

HUPOGRAMMOS -- THE PERFECT PATTERN

1 Peter 2:21 For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example [*hupogrammos*] for you to follow in His steps,

There is only one example of the word *hupogrammos* in the NT, but it is an example with a vivid picture behind it. Peter says of Jesus that 'He left us an example (*hupogrammos*) that we should follow in his steps' (I Pet. 2.21).

The word *hupogrammos* is a word which comes from Greek primary education. It is a word which has to do with the way in which Greek boys were taught to write. The common writing material in NT times was *papyrus*, which was a kind of paper made of the pith of the bulrush which grew mainly on the banks of the Nile. It was by no means a cheap material. It was usually manufactured in sheets which measured ten by eight inches. The sheets varied in quality and in price. The cheapest sheets were about fourpence; and the dearest slightly more than a shilling. Obviously papyrus was far too expensive a substance for boys to practice writing on. So, then, the school-boy's exercise book was usually the wax tablet. The wax tablet was like a very shallow box filled with soft wax. The writing was done with a *stylus* which was pointed at one end and flat at the other. The pointed end was used to write with, and the flat end was used to smooth over the wax, so that it could be used again.

The method by which boys were taught to write is outlined for us in two places. Plato in the *Protagoras* (326 D) tells us that in teaching to write the writing master first drew lines (*hupographein*, which is the verb corresponding to the noun *hupogrammos*) with a stylus for the use of the learner, and then gave him the tablet and made him write as the lines directed. In practice this meant two things. The writing master drew parallel lines to keep the boy's writing straight; and he also wrote at the top of the tablet a line of writing which the boy had to copy. That line was the *hupogrammos*, the pattern which the boy must follow. Sometimes the writing was a moral maxim; more often it was a nonsense sentence which contained all the letters of the alphabet. Clement of Alexandria (*Stromateis* 5.8) gives an example of such a sentence: *marpte sphigx klops zbuchthedon*. (In Greek *ph*, *ps*, *ch* and *th* are all single letters, respectively *phi*, *psi*, *chi* and *theta*.) That was the perfect line of writing which the master wrote at the top of the page and which the schoolboy had to copy. So Peter is saying: 'Just as the schoolboy learns to write by copying the perfect copper-plate example, so we are scholars in the school of life, and we can only learn to live by copying the perfect pattern of life which Jesus gave to us.'

But there was another way of using the *hupogrammos* which has something to contribute to Peter's meaning. Quintilian in his *Education of an Orator* (1.1.27) tells us that sometimes the schoolmaster traced the letters in the wax of the tablet; and "then the hand of the boy is guided along the grooves, for then he will make no mistakes". At first the master helped the boy by placing his hand over the scholar's, but then he let him try it by himself and the edges of the grooves kept him from 'straying beyond the boundary'. That, too, must have been in Peter's mind. Simply to have to copy the *hupogrammos* all by oneself must often have been difficult and discouraging; but for the scholar to have had the master's hand over his hand, and to have had the grooves to follow, so that his pen could not stray, must have made things much easier. Jesus does not give us an example and leave it at that; an example can be the most discouraging thing on earth. For centuries men watched the birds flying and got no nearer to being able to do the same. A man may watch a champion golfer and be left with nothing but the desire to burn his own clubs! A pianist may hear and see a master executant and be left with nothing but the resolution never to touch a piano again! But Jesus does more than give us an example. As the master's hand guided the scholar's first fumbling efforts, so he guides us; as the groove kept the scholar's pen within the boundary, so his grace directs us. He left us not only a dauntingly perfect *hupogrammos*; he constantly helps us to follow it.