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THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS—III. WADI EN-NAR

WADI EN-NAR

The MSS discovered in the Wadi en-Nar in 1952, further details of which are now available,¹ are of a different character altogether from those of Qumran and Wadi Murabba'at, as they date from the Christian and Arabic period in Palestine, a period about which a good deal was already known.

The exact place where the indefatigable Ta'amire Bedouin unearthed the MSS in July 1952 was in the subsoil of the ruins of the ancient Christian monastery, known as the Castellion of Khirbet Mird, some two and a half miles north-west of the present monastery of Mar Saba along the Wadi en-Nar (ancient Kedron). Nothing further is known of the Arabic papyri and Greek documents found there: viz. Arabic papyri, mostly letters, dating from the two or three centuries after the invasion of A.D. 636; fragments of Greek uncial codices of the 5th to 8th centuries, in which portions of *Wisdom*, *Mark*, *John* and *Acts* have been identified²; and fragments of non-canonical writings and documents in cursive script. Some details have been given about the fragments in Christo-Palestinian (Christian Aramaic), and one letter has been published.³ These fragments are the first texts in Christian Aramaic to be found in Palestine itself. Previously known texts came from the Omayyad Mosque in Damascus (probably as a result of pillage of Palestinian monasteries), from St Catherine's monastery on Mount Sinai, and from Egypt, where there were colonies of Palestinian monks. The present MSS include the first papyrus fragments and the first non-literary texts to be discovered in this language. Christian Aramaic—a derivative of Western Aramaic, spoken in Palestine in our Lord's time—seems to have been in use over a good part of Palestine and Transjordan from about the 6th century A.D., and persisted in Palestine itself

¹ See *Scripture*, VI (1953), pp. 19–20.

² With these may be compared the fragments of Greek papyrus codices of the New Testament (actually the first papyri to be discovered in Palestine) excavated in 1935–6 at Auja el-Hafir in the Negeb by the Colt Archaeological Expedition, and published in 1950. They date from the 7th century, and include thirty continuous pages of St John's gospel, and fragments of St Paul's epistles. This site was also an ancient monastery (Nessana). A variety of non-literary Greek and Arabic papyri was also found.

³ J. T. Milik: "Une inscription et une lettre en Araméen Christo-Palestinien", in *Revue Biblique*, LX (1953), pp. 526–39. The inscription referred to is of different provenance—it is on stone, and came, apparently, from Transjordan, being purchased in October 1952 by the Palestine Museum.

down to the 12th century at least. It was the language of many of the Christian monks in the various monastic settlements—"coenobia" and "laurae"—especially those of the desert of Juda.

The fragments found include biblical texts on parchment, some palimpsest, written in a beautiful archaic script. So far, the following texts have been identified: Jos. xxii.9-11; Mt. xxi.30-5; Lk. iii.1, 3-4; Acts x.36-42 and Col. i.16-18 and 20-1. Of these, the first, fourth and fifth were previously unknown in this language.

A letter, written by one of the monks on a strip of papyrus, measuring $9\frac{3}{4}$ in. \times $3\frac{3}{4}$ in., and now crumbling with age, has been published,¹ and may be translated as follows:

"From the Blessed of the Lord, and the sinner Gabriel, to the Superior of the Laura of our lords and our fathers.

I beg you to pray for me, because of the tribe, on account of which my heart trembles.

Peace be to you from the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, Amen".

This letter may be dated palaeographically to the 7th century A.D. It is a touching little witness to the communion in faith and prayer of the Palestinian monastic communities, ever menaced by the inroads of marauding Arab Bedouin ("the tribe"). The letter was addressed from the coenobium (monastery strictly so-called) of Castellion, which was founded by St Euthymius the Great (died A.D. 474), and is mentioned by St John Moschus (died A.D. 619) in his "Spiritual Meadow". The "Blessed of the Lord" could be the Bishop of the area, the abbot of the monastery or a priest. The "sinner Gabriel" is the monk who wrote the letter. The "Laura of our lords and fathers" to which the letter is addressed, was probably the famous anchorite settlement of Mar Saba, founded in 493 by St Sabbas, and still existing today, though as a monastery of Greek Orthodox monks. "Our lords and father" suggests that the monastery was refounded wholly or in part on several occasions, due no doubt to the incursions of these same Bedouin and other marauders in those unsettled days. It is known, in fact, that the Laura was pillaged by Arabs in 614, while Chosroas was besieging Jerusalem.

Although this little MS adds little to the history of monasticism in the desert of Juda—already well known from Christian literary sources, as well as from excavated MSS and inscriptions—it does show that Christian Aramaic was used for letter-writing, even among educated people, and hence was not so utterly subordinated to Greek as was hitherto believed.

To complete the story of the Wadi en-Nar discoveries, in 1953,

¹ *Revue Biblique*, loc. cit. plate 19 and pp. 533-7.

a Belgian expedition, organized by the University of Louvain, under the leadership of Canon De Langhe, and including the distinguished orientalist, G. Ryckmanns, and also Captain Lippens, who was responsible for the rediscovery of the first Qumran cave in 1948, set out for Palestine. The expedition was housed at the French Ecole Biblique in Jerusalem, and from there carried out a ten-weeks' search of the Wadi en-Nar area from February to April, concentrating on the Khirbet Mird ruins. It was there that the chief finds were made—Greek MSS dating from about A.D. 600, Arabic material from the 8th century, and some fragments in Christian Aramaic. Biblical fragments are believed to be included among the Greek and Christian Aramaic material.

G. GRAYSTONE, S.M.

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