

***A Brief Note on "Hellenistic
Formal Receptions and
Paul's Use of ΑΠΑΝΤΗΣΙΣ
in 1 Thessalonians 4:17"***

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This brief essay responds to an earlier essay by Michael R. Cosby (BBR 4 [1994] 15-34) which has created some confusion with respect to the meaning of ἀπάντησις in 1 Thess 4:17. The parallels between Paul's description of the Parousia of Jesus in 1 Thess 4:15-17 and those of Hellenistic formal receptions are closer than Cosby allows. It is probable that Paul's use of ἀπάντησις does indeed reflect such Hellenistic customs and traditions.

Key Words: Parousia, ἀπάντησις, 1 Thess 4:15-17, Hellenistic receptions

An article carrying the above-quoted title, written by Michael R. Cosby, and published in *BBR* 4 (1994) 15-34 left some confusion. On the one hand, "1 Thess 4:14-17 does not specifically mention any of the elements normally associated with receiving dignitaries" (p. 22); on the other hand, "the custom of the Hellenistic formal reception is part of the cultural background [later called 'a loose pattern'] for Paul's thinking" (p. 31). Again on the one hand, "most of . . . [the] usual elements [in Hellenistic formal receptions] are actually the opposite of what we find in Paul's description of the Parousia" (p. 15); and again on the other hand, "the various descriptions of receptions reveal diversity in the way such meetings were conducted" (p. 31, n. 45).

What then of the contrasts used by Cosby to play down a similarity between Hellenistic formal receptions and Paul's use of ἀπάντησις in 1 Thess 4:17? First-mentioned is the unexpectedness of the Parousia: "Christians anticipate Christ's arrival but are unaware of when it will happen (1 Thess 5:1-4)" over against the expectedness of Hellenistic *parousiai* "at a particular time."¹ In 1 Thess 5:4, however,

1. Cosby in the article cited above, p. 29.

Paul says to his Christian audience, "But *you*, brothers and sisters, are *not* in darkness that the day [of the Lord] should overtake *you* as a thief" (italics added). It is only the sleepers, who are "of the night" and "of darkness" and say, "Peace and safety," but "will by no means escape" on whom that day "comes as a thief in the night" (vv 2-5). Christian brothers and sisters have no need to be informed "concerning the times and seasons" (v 1); they have already been informed and will therefore be well aware of the nearness of the Parousia (2 Thess 2:3-12, esp. 5; cf. Mark 13:28-29 par. Matt 24:32-33 par. Luke 21:29-30; also Luke 21:28).

"Secondly, participants [in the Parousia] do not put on special garments or wear laurel wreaths [as do participants in Hellenistic formal receptions]. . . . This transformation [of being given resurrection bodies at the Parousia] greatly overshadows the wearing of festal clothing at normal [formal?] receptions. . . ." ² Yet for Paul the resurrection of Christians at the Parousia does entail the putting on of festal clothing: "For this perishable [body] must put on (ἐνδύσασθαι) imperishability; and when this perishable [body] puts on (ἐνδύσηται) imperishability and this mortal [body] puts on (ἐνδύσηται) immortality . . ." (1 Cor 15:53-54a); ". . . longing to put on in addition (ἐπενδύσασθαι) our building from heaven, if indeed also being clothed (ἐνδυσάμενοι³), we will not be found naked . . . we do not want to be unclothed (ἐκδύσασθαι), but to be additionally clothed (ἐπενδύσασθαι) . . ." (2 Cor 5:2-4). As for wearing a laurel wreath (στέφανος), Paul does speak of wearing one at the Parousia, and so speaks right here in 1 Thessalonians: "For what [is] our hope or joy or laurel wreath of exultation or—it's you, isn't it?—before our Lord Jesus at his Parousia?" (2:19; see also 1 Cor 9:24-27; Phil 4:1 with 3:20-21; 2 Tim 4:8, all in eschatological contexts).

Cosby is correct to note the difference between the summoning shout and trumpet blast at the Parousia (1 Thess 4:16) and the shouts of acclamation at Hellenistic formal receptions,⁴ but this difference is understandable in view of the need for supernatural action in the raising of deceased Christians and in the catching of them and living Christians up to meet the Lord in the air. At least the Parousia and Hellenistic formal receptions share the element of happy noise.

Cosby argues that for the Parousia "no donations are encouraged nor taxes levied to purchase presents to honor the heavenly king [as at Hellenistic formal receptions]. Instead, he brings rewards for his faithful servants."⁵ But no such rewards are mentioned in the passage

2. Ibid.

3. P⁴⁶ Ⓝ C D² Ψ 0243 33 1739 1881 Majority Text lat sy co Cl. The v.1. ἐκδυσάμενοι, "being clothed," is supported by D^{*c} a f^c Mcion Tert Spec.

4. Ibid., 29--30.

5. Ibid., 30.

at hand (1 Thess 4:15-17); and going elsewhere in Pauline literature, we find not only rewards for faithful servants of the king at his Parousia but also a reception-like presentation to him: "to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him . . . that we may present every person mature (τέλειον) in Christ" (Col 1:22, 28b; cf. 2 Cor 11:2: "to present you as a pure virgin to the Christ").

The execution of "wrathful judgment of the wicked" at the Parousia does not lack a counterpart in Hellenistic formal receptions,⁶ for Cosby himself references the execution of prisoners at those events.⁷ The comment that "divine judgment occurring as part of the event [of the Parousia] . . . is far different from Peterson's assertion that arriving dignitaries sometimes pronounced judgment as part of the ceremonies" looks itself like an assertion having little or no probative value.⁸

Again, Cosby himself supplies a reason why "Paul makes no mention of the Hellenistic custom of a dignitary offering sacrifices on local altars after the reception," i.e., "in Paul's thinking . . . Jesus already offered himself as the definitive sacrifice, so this aspect of the formal reception would be abhorrent, a grim reminder of the paganism from which he sought to deliver people."⁹

On the whole, then, Paul's description of the Parousia in 1 Thess 4:15-17 comes closer to what we know of Hellenistic formal receptions than Cosby allows. True, ἀπάντησις does not by itself connote a reception of that kind.¹⁰ But the Thessalonian context, the αὐτός which calls special attention to Jesus' dignity as Lord or Emperor ("the Lord himself"--1 Thess 4:15), the remarkable fact that only here in the NT are Christians said to be "caught [up] . . . to meet the Lord in the air" (1 Thess 4:17, though cf. Matt 25:1, 6), and the appearance of elements of Hellenistic formal receptions also in other Pauline mentions of the Parousia all combine to favor such a connotation for ἀπάντησις.¹¹ Of course, this connotation is hardly needed to keep Cosby or anyone else from slipping back into the doctrine of a pretribulational rapture of the church.

6. Against *ibid.*, 30-31.

7. *Ibid.* 18, 21, 22.

8. *Ibid.*, 30-31. Cosby is referring to the well-known article by Erik Peterson, "Die Einholung des Kyrios," *ZST* 1 (1930) 682-702.

9. Cosby, "Hellenistic Formal Receptions," 20-21, *et al.*

10. *Ibid.*, 31.

11. Cf. Robert H. Gundry, "The Hellenization of Dominical Tradition and Christianization of Jewish Tradition in the Eschatology of 1-2 Thessalonians," *NTS* 33 (1987) 161-69.