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Some Leading Ideas of the New Testament and Recent Research.

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THE past few years have seen a fresh development in the field of New Testament study. The comparison of its literature with other literature in the Greek tongue has been carried on for centuries, but the mass of material other than literary which has been accumulating in the shape of inscriptions, and especially of documents written on papyrus and potsherd, has only recently attracted serious attention. And yet when men have come to study this accumulation they have found it to be of the utmost value for the illustration of the sacred writings, because it comes for the most part from the same stratum of society from which the first Christian missionaries were drawn, and so throws light upon both their language and their range of ideas. In the following paper an attempt is made to show how the ideas of the New Testament receive fresh clearness of expression as they are compared with this set of parallels. A change has come over our apprehension of them which may be compared to that seen in the case of a coin rusted and corroded till its inscription and image are almost indistinguishable; it is handed over to a skilful cleaner, and then its outlines become clean and sharp and its inscription clear and legible. Somewhat similar has been the result of investigation in this field. The ideas of the New Testament writers have not been wholly misunderstood, but they have conveyed impressions which were blurred and indistinct, because they were overlaid with the growth of ages. We can now read them in the light of the practices and life of the age which gave them birth, and they at once recover something of the sharpness of definition and clearness of expression which they had to the minds of those who wrote them down.

Take first that figure which is constantly adopted by

St. Paul to express the new relationship between man and God in Christ—that of *Adoption* (Gal. iv. 4; Rom. viii. 15, etc.; Eph. i. 5). The practice is comparatively rare among us, but in the ancient world with its higher value of the family as against the individual it was of very frequent occurrence, and in Greek law adoption was the only way by which property could be left to one born outside the family. "Childless and intestate were convertible terms" (Ramsay, "Galatians," p. 340); consequently the inscriptions are full of references to the process, and an instance may be given from one copied at Missis (Mopsuestia) in Cilicia: "Claudianus, son of Cyrus, but by adoption son of Thaumastus."

Still more foreign to our ways of thought are the various figures drawn from ransom, redemption, and the like, which are used to express the atoning work of Christ. Slavery is an institution which belongs to a bygone age, but in the empire of the first century it would not be an exaggeration to say that two out of every three persons met were slaves or freedmen. The various forms of manumission were familiar, and were a great reality to the bulk of the class to which Christianity appealed.

St. Paul's use of the word "slave" to express his own relationship to our Lord (obscured by the A.V. "servant") is itself significant; but it was the familiar phraseology of the devotee of his day. A wandering priest of Atargatis, in Northern Syria, speaks of himself as her "slave"; and the Apostle's language about the transference of the Christian from the slavery of sin to the slavery of righteousness and of God—"being set free from sin, ye were made slaves to righteousness," "being made slaves to God" (Rom. vi. 18, 22)—receives new light from the inscriptions discovered at Delphi and elsewhere. When a slave desired to purchase his own freedom, the normal way was for him to pay the price into the treasury of the god, who then purchased him from his master, and so secured his future freedom against any encroachment. Here is one such inscription from Delphi: "Apollo the Pythian *bought* from Amphibius of Amphissa for *freedom* a female slave, whose name

is Nicæa, by race a Roman, *with a price* of three minæ and a half of silver. Former seller according to law Eumnastus of Amphissa. The *price* he receiveth, but the purchase Nicæa entrusted to Apollo, *for freedom*."

Compare St. Paul's words, "Ye are not your own; ye were bought *with a price*" (1 Cor. vi. 19); or "*For freedom* did Christ free us . . . for ye were called *for freedom*" (Gal. v. 1, 13). It is expressly stated in some such contracts that the manumitted slave "may do the things that he will," and St. Paul reminds the Galatians that as far as the flesh rules them, "ye may not do these things that ye will." The circle of ideas is rendered still more complete by the fact that such manumission by the god was incomplete without sacrifice; and in the Christian teaching, the price paid was *also* a sacrifice. "Ye were not ransomed with corruptible things as silver and gold . . . but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot" (1 Pet. i. 18, 19). Yet a further point of contract was the bond of gratitude and affection which bound the freedman to the one who had freed him. The Christian is "the Lord's freedman" (1 Cor. vii. 22), a feature which receives illustration from the many monuments set up by such to their former master's memory.

Another closely connected series of figures are those drawn from *debt* and its remission. Notes of hand and acknowledgments of debt are frequent, and they were cancelled by drawing a cross upon them X-wise. Whether this has anything to do with St. Paul's language in the letters to the Colossians, "having blotted out the bond (χειρόγραφον) consisting in ordinances, which was contrary to us . . . having nailed it to his cross," cannot be asserted; but the word for "bond" is of frequent occurrence, while the wiping out reminds us that the unfading ink of the papyri was easily removed with water, so that a sheet could be sponged clean for fresh use.

One other fact has been brought to light: Under Roman law, "agency"—the acting of one person on behalf of another—was only recognized within very narrow limits. It was permitted in

certain cases of the acquisition of property, but expressly excluded in cases of obligatory contract; but in popular Greek law, in Egypt or in Asia Minor, it was a very frequent transaction, and the application of it to the Atonement, in which Christ is uniformly described as the Representative or Agent of man, not as his Substitute, would be quite intelligible to ordinary folk. And St. Paul's actual use of the practice in the Epistle to Philemon, in which he makes an undertaking on behalf of Onesimus, would be quite valid—the more so that he speaks of the relationship between himself and his convert as that between father and son.

Quite a different group of terms has also received fresh illumination—viz., the titles used of Jesus Christ by His followers. The title of "Saviour" is widely paralleled. This was specially applied to the gods of healing, Asklepios of Epidaurus, and Apollo; but it was also used of the Emperors. The calendar inscription from Priene speaks of Providence as sending Augustus "as a Saviour to us and those that come after, to make wars to cease, and to set all things in order." The use of the word in connection with Divine healers and also with the Emperors would help to make its meaning clear when it was used by the Christian missionaries in their work, of the Master whom they proclaimed.

It has long been a commonplace of New Testament exegesis that the title "Lord" would recall to Jewish readers the Greek equivalent of the Divine name in the LXX version. It is only recently that we have found that to Gentile readers it would have been a similar connotation of divinity. It was the title applied by the pagan to his god. "The table of the Lord" has a Christian ring (1 Cor. x. 21), but its counterpart in St. Paul's words, "the table of devils," would be at once suggested by the frequent phrase: "I invite you to the table of the Lord Serapis." But, further, the claim of the Roman Emperors to Divine honours, made at first with hesitation, was steadily being pressed on their subjects by the middle of the first century. Seneca might satirize the deification of Claudius in his "Apocolocyntosis," or

"Pumpkinization," in which a man is admitted to the Divine rank of cucumber, but the process went on, rapidly in the East, where men had for centuries been used to the idea, from the practice of Oriental monarchs such as those of Persia and Egypt, from whom it had been borrowed by the successors of Alexander, more slowly in the West, where it was strange. Now, "Lord" was the title by which it was most usually expressed, and that title was increasingly given to the reigning Emperor, becoming common during the reign of Nero, the very period at which New Testament phraseology was being formed. Festus' remark (Acts xxv. 26) about St. Paul's case, "concerning whom I have nothing definite to write unto the Lord"—*i.e.*, Emperor—is wholly in accordance with usage of the time. Further, the adjective used by St. Paul and St. John in the phrases, "the Lord's supper" and "the Lord's day" is frequently found as the equivalent of "imperial" in such phrases as, "the imperial treasury." The very fact that a day was so named "Lord's" by the Church shows how closely she followed the usage of the time, for an "Augustus" day is used in dating documents both in Egypt and Asia Minor. Again, the words used in both Greek and Latin for the expected "coming" of Jesus Christ (*παρουσία* in Greek, *adventus* in Latin) were the technical terms for a royal visit. A quotation from a papyrus dating from 113 B.C., found among the wrappings of a sacred crocodile, and containing a petition from some village elders with regard to the expected visit of King Ptolemy Soter II., will illustrate the Greek use: "Applying ourselves diligently both night and day unto fulfilling the task set before us, and the provision of the imposed rations of wheat for the *coming* of the King," while the Latin use may be seen on commemorative coins of various cities and provinces, such as those of Trajan and Hadrian ("Adventus Augusti").

Moreover, the title "God" or "Son of God" was also used of the Emperors; the calendar inscription of Priene, found in duplicate in other Anatolian towns, speaks of the "birthday of the God"—*i.e.*, Augustus—as beginning "the gospel (*τῶν ἐναγγελίων*)

to the world," and another inscription from Pergamum illustrates the same use, while it is found at Tarsus in a position which must have brought it before the eyes of St. Paul as a boy.

All this, coupled with the language about the "Kingdom of God," goes far to explain the suspicion and hostility with which, by the end of the century, the Church was regarded by the Imperial authorities. It was not merely that, like the Jews, the Christians refused to pay Divine honours to the reigning Emperor; they went further, and claimed these very honours for "another King, one Jesus" (Acts xvii. 7). Such was the effect upon the outside world. To the Church itself, and especially to the Gentile portion of it, there was another consequence: the way was prepared for the conception of the Divinity of Jesus Christ. It was not to the Jew alone that "Lord" would connote the Divine nature; the Gentile also was familiarized with the ascription of Divine honours in this form. And the apostolic formula "Jesus is Lord" contained to the mind of both halves of the Church the doctrine of Christ's nature, which was developed more explicitly as time went on.

There was this great contrast, however, between the process within and without the Church: Within the Church, the claim that Jesus of Nazareth was the Son of God was made primarily upon the grounds of His character, backed by the exhibition of power involved in the Resurrection, which was the firm belief of Christian people; outside the Church, in the empire, the claim was made solely on the ground of power, without reference to character, the worst Emperors insisting most strongly upon the recognition of their divinity. Nor should it be forgotten that the belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ arose *first* in Jewish circles, where the claim of the Emperor to Divine honours was most stoutly resisted; only from the Jewish Church did it spread to the Gentile world, where the Imperial claims were preparing the way for its acceptance.

The examples just given will help to make clear the nature

of the advance made in the study of the New Testament; there has been nothing very startling or revolutionary in the change; the work of earlier scholars was too sober and too sound for any such result. But we have gained a clearer conception of the exact nuance of words and phrases and figures, and can consequently tread with firmer footstep in the attempt to discover the meaning of the Apostolic writings, which give the interpretation of the Person and Work of the Lord, which lie at the foundation of the whole structure of Christian doctrine.