aeneid, and demonstrates that there are significant connections between the two epics. In both works, bee similes illustrate the structure of the ideal society, as a close reading of each simile reveals. This paper demonstrates that both Homeric and Virgilian bee similes focus on the concept of community. In the Iliad, Homer’s first extended simile compares the Greek forces to a colony of bees. This prominent placement foreshadows the significance of bee similes in the Homeric epic. As a Greek poet, Homer demonstrates that his understanding of community has been influenced by the social structure of the individualistic Greek city-states. In the Iliad, his bee similes exemplify a tension between unity and self-interest within the Greek camp. Homer’s bee similes emphasize the need for mutual interest and cooperation, lest the Greek forces disintegrate. For Homer, the ideal community is not homogeneous, but it is unified. Like Homer, Virgil emphasizes bees throughout his epic. Unlike Homer’s similes, Virgil’s three bee similes exalt homogeneity as a central characteristic of the ideal society. Individuality is erased in the bee similes of the Aeneid. The wellbeing of the hive transcends the purpose of the individual. This paper examines these similes as a unit to provide a unique perspective on the two poets’ worldviews, thus contributing
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to the analysis of the relationship between the epics. Clearly, Virgil is well aware of the Homeric epics, and intentionally provides further commentary on the ideal society through his bee similes. When compared with each other, Homer’s and Virgil’s similes artfully depict two divergent portraits of the ideal society.

**Christian Worldview Integration:** This paper constitutes a search for truth, regularity, and relatedness in the Homeric and Virgilian epics. The existence of such patterns reveals that God has created humanity to systematically search for truth. Moreover, the nature of the ideal community is a central question for Christians, because the Christian church faces many of the questions about society that Homer and Virgil’s similes address. Throughout church history, the Christian community has wrestled with the relationship between unity and individuality. The bee similes in the Homeric and Virgilian epics provide an instructive commentary on the need for unity that echoes the repeated biblical exhortations toward harmony in the church (1 Corinthians 12.12-14). Christians can compare the poets’ conclusions with the Bible to more clearly define a biblical paradigm for unity and diversity in the church. Outside the Christian community, the comparison of Homer and Virgil has a two-fold benefit. First, the similarities between the epics point to their orderly design. Every example of order in the world gives Christians the opportunity to proclaim God’s truth, which is always orderly and coherent. Secondly, the epics address the common concerns of mankind, although they were written hundreds of years apart. Christians can point to Homer and Virgil as secular authors who stress the need for unity within society. The similes reflect the human hunger for perfect unity and belonging, which is unattainable outside the body of Christ. This call to unity is particularly poignant within the context of our current culture, which obsesses over the rights and needs of the individual. Homer
and Virgil provide a refreshing reminder that humble self-sacrifice for the common good is often more consistent with a biblical worldview.