

The Value of the Papyri for New Testament Study

by Frederick E. Blume

To even the most casual reader the language of the Greek New Testament exhibits striking dissimilarities from classical Greek in both vocabulary and grammar. There was a time when the Greek of the New Testament was accordingly looked upon as being a language in a class all its own, or even, as one German scholar called it, “a language of the Holy Ghost.” (R.Rothe, *Zur Dogmatik*, Gotha, 1863, p.238). Sometimes it had been hastily classed as “Judaic” or “Hebraic” Greek, the term implying that the language of the New Testament was an *artificial* product, stemming directly from the translation-Greek of the Septuagint.

Today the language of the Greek New Testament is universally recognized as being in the main the ordinary vernacular Greek of that period. That is to say, it is the common spoken language of the day, and not therefore in the style of contemporary literature which was often influenced by an attempt to imitate the great authors of classical times, then all dead for at least 300 years (Atticism). It was the language of everyday life as it was spoken and written by the ordinary men and women of the day, the κοινή (common: i.e., common property without dialects) of the great Graeco-Roman world.

To be sure Semitisms were bound to creep into the language of evangelist and apostle. The background of race (Jews all except perhaps Luke) and of the sacred literature of the Greek Old Testament would make their presence perfectly natural. But the fundamental character of the Greek New Testament as belonging to the κοινή has been very evident ever since it was recognized that the non-literary papyri and the New Testament speak the same language.

The credit for making the discovery goes to Adolf Deissmann, then pastor at Marburg. Deissmann happened one day to be turning over in the University Library at Heidelberg a new section of a volume containing transcripts from the collection of Greek Papyri at Berlin; and as he read he was suddenly struck by the likeness of the language of these papyri to the language of the Greek New Testament. Further study deepened in his mind the extent of this likeness, and he realized that he held in his hand the real key to the old problem of the precise nature of the language of the New Testament.

It is strange that Deissmann’s discovery was not made long before his time. If tradition be true, the value of such documents as the papyri would prove to be was anticipated as early as 1863. In that year J.B. Lightfoot, lecturing to his class at Cambridge is reported to have said:

You are not to suppose that the word (some N.T. word which had its only classical authority in Herodotus) had fallen out of use in the interval, only that ilk had not been used in books which remain to us; probably it had been part of the common speech all along. I will go further and say that IF WE COULD ONLY RECOVER LETTERS THAT ORDINARY PEOPLE WROTE TO EACH OTHER WITHOUT ANY THOUGHT OF BEING LITERARY, WE SHOULD HAVE THE GREATEST POSSIBLE HELP FOR THE UNDERSTANDING OF THE LANGUAGE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT GENERALLY.

The discoveries of these “letters that ordinary people wrote to each other without any thought of being literary” made in the last half century constitute a dramatic and important chapter in the history of Greek as well as New Testament studies.

Papyri began to come to light in 1752 when the library of an Epicurean philosopher was uncovered in Herculaneum, and twenty-six years later, in 1778, a group of forty or fifty rolls was found in Egypt, probably in the Fayum, one of which is preserved in the Naples museum. In 1820 the Serapeum papyri were discovered and passed into the museums of London, Paris, Leyden, Rome, and Dresden. The next great find was made in 1877, on the site of Arsinoe, in the Fayum. This great mass of private documents found its way into the collection of the Archduke Rainer at Vienna.

All these finds were made by native diggers, and mostly by chance. But in 1889 the first discovery of Greek papyri by archaeologists was made by Professor W.M. Flinders Petrie at Gurob, in the Fayum. There he found mummies of the Ptolemaic period with breast-pieces, sandals, and head-pieces made of papyrus cartonnage,—old waste papyri glued together into a sort of pasteboard, which had been whitened over and painted with mortuary designs. These Petrie Papyri attracted much attention because of their Ptolemaic date, and because many remarkable literary pieces were found among them.

A new stage in the progress of papyrus research was reached in the work of Grenfell and Hunt at Behnesa, in Upper Egypt, in 1897. There the Romans in early Christian times had cleared out their record office, and sent out baskets full of old documents to be piled up and burned. The fire had smouldered and gone out however, and sand had covered the heap, so that Grenfell's men carried the papyri to his camp in some cases in the very baskets in which the Romans centuries before had sent them out to be burned. A leaf of the Sayings of Jesus (Logia), found among them drew general attention to the Oxyrhynchus Papyri, which now fill seventeen large volumes. Grenfell and Hunt dug at Tebtunis in the Fayum in 1900 (THE CROCODILE STORY) and at Hibeh in Upper Egypt in 1903, in which year they also returned to Behnesa and pursued their excavations there, with success.

Other archaeologists also have gathered Greek papyri and *ostraka* from the drier strata lying back from the Nile, and a number of scholars have worked upon them; among these Wessely, Wilcken, and Kenyon have been conspicuous. (MEDINET-BABU OSTRAKA)

The value of these studies for the language of the New Testament has become increasingly evident, and some acquaintance with such documents must now be recognized as an indispensable part of a thorough training for New Testament study.

For in content the papyri present a great variety of documents, Christian, Jewish, pagan; literary and non-literary; personal and official; private and public; private letters, receipts, lists, requests, legal contracts, leases, reports of judicial proceedings and lawsuits, wills, census and property returns, loans of money, certificates for work on the embankments during flood-time, and accounts galore; occasionally a work of literature comes to light for the first time on papyrus (Aristotle's *Constitution of Athens*; Menander's plays; Herondas' mimes, six of Hyperides' speeches; and as is to be expected there is a liberal intersprinkling of literary texts, i.e. copies on papyrus of passages from Greek literature from Homer on down.

As I take the word *papyri* in my theme in its widest sense (to include ostraka, inscriptions, etc.), so I shall take the words *New Testament Study* also in a rather wide sense so as to include not only the vocabulary and grammar of the New Testament itself but everything that properly belongs to the field of N. T. study, e.g. early church history

Thus liberally interpreting my theme, I shall say that, in the first place, the papyri ought to interest us, for

I. The Fragments of Early Christian Literature they contain.

The early church fathers knew of an apocryphal story of Paul and the Baptized Lion. The episode has now turned up in a papyrus Manuscript of the Acts of Paul, and gives such a good example of what the NT apocrypha are like that I should like to translate a part of the lion story for you:

(Hamburg Papyrus 4:25-5:4) the lion then looked all around and came fully into view. Then he came running and lay down at Paul's legs like a trained lamb and like his slave; then he finished his prayer and arising to his feet as if out of a dream he said to Paul in a human voice: "Grace be with you." And Paul was not at all frightened but answered: "Grace be with you, lion." He laid his hand upon him and the whole crowd began to yell: "Away with the wizard; away with the condemned criminal."

The lion looked at Paul and Paul at the lion, and Paul knew that he was the lion who had come and had been baptized. And carried along by faith Paul said: “Are you the lion whom I baptized?” The lion answered Paul: “Yea.” And Paul spoke again and said to him: “And how were you caught?” The lion answered with a (divine?) voice: “Even as you were, Paul.”

In a papyrus from the third or fourth century in the Florence collection (PSI 1641, GPR 5) Sotas a Christian official sends to a certain Paul the church letters of Heros, Orion, Philadelphus, Pekysis, and Naaroun “catechumens”, and of Leon “catechumen in the beginning of the Gospel. “Receive them,” Sotas writes, “as is in order.”—Also in the Florence collection there is a letter from the Christian boy, Ammon to his “lady mother” Kallonike. The last lines of the letter preserved for us contain this bit of mature insight: “I want you to know that the wealthy Theaetetus is dead and has left all his earthly goods behind.”

These samples will illustrate the usefulness of the papyri for reconstructing a picture of the individuals in those early Christian communities that loom so large in the New Testament and in early Christian literature (Apostolic Fathers, Apologists). That these first converts to the Faith were not entirely free from certain notions carried over from paganism is also patent from the papyri. Chrysostom speaks of the magical use of the Gospels in his day; the superstitious reverence for the Gospel Book prevalent in the Eastern Church is well known; a papyrus from about 400 A. D. (GPR 3) uses as a charm the opening of each of the Gospels (John, Matthew, Mark, Luke in that order), of the 90th Psalm, and of the Lord’s prayer.

For information on magic as it was practiced in Graeco-Roman Egypt, the papyri have furnished numerous examples of the kind of magical papyrus books (i.e. *rolls*) burned that day at Ephesus (Acts 19:19).

II. Value of the Papyri for the Textual Criticism of the N. T.

This is not the time nor the place to discuss the theory and practice of textual criticism of the New Testament, but we ought not omit pointing out that the papyri have brought to light a number of both Old and New Testament texts, some of which present a textual problem all their own. At any rate, a number of Papyrus Manuscripts of the New Testament give us a Bible text at least 200 years older than any parchment Manuscript hitherto known.

The principal NT Biblical papyri are the following:

P⁴⁵ — (P.Oxy.208) III Century. This is a conjoint pair of leaves (i.e. two leaves from a single quire, still joined together as when the sheet of which they are composed was originally folded) found by Grenfell and Hunt at Oxyrhynchus in 1896/7 and published as P.Oxy.208. Since one leaf of it contains John 1:23-31,33-41 and the other John 20:11-17, 19-25, it is evident that the whole Gospel was included in a single quire probably of 25 folded sheets of which this is the outermost but one; it was thus the first example to be discovered of the single-quire codex, but now this form is known to have been quite common in the second and third centuries.

P¹³ — (P.Oxy.1582) III/IV Centuries; It contains Hebrews 2:14-5:5; 10:8-22; 10:29-11:13; 11:28-12:17.

P³⁸ — (P. Mich 1571) probably IV century, contains Acts 18:27-19:6; 19:12-16.

P⁴⁵ — (Chester Beatty Papyrus I) This consists of portions of 30 leaves of a codex which originally consisted of about 220 leaves and contained all four Gospels and Acts. In direct contrast with P⁵ and P⁴⁶ (Chester Beatty II) it is formed of a succession of quires of only 2 leaves; it seems that these 2 methods of forming papyrus codices represent early experiments which were eventually abandoned in favor of quires of 8, 10, or 12 leaves such as we find in later papyrus codices and universally in vellum or paper books.

P⁴⁶ — (Chester Beatty III) was once a papyrus codex of Paul’s church epistles on 86 leaves. It was written early in the III century and contained Romans, Hebrews, I and II Corinthians, Ephesians, Galatians,

Philippians, Colossians, I and II Thessalonians. Of the original 86 leaves, 10 are in the original Chester Beatty acquisition, 30 have been acquired by the University of Michigan.

P⁴⁷ — (Chester Beatty III) of the III century consists of 10 leaves of a codex of Revelation.

P⁴⁸ — (PSI 1165) contains Acts 23:11-16, 24-26. Its text is of the type of Codex Bezae (Codex D).

Finally, **P**⁵² (Pap. Rylands Gr. 457) is interesting principally for its early date, being dated by all palaeographers as surely no later than 150 and by the best palaeographers as early as 110. It is of canonical rather than textual interest, since the very existence of this papyrus codex proves that the Gospel of John was circulating in Egypt possibly still during the Apostle's lifetime and certainly in the generation after his death. It is easily our earliest fragment of any ms. of the N. T. But it is to be regretted that it contains only John 18:31-33,37,38.

I shall try to illustrate the textual problem presented by these papyri by a few examples chosen from **P**³⁸ (P Mich 1532). In Acts 19:1 our English Bibles and the Nestle text read: "And it came to pass, that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul having passed through the upper coasts came to Ephesus." **P**³⁸ reads: "And although Paul wished according to his own will to go to Jerusalem, the Spirit told him to return to Asia; so having passed through the upper parts ("coasts") he comes to Ephesus." This is also the reading of Codex D and the margin of the Harklensian Syriac of 616 A. D. Accordingly, "western readings" are not confined to the geographic West.

In v.2 of Acts 19 our versions reads: "He said unto them, Have ye received the Holy Ghost since ye believed? And they said unto him, We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost." For the latter reply, **P**³⁸ reads: "We have not so much as heard whether *any* receive the Holy Ghost." Again D and the margin of the Harklensian Syriac agree.

In Acts 19:5 our Version reads: "When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus." **P**³⁸ adds: "Christ, for the forgiveness of sins."

Acts 19:14 our Version reads: "And there were seven sons of one Sceva, a Jew, and chief of the priests, which did so." **P**³⁸ puts it thus: "Among whom also sons of Sceva, a certain Jewish high priest wished to do the same; since it was their custom to exorcise persons like this and to go in to them, they began to invoke the Name saying: We bid you by Jesus whom Paul the Apostle preaches to come forth."

All of these readings are supported by some branch of the younger manuscript tradition. Their particular value lies in their extreme age; that is to say, they are generally very much closer to the apostles themselves than the hitherto known text carried by the parchment manuscripts of the fourth century and later.

But it must be borne in mind that these Biblical papyri have all been found and published within very recent times. What their influence will be upon Textual theory remains to be seen. But certainly it will be well worth our while to watch these developments.

III. The Value of the Papyrus Finds for the History of the NT Canon.

This subject I have recently treated at length elsewhere (*Quartalschrift*, vol. 38, no. 4, pp. 279-280) and the matter need hardly be repeated here.

IV. The Value for New Testament Vocabulary.

The area in which the value of the papyri is the most apparent from the outset is that of vocabulary. Here repeatedly N. T. words that are unknown to or rare in classical usage appear as the familiar property of the writers of Egyptian papyrus letters; or meanings that are demanded from the New Testament context but are not found elsewhere are evident in the papyri. Or again, words are used by the papyri in just those homely connections in which we find them in the Gospels.

Here again, only a very few examples must suffice:

The word used for “salary” in Luke 3:14; Romans 6,23; 1 Cor. 9:7; 2 Cor.11:8 and rejected by the Atticists as poor Greek occurs for instance in a little papyrus memorandum by a native farmer of Philadelphia, Egypt to his employer. It reads: “Memorandum to Zeno from Labois: please, give me some salary. Good-bye.” (GPR 1)

The word for “sending up after legal arrest” (ἀναπέμπω) of Luke 23:7,11,15; Acts 25:21 occurs, e.g. in a warrant for the arrest of a certain Hermes who is wanted on the complaint of a “senator” Aurelius. (GPR 12)

The Elder Son in the Parable of the Prodigal returns home to have his ears outraged by the sound of an *orchestra* (συμφωνία) his father has ostensibly hired for the occasion. We have in the papyri a contract under the terms of which a village hires such an orchestra of flute-players and musicians to entertain them for a period of five days.

In a termination of partnership of A. D. 143 (GPR 70) the part to which each partner has legal claim is described in the same word as the one used by the younger brother in the prodigal son story when the younger son makes his impertinent demand of his parent: Luke 15:13 “Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me.”—This bit of added light certainly makes the younger brother’s early attitude seem still much more arrogant: by the very words he uses he claims to have a legal right to a portion of his father’s estate during the father’s lifetime.

In another papyrus a farm owner writes to his tenant about various duties of the latter. He includes the injunction: “Take good care of the calf.” One wonders whether this was such another fatted calf, saved up for the grand occasion, as was the one that graced the feast at the prodigal’s return.

In like manner one might go on to illuminate the words in almost every sentence of the N. T. And while in most cases the fundamental meanings of the words will not be greatly affected, the gain to the student in vividness and concreteness is immeasurable (ἀπέχω, παρουσία, οὐ μετρίως, οἱ σύν τι).

V. The Value of the Papyri for Grammar and Syntax of the N. T.

In this field the papyri have been all-too-little studied. But the papyri again bring many examples of what all of us no doubt felt to be “Oddities” when we first turned from the reading of the classics to that of New Testament Greek. For here, just as in the New Testament, prepositions are common where the older Greek would use a simple case form without the preposition; the periphrastic conjugation is not unusual; ἵνα-clauses are as often something else as final, often being synonymous with ὅτι-clauses; ἵνα with the subjunctive may be an imperative as it perhaps is Mark 2:10; the optative has practically disappeared; -μι verbs are treated like verbs in -ω; and second aorists suddenly receive first aorist endings (e.g., ἐλάβοσαν).

The practical value of these remarks to us should be the reminder that we dare not try to press the exegesis of a New Testament text into forms which suit classical grammar and syntax but which are not necessarily those of the *koine* or of New Testament Greek.

VI. The Human Interest Value of the Papyri.

I should like to conclude this sketch with a few examples that will show the human side of the men, women, and children of the Graeco-Roman world.

Here are two quotations from parallel letters exchanged between the father at home, and the boy away at college; in the first (P Oxy 531) a father gives good advice to his “sweetest son”: “Take care not to offend any of the persons at home, but give your mind to your books and nothing else, devoting yourself to learning, and so you will have profit from them.” The second (P Oxy 1296; GPR 21) is from a son to his “sweetest father”: “Do not be anxious, father, about my studies; I am working hard and taking relaxation. All will be well with me.”

Then there is the prodigal son who, different from the one in the parable, is ashamed to come home from the far country to his native village Karanis in the Fayum and writes a badly-spelled but moving letter to his mother, begging to be forgiven (BGU 846 LO p.128):

Antonius Longus to Nilous his mother, heartiest greetings. I pray continually for your good health, making supplication for you every day to the Lord Serapis. I would have you know that I never expected you to come up to the metropolis; and on that account neither did I enter the town. And I was ashamed to come to Karanis because I am going about in rags. I write to tell you that I am naked. I beseech you, mother, be reconciled to me. Besides, I know what I have brought upon myself. I have got a lesson, as was needful. I know that I have sinned. I have heard from Postumus who met you in the Arsinoe district and told you the whole story without reserve. Don't you know I would rather become a cripple than be conscious that I am still owing any man an obol?

The rest of the papyrus is unfortunately much torn, but the following pathetic words can be made out in successive lines: "Come yourself...I have heard...I beseech you...I almost...I beseech you...I am willing."

Another prodigal appears in a public notice (P Flor 99) officially displayed at Hermopolis. The prodigal's parents are cutting him adrift:

Since our son Castor along with others in riotous living has squandered all his own property, and is now laying hands on ours and desires to make away with it, we are on that account taking precautions lest he should deal spitefully with us, or do anything else amiss; we beg, therefore, that a proclamation be set up that no one should lend him money in future.

In Roman times Egypt had a bad reputation for evil practices. Trickery in Ptolemaic Egypt, too, is revealed by a papyrus (P Petr Fr.4) of B. C. 241, in which it appears that certain inhabitants of Arsinoe built up the doors of their houses, and set up altars there in order to avoid having Crown officials billeted on them. So did the evil the ancients did live after them, while the good was oft interred with their bones. But as an expression of loyalty and fine feeling, it would be hard to equal the following sentences from a maidservant to her absent master in the time of Hadrian (II A.D.) (P Giess 17; GPR 26): "We are dying because we do not see you every day. Would that we could take wing, and come and do obeisance to you."

The greetings at the end of a letter are often very numerous and, one might think, stereotyped; but they are evidently highly valued, for their absence was keenly felt, as is clear from these two quotations: (PGiss 78) "My little Heraidous, writing to her father, sends me no greeting, and I don't know why."

And (P Grenf 53) "Allous threatens you with many penalties, for, although you write often and give greetings to us all, her alone you do not greet." The latter sentence is addressed to a soldier by Artemis, his wife.

The papyri are of the utmost value in illuminating the pagan background of the centuries when Christianity was young. For example, the following passage from a letter (POxy; GPR 13) of the third century illustrates the pagan inclination to regard religion as a business transaction:

On receipt of the letter from my son Theon, put off everything, and come at once to me at the village because of what has happened to me. If you neglect this, as the gods have not spared me, so will I not spare the gods. Goodbye.

The relationship between gods and men was one of strict reciprocity. If the gods neglected their duty and afflicted their devotees, the latter had the right to retaliate by turning their backs on the gods.

Some of the letters from Oxyrhynchus give a glimpse of "society" in the town. Apparently the fashionable hour for dinner-parties was the ninth, i.e. about 3 o'clock in the afternoon; and such parties could be held in one of the temples. One invitation (POxy 110) formally expressed according to ancient and modern custom in the third person runs as follows: "Chaeremon requests your company at dinner, at the table of the Lord Serapis in the Serapeum, tomorrow the 15th at 3 o'clock."

The following letter (POxy 112) shows how the festivals of the gods were combined with social intercourse:

Greeting my dear Serenia, from Petosiris. Be sure, dear, to come up on the 20th from the birthday festival of the god; and let me know whether you are coming by boat or by donkey, so that we may send for you accordingly. See that you don't forget. I pray for your continued health.

Sometimes the reports of law-cases shed curious sidelights on the daily life of the people; for example, at Arsinoe in 221 B.C. a woman lodges a complaint against Petechon, the male attendant in the women's baths, that he threw hot water over her and scalded her body severely (PMagd 33r). We hear of a young widow in Alexandria who set herself expressly to destroy all remembrances of her deceased husband. A Christian document (P Oxy 903) of the fourth century gives a circumstantial account of a husband's violent and insulting treatment as described by the injured wife. I quote one sentence: "When I had gone off to church at Sambatho, he had the outside doors shut on me, saying, 'Why did you go to church?' and using many terms of abuse to my face and through his nose."

Examples on every phase of ancient life could of course be multiplied endlessly, but I hope to have given you a sufficient sampling of the variety in the papyri to impress you with the thought that my last point is by no means the least; namely that in a very special way the papyri are of value for an intimate understanding of the personal affairs of the people of the Graeco-Roman world, that world out of which so far as its temporal husk is concerned, the books of the New Testament came.

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