

HOW DID THE NON-LITERARY TEXT ILLUMINATE THE LANGUAGE,  
LITERARY CLASSIFICATION,  
AND RELIGIOUS HISTORY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

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### Introduction

The epoch making discovery of the papyri, ostraca and inscriptions was destined to transform the world's understanding of New Testament background and reclassify the sacred text as the book of the common man. Several scholars stand out in this epical task: Moulton in England, Robertson in the United States, and Deissmann in Germany. The work of these men points indubitably to the conclusion that the New Testament is not a piece of classical literature, nor is it written in the language of the "holy Ghost" but is a lucid example of first century colloquial speech--the Κοινή.

One of the most significant contributions to this new understanding is the imposing volume of Adolf Deissmann, Light from the Ancient East. In these illustratively adorned 535 pages, the author attempts to demonstrate that from the light of the non-literary texts discovered comes the unmistakable conclusion that the New Testament text is in contact with (not contrast to) the lower classes in language, literary classification and religion.

In reviewing this work we have attempted first to state the author's thesis as illustrated by examples and then to evaluate the conclusions drawn therefrom.

### The Language of the New Testament

After pointing out the futility of contending for a per-

fect language for the New Testament as some of the Latin Fathers did, Deissmann proceeds to give example in the fields of phonology, onomatology, vocabulary and syntax to demonstrate that the New Testament is a record of late colloquial Greek.

### Phonology

Here the author simply states the fact of the innumerable details of correspondance between the contemporary "profane" records and the New Testament and points to the works of Winer, Schmiedel, and Dieterich as demonstrative of his point.

### Onomatology

One example is used here, the word panthera from the early Christian tradition concerning Jesus' family. It was once thought to be a nickname specially invented for the purpose of Jewish polemics. Now from Latin inscriptions it can be demonstrated as a family name often found on epitaphs (page 74).

### Vocabulary

This field of linguistics abounds with evidence for the author's contention. His main contention is in the direction of narrowing the formerly accepted list of purely "Biblical" words by either pointing to their discovery in profane usage or to their obviously secular nature. Ἀγάπη (page 75) and ἀποκάλυψις (page 78) provide excellent examples of this. The former is used of a devotees prayer to the god, Isis (page 75), and the latter St. Jerome mistakenly excludes to the New Testament (page 78).

A Resulting Rule The author concludes that research would

reverse the formerly accepted philological principle and assert that "unless a word is recognized as Christian or Jewish at sight we must consider it ordinary Greek untill the contrary is proved" (page 78). Hence, he would narrow the list of "Biblical" words to one per cent (50 out of the 5000) of New Testament vocabulary.

Meaning of Words He concludes that by far Christianity has changed more meanings than it has created new words (page 107) even though men have exaggerated this too.

### Syntax

From this area the author points out a few formerly held "Hebraisms" that have been discovered in the papyri as *Βλέπειν ἀπὸ* ("beware of"), *δὺὸ δὺὸ* ("two by two") and *πληρὴς* (full) which was once held to be a mononym of the Holy Spirit and now has its parallel in the papyri with the others (page 122).

### Style

The author singles out the paratactic style of John as a test case since it is so often considered Semetic. He points to the "I am's" and "and...and's" constructions as having their parallels in the Fayum papyri number 108 (page 134), the inscription of Asclepius in Rome (page 135), and many others. He concludes that the popular style of John is not a result of imitation but a result of natural growth (page 133) via a simple Hellenistic style of expression in the first person singular (page 141).

### Summary and Evaluation

The verdict of historical philology based on the contemporary non-literary text must be that the "sacred books are so many records of popular Greek, in its various grades; taken as a whole the New Testament is a book of the people" (page 143).

There is nothing profound about the author's premis: the texts of stone, paper and pottery have helped us to acknowledge the New Testament not as a product of the refined upper classes but of the simple speech of the lower classes strengthened by the Divine presence (page 144).

With this basic contention we have no disagreement as likewise with the author's general linguistical principles. At times the author may have overdrawn his premises (such as the style of John and the rule for vocabulary) nevertheless it seems as though he did so in the right direction at least-in favor of the colloquial language of the sacred text.

#### The New Testament as Literature

The question which the author undertakes to answer concerns whether the New Testament is properly literature or not with respect to its origin. That is, was it "something written for the public cast in artistic form" or was it a "product of life and not art" being literature only in a secondary sense.

#### Non-Literary Ancient Letters

In order to illuminate the obviously foregone conclusion to this question, Deissmann sets before the reader some 26 ancient letters representing non-literary writing. We will list only a few key ones and point out their illuminating value for the New Testament.

### Leaden Tablet from Chaidari

From the third or fourth century B. C. comes to us the oldest extant Greek letter known. The interesting feature of it is its epistolary form. It shows that the praescript is not part of the address. The address was printed on the outside after the letter ~~was~~ folded. So likewise, concludes the author, we are not to confuse praescript and address in Paul's letters.

### Letter to Appolonius from Zoilus

This piece of third century B. C. religious correspondence provides a remarkable parallel with the letters of Paul. It is similar in content and form as well as religious experience reflected. The writer is a religious devotee of the god Serapis and has a very similar attitude toward his god as Paul did toward Christ (page 156).

### Ostraca Letter to Partis

This private receipt from an Egyptian landowner to his tenant points out the evidently common custom, also employed by the Apostle Paul, of using an amanuensis. It may likewise parallel Gal. 6:11 IN SO FAR AS Paul didn't write his own letters because of the slowness of his large workman's hands.

### From Apion to Epimachus

Likewise noteworthy is this letter from a sailor to his father in which we have the typical "Pauline" beginning, viz., "I thank God etc".

### Numerous Other Letters



This section of the book abounds with live examples waiting as ready evidence for the author's thesis. There is the letter from the farmer to an official written with a unc~~ce~~al body and cursive signature (page 180) just the reverse of Paul in Galatians,<sup>1</sup> the prodical's confession to his mother (page 190), the laborer<sup>2</sup> to his wife, and the olive planter to his priest illustrating a letter of recommendation. From these and many more the author<sup>3</sup> concludes that there must have been a common linguistical source from which both the non-literary text and the Biblical writers drew their language.

#### The Difference Between a Letter and an Epistle

This distinction, according to Deissmann becomes more and more apparent as one encounters the literature of the primitive Christian era. The letter is a non-literary means of communication which is personal in nature while the epistle is literary and public--an essay with artistic style.

#### New Testament "Epistles"

On the basis of this distinction the author places all the writings of Paul into the class of letters, even Romans. They were personal and private in nature and were only raised to the dignity of epistles when latter the church canonized them and promulgated their contents as sacred text (page 240). The three "epistles of John and the Apocalypse are likewise classified" as letters because of their personal nature.

#### General Epistles

These by their very nature as general and Catholic are

essentially epistolary. They were circulatory and universal and not private. The book of Hebrews belongs here except it marks the beginning of Christianity's literary and artistic epistles.

### The Literary Development of Primitive Christianity

The origin of Christianity was in a non-literary creative period. Jesus never wrote a letter and Paul never wrote an epistle (page 248). The next step was into the conservative 2 period of the gospels and general epistles with their simple form and popular prose. And then finally, the artistic literature of 3 Hebrews and on to the final canonization of the testament which 4 has proved to be the most important literary step in the history of mankind (page 250).

### Summary and Evaluation

The New Testament writings originated in the non-literary style of the masses--the lingo of the λαός, and it was because of this very fact, the unpolished prose of Paul with their unassuming yet powerful originality, that they were destined to a literary stature. This is a powerful section in the development of the author's thesis and very well illustrated. He has resuscitated the primitive Christian century via the papyri as they are made to cast their revelatory light on the kind of literature the New Testament is. There are no bones to pick with his method and general conclusions, and there is only an occasional theological distaste encountered here and there from an orthodox vantage point.

### The Religious History of the New Testament



The clues to this study are found in the New Testament itself. Jesus' handling the Roman denarius, Paul's preaching on the Athenian inscription, and the burning of the magical books all offer a contact point for understanding the religious background of the sacred text.

#### The Method Employed

The author sees two alternatives in each single point of discovered similarity between New Testament and non-literary text: they are either analogical or genealogical. That is, they are either parallel or identical. The Christian Apologist knows only the former and the amateur sees only the latter. Deissmann prefers to call the similarity, analogical when referring to inward emotions and genealogical when reflecting outward expression as in ritual or symbol. This is to say, the Christian's experience is different from the heathen's while the form of expression may be the same (page 266). And yet the author wishes to be the slave of no method testing each case on its own merits and leaving doubtful the uncertain and recognizing light as light (page 267). The author is especially unsympathetic with the methods of the critics whom he calls "sifters-on" and "wipers-out" (page 266).

#### Cultural Background

In order to understand the setting of primitive Christianity, according to Deissmann, one must view it through the spectacles of the philosophy of religion for it was an era to temples, worship, and cultured religion (page 287). Basically, the same

Hellenistic culture prevailed throughout the Mediterranean world as the author illustrates from the census tax (cf. Lk. 2:3), the delivery of a criminal to the people (cf. Barabbas) (page 269), and the price of sparrows all found in Egyptian texts paralleling the Palestinian Biblical accounts.

### Competing Cults

Judaism, Emperor worship, and Mithras were all missionary religions. The letter of Zoilus illustrates the religious zeal of heathen religions. The dispersed Jews left ample evidence of their religious escapades to reconstruct their history as Emil Schurer has done. The monuments have yielded enough evidence for Franz Cumonts to write his monumental work on the Mithras. It was into this whirlpool of religious missionary zeal that Christianity made its bid as a world religion.

### Types of Individual Souls

One of the most significant areas of illumination comes from the unnumbered individual personalities whose private devotions have become an open book for the world. These stand out in bold relief over the masked idealization of classical literature with their speechless statues and masked human personalities. For here in the non-literary text we have, as it were, the living voice of a soldier, a wife, a religious propagandist in devotion to his god (page 298). "Anyone coming from the soul life of the New Testament to the papyri finds himself in no strange world" and vice versa (page 299).

### The Technical Language of Popular Religion

One of the marks of the highly popular style of Paul is his employment of technical phraseology particularly familiar to popular feeling like the technical language of magic (page 301). The author points to the Leyden papyrus as a parallel of Galatians 6:17, "the marks of Jesus". First Corinthians 5:5 is exemplar of the ancient custom of exorcism, or the devotion of a person to the gods of the lower world (page 302). Likewise, technical expressions were adapted from the ritual of cursing, e.g., "deliver unto Satan..." (I Tim. 1:20) has its parallel in the London Magical Papyrus (page 302).

#### The Technical Language of Popular Morality

Here again the text abounds with illustrations including the well known "I have fought a good fight", "Love your husband", "Rebuke not an Elder" etc. (page 314). The lists of sins (excepting idolatry and covetousness) are also similar. The author concludes again that both Paul and the papyri must have possessed a common source for their terminology since their phrases were employed contemporaneously as the common formulas of the day.

#### The Technical Language of Popular Law

Here the most outstanding illustration is Paul's famous analogy of slavery. The evidence for manumission is abundant in the non-literary text (page 322) including illumination of such phrases as "ye are bought with a price" (Gal. 5:1), "for freedom did Christ set us free" (Gal. 5:13) etc. It was this légal lingo that became the vehicle of expression for some of Paul's most cherished metaphors.

### The Language of Emperor Worship

One of the closest parallels, and the one that caused the greatest difficulty for Christianity, was the similar phraseology applied to Christ that the Greeks applied to Caesar. The Christian antipathy for emperor worship probably came from their Hebrew tradition (page 329) and was implicit even in Jesus' answer, "...and render unto God (a fortiori) the things that are God's" (page 252). The attribution of Deity to Caesar was common (page 347). Also the word *Θεολόγος* was borrowed from an Imperial Cult (page 348). "Lord" was an appellation used for Nero (page 354). The phrase, "Lord's Day" was in direct contrast to "Imperial Day" or "Augustus' Day" (page 359). Likewise, the terms "parusia" and "Epiphany" were applied to both Caesar and Christ (page 370). It was this identity of terms which occasioned the tremendous persecution and martyrdom of so many of the early Christians (page 356).

### New Testament as a Book of Religion not Theology

The New Testament is not a creature of theology but of religion. To think otherwise is to read blindly in retrospect through the glasses of the church fathers and theologians. Contemplative theology is a child of doubt (page 380). Jesus was altogether non-theological (page 379). It is impossible to make a system of the New Testament (page 380). The pulse beat of Paul is found in allegory (page 381). Primary with Paul is his mystic appreciation of Christ (page 382). These are all concomitants to a book of the people in the popular phraseology of the first century, says the author.

### Conclusion and Evaluation

Hence, the essential character of the New Testament is a book of human souls, a book of the people, by the people, and for the people--a work of humanity. And with this the author concludes. To his rather humanistic conclusion one would need to add but the statement that "miracles have nothing to do with the historic peculiarity of primitive Christianity" and he would have hit upon our deepest regret in the author's conclusions. Surely, this is a simple case of overdrawing good premises for a wrong conclusion. Concomitantly, we may also find a distaste for the non-theological Jesus and the mystical Paul. However, these are peripheral areas to the main thrust of the work.

An issue closer to the heart of the work is the oft repeated implication of the author in this last section that the meaning of New Testament terminology comes from its technical usage, as for example, Paul's use of technical terms from cults, law and morality. The implications of this would seem to minimize the revelatory nature of the gospel and forget its Hebraistic background. Certainly Paul used the language of the heathen but he invested it with the meaning of heaven. In the interpretation of Paul's letters it seems more likely that often the clue to what is meant by what is said may be found in the Hebrew idiom behind the Greek word he employs especially when referring to any Old Testament concept. The author seems to come dangerously close to confusing the adoption of the world's language with an adoption of the world's religion.

However, one may set aside the occasional humanistic



implication in view of the overall impressively good presentation and pay to the author a great tribute for the laborious task of bringing together the convincing data from the relics of antiquity to demonstrate the unquestionable connection between the language and literature of the testament with that of the common man of the primitive Christian era.