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THE LANGUAGE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Without using intolerably cumbrous and pedantic methods, it is nearly impossible to define a particular phase of some language with strict accuracy. Consider, for instance, the many types and intermerging gradations of dialect current in England alone. The difficulty of reaching precision in such cases makes careful writers hesitant about the use of such labels as ‘Hellenistic’ and κοινή (short for κοινή διάλεκτος, i.e. *a language in common or widespread use*). But, broadly speaking, both these labels are habitually applied to the new language whose origin is associated with the rise of Alexander of Macedon, otherwise Alexander the Great (who reigned from 336 to 323 B.C.). To call it a new language serves to emphasize the fact that it is not simply Classical Greek growing senile and going into a decline—a mistake which it is easy for anybody to make who comes straight from a Classical education to the study of the New Testament. Κοινή is not, as it were, pure gold accidentally contaminated, but something more like a new and serviceable alloy. The dominant component is the Attic dialect—not because it was the most widely spoken dialect at the time, but apparently because it had a certain vitality which asserted itself: in fact (as D.-B. § 2 puts it) Hellenistic Greek is a compromise between the rights of the stronger minority (i.e. Attic) and the weaker majority (other dialects).¹

The fact that, roughly speaking, a single alloy did emerge was due, it is said, to the unifying power of Alexander’s conquests. Colonies in earlier Greek history had been more or less uniform: by definition, they were the budding-off from some one species of city—Ionic, Attic, etc. But Alexander’s colonies were not monochrome but mixed; and this must have been a new and powerful factor in blending the dialects: probably the most powerful, in fact, until the advent of printing.²

¹ Of these, the opinion of Thumb (as presented in *Beg.* II, 32) specifies Ionic: ‘... the κοινή in its nascent stage was formed by a dominant influence of Attic crossed by an Ionic counter-current.’

² I owe this observation to Mr N. G. L. Hammond, of Clare College, although he is not responsible for the form in which it is expressed.

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Besides this, the very scope of Alexander's empire must have accelerated the formation of a κοινή διάλεκτος: '...in the days of Macedonian ascendancy the old boundary lines grew fainter: soldiers of fortune, diplomatists and traders freely moved from place to place, and lost their fineness of ear for purity of speech, while some sort of official language was required for the uses of government and the intercourse of educated men.'¹ In our own day broadcasting must be 'ironing out', for better or for worse, some of the local varieties of speech; and, undoubtedly for the worse, certain types of 'cinema' film are certainly breeding a barbarous vocabulary. The Macedonian dialect itself does not appear to have constituted more than a negligible component in the new alloy. What counted in the growth of the language was not the origin of the impulse to unity, but the respective degrees of assertiveness in its components.

But to speak in general terms about the coming into existence of this new lingua franca, known as Hellenistic Greek or κοινή, is, of course, not to deny that it, too, varied considerably at different times and places, or according to the idiosyncrasies of individuals even at the same time and in the same region. Polybius the historian (who died c. 128 B.C.) is usually claimed as its earliest representative; and there are many gradations of style and quality from his time onwards, including the extremely colloquial character of some of the papyri. Indeed, at any period the literary style was probably very different from the colloquial (see *Beg.* II, 31); and although the genius of Christianity made at least some of the New Testament writers into creators of great literature (cf. Milligan in *M.M.* xix, xx), still Josephus (for example) writes in a markedly more literary style than that of his near contemporary St Luke, with the exception of comparatively few passages from the latter.

Within the general field, therefore, of Hellenistic Greek as a whole, there is a wide and fascinating range of variety; and it is the style of the New Testament writers in particular which here claims our attention; while they, in their turn, vary among themselves. St Luke (probably a Gentile and perhaps the only one among the writers of the New Testament) is usually claimed as the most accomplished of them in respect of style. But it needs to be said that his Gospel and the Acts (which is by many scholars regarded as substantially his work also) are so uneven in style that it is probable that he used sources

¹ W. W. Capes, *The History of the Achaean League as contained in the Remains of Polybius* (1888), xv.

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(oral or written) and often incorporated them; and it may be also that he deliberately varied his style, making it more and less Semitic according to the setting of the scene. At any rate St Luke is less uniformly elegant than the anonymous writer to the Hebrews, who has a considerable sense of the rhetorical and the poetic, and a style which has glitter if not warmth. At the other end of the scale is the author of the Apocalypse, who writes like a person who, nurtured in a Semitic speech, is only just learning to write in Greek. He is capable of horrifying grammatical blunders and patently Semitic idioms, but is not thereby prevented from achieving extraordinary power and sometimes a quite unearthly beauty. Few can now believe that the John of the Apocalypse is the same as the author (or authors) of what are commonly called the Johannine writings—the Gospel and the three Epistles. These are in a very simple, ‘paratactic’ style (sometimes, at least, with a Semitic tinge), but are mostly free from grammatical mistakes. In an utterly different style, St Paul’s Epistles surge along with the fervid heat of a very agile mind and a highly-strung temperament, thinking and feeling as an Aramaean, but thoroughly familiar with the vocabulary of the Greek world.

The arrival of papyrus fragments from Egypt upon the philologists’ desks marks a new era in the study of New Testament Greek. Till then, despite shrewd forecasts from some great men, most of the scholars—even the finest—had allowed their exegesis to be dominated (perhaps half unconsciously) by two misleading ideas: one was that Classical standards could be applied to the language; and the other was that, if Biblical Greek differed from Classical Greek, it was also quite distinct from contemporary ‘secular’ Greek. But the discovery and editing of piles of documents from the waste paper dumps of ancient Egypt (the only place with a climate and conditions such that so fragile a material could survive) revolutionized Biblical scholarship; and A. Deissmann and J. H. Moulton, among others, revealed a large number of words and idioms which, while previously classed as belonging exclusively to ‘Biblical’ Greek, could in fact be demonstrated by the papyrus scraps to have been part of the ‘secular’ currency.

A fresh chapter is thus opened in the story of New Testament interpretation. But one word of caution is perhaps necessary. The pendulum has swung rather too far in the direction of equating Biblical with ‘secular’ Greek; and we must not allow these fascinating discoveries to blind us to the fact that Biblical Greek still does retain

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certain peculiarities, due in part to Semitic influence¹ (which must be far stronger in the New Testament than in an equivalent bulk of colloquial or literary 'secular' Greek, even allowing for the permeation of society by Jewish settlements), and in part to the moulding influence of the Christian experience, which did in some measure create an idiom and a vocabulary of its own.

¹ W. F. Howard (M.-H. 414 n. 1) aptly quotes Père Lagrange (*S. Luc*, xcvi): 'Il n'en est pas moins vrai que lorsqu'un helléniste ouvre le NT, en particulier les évangiles, il se trouve transporté dans les tentes de Sem. L'exagération de quelques hellénistes a été, reconnaissant chaque objet comme déjà vu dans le domaine de Japhet, de prétendre qu'il en venait toujours.'