

## The Oriental Background of the Compound γονυπετεῖν

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The compound γονυπετεῖν has been studied as a New Testament word<sup>1</sup>), but although most of its occurrences are listed in the standard works of reference the consistency of its connotation outside specifically religious works has not been noted. The writers of the NT gospels use γονυπετέω quite naturally in the sense “kneel down”, “fall on one’s knees”. Twice it occurs with a direct object (Mk 10.17 γονυπετήσας αὐτὸν ἐπηρώτα αὐτόν, Mt 17.14 ἄνθρωπος γονυπετῶν αὐτὸν καὶ λέγων); in neither case is there an equivalent verb in the other synoptic gospels. Nor is the absolute use in Mt 27.29, γονυπετήσαντες ἔμπροσθεν αὐτοῦ, paralleled closely in any of the other gospels. However for the similar usage in Mk 1.40 (λεπρός . . . γονυπετῶν λέγων αὐτῷ) Matthew (8.2) has προσεκύνει αὐτῷ<sup>2</sup>) and Luke (5.12) πεσὼν ἐπὶ πρόσωπον. The only possible suggestion that γονυπετέω is not entirely acceptable is in Lk 5.12 where an alternative phrase is used; Luke may be refining Mark, as elsewhere<sup>3</sup>). But it is clear from other parallel passages that the NT writers made little distinction between kneeling and prostration<sup>4</sup>), and hence it can still be argued that the verb is an accepted element in the vocabulary of the gospel writers.

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<sup>1</sup>) For example, by H. Schlier in G. Kittel (ed.), *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* I (Stuttgart 1933) 738–740; cf. W. Bauer, *Griechisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der übrigen urchristlichen Literatur*<sup>4</sup> (Berlin 1952) 299. The adverb γνώξ, with particular reference to the Homeric formula σιῆ δὲ γνώξ ἐριπών, is discussed by H. Erbse in *Glotta* 32 (1953) 240–243.

<sup>2</sup>) On προσκύνειω with the dative and accusative and its meanings, see J. H. Moulton et al., *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* I<sup>3</sup> (Edinburgh 1908) 64, 66; III (Edinburgh 1963) 7, 65, 245; J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan, *The vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (London 1914–30) VI. 549; F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *Grammatik des neutestamentlichen Griechisch*<sup>11</sup> (Göttingen 1961) 100–101, 121. See further H. Greeven in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* VI (Stuttgart 1959) 759–767.

<sup>3</sup>) e.g. Mk 2.4, 11 τὸν κράβαττον, Lk 5.18 ἐπὶ κλίνης (so Mt 9.2), Lk 5.24 τὸ κλινίδιον.

<sup>4</sup>) H. Schlier, *loc. cit.* (n. 1, p.) 738–739.

In the Greek fathers *γονυπετέω* at first does not differ perceptibly from its meaning in the NT but later develops the specific sense of “genuflect”. Clemens Alexandrinus *q.d.s.* 8 (M.9.612C), *ἤτει γονυπετῶν τὴν ἀθανασίαν*, refers to the story in Mk 10.17–31 where *γονυπετέω* is used. However *q.d.s.* 42 (M.9.649C = Eus.*h.e.* 3.23.19), *δεόμενος, γονυπετῶν*, and Eus.*v.C.* 4.22 (M.20.1169A), *ἱκετηρικαῖς τε δεήσεσι γονυπετῶν*, confirm the meaning “kneel down”, “fall on one’s knees”. During the first four centuries the fathers use other terms for kneeling: 1 *Clem.* 48.1 *προσπέσωμεν τῷ Δεσπότη*, Hn 1.1.3, 2.1.2 (cf. 3.1.5) *τιθῶ τὰ γόνατα*<sup>1)</sup>, Hegesippus ap. Eus.*h.e.* 2.23.6 (M.20.197A) *κάμπτειν ἐπὶ γόνυ* (cf. 1 *Clem.* 57.1), Eus.*h.e.* 5.5.1 (M.20.441A) *γόνυ θέντας ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν*, Ps.-Justin *qu. et resp.* 115 (M.6.1364A) *τὸ κλίνειν τὸ γόνυ . . . γόνυ οὐ κλίνουσιν οἱ εὐχόμενοι*. The sense “genuflect” for *γονυπετέω* must have been established before *γονυπέτησις* was used for “genuflexion”, as in Thdr.*Stud.or.* 11.2.12 (M.99.813C) *ἀποπεμπόμενος μετὰ γονυπέτησιω παρὰ τοῦ Πατρὸς* and Eust.*adv.imprac. accus.* 33<sup>2)</sup> *τὰς ψευδεῖς γονυπετήσεις ἐθεώρησα*. But the more general sense remained, as Eustathius’ explanations in *Commentarii ad Homeri Iliadem* 129.20, 669.32 and 1171.45 show. The fathers also used *γονυκλιέω* and *γονυκλιτέω* for “kneel”, as well as *γόνυ* with *κλίνω*, *κάμπτω* and *τίθημι* (especially the first), while *γονυκλιῆς* signifies “on bended knee”, “kneeling” and *γονυκλισία* “bending the knee”, “genuflexion”, has a wide range of uses<sup>3)</sup>. In Latin the important words are *geniculatio*, *geniculatus*, *geniculo*, *geniculum*, *genuflecto*, *genuflexio* and *genuflexus*<sup>4)</sup>; in the Old Irish texts, where special uses of genuflexion are detailed, the key word is *slechtaim* (from Latin *flecto*)<sup>5)</sup>. In modern Greek *γονυκλισία*, *γονά-*

<sup>1)</sup> Cf. Mk 15.19; this may be a Latinism (*genua ponere*; cf. Blass-Debrunner, *op.cit.* [n.2, p.] 8).

<sup>2)</sup> Eustathii *Opuscula*, ed. Tafel (Frankfurt/M. 1832) XIV, p. 105.62.

<sup>3)</sup> For examples, see G. W. H. Lampe (ed.), *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* Fasc. 2 (Oxford 1962) s.vv.; H. Schlier, *loc.cit.* (n.1, p.) 740.

<sup>4)</sup> See (B. J. Schmid and) A. Sleumer, *Kirchenlateinisches Wörterbuch* (Limburg 1926) and A. Souter, *A Glossary of Later Latin to 600 A. D.* (Oxford 1949).

<sup>5)</sup> On the practice of genuflexion see H. Leclerq, art. “Génuflexion” in F. Cabrol and H. Leclerq, *Dictionnaire d’archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie* vol. 6 (Paris 1924) coll. 1017–1021; for Irish variations, see for example sections 11 and 12 of the *arrea* edited and translated by K. Meyer in *Revue celtique* 15 (1894) 489, 494–495; Walafrius Strabus, *de rebus eccles.* 25 (M. PL 114.952–953); L. Gougaud, “Some liturgical and ascetic traditions of the Celtic church. I. Genuflexion”, *JThS* 9 (1908) 556–561; H. Leclerq, *loc.cit.* 1020–1021.

τισμα, γονατιστός and γονατίζω are used, the last apparently overshadowing *γονυπετέω*<sup>1)</sup>. *γονυπετής* seems to have continued in use, as is shown by the examples from 5th century prose and 19th century poetry quoted by D. Demetrakou<sup>2)</sup>.

What is the background of this compound which occurs naturally in the New Testament and is adopted by the fathers of the Christian church? J. Pokorny suggests as an original form *γνο-πετεῖν*<sup>3)</sup> but in fact *γονυπετεῖν* can only be traced back as far as Polybius. *γονυπετής* seems to be the earlier form for three reasons: it occurs in earlier writers; the verb is formed in *-πετέω*, whereas the prepositional compounds are formed with *-πίπτω* and *-πίτνω*; and there are at least six compounds in *-πετής* where there is no record of a corresponding verb in *-πετέω*<sup>4)</sup>. In any case, it is necessary to examine the isolated occurrences of *γονυπετής* in order to understand the background of *γονυπετέω*<sup>5)</sup>. Timotheus describes the Persian king in great distress at the flight of the Persians:

Tim. Pers. 173 ὁ δὲ παλινπόρευτον ὡς ἔσ-  
εἶδε Βασιλεὺς εἰς φυγὴν ὄρ-  
μῶντα παμμικτῆ στρατόν,  
176<sup>6)</sup> γονυπετής αἰκίζε σῶμα,  
φάτο δὲ κυμαίνων τύχαισιν.

<sup>1)</sup> G. Rohlfs, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch der unteritalienischen Gräzität* (Halle 1930) 54–55, 209, *Lexicon Graecanicum Italiae Inferioris* (Tübingen 1964) 111, 426 cites *γονατίζω*, *γονατιστός*, *γόνατον* and *προσκυνέω* but not *γονυπετέω* or *γονυπετής* for the dialects of southern Italy.

<sup>2)</sup> *Μέγα Λέξικον τῆς Ἑλληνικῆς γλώσσης* (Athens 1949) ii. 1678; the poem of Balaorites (*Στιχούρημα γ' : ὁ Λευκάτας*, v. 33) is readily consulted in volume 16 of the Basike Bibliothek collection (Athens 1959).

<sup>3)</sup> *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch I* (Bern & Munich 1959) 381; cf. H. Frisk, *Griechisches etymologisches Wörterbuch I* (Heidelberg 1960) 317 (s. v. γνύξ). These suggestions appear to be based on the entries in Hesychius (ed. Latte) γ 730–736, 834. The explanation of Eustathius (129.20: *συνθέντες ἐκ τοῦ γόνυ καὶ τοῦ πέτειν, ἐξ οὗ τὸ πίπτειν παράγεται, ὡς τὸ ῥίπτειν ἀπὸ τοῦ ῥέπειν*) is clearly inadequate. Blass-Debrunner, *op. cit.* (n. 2, p.) 79 suggest the priority of *γονυπετής*.

<sup>4)</sup> *ἀεροπετής*, *γηπετής*, *Διοπετής*, *ἐδπετής*, *οὐρανοπετής*, *προπετής*; in addition Sophocles has *δυσπετής*, Aeschylus and others *δυσπετῶς*, but *δυσπετέω* only occurs in Suidas; Aeschylus and others have *χαμαιπετής* while the single occurrence of *χαμαιπετέω* (Pi. N. 4.41) may be *χαμαι πετοῖσαν*.

<sup>5)</sup> Neither compound occurs in the Septuagint or other Greek versions of the Old Testament.

<sup>6)</sup> D. L. Page, *Poetae Melici Graeci* (Oxford 1962) 411 = v. 189 of *die Perser*, ed. Wilamowitz-Möllendorff (Leipzig 1903).

As a normal Greek prose expression for verse 176 we might quote Wilamowitz-Möllendorff's paraphrase: *ἐπὶ τὰ γόνατα προπεσὼν τὸ μὲν σῶμα ἤικιζε*. Timotheus seems to be striving for a word (inventing one?) which represents vividly the action of the Persian king. About a decade later Euripides had his chorus of Phoenician women use *γονυπετής* in addressing Polyneices when they found out his identity:

E. *Ph.* 293            *γονυπετεῖς ἔδρας προσπίτνω σ', ἄναξ,  
τὸν οἴκοθεν νόμον σέβουσ' —*

His lineage reminds them of their native land (*Φοίνισσα γῆ* in v. 280) and they respond in a typically eastern manner, falling into "a kneeling position". They say explicitly that it is a Phoenician custom (v. 294 above) and Jocasta herself, on entering, emphasises their ties with their native land (vv. 301f.). Both Timotheus and Euripides use the adjective to impart a definite oriental flavour to their poetry.

Over two hundred years later comes the first occurrence of the verb:

Plb. 15.29.9            *ἐλπάρει γονυπετοῦσα καὶ μαγγανεύουσα πρὸς τὰς  
θεάς*

The woman whom Polybius describes praying in the Thesmophoreum is Oenante, a Macedonian in Egypt. She was the mother of Agathocles, regent of Ptolemy V Epiphanes in Alexandria, who conducted the state so badly that he provoked a revolution in 203 B. C. in which he and his family were brutally murdered. *γονυπετέω* naturally enhances the dramatic setting. In book 32 Polybius describes Prusias II of Bithynia before and after his victory over Attalus II (157–5 B. C.). After sacrificing in the temple of Asclepius, Prusias led his army to the Nicephorium and destroyed all the temples and sacred precincts, even carrying off the statue of Asclepius. Polybius calls these the acts of a madman, for his devotion to the god previously had been equally frenzied:

Plb. 32.15.7            *προσκυνοῦντα καὶ λιπαροῦντα τὰς τραπέζας καὶ τοὺς  
βωμοὺς ἐξάλλως, ὅπερ ὁ Προουσίας εἰθιστο ποιεῖν  
γονυπετῶν καὶ γυναικιζόμενος.*

The scene of these activities is the Nicephorium at Pergamum, which Prusias captured from Attalus. In both passages where Polybius uses *γονυπετέω* he does so to emphasise excessive devotion in eastern temples, one in Asia Minor and the other in Egypt.

If we look again at the NT occurrences of the verb, we see that kneeling is not represented as a specifically Christian practice: *γονυπετέω* is used by Jewish Christians of Jews who are not Christ's followers. The act of kneeling — and indeed of prostration (the Mt and Lk parallels to Mk 1.40) — before a recognised teacher (thus Mk 10.17) or healer (thus Mk 1.40) seems to have been accepted by the Jews. Jesus is addressed in the passages where *γονυπετέω* is used as *Κύριε, Διδάσκαλε ἀγαθέ* and *Βασιλεῦ τῶν Ἰουδαίων*. The verb occurs elsewhere about the same time:

Corn. ND 12.7 [τάς Λιτάς] *χωλὰς μὲν οὔσας διὰ τὸ πίπτειν τοὺς γονυπετοῦντας.*

Now Cornutus is explaining various aspects of traditional Greek mythology in Stoic fashion<sup>1</sup>); in this case he is seeking to explain the epithets used of the daughters of Zeus in Il. 9.503 (*χωλαί τε ἔρσαι τε παραβλῶπές τ' ὀφθαλμῶ*) and in so doing he introduces a vivid word not occurring in Homer. In the third century Heliodorus described the people of Syene craving forgiveness of the Ethiopians after they let Oroöndates and his fellow-Persians escape:

Hld. 9.11.4 *ικέται πόρρωθεν γονυπετοῦντες ἐκάθητο.*

Along with other phrases (e.g. *ἐλεινήν ὀλολυγὴν ἰέντες*) *γονυπετέω* serves to highlight the utter degradation of the supplication of the people of Syene. Apart from the example quoted in Preisigke's *Wörterbuch*, I cannot find any occurrences of *γονυπετέω* in papyri, even in collections of papyri published more recently than the standard reference works. Preisigke refers to a papyrus in J. Maspero, *Papyrus grecs d'époque byzantine* (1910–16):

PMasp (6700) 2 III.20 *παρακαλοῦμεν γονυπετοῦντες τὸ διαβεβη- μένον ὕψος ὑμῶν.*

The appeal sounds as humble as that described by Heliodorus, but this one was addressed to an actual official, Fl. Marianos, duke of the Thebaid, in A. D. 522 or 537. "We entreat your celebrated highness on our knees" is part of an appeal by the village of Aphrodito against the dealings of Menas, pagarch of Antaiopolis, and his employees. There are signs of Christian influence in the letter<sup>2</sup>), but the practice alluded to in this metaphor must be Egyptian rather

<sup>1</sup>) For example a few lines previously (11.20) he justifies the statement that *πάντ' ἐφορᾷ Διὸς ὀφθαλμὸς καὶ πάντ' ἐπακούει* (cf. Il. 3.277, Od. 11.109, 12.323, Hes. *Op.* 267, Sol. 13.17, S. *El.* 175) by the question *πῶς γὰρ οἶόν τέ ἐστι τὴν διὰ πάντων διήκουσαν δύναμιν λανθάνειν τι τῶν ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ γινομένων;*

<sup>2</sup>) See I. 2 and III. 25 with notes on (vol. I) pp. 7, 13.

than Christian, since the Greek fathers use *γονυπετέω* of respect for God, not men.

The early occurrences of *γονυπετής* and the consistent connotation fo *γονυπετέω* combine to show that the compound was formed by Greek writers for passages where the setting is definitely oriental. With the exception of Cornutus (and there are special features in his passage), Greek authors use the verb of Persians, Phoenicians, members of Greek ruling families in Egypt and Asia Minor, but not of Greeks in Greece. Timotheus, Polybius and Heliodorus employ the compound to describe excessive eastern practices. It is used without literary motive in the NT, but there it is by Jews speaking about their own people; and in the byzantine papyrus it is used by Egyptians of themselves. Now the consistent eastern context in passages where *γονυπετέω* is used is not due to a Greek abhorrence of kneeling before the gods. They may have objected to prostration<sup>1)</sup>, but they did not to kneeling, as is shown by the representations of kneeling worshippers on Attic reliefs<sup>2)</sup>. Yet when this practice is discussed, *γονυπετεῖν* is avoided. For example, in the text where Dionysus is worshipped in this way the key phrase is *τὸ γόνυ τὸ δεξιὸν κλίναντα*<sup>3)</sup>. This avoidance of *γονυπετέω* confirms the theory that the verb was reserved for occasions when the writers wished to impart a specifically oriental tone.

### Greek Names in -σσοσ/-ττος

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R. A. Crossland has recently called attention to the difficulties standing in the way of assuming that Greek and Anatolian names in *-ssos/-ttos* are of Luvian origin<sup>4)</sup>. And though he is right to reopen

<sup>1)</sup> See Hdt. 7.136.1, E. Tr. 1021, Or. 1507, X. An. 3.2.13, Isoc. 4.151, Arr. An. 4.11.1–12.1 and references given by R. A. Neil, *The Knights of Aristophanes* (Cambridge 1901) 28 (on Eq. 156).

<sup>2)</sup> O. Walter, *J Œ AI* 13 (1910) Beiblatt 229ff. For Greek and Roman acceptance of kneeling, see further Nonn. D. 22.374–375, Liv. 26.9.7, Plu. CG 16.

<sup>3)</sup> Aristid. or. 50(26).39 (II. 435 Keil = I. 513 Dindorf). It is true that the force of *δεξιός* would be awkward to include if *γονυπετέω* were used. O. Weinrich, *ARW* 17 (1914) 527–531, adds this text to Walter's collection and discusses it fully.

<sup>4)</sup> R. A. Crossland, "The Supposed Anatolian Origin of the place-name formants in *-ss-* and *-tt-*", *Atti VII Congresso Internazionale di Scienze onoma-*