

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

*THE PHILOLOGY OF THE GREEK BIBLE: ITS
PRESENT AND FUTURE.*¹

I.

THE GREEK BIBLE AS A COMPACT UNITY. THE NEW
LINGUISTIC RECORDS.

“THE Greek Bible!”—There, in the brilliant sunshine of the south, stretched out before the student’s eye, lies the Hellenistic world as it was at the great turning-point of religious history. Alexander, the conqueror and moulder of the world, had marched with his armies towards the rising sun, bearing with him the spirit of the Greek race, and round about the Mediterranean basin the seeds of a world-wide Greek civilization had been planted in the ancient soil. In the State and in society, in science and art, in language and religion, the Mediterranean world was in process of more or less vigorous Hellenization and consequent levelling towards uniformity.

About this time, say at the end of the second or beginning of the first century B.C., it happened that two Jewish girls named Heraclea and Marthina, were murdered in the island of Delos. Their innocent blood cried aloud for vengeance, but the murderers were unknown. On the Great Day of Atonement, therefore, the relatives made their petition to

¹ These lectures were delivered in the Summer School of the Free Churches, at Cambridge, in July and August, 1907. In writing them I allowed myself the use of part of an address given by me at Giessen in 1897. The lectures were translated for me by Mr. Lionel R. M. Strachan, M.A., Lector of English in the University of Heidelberg.

the God of their fathers. With fervent prayers they consigned the cruel murderers to the vengeance of God and His angels, and their imprecations were immortalized on marble tablets above the graves where the murdered girls lay buried in the island of Rheneia, which was the cemetery of Delos.

The original text of these Jewish prayers for vengeance, found at Rheneia¹ and now preserved at Athens and Bucharest, shows us the Jews of Delos about the year 100 B.C., in possession of the Greek Old Testament. This single picture is typical. The Old Testament, as you know, had been translated from Hebrew into Greek at different times and by different persons in Egypt, beginning in the third century B.C., and the complete version is known as the Septuagint. We see then that by 100 B.C. the Septuagint Bible had already found its way from its home on the Nile to the remoter Jews of the Dispersion—a book from the Hellenistic world for the Hellenistic world.

It is true that in spirit it was an Eastern book, but as regards form and subject matter it was adapted to the needs of the Western world ; it was a book both of the East and the West.² It was not a book according to the professional ideas of the artistic literature of that age, for it was not clad in the garb of the literary language. But it was a book for the People ; for on the whole, though in many passages that would seem strange to the Greeks it did not conceal the peculiarity of the original text, it spoke the colloquial language of the middle and lower class, as is shown especially clearly by its vocabulary and accidence. Here and there, less in some of the single books and more in others, it was

¹ Cf. my essay, "Die Rachegebete von Rheneia," in *Philologus*, lxi. New Series, xv. (1902), pp. 252-265 ; reprinted in my forthcoming book *Licht vom Osten*, Tübingen, 1908.

² Cf. my little sketch *Die Hellenisierung des semitischen Monotheismus*, Leipzig, 1903.

unintelligible to the men of the Hellenistic world ; but taken as a whole it must not be dismissed with the hasty criticism that it was an unintelligible book. Such criticism is the result of looking at the artistic Attic prose instead of at the contemporary popular language. Taken as a whole the Septuagint became emphatically a popular book—we may even say a universal book.

If the historical importance of things is to be estimated by their historical effects, how paltry must, for example, the History of Polybius appear beside the Septuagint Bible ! Of all pre-Christian Greek literature Homer alone is comparable with this Bible in historical influence, and Homer, in spite of his enormous popularity, was never a Bible. Take the Septuagint in your hand, and you have before you the book that was the Bible of the Jews of the Dispersion and of the proselytes from the heathen ; the Bible of Philo the philosopher, Paul the Apostle, and the earliest Christian missions ; the Bible of the whole Greek-speaking Christian world ; the mother of influential daughter-versions ; the mother of the Greek New Testament.

But is that true ? Is the Septuagint really the mother of the Greek New Testament ? It seems a bold statement to make, but it is not difficult to show what I mean by it.

The Septuagint was not necessary for the coming of the Lord Jesus. The Semitic, not the Greek, Old Testament was a constituent factor in His Gospel. The historical Jesus of Nazareth takes His stand firmly on the non-Greek Old Testament. But Paul, the preacher and propagator of the Gospel, is not comprehensible without the Septuagint. He is not only the great Christ-Christian but also the great Septuagint-Christian. And the whole of Primitive Christianity, so far as it is missionary Christianity, rests on the Lord and the Gospels as one pillar, and on the Septuagint Bible as the other. Through the Pauline Epistles and all

the other earliest Christian writings the words of the Septuagint run like veins of silver.

We shall not, however, speak of the Septuagint as the mother of the New Testament in the sense that without it the separate parts of the New Testament would not have been written. They arose as echoes of the prophecies of Jesus and as the reflex of His personality. But in respect to their contents they are immensely indebted to the Septuagint Bible, and—this is for us the matter of most importance—the parts would never have grown into the New Testament as a whole—the Canon—but for the Septuagint. The Old Greek Canon of Scripture is presupposed by the New. The history of religion displays the marvellous spectacle of the Old Bible, encircled by the apparently unscalable walls of the Canon, opening wide her gates and admitting a New Bible to the sacred precinct : the Saviour and His disciples take their places by Moses and the prophets. This cohesion between the New Testament and the Old was historically possible only because the Old Testament by its Hellenization had become assimilated in advance to the future New Testament.

The daughter belongs of right to the mother ; the Greek Old and New Testament form by their contents and by their fortunes an inseparable unity. The oldest manuscript Bibles that we possess are complete Bibles in Greek. But what history has joined together, doctrine has put asunder ; the Greek Bible has been torn in halves. On the table of our theological students you will generally see the Hebrew Old Testament lying side by side with the Greek New Testament. It is one of the most painful deficiencies of Biblical study at the present day that the reading of the Septuagint has been pushed into the background, while its exegesis has been scarcely even begun.

All honour to the Hebrew original ! But the proverbial

Novum in Vetere latet cannot be fully understood without a knowledge of the Septuagint. A single hour lovingly devoted to the text of the Septuagint will further our exegetical knowledge of the Pauline Epistles more than a whole day spent over a commentary.

We must read the Septuagint as a Greek text and as a book of the people, just as the Jew of the Dispersion would have done who knew no Hebrew, and as the converted heathen of the first and second century would have read it. Every reader of the Septuagint who knows his Greek Testament will after a few days' study come to see with astonishment what hundreds of threads there are uniting the Old and the New. By underlining all the parallels and reciprocally illustrative passages it is easy to render this impression concrete and permanent.

Many pages there are which we shall be able to read without difficulty. Then, it is true, we shall meet with obscurities here and there, peculiarities and rare words, where our lexicons give us no real information. For the present let us simply pass over whatever is doubtful. After all the total impression will not be, "Here is a book unintelligible to a Greek but containing some things that he could understand," but, "Here is a text intelligible to him as a whole but with some obscurities." These obscurities did not prevent the Septuagint from influencing the Graeco-Jewish and Graeco-Christian world, and even to-day only pedants will be deterred by them from reading the Septuagint.

He who does read, however, will be amply rewarded. An empty abstraction will have acquired reality; a forgotten Bible will have been rediscovered; a sacred relic, buried in sand and dust and unobserved by hundreds of passers by, will have attracted the pious eye for which it waited. And that eye perceives that the re-discovered Septuagint is the

sanctuary leading to the Holy of Holies, namely the New Testament, and that both together make up the one great temple, the Bible.

This connexion between the two Greek Testaments will be recognized more and more with the progress of scientific research. In the study of Hellenistic civilization, i.e., the civilization of the Hellenistic world of the Mediterranean in the post-Alexandrian and Imperial ages, a study which has developed so enormously during the last twenty or thirty years, it will be more and more clearly recognized that amid the vast mass of witnesses to that civilization the Greek Bible (Old and New Testament) is the chief.

It deserves to be so regarded not only for the special character of its form and contents, betokening as they do a union of the Eastern with the Western spirit altogether remarkable in the history of the world, but also on account of the mighty influence it exerted. To see things in their true historical perspective we must place the Greek Bible in the midst of the other witnesses to the contemporary Hellenistic world. This restoration of the Greek Bible to its own epoch is really the distinctive feature of the work of modern Bible scholarship ; and by utilizing the newly discovered texts of the Hellenistic age fresh vigour has been infused into Bible scholarship, reviving and rejuvenating that somewhat torpid and inactive organism.

What are these newly discovered texts ? Your thoughts fly at first perhaps to newly found books or fragments of ancient authors. But valuable though these discoveries are, the chief importance attaches to the non-literary texts, especially those on stone, papyrus, and fragments of pottery, which have been brought to light in their thousands and ten-thousands. The inscriptions, papyri, and potsherds form a great storehouse of exact information, from which

Biblical research has recently drawn as rich supplies as any other branch of the science of antiquities.

The *Inscriptions* are found in astonishing numbers on the site of the ancient seats of civilization on the shores of the Mediterranean, either in their original positions or lying under ruins and mounds of rubbish. In the latter case they have to be excavated, and some of them find a home in our museums. They are rendered accessible by publication in great cyclopaedic works, the two largest of which are the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* and the *Inscriptiones Graecae*, the latter gradually replacing the older and now obsolete *Corpus Inscriptionum Graecarum*.

The period of the discovery of new inscriptions is by no means ended. The researches and excavations of the European and American archaeological institutes, and the archaeological expeditions sent out by various states or by private individuals, bring to light innumerable inscribed stones year by year. To these agencies we must add the engineering enterprises for opening up the old Mediterranean countries to modern industry and commerce, which are not always harmful but in many cases helpful to the study of antiquities.

A particularly interesting example of an unexpected find came under my notice in the spring of 1906. My friend Theodor Wiegand showed me among the extensive ruins of ancient Miletus, now being excavated by him, the remains of a temple of Apollo Delphinios, the paving stones of which consisted chiefly of highly important ancient documents in stone. The encroachments of the surface water had at some period made it necessary to raise the level of the floor, and to effect this a number of old inscribed slabs had been laid face downwards on the original marble pavement. By turning them up Wiegand had discovered quite a collection of entirely new inscriptions,

which may be described as a sort of ancient Milesian archives.

The student of the Greek Bible is of course most interested in the inscriptions found in Egypt, the country that gave birth to the Septuagint, and in the centres of early Christianity, i.e., Syria, Asia Minor, and Greece. At the present moment excavations are in progress that are certainly full of promise in this direction, not only at Miletus and at Didyma, where the oracle of Miletus was situated, but also at Ephesus, Pergamos, and Corinth. The total wealth of the epigraphical material from the oldest seats of Greek Christianity will be appreciated when the great Corpus of the Inscriptions of Asia Minor as planned by the Austrian archaeologists is completed. Some conception of it can be formed even now by reading the books of Sir William Ramsay¹ or by studying the inscriptions of a single small town, such as those of Magnesia on the Maeander, published by Otto Kern,² or those of Priene by Hiller von Gaertringen.³

Neither in form nor in subject-matter do the inscriptions make a uniform group. When they are of official origin, the work of kings, emperors, high dignitaries, civic authorities, they are usually very carefully expressed and written in literary Greek. When they are the work of private indivi-

¹ Works by Sir William Mitchell Ramsay:—*The Church in the Roman Empire before A.D. 170*, London, 1893; 7th ed., 1903. *The Cities and Bishoprics of Phrygia*, Oxford, 1895. *St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen*, London, 1895; 3rd ed., 1897. *Was Christ born at Bethlehem? A Study on the Credibility of St. Luke*, London, 1898. *A Historical Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians*, London, 1899. *The Education of Christ*, London, 1902. *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia*, London, 1904. *Pauline and other Studies in Early Christian History*, London, 1906. *Studies in the History and Art of the Eastern Provinces of the Roman Empire*, London, 1906.

² *Die Inschriften von Magnesia am Maeander*, herausgegeben von Otto Kern, Berlin, 1900.

³ *Inschriften von Priene*, herausgegeben von F. Frhr. Hiller von Gaertringen, Berlin, 1906.

duals they are not infrequently done rather carelessly and are more or less specimens of the colloquial language. This is particularly the case with the private inscriptions of the Roman Imperial period, which for this reason are valuable for Biblical purposes, since the Greek Bible itself is for the most part a monument of the spoken, not of the written language. The inscriptions are fruitful to Biblical philology chiefly from the lexical point of view.

These epigraphical remains of antiquity have for centuries attracted the attention of scholars, and Biblical exegesis has turned them to account since the end of the eighteenth century. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century they were reinforced by a large new group of texts written on what would seem to be a most perishable material, viz., the *Papyri*.

Suppose that in the course of casual excavations in a mound of absolutely dry sand we were to find to-day whole bundles of original private letters, contracts, wills, records of judicial proceedings, and government documents, emanating from our ancestors of the tenth century A.D.,—the whole of the learned world would be interested in the discovery. How few original letters, for example, written by humble individuals have come down to us from the olden time. The record of history has taken notice only of the great. The scanty memorials of the common people are found scattered here and there—on a weathered tombstone, maybe, or noted by chance in the reports of legal cases or in the account-books of towns or shires.

So was it formerly with our knowledge of antiquity. In so far as it was based on literary tradition it was, roughly speaking, the history of great things, the history of nations and their leaders in politics, learning, art, and religion. Records of humble life, written memorials of the masses, were wanting. At best we caught glimpses of such insignificant

persons in the comedies and some other literary works, but then they were seen in the light thrown on them by their social superiors. And so far as the tradition was non-literary, the upper classes again took the lion's share, for the majority of the inscriptions come from the privileged powerful and cultured class.

The discoveries of papyri have made good this deficiency in a most unexpected manner. Though they, too, throw a flood of light on the upper, cultivated class, yet in innumerable cases these scraps of papyrus are records of the middle and lower classes. They possess for the study of antiquity the same eminent degree of importance as that sandhill we imagined just now—alas that it is undiscoverable!—would possess for our own earlier history if it contained original letters of the tenth century.

It is owing to the Egyptian climate that such mounds exist beside the Nile. On the outskirts of ancient Egyptian towns and villages there were, as in our towns, places where rubbish and refuse might be deposited. Whole bundles of old time-expired official documents, instead of being burnt or otherwise destroyed, were cast out by the authorities on these rubbish heaps. Private persons did the same when clearing out their accumulations of old and therefore worthless written matter. The reverence of mankind in antiquity for writing of any kind may have been a reason for rejecting the more convenient method of destruction by fire. The centuries have covered these rubbish heaps with thick layers of dust and sand, which, in conjunction with the dryness of the climate, have preserved even papyrus most admirably.

Egyptian peasants, digging in these mounds for earth to manure their fields with, were the first chance discoverers of ancient papyri. The news of such discoveries first reached Europe in the eighteenth century ; the nineteenth

witnessed the gradual arrival here and there of a small number of papyri in the European museums. There they were looked upon as curiosities until in the last quarter of the century the great and astounding discoveries began.

These discoveries immediately led to systematic searches, and even excavations; and here it is chiefly British investigators who have done the greatest service in enlarging and publishing our store of papyri. Flinders Petrie¹ has recovered magnificent old specimens, particularly from mummy-wrappings, which were made by sticking sheets of papyrus together. Grenfell and Hunt,² the Dioscuri of research, have carried out epoch-making excavations at Oxyrhynchus and other places, and have published their treasures with astonishing promptitude and masterly accuracy.

Thus during the last twenty years a new science, Papyrology, has grown up and has undergone division into numerous branches according to the various languages in which the documents are written. The oldest documents, going back to more than 3,000 B.C., fall within the province of Egyptology. There are also Aramaic papyri, and great interest has been aroused by those of the fifth century B.C., which were recently published by Sayce and Cowley.³

¹ Cf. J. P. Mahaffy, *On the Flinders Petrie Papyri*. With transcriptions, commentaries, and index. Royal Irish Academy, Cunningham Memoirs, 1891, vol. ii. 1893.

² By B. P. Grenfell:—*An Alexandrian Erotic Fragment, and other Greek Papyri, chiefly Ptolemaic*, Oxford, 1896. By B. P. Grenfell and A. S. Hunt:—*New Classical Fragments, and other Greek and Latin Papyri*, Oxford, 1897. *Λογία Ἰησοῦ* . . . From an early Greek Papyrus, London, 1897. *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, London, 1898–1904. *Fayûm Towns and their Papyri* (with D. G. Hogarth), London, 1900. *The Amherst Papyri*, London, 1900–1901. *The Tebtunis Papyri*, London, 1902–7. *New Sayings of Jesus and Fragment of a lost Gospel from Oxyrhynchus*, London, 1904. *The Hibeh Papyri*, London, 1906.

³ A. H. Sayce and A. E. Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri discovered at Assuan*. With appendices by W. Spiegelberg and Seymour de Ricci. London, 1906 (pp. 79; 27 plates).

With the fourth century B.C. begins the main body of the papyri. Greek documents, of the most various contents, they run through the whole Ptolemaic period—i.e., for us the period of the origin of the Greek Old Testament ; they run on through the earliest Imperial period—i.e., for us the period of the origin of the New Testament ; they continue from the second to the fourth century, A.D.—i.e., for us the age of the persecutions ; and finally they extend over another five hundred years of Christian Byzantine civilization. Together with them are found also a number of Latin papyri ; in the later periods numerous fragments in Coptic, Arabic, Hebrew, Persian, and other languages.

The great published collections of these treasures confront us like some high mountain that has just been discovered, and from whose summit we shall be able to see farther than ever our ancestors could ; but we have not yet climbed one tenth part of the ascent. Papyrological students have found a rallying-point in the *Archiv für Papyrusforschung*, a journal founded by the greatest of German papyrologists, Ulrich Wilcken.¹

Students of the Greek Bible are indebted principally to the Greek papyri for additions to their knowledge. There are of course numerous fragments of Biblical and early Christian manuscripts, but of these I do not intend to speak here. I am concerned with the non-Christian texts. They are not a uniform group. Side by side with documents of the lower and middle class we find also—and in the pre-Christian period find most commonly—official texts written in official style and in the unvarying language of legal formularies. Even these afford us deep insight into the civilization of their time. But freshest and most direct

¹ *Archiv für Papyrusforschung und verwandte Gebiete*, hrag. von U. Wilcken, Leipzig, 1900, etc.

in their appeal are those written in the colloquial language, often in the crudest of vulgar Greek. Here truly are the great storerooms from which Biblical philology draws its new knowledge.

Still more "vulgar" are the texts newly discovered on the *Ostraca*. The ostrakon or potsherd, obtainable from any broken jug or vessel, was the writing material of the poor, a favourite even with the authorities in their dealings with the poorer classes, and used especially often for tax-receipts. Formerly almost unnoticed and even despised by investigators, the ostraca have now attained a place of honour—thanks especially to the labours of Wilcken¹ on the Greek, and of Crum² on the Coptic ostraca—and large collections of them have been rapidly formed in the European museums. In 1819 an architect named Gau, who was working at Dakkeh in Nubia, threw away nearly all the ostraca he found there as worthless rubbish, but nowadays these little texts are properly respected. Only the dealers in antiquities have not yet learnt to set a high value on them. A short text written on an ostrakon would cost twenty times as much if it were on papyrus, though there is no difference in the historical value of its contents.

The number of Biblical fragments on ostraca is not large at present. The most important find hitherto consists of twenty ostraca from Upper Egypt, some large and some small, with fragments from the Gospels.

But the ostraca, like the papyri, possess a greater indirect value. As linguistic memorials of the lower classes these humble potsherd texts shed light on many a detail of the

¹ U. Wilcken, *Griechische Ostraka aus Aegypten und Nubien. Ein Beitrag zur antiken Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, Leipzig and Berlin, 1899 (2 vols.).

² Coptic Ostraca from the collections of the Egypt Exploration Fund, the Cairo Museum and others. The texts edited with translations and commentaries by W. E. Crum, London, 1902.

linguistic character of our sacred Book—that Book which was written not by learned men but by simple folk, by men who themselves confessed that they had their treasure in earthen vessels (2 Cor. iv. 7). And thus the modest ostraca rank as of equal value with the papyri and inscriptions.

In the following lectures we shall have to speak of the great changes which Biblical philology has undergone as a consequence of the employment of these texts. But I may say here that the autograph evidence of the world contemporary with the Greek Bible helps us to understand that Bible not only linguistically, but also in other ways. The most important thing of all perhaps is that we become better acquainted with the bright and dark side of the men to whom were addressed the propaganda of cosmopolitan Graeco-Judaism and the missions of cosmopolitan Christianity, and that we thus learn to judge more justly of both the contact and the contrast in which Primitive Christianity stood with the surrounding world.

ADOLF DEISSMANN.