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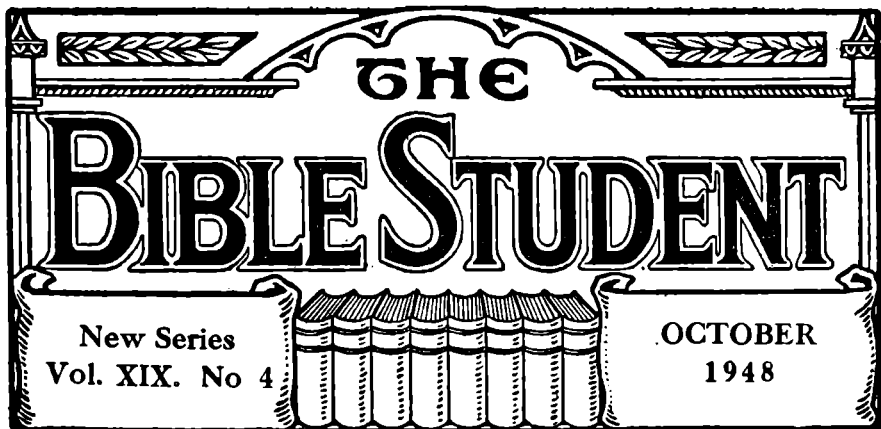
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"The Entrance of THY WORDS Giveth Light"

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OLD WORDS WITH NEW MEANINGS

A NEW TESTAMENT STUDY

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The inscriptions and especially the papyri have shown conclusively that the language of the NT is not of an isolated type, "biblical" Greek, but is one with the *Koinē* or "common" speech of the Hellenistic world. Words occurring in the LXX and NT, hitherto supposed to carry a special meaning, are now found abundantly in the papyri bearing, the same signification, and are accordingly regarded as samples of popular Greek. They find their closest parallel not in the *Koinē* (represented by Polybius, Philo, etc.), but in the spoken language of the time. That there are literary elements in the NT is obvious (cf. Luke 1:1-4, 1 Cor. 13, Heb. etc), but that fact in no way invalidates its kinship with the vernacular of its day. This position, thanks to the labours of Deissmann, J. H. Moulton, and other scholars, is now widely accepted. Differences of view exist as to how far Semitisms* have affected the language of the NT writers. But its general character as typical of the common Greek of the Empire is established. The Greek Bible cannot claim any linguistic seclusion. Its adequate interpretation (and that not with respect to language alone) demands that it should be set in the context of contemporary Hellenistic writings.

Can we then claim nothing distinctive for the language of the NT? It would be easy so to stress its affinities with the vernacular as to make such a conclusion probable. But it would be extreme none the less. For purposes of convenience we may well distinguish between language *per se* and the associative idea it conveys to the mind. It is to the latter, in this regard, that we should pay attention. The words of the NT are in the main identical with those scattered in rich profusion throughout the Græco Egyptian papyri. The difference rests in the content they not infrequently carry. The formative power of Christianity in

* That is, traces of Hebrew, the language of the OT, and of Aramaic, which supplanted Hebrew as the mother tongue of the Jews.

the sphere of language lies mainly in this direction—that is, it shows itself not so much in the coining of new words as in the deepening of the existent secular vocabulary. It is of course true, as Deissmann reminds us, that “the language of the early Christians contained a series of religious terms peculiar to itself, some of which it formed for the first time.” As the mirror of enlarging life and developing thought, language is a living thing. Hence it is always adding to its store of words,* and not seldom reminds old terms for fresh and wider circulation. Christianity was a mighty influx of new life, and it would indeed be passing strange if it had brought no new words to the common stock. Yet such additions were limited in number. The pages of the NT show indeed not a few Greek words not found in classical writers. But many of these occur in late Greek authors (*e.g.* Polybius), and the papyri in particular are constantly lessening their rarity and isolation. Deissmann estimates that out of nearly 5,000 NT words only fifty or fewer can be reckoned as “Christian” or “Biblical” Greek words—*i.e.* about 1 per cent. of the whole vocabulary. The distinctive contribution of Christianity as regards language lies elsewhere—namely, in its power to infuse into some of the common terms of everyday parlance deeper spiritual meaning. The signification of words changes in the normal course of things with changing times†. But it is only reasonable to suppose that a vital religious movement in history such as Christianity showed itself to be should accelerate that change.

For this heightening of the meaning of familiar Greek words the LXX translation had prepared the way. That the majority of the Jews of the Dispersion spoke Greek as their daily language is clear. They could not afford to ignore it, had they so desired, since it was the speech of market and street. Herein lay the *raison d'être* of the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures—to meet the needs of the Alexandrian Jews by clothing the Word of God in the language with which they were most familiar; in short, to make Greek the language of the sanctuary. Jewish

* Compare the comparatively recent invasion of our modern speech by terms of the street and of the study like ‘stunt’, ‘complex’, etc.

† Note the transition of meaning in the terms ‘awful’ (originally eulogistic—‘inspiring awe’), ‘vulgar’ (*i.e.* ‘popular’).

inscriptions, too, are penned in the Greek tongue. Now to this speech in common use the religious fervour of the Jew must have imparted something of a distinctive tone. By the time that the NT came to be written, the Greek OT had been in the hands of the dispersed Jews for more than two centuries, with the result that insensibly the Greek language came to be regarded as the vehicle not merely of commercial intercourse but of religious beliefs and hopes. To some extent at least its secularity would be refined.

In the LXX itself this process of investing common words with new meaning may be faintly traced. But in the NT it is plain. That the NT writers drew largely upon the vocabulary of the Greek OT is both natural and evident. What is significant is that terms found in the LXX and recurring in the NT do not always carry with them in the latter the meaning they bear in the former. We cannot in every case assume the equivalence of words and phrases common to both parts of the Greek Bible*. The intervention of the Gospel was the differentiating factor. As into the life so into the speech of men the Gospel brought new meanings. It was an accession of fresh creative experience and thought that made "all things new"—language, or rather its implications, no less than the rest. If, then, to some of the familiar terms of the LXX the NT writers under the pressure of a new and richer religious experience attached a higher meaning, this would be true in equal or greater degree of their use of extra-Biblical Greek words. As men of their own time, they employed the contemporary speech, but inevitably some of its terms became in their hands instinct with fresh meaning. For example, what wide difference exists between the conception of "faith" (*πίστις*) in the LXX and in Paul! What ennobling content the NT pours into the old and often debased notion of "love" (*ἀγάπη*)! We can measure the extent of this transvaluation of familiar words only by tracing the steps of their development from their original and secular usage to the deeper and more spiritual sense they bear in the NT.

It is, then, this rich baptism of pagan terms that constitutes a distinctive feature of NT Greek. Perhaps we may be permitted

* Cf. *e.g.* the word *ἐκκλησία*. In the LXX, the assembly or congregation of Israel; in the NT, the new society founded by Christ.

to quote here words written elsewhere* "The acceptance of the thesis that the language of the NT is not a distinct entity but is typical in the main of the ordinary colloquial speech of its day must not hide the fact that in a very real sense the sacred writers had a language of their own. Their work was not so much to coin new words as to enrich old ones. No objection need be taken to the term 'NT Greek' if, by its use, it is recognized that the authors gave the vocabulary they found in common currency *a new and richer meaning*. Workaday words were filled with a deeper content. . . . We have also seen that terms used by Stoic moral teachers assume a richer and fuller significance on the lips of Paul. Moulton† reminds us pertinently that 'the NT must still be studied largely by light drawn from itself.' The setting of the NT Scriptures in their historical linguistic connexions, so far from impairing their peculiar genius serves only to throw it into stronger relief. The high themes with which the NT deals (and these necessarily find reflection in heightened and enriched language) accord it a distinction all its own."

The following NT examples (restricted to lexical points, syntax not being here included) will, it is hoped, serve to illustrate this process of vacabular enrichment.

The terms selected are some common words expressive of some ethical and religious conceptions, since it is in this class that the tendency to heighten the meaning is most apparent. "It must constantly be borne in mind that the Greek words which express theological and religious ideas, as we read them in the pages of the NT, have undergone a subtle change, in the nature of sublimation, of meaning," says Box.‡

At the same time we cannot assume that these intensified or extended meanings are necessarily a "Biblical" peculiarity. In some cases they may have been in common vogue in the spoken *Koinē*, and have been adopted therefrom by the Biblical writers. The word 'brother' (ἀδελφός) is a case in point. The sense 'a fellow-Christian' (1 Thess. 1:4, etc), whilst characteristic of Jewish literature, is not peculiar to it. The term is found in contemporary

* Meecham, *Light from Ancient Letters*, p. 163.

† *Grammar of NT Greek*, vol. i, Prolegomena, p. 20.

‡ *The People and the Book* (p. 438.)

Greek bearing a like connotation—namely, membership in the same religious community.

The possibility, therefore, that in some instances what seems a distinctive NT meaning may be drawn from existing Greek usage is not excluded, and wider knowledge of the late colloquial language coming to us through the discovery and decipherment of papyri may well cut down the list to still smaller dimensions. There will be, however, a residue of terms bearing in the NT a richer and deeper sense than they held for pagan Greeks. In those cases where the terms occur in both parts of the Greek Bible the enriched meaning in the NT is prepared for by the LXX usage, and is directly due to it in not a few instances. Where the words are found in the NT only, the enrichment is original to the writers, and not occasioned by their familiarity with Septuagintal terms.

GLORY (*δόξα*)—"We beheld his *glory*" (John 1:14); "the *glory* of God did lighten it" (Rev. 21:23); cf. Rom. 9:4, etc. This sense of the word ("Divine resplendence") is common in the LXX (cf. 2 Macc. 2:8), but is apparently foreign to classical Greek where *δόξα* connotes 'expectation', 'good opinion', and kindred ideas. The Biblical writers, therefore, whilst employing this common term in its ordinary sense, also invest it with a distinctive meaning, visible '*brightness*' or '*splendour*' (especially of God).

PEACE (*εἰρήνη*)—In classical Greek usually means 'a state of peace' as opposed to war. In the LXX it is used to connote the idea of 'security', 'welfare', a sense which passes into the NT; cf. Acts 16:36 ("go in *peace*"), Matt. 10:13 ("let your *peace* return to you"). But the deepest note is sounded in the distinctively Christian meaning 'tranquillity of soul' (the gift of Christ); cf. John 16:33, "these things have I spoken unto you, that in me ye may have peace"—*i.e.* a *spiritual* peace which far surpasses either concord or happiness. Cf. Phil. 4:7, "the *peace* of God", and the familiar Apostolic salutation (1 Cor. 1:3, etc.). Thus the NT lifts this common ethical term to its highest religious level.

CHASTISEMENT (*παιδεία*)—In classical Gk *παιδεία* connotes 'instruction', 'culture'. The LXX writers add to it a *moral sense*,

'admonition', and employ it specially of *God's* 'chastisement' of His wayward people (cf. Prov. 3:11), a sense which colours the NT use of the word; cf. Heb. 12:7, "it is for *chastening* that ye endure". That this, however, is not a distinctively 'Biblical' sense of the word we see from a second century A.D. papyrus letter of a prodigal son who says: "I have been *chastened* (παιδεύω) even as it is meet."

AFFLICTION (θλίψις) —The meaning 'pressure' found in classical Greek is metaphorically turned in the LXX and NT to 'tribulation'; cf. 2 Cor. 1:4, "who comforteth us in all our *affliction*". It is "a good example of a word transformed to meet a special want in the religious vocabulary."*

GRACE (χάρις) —In early Greek literature 'gracefulness', 'favour'. In the LXX especially of the 'favour' found in the eyes of a superior. So also in the NT (cf. Luke 2:40). A distinctively Christian sense appears in Paul's use of the term to denote the Divine 'grace' universal and unbought (1 Cor. 3:10, 2 Cor. 6:1, etc.); that is to say, Paul puts into the familiar term χάρις a distinctive nuance, the 'Divine grace'.†

LIFE (ζωή) —In classical Greek ζωή bears the sense 'physical existence' as opposed to death. The word βίος stands for all other shades of meaning of the term 'life', including its ethical connotation. In the Greek Bible, however, βίος loses its ethical significance; ζωή becomes the ethical word, and in the NT, especially the Johannine and Pauline portions, it comes to signify 'the highest blessedness'; cf. John 4:36, Phil. 2:16, etc. This is an interesting example of the extension of meaning in 'Biblical' Greek of a familiar term.

LOVE (ἀγάπη) —The word itself was formerly deemed exclusively 'Biblical'. But its occurrence in at least one pagan text makes that view no longer tenable. In the LXX ἀγάπη and ἀγαπᾶν frequently connote the lower sense 'sexual love' (Judg. 16:4), though a higher meaning is also found (Sir. 4:12). Under the influence of the Alexandrian Hellenists the terms were purged

* G. Milligan, *Epistles to Thessalonians*, p. 10.

† Paul's usage of the word puts the emphasis on the *freeness* of the Divine favour and on its *universality*. See Armitage Robinson's *Ephesians*, p. 221, ff.—Editor.

of their carnal association (cf. Wisd. 6:12), and the way was paved for the use of ἀγάπη by NT writers to denote a spiritualized love, the love of God for men, and of men for God and Christ, or for their Christian brethren (especially in Paul). The Letter of Aristeas also approximates to this higher sense of ἀγάπη (cf. 229, "its power is *love*"). 2 Pet. 1:7 represents ἀγάπη as the crown of Christian virtues. This gradation from the sexual to the spiritual implication of the term clearly illustrates its refinement at the hands of Jewish and Christian writers.

SIN (ἁμαρτία) —The term (and its cognates) means in ordinary Greek 'a missing of the mark', but bears also an ethical sense 'offence' (against king or realm). It develops in the Greek Bible the distinctive religious sense 'sin against God' (Gen. 20:6, Mark 2:5, etc). Whilst this religious connotation is not confined to the Greek Bible (it occurs elsewhere in the *Koinē*), Christianity gave the term its deepest content.

The above few instances will, it is hoped, serve to show that primitive Christianity refined to no small extent the language it employed. It took common terms and gave them a far deeper meaning; a plan that is often necessarily followed by missionary translators. They take words in the vernacular which do not fully express the meaning they wish to convey, and seek to expand and enrich them in the course of their teaching. It may not be without encouragement to realize that the composition of the NT Scriptures furnishes a precedent for their method.

Fold not thy hands!

What has the pilgrim of the cross and crown
To do with luxury or couch of down?

On, pilgrim, on!

With His reward

He comes: He tarries not: His day is near:
When men least look for Him will He be here.

Prepare for Him!

Withstand the foe:

Die daily, that thou may'st forever live;
Be faithful unto death: the Lord will give
The crown of life.