

This is a pre-publication version for consultation only. Please do not cite this. Consult the printed edition which is the official text. © D Instone-Brewer 1999

“Comfort” - for the New Dictionary of Theology

Comfort in the Ancient World

Comfort or consolation is the encouragement or sympathy given to someone who is grieving or sad for other reasons. In both the Jewish world and the pagan world it was considered the duty of a relative or neighbour to give comfort by visiting or by writing a letter if the distance was too far.

The many letters of comfort which have survived suggest that the normal message was “do not lament long”. It was argued that “lamenting is useless”, and that they should “set an example” by mourning for a short period. The reading of philosophy and poetry was encouraged, and philosophers would attend the sorrowful like physicians attended the sick. Sometimes diversions such as wine, song or even riddles were encouraged. Assurances of immortality, or the peacefulness of eternal nothingness were given, depending on the beliefs of the comforter.

The gods were almost never invoked or referred to. Comfort was not regarded as a function of the gods, and there was no deity with this role. The Biblical concept of a God who comforts was virtually unknown in the pagan world.

Comfort in the Old Testament

The concept of comfort is expressed most often by the word *neham*. This is used for sorrow and regret in the *niphal* form, and comfort or consolation in the *piel* form. Sorrow is comforted by visiting (Gen.37:35; Job 2:11; 42:11) and by bringing food and wine (Jer.16:5,7; Gen.14:18). Consolation was given mostly to those who were bereaved (Gen.24:67; 37:35; 38:12; 2 Sam.10:2; 12:24; 1 Chr.19:2; Is.61:2; Jer.16:7; 31:15).

The book of Job shows how friends were expected to comfort. They came to sit with the sorrowful, and share their sorrow. They give encouragement through talking, especially about philosophical aspects of life and death, punishment and reward. They surrounded him with support like troops surround their king (Job.29:25), but in Job's case they gave poor comfort (Job 16:2).

The Psalms and Prophets emphasise that comfort comes from God. God comforts individuals (Pss.22:5; 86:17; 93:19) and the people of God (Is.40:1ff; 54:11ff; 51:19ff). He comforts like a shepherd (Ps.23:4; Is.40:11) and like a mother (Is.66:13). His consolation is mediated through Scripture (Ps.118:52, 76, 82; 2 Macc.15:9), Wisdom (Wisdom 8:9), and especially through his Servant (Is.61:2). The Septuagint of Isaiah 57:18 calls the comfort of God, "true comfort".

Development of Comfort / Consolation in Judaism

The Consolations of Isaiah opening with Isaiah 40:1 "Comfort, comfort my people", became very important in Judaism. The Messiah was called "the consolation of Israel" (based on Is.61:2), and the end time was called the "the time of consolation". Consolation also became a term for preaching, and was used to describe the subject of the second synagogue reading from the Prophets, the *haftorah*. Before the lectionary of the *haftorah* was finalised, the reader could choose any passage from the Prophets which had links with the Torah, or he could choose any passage about the consolation of Israel.

Comfort in the New Testament

Comfort or consolation is almost always expressed using *parakalein* and its cognates. The normal meaning of *parakalein* outside the Septuagint and Christian writings is "to summon" someone and "to beseech / exhort" a person or a god. It was occasionally

used for “to comfort”, but this meaning became much more common in Jewish and Christian writings. They were both influenced by the Septuagint which used *parakalein* as the regular translation of *nacham*.

The use of *parakalein* in the Gospels and Acts is influenced by the Jewish development of “consolation” as a term for the Messiah and the eschatological hope. The rich have their comfort now (Luke 6:24), but the righteous wait for eternal consolation (Matt.5:4; Luke 16:25), “the consolation of Israel” (Luke 2:25). In Acts it is used for the second Torah reading and for the preaching on these passages of consolation (Acts 13:15, 31; 15:31).

The epistles reflect the Septuagint concept of comfort from other people and especially from God. Hebrews and Paul find comfort in the word of God (Heb.6:18; 12:5 referring to Prov.3:11; Rom.15:4). Paul also sees comfort in the visits of Tychicus (Col.4:8, cf. Eph.6:22), Philemon (Philem.7) and Timothy (1 Thess.3:7), who himself was comforted when at Corinth (2 Cor.7:4, 7, 13). Paul points out that when we receive comfort, we can give it to others, especially when that comfort comes from God (2 Cor.1:3-7). Although the epistles speak mostly about receiving comfort from each other and from God in this life, Paul also looks forward to the eternal consolation (2 Thess.2:16).

The Holy Spirit as Paraklete

{Editor: Move this to “Holy Spirit” or elsewhere if it does not fit in this article}

The traditional translation of *parakletos* as “comforter” is probably mistaken. It was popularised in many early translations (especially Wycliff, King James, and perhaps Luther), but later translations have favoured the more accurate “advocate” or a more neutral “paraclete”.

The normal meaning of *parakletos* in Greek literature is “advocate”, usually in the legal sense of one who speaks in court on someone’s behalf. Rabbinic literature speaks

of Michael or other angels who are advocates for Israel in the heavenly courts. The advocates for individuals appearing before God are their good deed and their repentance.

In the New Testament, *parakletos* clearly means “advocate” in 1 John 2:1, where Jesus stands before the Father interceding for the sinner. This fits the rest with other NT teaching concerning Christ as intercessor (Rom.8:34; Heb.7:25; Matt.10:32f).

The Holy Spirit is called *parakletos* in the farewell discourses of John 14-16. Here too a courtroom theme of judgement and conviction is present (John 16.7-11), which makes the title “advocate” very apt. This does not detract from the role of the Holy Spirit as one who comforts the disciples when Jesus leaves them (cf. Acts 9:31).

Bibliography:

Schmitz, “*Parakaleo, paraklesis*” in TDNT V: 773-799

Behm, “*Parakletos*” in TDNT V: 800-814

M. Butterworth, “5714 *NHM*” in DOTTE III 81-83

J. Mann & I. Sonne, *The Bible as Read and Preached in the Old Synagogue* (2 vols, Cincinnati, 1940-1966)

D Instone Brewer