

Tabula Cebetis and Christianity

MIKLÓS JANZSÓ



The Cebes' Tablet ("Tabula") is deemed a not widely scrutinized text among the remaining works of ancient philosophy. This dialogue demonstrates an ethical teaching for finding happiness by describing a painting that is claimed to be the allegory of human life. The artwork is interpreted to young men by an old *exegetes*. This work was given a high reputation and popularity from the first printed edition¹ to the publishing of the critical edition,² but in the 20th century the interest of scholars decreased. Modern scholarship attempted to determine the date of creation by analysing possible influences of philosophical ideas that could be identified in the text of the Tabula. Nevertheless, there is no accordance in this question, but at the same time most of the scholars accept that there is a lot of influence from Socratic philosophy in the Tabula Cebetis. The thematic element that eminently underlines the evocation is the discussion about life and death, health and richness.³

Although the thoughts of Platonism⁴ and Pythagoreanism⁵ are noticeable, the Stoic influence is the most important point. It is beyond dispute that the Tabula incorporated the most influential preceding ancient philosophical ideas, yet modern scholarship seldom focuses on the probable inspiration of early Christian tradition. In this study it is assumed that revealing the correspondent elements between the Tabula and early Christian tradition could enable not only to specify more accurately the date, but also to give a deeper and more detailed interpretation of the work. The aim of this paper is to take into account

¹ The dating of the editio princeps is uncertain, cf. Schweighäuser, Johann: *Epicteti Manuale et Cebetis Tabula Graece et Latine. Graeca ad fidem veterum librorum denuo recensuit, et collata omni lectionis varietate vindicavit illustravitque; Latinam versionem, Enchiridii praesertim, ad Graeci exempli praescriptum diligenter recognovit et emendavit.* Lipsiae 1798, 130-132.

² Prächter, Karl: *Κέβητος πίναξ. Cebetis Tabula.* Lipsiae 1893.

³ *Tab. Ceb.* 36-41.

⁴ Sinko, Th.: "De lineamentis platonicis in Cebetis Tabula," *Eos* 45:1 (1951), 3-31.

⁵ Joly, R.: *Le tableau de Cebes et la philosophie religieuse.* Bruxelles 1963.

and analyse motifs, which had not been discussed yet provide new aspects on the Christian explanation of the work.

First, the Christian theological interpretation of humanist commentaries will be presented. The hypothesis that the *Tabula* had been influenced by the early Christian tradition is not a recent issue. The scholars of the Renaissance had proposed it for the first time. At the end of the 15th century the Greek opus had been reinvented. Due to its translation into Latin made by Ludovicus Odaxius,⁶ in the middle of the 16th century the *Tabula* became widely known and popular across Europe and commentaries were published. The first one was written by the rhetorician Huldricus Fabri⁷ with a slight pursuit to interpret the *Tabula* in the light of Christian ideas.

The most remarkable author of the Christian interpretation was Joannes Camers, a minorite monk and theologian.⁸ His commentary,⁹ published in 1524 in Cracow, is probably the best example how to interpret an ancient philosophical work in the aspects of Christianity. In the summary of the commentary he mentioned that the content of the *Tabula* i.e. such description of human life comes not only from the anonymous author, but also the *Sacra Scriptura* (Holy Bible): *In uniuersum, hac tabula Ceibes, humanae naturae cursum mira quadam insinuatione adamussim (quod dicitur) exprimit ferme totum. Sunt qui tradant hunc humanae naturae cursum, non primum a Ceibete excogitatum, sed eum ex sacris litteris desumpsisse.*¹⁰ Although Camers does not clarify explicitly that the *Tabula* is tightly bound to Christianity, he never misses a chance to interpret the work with regard to this view. He draws a parallel between many points of the *Tabula* and the Holy Bible, and the thoughts of the Church Fathers. By the analysis of the motif of penitence, he emphasises the influence of Lactantius¹¹ who claims that it is an important moment in human life as the mercy of God

Ancient philosophical and literary parallels were involved in the interpretation of many places where it seemed plausible in order to achieve a deeper and more accurate explanation. As it can be detected from the large amount of the cited authors, his awareness about Greco-Roman philosophy was outstanding.

⁶ H.-G. Nesselrath, „Von Keibes zu Pseudo-Keibes.“ in R.-H. Luidpold, Hrsg. *Die Bildtafel des Keibes: Allegorie des Lebens*. Darmstadt 2005, 49-50.

⁷ *Cebetis Thebani Philosophi Excellentissimi Tabula, in qua breuiter totius uitae humanae ratio, hoc est ingressus, medium et exitus, nec non alia quaedam haud minus iucunda, luculenter, ut pictura indicat describuntur, Cum scholiis per Huldricum Fabri non inepte marginibus adiectis*. Viennae 1519.

⁸ L. Wadding, *Scriptores Ordinis Minorum quibus accessit syllabus illorum qui ex eodem ordine pro fide Christi fortiter occubuerunt*. Romae 1906, 150.

⁹ I used the 1558, Basel-edition: *Commentaria in C. Iulii Solini Polyhistora, et Lucii Flori De Romanorum rebus gestis, libros, ac Tabulam Cebetis, omnibus et res ecclesiasticas et civiles administrantibus, sive lucem, sive rerum uarietatem doctrinamque spectes, utilissima, Ioanne Camerte autore viro in omni literarum genere praestanti*. Basileae 1558, 425-477.

¹⁰ Camers, *Commentaria*, 426.

¹¹ Camers, *Commentaria*, 444-445.

Nevertheless, the most important and peculiar point of his commentary is the emphasis on the elemental influence of Christianity on the work. In my judgement Camers claims correctly that the Tabula must be interpreted allegorically, therefore his interpretation focuses on the metaphoric aspects of some phrases. After all, the most significant methodical failure of his commentary is that the analysis had not been based on the original Greek text, but on Odaxius' Latin translation. Thus, not every conclusion is deemed sound and utterly acceptable.

Let us take into account the following examples. The painting described in the Tabula symbolizes the path of human life as an allegory composed from metaphors. This way consists of three different stages separated by walls in the picture. In the first section there is a crowd of women symbolizing sins and wicked pleasures. Camers claims that sins had arisen from the female principium. This idea can be retraceable to the book of Genesis.¹²

In Camers' commentary the second remarkable item among that sort of elements is ignorance (ἄφροσύνη), which is deemed a serious threat in life. It could only be compared to the riddle of the Sphinx.¹³ Ignorance not only poses a one-time threat, but poisons the mind continuously. Thus, no one is able to make right decisions living ethically bad. If it became recognizable which things are wrong or right and bad and good in human life, ignorance would pass away and the possibility of blissful life would be provided. Ignorance appears in the commentary as one of the greatest dangers. In order to prove this explanation, he cited Cicero, Seneca and Socrates concluding his point by the following statement: to deny the existence of God is the peculiarity of ignorant people.¹⁴ Thus, the way of interpretation had turned to theological explanation.

Before one comes to Paideia, Pseudopaideia seduces him. The followers of Pseudopaideia are teachers of liberal arts and adherents of some philosophical school, such as hedonists, Peripatetics.¹⁵ Even Camers despises these sciences

¹² *Per multitudinem mulierum, quae intra ambitum visebatur morum corruptelam debemus accipere. Constat enim a femina initium sumpsisse peccatum. Genesis cap. 3.* Camers, *Commentaria*, 429.

¹³ *Tab. Ceb. 3, 2-4.* ἔστι γὰρ ἡ ἐξηγησις εὐκυβία τῷ τῆς Σφιγγὸς αἰνίγματι, ὃ ἐκείνη προεβάλλετο τοῖς ἀνθρώποις. εἰ μὲν οὖν αὐτὸ συνίει τις, ἐσώζετο, εἰ δὲ μὴ συνίει, ἀπόλετο ὑπὸ τῆς Σφιγγὸς. ὡσαύτως δὲ καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς ἐξηγήσεως ἔχει ταύτης. **ἡ γὰρ ἀφροσύνη τοῖς ἀνθρώποις Σφίγξ ἐστίν.** αἰνίττεται δὲ τάδε, τί ἀγαθόν, τί κακόν, τί οὔτε ἀγαθόν οὔτε κακόν ἐστίν ἐν τῷ βίῳ. ταῦτ' οὖν ἂν μὲν τις μὴ συνίῃ, ἀπόλλυται ὑπ' αὐτῆς, οὐκ εἰσάπαξ, ὡσπερ ὁ ὑπὸ τῆς Σφιγγὸς καταβρωθεὶς ἀπέθνησκεν, ἀλλὰ κατὰ μικρὸν ἐν ὄλῳ τῷ βίῳ καταφθείρεται καθάπερ οἱ ἐπὶ τιμωρία παραδιδόμενοι. ἂν δὲ τις γνῶ, ἀνάπαλιν ἢ μὲν ἀφροσύνη ἀπόλλυται, αὐτὸς δὲ σώζεται καὶ μακάριος καὶ εὐδαίμων γίνεται ἐν παντὶ τῷ βίῳ.

¹⁴ *Solius insipientis est, negare Deum esse.* Camers, *Commentaria*, 431.

¹⁵ *Tab. Ceb. 13, 1-2.* Οἱ τῆς Ψευδοπαιδείας, ἔφη, ἔρασταί ἡπατημένοι καὶ οἰόμενοι μετὰ τῆς ἀληθινῆς Παιδείας συνομιλεῖν. Τίνες οὖν καλοῦνται οὗτοι; Οἱ μὲν ποιηταί, ἔφη, οἱ δὲ ῥήτορες, οἱ δὲ διαλεκτικοί, οἱ δὲ μουσικοί, οἱ δὲ ἀριθμητικοί, οἱ δὲ γεωμέτραι, οἱ δὲ

stating that these do not serve ethical education, but only flatter people. According to Camers the sciences from the circle of Pseudopaideia can be derived from Stoic sources and are deemed insufficient for intellectual development.¹⁶

As it can be observed in a note related to the role of virtues, the theological explanation overweighs the importance of ancient literary and philosophical tradition. He disapproved of virtues as goddesses who derived from Zeus. He revised that ancient theory by a citation of Saint Augustin claiming that virtues are not divine beings, but donations of God for mankind.¹⁷ Although the commentary of Camers does not meet entirely the requirement of modern scholarship in every case, it has inspired my survey to reveal more correspondent points between Christianity and the Tabula.

As it was mentioned above, the popularity of the Tabula was constant from the 16th to the 18th century among the Christian churches and it was deemed an intermediary between so-called pagan philosophy and the Christian ethic. This point is demonstrated most eloquently by Imre Mészárovcis in the introduction of his translation: ... *si quaedam fabulosa, quae interdum insperguntur, et nonnullas Ethnicas loquendi formulas demas, doctrinam Christianam putes.*¹⁸

Consequently, the Cristian interpretation had given the possibility for determining the date of the Tabula more accurately. According to Prächter's survey¹⁹ on the phrases it is to be assessed that the Tabula had been allegedly composed in the 1st century AD. Prächter revealed that the words, phrases, grammatical structures used in the Tabula can be found mostly in the works of the 1st century AD. He composed a vocabulary containing the list of words and phrases that proves the first century dating.

On the basis of Prächter's literary analysis I have expanded the scope of the survey. Thus, it can be concluded that phrases with the same semantic content can be paralleled with the context of the Novum Testamentum and early Christian literature.

First, I have scrutinized the phrase of πολλὸς ὄχλος occurring frequently in the Tabula, so that it is deemed a thematic motif. It occurs 13 times in the New Testament. As a consequence, it was widely used in the works of the Church Fathers. In the Gospels the crowd surrounding Jesus was described by this phrase. There is also a reference alluding to the crowd of disciples. In the Tabula two crowds are named by this phrase. The first is standing in front of

ἀστρολόγοι, οἱ δὲ κριτικοί, οἱ δὲ ἡδονικοί, οἱ δὲ περιπατητικοὶ καὶ ὅσοι ἄλλοι τούτοις εἰσι παραπλήσιοι.

¹⁶ Camers, *Commentaria*, 446-447.

¹⁷ *Sunt qui tradiderunt ex parente love virtutes omnes olim fuisse progenitas. Sicque germanas inter se, cunctas esse virtutes. Hinc natus gentilitatis error qui virtutes esse deas quasdam putaverint. Verius Augustinus quarto de Civitate Dei libro scribit, non Deas esse virtutes, sed Dei dona potius.* Camers, *Commentaria*, 450.

¹⁸ I. Mészárovcis, *Somnium Philosophi Repraesentans Tabulam Cebetis Philosophi Platonici, et Enchiridion Epicteti Philosophi Stoici.* Nagyszombat 1707, 2.

¹⁹ K. Prächter, *Cebetis tabula quanam aetate conscripta esse videatur.* Marburg 1885.

the gate where they want to enter Life.²⁰ The second is the crowd of *inconsulti*, who surround Tyche to partake of her givings.²¹

Moving on, the interpretation of σωζόμενοι provides a more evident parallelism between the Tabula and Christianity. Several different forms of the verb σώζω can be found in the Tabula strengthening the possibility of the redemption-centric interpretation. According to Robert Joly's theory the Tabula describes a Pythagorean initiation rite by which the initiated persons acquire peculiar, nowhere else obtainable knowledge in order to reach happiness. Although Joly's interpretation gives a useful viewpoint, it is not sufficient for the deeper understanding of the Tabula because he selected the phrases arbitrarily to support his argumentation.²² According to Prächter's dating it is obvious that in the prominent use of the verb σώζω the Christian tradition is reflected. Therefore, it should be interpreted as "be saved" in its semantic content. This point is in perfect accordance with the goal of the Tabula to show the way to Happiness.

Next, I turn to the analysis of Metanoia (Repentance) that is deemed the crucial motif of the Tabula. According to my judgement this is the most important evidence for the Christian influence: εἶτα ἐνταῦθα πάλιν εἰς τὸν ἕτερον οἶκον ῥίπτεται, εἰς τὴν Κακοδαμονίαν, καὶ ὅδε τὸν λοιπὸν βίον καταστρέφει ἐν πάσῃ κακοδαμονίᾳ, ἂν μὴ ἢ **Μετάνοια** αὐτῷ ἐπιτύχη ἐκ προαιρέσεως συναντήσασα.²³ Metanoia helps to dismiss all sorts of misfortune and agony. The acceptance of Metanoia's help is a human decision and beginning of purification and journey to a happier life. The appearance of the word is significant in the Novum Testamentum because it occurs 22 times. Moreover, it should be mentioned that the word refers not only to repentance, but also to conversion. Therefore, the cited sentence can be interpreted as a paraphrase for the sacrament of baptism that abolishes sins. In the Biblical occurrences this sentence points out the similarity: ἐγένετο Ἰωάννης [ὁ] βαπτίζων ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ καὶ κηρύσσων βάπτισμα μετανοίας εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν.²⁴ The motif-structure can be traced back to the context of the cited sentence proving the Christian influence on the Tabula. In the Gospel John baptized with water, but Jesus, who comes after him, baptized with the Holy Spirit. Similarly, in the Tabula the purifying strength of Eudaimonia is more significant than Metanoia to find real Happiness. Anyway, it should be mentioned that the former value (Repentance) is a prerequisite for the realization of Happiness.

Be that as it may, at the turning point of life depicted in the Tabula, Metanoia stands and liberates from the former sinful life, but it is enough for complete salvation. The *metanoia* is important in scriptural passages, because it

²⁰ Tab. Ceb. 4, 2.

²¹ Tab. Ceb. 4, 2.

²² Albrecht, Michael von, "Recension von Robert Joly: Le Tableau de Cébes et la philosophie religieuse," Gnomon 36 (1964), 755-759.

²³ Tab. Ceb. 10, 4

²⁴ Mc. 1, 4

ensures admission to Christian community. Regarding the presented thematical and conceptual concordances it is to be concluded that there would have been closer correspondence between the Tabula and early Christian tradition.

The allegory of narrow and broad roads demonstrates evidently the Christian inspiration which is also an ancient philosophical *topos* (common place) coming from the Prodicus-myth.²⁵ Heracles standing at the crossroads had to choose between Worthlessness calling herself happiness, and Virtue. According to this allegory the way to virtue is claimed harder and rougher than the other, yet it offers fair and valuable prospects. In the Tabula we can see the hardness of the way leading to Paideia: Οὐκοῦν καὶ θύραν τινὰ μικρὰν καὶ ὁδὸν τινα πρὸ τῆς θύρας, ἣτις οὐ πολὺ ὀχλεῖται, ἀλλ' ὀλίγοι πάνυ πορεύονται ὥσπερ δι' ἀνοδίας τινὸς καὶ τραχείας καὶ πετρῶδους εἶναι δοκούσης; Αὕτη τοῖνυν ἐστὶν ἡ ὁδὸς, ἔφη, ἡ ἄγουσα πρὸς τὴν ἀληθινὴν Παιδείαν.²⁶ However, the Tabula describes just one way, which is narrow and tight and can barely be passed through with a small door at its end. It demonstrates that because of its toughness only a few people choose this path to reach Happiness. Thus, the Tabula clarifies obviously that only one way leads to Happiness. The content seems to be similar to the parable in the seventh verse of the Gospel according to Matthew: Εἰσέλθατε διὰ τῆς στενῆς πύλης· ὅτι πλατεία ἡ πύλη καὶ εὐρύχωρος ἡ ὁδὸς ἡ ἀπάγουσα εἰς τὴν ἀπώλειαν, καὶ πολλοὶ εἰσὶν οἱ εἰσερχόμενοι δι' αὐτῆς· τί στενὴ ἡ πύλη καὶ τεθλιμμένη ἡ ὁδὸς ἡ ἀπάγουσα εἰς τὴν ζωὴν, καὶ ὀλίγοι εἰσὶν οἱ εὐρίσκοντες αὐτήν.²⁷ These similar thematic elements with regard to the motifs in the second half of the work emphasize the presence of Christianity.

According to the ideas of the Tabula, ignorance is the worst thing, because people are not able to decide properly whether certain things have a good or bad nature. Ignorance is instilled into man by Ἀπάτη (Deceit) at the moment of birth. As a consequence, the perfect Good remains hidden from them.²⁸ Paul the Apostle names ignorance as the cause of the sinful way of life: ἐσκοτωμένοι τῇ διανοίᾳ ὄντες, ἀπηλλοτριωμένοι τῆς ζωῆς τοῦ θεοῦ, διὰ τὴν ἄγνοιαν τὴν οὖσαν ἐν αὐτοῖς, διὰ τὴν πώρωσιν τῆς καρδίας αὐτῶν, οἵτινες ἀπηληγότες ἑαυτοὺς παρέδωκαν τῇ ἀσελγείᾳ εἰς ἐργασίαν ἀκαθαρσίας πάσης ἐν πλεονεξίᾳ.²⁹ In the letter to Titus Paul claims that all of us follow sinful desires before the experience of God's mercy: Ἴμεν γάρ ποτε καὶ ἡμεῖς ἀνόητοι, ἀπειθεῖς, πλανώμενοι, δουλεύοντες ἐπιθυμίαις καὶ ἡδοναῖς ποικίλαις, ἐν κακίᾳ καὶ φθόνῳ διάγοντες, συγρητοί, μισοῦντες ἀλλήλους.³⁰

The way leading to happiness is presented as a competition in the Tabula. Happiness crowns the winner with a wreath that has power to make someone happy (εὐδαιμονικὴ δύναμις). Then one can live in the state of constant and perfect happiness, which depends on him not on others. In the first letter to the

²⁵ Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 2, 1, 21-34.

²⁶ *Tab. Ceb.* 15, 2.

²⁷ Mt. 7, 13-14.

²⁸ *Tab. Ceb.* 6, 3.

²⁹ Eph. 4, 18-19.

³⁰ Tit. 3, 3.

Korinthians Paul attributes a similar role to the wreath as a metaphorical personification of virtue:

Οὐκ οἶδατε ὅτι οἱ ἐν σταδίῳ τρέχοντες πάντες μὲν τρέχουσιν, εἷς δὲ λαμβάνει τὸ βραβεῖον; οὕτως τρέχετε ἵνα καταλάβητε. πᾶς δὲ ὁ ἀγωνιζόμενος πάντα ἐγκρατεύεται, ἐκεῖνοι μὲν οὖν ἵνα φθαρτὸν στέφανον λάβωσιν, ἡμεῖς δὲ ἄφθαρτον.³¹ Therefore, the wreath symbolizes in both cases the prospective and ideal happiness. There is only one different element between the Tabula and the scriptural tradition. In the Tabula Happiness gives the wreath, whereas it is to be gained from God in the Sacra Scriptura.

Following the crowning scene Virtues take men back to the location of earlier sinful life and demonstrate how badly they were living under the slavery of sins. The Tabula names four of them: incontinence, pretentiousness, avarice, vanity. The phrase *κενοδοξία* i. e. vain glory had been applied mostly by the Church Fathers according to Saint Paul's prohibition: *μηδὲν κατ' ἐριθείαν μηδὲ κατὰ κενοδοξίαν...*,³² *μὴ γινώμεθα κενόδοξοι, ἀλλήλους προκαλούμενοι, ἀλλήλοις φθονοῦντες.*³³

To sum up, it can evidently be concluded that the Tabula is an eclectic work containing most of the contemporary philosophical ideas and trends. The importance of the Tabula is that it had built a bridge between the philosophical tradition of antiquity and Christianity. The next step of my survey will be to demonstrate this linking function between two worlds: classical antiquity and Christianity.

³¹ 1Cor 9, 24-25.

³² Phil 2, 3.

³³ Gal 5, 26.