

## *Archaeological Confirmation of the New Testament*

**F.F. Bruce**

[p.319]

Biblical archaeology, for most people to whom the expression means anything, is almost exclusively associated with the Old Testament. There are several reasons for this. One is that the historical setting of the New Testament—the Graeco-Roman world of the first century A.D.—was well-known from the writings of classical authors of the period, and there was no need for archaeological research to recover the record of vanished civilizations such as form the historical setting of the greater part of the Old Testament narrative. Another reason is that many archaeological discoveries relating to the Old Testament have impressed the public imagination to a degree unparalleled in the New Testament field. For a hundred people who have some idea of the flood-line at Ur or the excavations at Jericho, there is barely one who knows anything about the Oxyrhynchus papyri or the warning inscription from the temple at Jerusalem. There is a picturesqueness about the cuneiform tablets which is not shared by the rough notes on Egyptian ostraca of a later date. The reported discovery of the tomb of St. Peter has excited more stir than most finds from the early Christian period, but this may be due as much to its supposed bearing on ecclesiastical controversy as to its purely historical interest. The Dead Sea, Scrolls have received much more public attention than is usually given to written documents from the Near East of Graeco-Roman days, but interest in them has been stimu-

[p.320]

lated by the widely publicized suggestion that their evidence in some way or other has weakened the authority of Christianity.

### **I. THE NATURE OF NEW TESTAMENT ARCHAEOLOGY**

New Testament archaeology is for the most part a matter of written documents. These may be public or private inscriptions on stone or some equally durable material; they may be papyri recovered from the sand of Egypt recording literary texts or housewives' shopping lists; they may be private notes scratched on fragments of unglazed pottery; they may be legends on coins preserving information about some otherwise forgotten ruler or getting some point of official propaganda across to the people who used them. They may represent a Christian church's collection of sacred Scriptures, like the Chester Beatty Biblical Papyri; they may be all that is left of the library of an ancient religious community, like the scrolls from Qumran or the Gnostic texts from Nag Hammadi. But whatever their character, they can be at least as important and relevant for the study of the New Testament as any cuneiform tablets are for the study of the Old.

F.F. Bruce, "Archaeological Confirmation of the New Testament," Carl F.H. Henry, ed., *Revelation and the Bible. Contemporary Evangelical Thought*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958 / London: The Tyndale Press, 1959. pp.319-331.

---

Again, if New Testament archaeology cannot boast of the excavation of long-buried cities, it has enabled us, by less spectacular but not less convincing means, to identify a large number of sites mentioned by the apostles and evangelists. At times it has succeeded in pinpointing the location of an ancient city whose name and whereabouts had long since disappeared from popular memory. At other times a tomb, a monument, or the foundations of a building have come to light and helped us to understand better some New Testament incident associated with the place in question.

## II. PAPYRUS DISCOVERIES

Papyrus documents have been discovered from all ages of ancient Egyptian history, but we are concerned here with those which belong to the later centuries B.C. and the earlier centuries A.D., when there was a large Greek-speaking population in Alexandria and other parts of Egypt. This Greek-speaking population was literate in all its strata. The common people wrote letters and kept the ordinary commercial accounts of daily life on pieces of papyrus; for odd jottings some of them found an even cheaper writing-material in broken pieces of pottery, or ostraca, as they are commonly called.

These scraps of papyrus and pieces of pottery soon found their way to the local rubbish heaps, where they lay undisturbed for centuries. It was towards the end of last century that scholars began to take an interest in them. Unlike the papyri containing literary texts, of which many have been found, the papyri which have thrown most light on the New Testament are those which contain the writing of ordinary people in their everyday vernacular. For this everyday vernacular presents remarkable similarities to the Greek in which

[p.321]

a good part of the New Testament is written. Scholars had for long recognized the differences between New Testament Greek and the Greek of classical literature, but they were not sure how to account for them. Richard Rothe in 1863 could refer to New Testament Greek as "a language of the Holy Ghost," from which it might be inferred that it was a form of Greek divinely produced for the purpose of recording the Christian revelation. But in that same year Joseph Barber Lightfoot, lecturing in Cambridge, declared his belief "that if we could only recover letters that ordinary people wrote to each other, without any thought of being literary, we should have the greatest possible help for the understanding of the New Testament." His words were prophetic. For when the attention of scholars was turned a few years later to the vernacular papyri, they discovered that the "language of the Holy Ghost" was not very different from the language of the common people.

The pioneer in comparing the language of the New Testament with that of the papyri was the German scholar Adolf Deissmann. The study was taken up by others, among whom special mention should be made of two British scholars, James Hope Moulton and George

F.F. Bruce, "Archaeological Confirmation of the New Testament," Carl F.H. Henry, ed., *Revelation and the Bible. Contemporary Evangelical Thought*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958 / London: The Tyndale Press, 1959. pp.319-331.

---

Milligan, who between them produced a monumental work, *The Vocabulary of the New Testament illustrated from the Papyri and other Non-literary Sources* (Edinburgh, 1914-30), in which the results of this comparative study were made accessible to the student.

There was at first a natural tendency to go too far in assuming that the language of the New Testament could be entirely explained in terms of the new discoveries. The New Testament idiom is indeed vernacular when it deals with everyday affairs, although much of it (as we might expect) has a Semitic flavor not found in the Egyptian papyri. But there is also a large literary element in the New Testament for which we must seek parallels in the later Greek authors; while in order to understand what we may call the theological vocabulary of the New Testament, we must pay special attention to the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament which was made in Alexandria in the closing centuries before Christ.

Great excitement was aroused towards the end of last century by the discovery of two papyrus fragments at Oxyrhynchus in Egypt, containing a number of isolated sayings of Jesus, each introduced by the words, "Jesus said." Some of these were similar to sayings of Jesus preserved in our Gospels; others had no known parallels. One of the most striking was the frequently quoted one: "Jesus said: Wherever there are two, they are not without God, and wherever there is one alone, I say, I am with him. Raise the stone, and there thou shalt find me; cleave the wood, and there am I." The fragments belong to about A.D. 140.

The substance, though not the diction, of these sayings has affinities with the teaching of Jesus in St. John's Gospel. One of the Oxyrhynchus sayings was previously known from a reference by Clement of Alexandria (c. A.D. 180), who quotes it as coming from *The Gospel according to the Hebrews*, a

[p.322]

work which was current in Egypt in the early Christian centuries. This saying has now been identified afresh in the recently discovered Coptic version of the *Gospel of Thomas*. This work (which is quite different from the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas hitherto known) is a comprehensive collection of sayings of Jesus of the same character as those found on the Oxyrhynchus papyri, and the first saying in the collection is the one quoted by Clement: "Whosoever listens to these words shall never taste death. Let not him who seeks cease until he finds, and when he finds he shall be astonished; astonished he shall attain the kingdom and when he attains it he shall rest...."

The authenticity of these uncanonical sayings attributed to Jesus must, of course, be carefully assessed. Several of them are clearly the product of Gnostic reconstruction of the original Christian message; others are the fruitage of pious but undisciplined imagination. In *Unknown Sayings of Jesus* (London, 1957), Joachim Jeremias isolates 21 sayings unrecorded in the Gospels which in his judgment have a specially high claim to authenticity, and considers their significance in detail. Such a study does not indeed confirm the New Testament record, but plainly any sayings which may reasonably be

F.F. Bruce, "Archaeological Confirmation of the New Testament," Carl F.H. Henry, ed., *Revelation and the Bible. Contemporary Evangelical Thought*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958 / London: The Tyndale Press, 1959. pp.319-331.

---

traced back to Jesus deserve to be considered by every Christian with great interest and attention.

Along with the Gospel of Thomas just mentioned there was found about 1945 a whole library of Gnostic literature—at Nag Hammadi on the west bank of the Nile (the ancient Chenoboskion). This library consists of 13 papyrus codices, comprising 48 Gnostic treatises, mostly translated from Greek into Coptic. While the codices themselves belong to the third and fourth centuries A.D., the Greek originals were composed a century or two earlier. One of these treatises, *and that a most important one, has been published thus far—the Valentinian Gospel of Truth*, which was composed about the middle of the second century and is mentioned by Irenaeus a few decades later (*Against Heresies* iii. x 1.9). Such works do not help us to understand the New Testament better, but they do indicate how the New Testament was understood in some very significant and influential circles in the early days of Christianity.

What was believed to be a previously unknown Gospel was discovered among Egyptian papyri purchased from a dealer in 1934 and promptly published in *Fragments of an Unknown Gospel and other Early Christian Papyri*, by H. I. Bell and T. C. Skeat (London, 1935). The fragments of the "unknown Gospel" (Egerton Papyrus 2), dated on palaeographical grounds around A.D. 150, appear actually to have belonged to a manual designed to teach people the Gospel stories. This manual drew upon all four of our canonical Gospels, and thus makes its contribution to the evidence that the fourfold Gospel was generally accepted in the Church at the middle of the second century.

In 1931 news was published of the discovery of a collection of papyrus texts of the Greek Scriptures which have come to be known as the "Chester

[p.323]

Beatty Biblical Papyri." This collection evidently formed the Bible of some outlying church in Egypt; it comprises eleven fragmentary codices, three of which in their complete state contained most of the New Testament. One contained the Gospels and Acts, another Paul's nine letters to churches and the Epistle to the Hebrews, and a third the Revelation. All three were written in the third century; the Pauline codex, the oldest of the three, was written at the beginning of that century. Even in their present mutilated state, these papyri bear most important testimony to the early textual history of the New Testament; they have provided most valuable evidence for the identification of the "Caesarean" text-type.

The oldest known fragment of any part of the New Testament is a scrap from a codex of St. John's Gospel, to be dated in the first half of the second century, and therefore probably less than fifty years later than the actual composition of that Gospel. One side exhibits John 18:31-33, the other side verses 37 and 38 of the same chapter. It was included in a miscellaneous lot of Egyptian papyri bought for the John Rylands Library in

F.F. Bruce, "Archaeological Confirmation of the New Testament," Carl F.H. Henry, ed., *Revelation and the Bible. Contemporary Evangelical Thought*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958 / London: The Tyndale Press, 1959. pp.319-331.

---

Manchester in 1920, and was published in *An Unpublished Fragment of the Fourth Gospel in the John Rylands Library*, edited by C. H. Roberts (Manchester, 1935).

More recently another papyrus text of St. John's Gospel has been discovered and published, later in date than the Rylands fragment (for it belongs to the end of the second century) but much more comprehensive (for it preserves most of John 1-14, while fragments of the following Chapters have also been identified). This text has been published by V. Martin in *Papyrus Bodmer Évangile de Jean*, Chap. 1-14 (Bibliotheca Bodmeriana, 1956), Chap. 15-21 (1958). For two-thirds of this Gospel it adds to our knowledge of the text current in Egypt a century and a half before the date of the great vellum uncials, Vaticanus and Sinaiticus.

When archaeology provides us with the material for tracing the text of the New Testament farther back and establishing it on a firmer basis, it renders an inestimable service to Biblical studies.

But it happens from time to time that papyrus texts which have no direct relation to the New Testament help nonetheless in its interpretation. Thus, the statement in Luke 2:3, that in pursuance of the imperial census-decree which preceded our Lord's birth, "all went to be enrolled, each to his own city," is illustrated by a papyrus in the British Museum, recording an edict of A.D. 104 in which the Roman prefect of Egypt gives notice: "The enrollment by household being at hand, it is necessary to notify all who for any cause whatsoever are outside their own administrative districts that they must return to their own homes, in order both to carry out the customary procedure of enrollment and to continue steadfastly in the agriculture which belongs to them."

One final and problematical papyrus document must be mentioned: a letter written by the Emperor Claudius in A.D. 41 to the people of Alexandria in Egypt, and now preserved in the British Museum. There had

[p.324]

been serious outbursts of violence between the Greek and Jewish communities in Alexandria; Claudius bids them keep the peace and exercise mutual tolerance. Then, addressing himself to the Jewish community, he goes on: "Do not introduce or invite Jews who sail down to Alexandria from Syria or Egypt, thus compelling me to conceive the greater suspicion, or else I will certainly take vengeance on them as fomenting a general plague for the whole world." The language used here reminds us of similar language provoked in official quarters by the spread of the Christian movement, and it may be that the introduction of Christianity into the Jewish community of Alexandria was leading to riots of the same kind as broke out in Rome some years later—"at the instigation of Chrestus," says Suetonius—when "Claudius commanded all the Jews to leave Rome" (Acts 18:2). Was Apollos forced to leave Alexandria for much the same reason as forced his friends Priscilla and Aquila to leave Rome? It may be so; we wish the evidence were more explicit.

F.F. Bruce, "Archaeological Confirmation of the New Testament," Carl F.H. Henry, ed., *Revelation and the Bible. Contemporary Evangelical Thought*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958 / London: The Tyndale Press, 1959. pp.319-331.

---

### III. INSCRIPTIONS

Another enigmatic decree of Claudius has been preserved, not on papyrus but on stone. A slab of white marble in the Louvre, coming originally from Nazareth (so far as can be ascertained), records an edict of a Roman emperor ordaining, on pain of death, "that graves and tombs remain undisturbed in perpetuity for those who have made them for the cult of their ancestors or children or members of their family." The character of the Greek script and a consideration of historical circumstances point to Claudius as the emperor in question. It is suggested by some scholars that, concerned about the "general plague" which was infecting Alexandria and Rome, and indeed the whole world, Claudius (who was in any case a man of antiquarian interests) investigated the history of the trouble and found that it went back to one Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified, and whose body was shortly afterwards found to be missing from the tomb in which it had been laid. Again, we must suspend final judgment until more evidence comes to light.

There is no such enigma about another edict of Claudius, inscribed on limestone at Delphi in Central Greece. This edict is to be dated during the first seven months of A.D. 52, and mentions Gallio as being proconsul of Achaia. We know from other sources that Gallio's proconsulship lasted only for a year, and since proconsuls entered on their term of office on July 1, the inference is that Gallio entered on his proconsulship on that date in A.D. 51. But Gallio's proconsulship of Achaia overlapped Paul's year and a half of ministry in Corinth (Acts 18:11 ff.), so that Claudius's inscription provides us with a fixed point for reconstructing the chronology of Paul's career.

A fragmentary door-inscription in Greek from Corinth, belonging to this general period, appears to have read when complete "Synagogue of the

[p.325]

Hebrews"; conceivably it belonged to the synagogue in which Paul "reasoned every sabbath" (Acts 18:4) after his arrival in that city, until his presence was no longer tolerated there and he moved to the house of Justus next door. In the course of excavations in Corinth in 1929, a pavement was uncovered which bore the inscription in Latin: "Erastus, procurator for public buildings, laid this pavement at his own expense." The pavement evidently existed in the first century A.D., and we wonder if it was laid by Paul's friend Erastus, city treasurer of Corinth, whom he mentions in Romans 16:23. Yet another Corinthian inscription refers to the "meat market" (Gk. *makellon*), mentioned by Paul in I Corinthians 10:25.

Our reference to Gallio reminds us how frequently Luke, in his Gospel and Acts, has occasion to mention men who occupied official positions in various parts of the Roman Empire. The student of Roman history is aware of the bewildering variety in the titles held by these men, and he cannot fail to be struck by the confident accuracy with which Luke uses them. He tells us, for example, that Paul's opponents in Thessalonica laid

F.F. Bruce, "Archaeological Confirmation of the New Testament," Carl F.H. Henry, ed., *Revelation and the Bible. Contemporary Evangelical Thought*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958 / London: The Tyndale Press, 1959. pp.319-331.

---

information against him and his friends before the *politarchs*, for thus he denotes the civic authorities (Acts 17:6). This term *politarchs* is not found in any classical author, but it is found in some nineteen inscriptions, ranging from the second century B.C. to the third century A.D., as a title of magistrates in Macedonian cities. In five of these inscriptions Thessalonica is the Macedonian city in question; it had five *politarchs* at the beginning of the first century A.D., and six in the middle of the following century.

Another example is the designation which Luke gives to Publius, the chief man in Malta. He calls him literally "the first man of the island" (Acts 28:7), and inscriptions have been found in both Greek and Latin which show that "first man" (Gk. *protos*, Lat. *Primus*) was indeed his proper title.

Luke's narrative of the riot in Ephesus (Acts 59:23 ff.) represents the ecclesia or civic assembly of that place as meeting in the theatre. That it did in fact meet there is shown by an inscription in Greek and Latin, found in the Ephesian theatre, which records that a Roman official, Vibius Salutaris, presented a silver image of Artemis ("Diana" of KJV and ASV) and other statues "to be set up in the theatre during a full session of the ecclesia." The mention of the silver image of Artemis reminds us of the leading part played in the riot by Demetrius, president of the guild of silversmiths, which boasted Artemis as its patron goddess. The great open-air theatre of Ephesus, when excavated, proved to have room for about 25,000 people.

In Acts 14:11 we are told that, when Paul and Barnabas visited Lystra in Asia Minor during their first missionary journey, and healed a lame man, the local inhabitants shouted in their Lycaonian vernacular: "The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!" They identified the apostles with two deities, calling Barnabas Zeus (KJV and ASV "Jupiter") and Paul Hermes (KJV and ASV "Mercurius" or "Mercury"), "because he was the chief speaker." These two gods had a traditional association with that part

[p.326]

of Asia Minor. The Roman poet Ovid, for example, relates how they once came to that district incognito, and found no hospitality except in the hut of an aged and impoverished couple, Philemon and Baucis. More precise evidence came to light in 1910, however, when W. M. Calder found near Lystra an inscription recording the dedication to Zeus of a statue of Hermes, along with a sundial, by men with Lycaonian names. Sixteen years later Calder and W. H. Buckler found in the same vicinity a stone altar dedicated to the "Hearer of Prayer" (presumably Zeus) and Hermes.

The city of Derbe is closely associated with Lystra in the narrative of Acts, but its site was unknown until 1956. In that year Michael Ballance discovered a dedicatory inscription set up by the council and people of Derbe in A.D. 157. The inscription was found at the mound of Kerti Hüyük (some thirteen miles N.N.E. of Laranda) in circumstances which make it practically certain that Kerti Hüyük is the ancient Derbe. Previous tentative identifications had been made several miles to the west of that, on the supposition that

F.F. Bruce, "Archaeological Confirmation of the New Testament," Carl F.H. Henry, ed., *Revelation and the Bible. Contemporary Evangelical Thought*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958 / London: The Tyndale Press, 1959. pp.319-331.

---

Acts 14:20 implies that Paul reached Derbe from Lystra in one day. It is now clear that the end of this verse should be translated: "on the next day he set out with Barnabas for Derbe." Mr. Ballance gives an account of his discovery in *Anatolian Studies* 7 (1957, pp. 147 ff.).

On Paul's last visit to Jerusalem, a riot broke out because it was rumored that he had taken a Gentile into the temple with him (Acts 21:28). Gentiles were forbidden on pain of death to penetrate beyond the outer court of the Jerusalem temple; notices in Greek and Latin were posted at intervals on the barrier surrounding the inner courts which warned Gentiles of the penalty for such sacrilegious trespass. Two of these inscriptions have been found, both in Greek—one in 1871 by Charles Clermont-Ganneau, and another one, in a more fragmentary condition, in 1935. The inscriptions read: "No foreigner may enter within the barrier which surrounds the temple and enclosure. Anyone who is caught doing so will be personally responsible for his ensuing death."

The writings of Luke lend themselves to this sort of illustration more than other parts of the New Testament because Luke, more than any other New Testament writer, relates his narrative to the context of contemporary events. It is unnecessary to remind readers at this time of day how thoroughly Luke's accuracy in detail has been vindicated when tested by evidence of this kind. The early researches of the late Sir William Ramsay made valuable pioneer contributions to the establishment of Luke's credit as a serious historian, although in his later writings there was an unfortunate tendency for the popular apologist to swamp the scientific archaeologist. Much useful information is presented by Henry J. Cadbury in *The Book of Acts in History* (New York, 1955), a volume whose worth is all the greater because Dr. Cadbury disclaims any apologetic motive.

Even where Luke has been suspected of nodding, he has a habit of being

[p.327]

vindicated in due course by some new item of evidence. For example, his reference in Luke 3:1 to "Lysanias the tetrarch of Abilene" at the time when John the Baptist began his ministry (A.D. 27) has been regarded as a mistake because the only ruler of that name in those parts known from ancient historians was King Lysanias whom Antony executed at Cleopatra's instigation in 36 B.C. But a Greek inscription from Abila (18 miles W.N.W. of Damascus), from which the territory of Abilene is named, records a dedication by one Nymphaeus, "freedman of Lysanias the tetrarch," between A.D. 14 and 29, around the very time indicated by Luke.

Much study has been devoted to the statement in Luke 2:2 about the imperial Census which was first held "when Quirinius was governor of Syria." We know that Quirinius was governor of Syria from A.D. 6 onwards, but the census referred to in Luke 2:1 ff. must have been held before the death of Herod the Great in 4 B.C. It is widely admitted that such a census may have taken place in Herod's reign, may have formed part of an empire-wide enrollment, and may have involved registration at one's original home (cf.



F.F. Bruce, "Archaeological Confirmation of the New Testament," Carl F.H. Henry, ed., *Revelation and the Bible. Contemporary Evangelical Thought*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958 / London: The Tyndale Press, 1959. pp.319-331.

---

the papyrus mentioned on p. 323). It has been argued also that Quirinius was governor of Syria for the second time in A.D. 6, and that the census of Luke 2:1 ff. took place during an earlier governorship of his. It is, however, very difficult to fit such an earlier governorship into what we know of the history of the province of Syria in the last decade B.C., and the Latin inscription (on the *Lapis Tiburtinus*) which has usually been invoked as evidence that Quirinius was governor of Syria twice proves only that he twice governed a province as imperial legate; it does not prove that his earlier governorship was exercised in Syria, as his later governorship certainly was. It is more generally accepted nowadays that his earlier governorship was exercised in Galatia. In that case it may be best to follow those commentators who, following a hint in Tertullian, read "Saturninus" instead of "Quirinius" in Luke 2:2. Sentius Saturninus was governor of Syria in 8-6 B.C.

While inscriptional evidence illustrates the accuracy of Luke in details, more impressive—and in fact more important—is the sure confidence with which he can convey the right atmosphere and local color of one place after another with a minimum of descriptive words. Here is an author who can see the places and events which he portrays, and can enable his readers to see them too.

#### IV. OSSUARIES

In 1945 the late Eleazar L. Sukenik discovered two ossuaries—receptacles for bones—in the vicinity of the Jerusalem suburb of Talpioth exhibiting graffiti which he claimed to be "the earliest records of Christianity." The burial Chamber in which the ossuaries were found was in use during the years preceding A.D. 50. The two graffiti, scratched in charcoal in Greek

[p.328]

letters, read *Iesous iou* and *Iesous aloth*. Sukenik suggested, with a considerable measure of plausibility, that both inscriptions referred to Jesus; he supported this argument by the presence of four crosses on the second ossuary, but their significance is much more problematical. But while Sukenik supposed that the inscriptions expressed a lament over the crucifixion of Jesus, it is more probable that the first is a prayer to Jesus for help, and the second a prayer to Jesus that the person whose bones are contained within may rise from the dead. (Sukenik was caused considerable embarrassment at times by those who misunderstood him to mean that he had found Jesus' own ossuary—which, of course, he never suggested.) It is possible, then, that here we have relics from the Christian community in Jerusalem during the first twenty years of its existence. (See B. Gustafsson, "The Oldest Graffiti in the History of the Church," *New Testament Studies* 3, 1956-7, pp. 65 ff.)

In 1923 an ossuary of the same period was found in the Yemenite quarter near Bezalel in Jerusalem, bearing the name Sapphira in Hebrew and Greek letters. Joseph Klausner proposes to identify this Sapphira with the wife of Ananias in Acts 5:1 (*From Jesus to Paul*, London, 1944, pp. 289 f.), but we cannot be sure of the identification.

F.F. Bruce, "Archaeological Confirmation of the New Testament," Carl F.H. Henry, ed., *Revelation and the Bible. Contemporary Evangelical Thought*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958 / London: The Tyndale Press, 1959. pp.319-331.

---

## V. COINS

The coin record of New Testament times is a fascinating study, not only for general illustrative interest, but also because Roman coinage supplies an outline of the successive phases of imperial policy towards the Jews for the two centuries between 63 B.C. and A.D. 135, while the legends on the coins struck by the emperors to mark special occasions express those hopes of abiding peace which the emperors might promise but which Christians found to be realized in Christ (cf. Ethelbert Stauffer, *Christ and the Caesars*, London, 1955, *passim*).

Occasionally the coin record, or its absence, throws light on a point of New Testament history. For example, the reference in II Corinthians 11:32 to the ethnarch of King Aretas who guarded the gate of Damascus to seize Paul has been correlated with the fact that, while coins of Damascus have been found with the insignia of the Emperors Tiberius and Nero, none have been found thus far with the insignia of Gaius and Claudius, who between them ruled from A.D. 37 to 54. Should we infer from this that during Paul's residence at Damascus that city was not within the imperial frontier but directly governed by the Nabataean king? We cannot be certain; the argument from silence is always liable to be reversed.

Again, a crucial question in the chronology of Paul's Career is the date of Felix's replacement by Festus as procurator of Judaea (Acts 24:27). The fact that a new Judaeian coinage begins in Nero's fifth year, before October of the year 59, may point to the beginning of the new procuratorship; A.D. 59 is a date probable on other grounds for the arrival of Festus.

[p.329]

## VI. THE QUMRAN TEXTS AND THE NEW TESTAMENT

The "Dead Sea Scrolls" found at Qumran have introduced us to the literature of a Jewish community which flourished between 100 B.C. and A.D. 68 and resembled the primitive Church in these respects: it regarded itself as the true remnant of Israel, supported this claim by a distinctive exegesis of the Old Testament writings, and interpreted its divine vocation in strongly eschatological terms. A comparative study of two contemporary movements of this character is bound to throw fresh light on both, quite apart from the possibility of establishing direct contact between them. Thus far the most promising attempts to establish direct contact have centered around the person and ministry of John the Baptist, although nothing in the way of real proof has yet been forthcoming. Alongside the resemblances, we must take account of the differences between the two communities, the chief of these being that, whereas the Qumran sect expected the Messiah (or Messiahs) to come, the primitive Church maintained that he had come—in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

F.F. Bruce, "Archaeological Confirmation of the New Testament," Carl F.H. Henry, ed., *Revelation and the Bible. Contemporary Evangelical Thought*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958 / London: The Tyndale Press, 1959. pp.319-331.

---

These documents have at least provided us with a new background for New Testament study, and certain phases of New Testament study have already taken on a new appearance against this background. The Johannine literature and the Epistle to the Hebrews in particular may be illuminated in important respects by this discovery. It is impossible to enter into details within the scope of this chapter, but reference may be made to the symposium *The Scrolls and the New Testament*, edited by Krister Stendahl (New York, 1957), although at this stage it can be looked upon as no more than an interim report.

## VII. SACRED SITES

The identification of "sacred sites" is an important and fascinating branch of New Testament archaeology. But, while we can usually be sure of the general location of the places where Christ and the apostles lived and worked, it is rarely possible to fix the scenes of some of the great New Testament events within a matter, of square yards. Tradition goes quite far back, but seldom far enough. The destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, and the foundation of a new pagan city on the site in A.D. 135, make it particularly difficult to identify the places in Jerusalem mentioned in the Gospels and Acts. The temple area, of course, is certain. The place called Gabbatha, the Pavement (Greek *lithostrōton*), in John 19:13 has been identified with the court of the fortress of Antonia, a Roman pavement of nearly 3,000 square yards. The pool of Bethesda (John 5:2) can be identified with a fair measure of certainty in the northeast quarter of the old city (the area called Bezetha, or "New Town," in the first century A.D.), where traces of it were discovered in the course of excavations near the Church of St. Anne in 1888.

[p.330]

The fourth Evangelist knew Jerusalem as it stood before A.D. 70. The pool of Siloam (John 9:11) still stands south of the temple area as it did when Jesus sent the blind man to wash there.

The most important of Jerusalem's sacred sites, the place where Christ was crucified and buried (John 19:41), cannot be located with absolute certainty. The traditional site, covered by the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, was pointed out to Constantine in 327; but there is some doubt whether it actually lay outside the "second wall" of Jerusalem, as Golgotha must have done. A good popular examination of the problem is provided by Anché Parrot in *Golgotha and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre* (London, 1957). But, interesting as the problem must be to every Christian, it is not of the first importance; wherever our Lord's sepulchre is to be located, "he is not here, for he has risen."

Among other Palestinian sites mentioned in the Gospel record none is more certain than Jacob's well, near Balatah (the ancient Shechem). The third-century synagogue at Capernaum is visible; it was possibly built on the same site as the synagogue where Jesus did the mighty works recorded in Mark 1:21 ff.

F.F. Bruce, "Archaeological Confirmation of the New Testament," Carl F.H. Henry, ed., *Revelation and the Bible. Contemporary Evangelical Thought*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958 / London: The Tyndale Press, 1959. pp.319-331.

---

Rome, unlike Jerusalem, has preserved its Christian tradition unbroken from the first century. Its early Christian cemeteries, however, belong to a later period than the New Testament narrative. Towards the end of the second century the presbyter Gaius claimed that he could point out at Rome the "trophies" (i.e. burial-places) of the apostles Peter and Paul on the Vatican hill and the Ostian road respectively. Within recent years the monument which he described as the "trophy" of Peter has almost certainly been found in the course of excavations beneath St. Peter's; it appears to go back to the time of Marcus Aurelius (161-180). A full account is given by Jocelyn Toynbee and J. Ward Perkins in *The Shrine of St. Peter and the Vatican Excavations* (London, 1956). It is only to be expected that the places where the apostles were executed and buried should be remembered by the Roman Christians a century later.

Another early visitor to Rome was Simon Magus (cf. Acts 8:9 ff.); he is said to have founded a heretical sect there and opposed the apostles. Justin Martyr, who lived in Rome in the middle of the second century, tells us that this sect, the Simonians, paid divine honors to Simon and had erected a statue to his memory with the inscription *Simoni deo sancto* ("To Simon the holy god"). Possibly Simon did receive divine honors, but the story of the inscription is evidently a mistake, based on a misreading of an old Roman dedication *Semoni Sanco deo fidio* ("To Semo Sancus the god of oaths"). The Simonians may have regarded this inscription as providentially applicable to Simon, and used it in their worship.

### VIII. THE NATURE OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONFIRMATION

Generally speaking, "confirmation" is not the best word to use of the bear-

[p.331]

ing of archaeology on the New Testament. In fact, in both Testaments it is better to regard archaeology as illustrative than as confirmatory. In places (say) where Luke has been suspected of inaccuracy, and his accuracy has been vindicated by some inscriptional evidence, it may be legitimate to say that archaeology has confirmed the New Testament record. But for the most part the service which archaeology has rendered to New Testament studies is the filling in of the contemporary background, against which we can read the record with enhanced comprehension and appreciation. And this background is a first-century background. The New Testament narrative just will not fit into a second century background.

But when we talk of background, or even when we think of the exact confirmation of historical details, we have not touched the heart of the New Testament message. To the New Testament writers, as to Christians of today, the heart of the message is the Son of God, incarnate in the Man Christ Jesus, the Saviour of the world. Archaeology may illuminate the historical context in which he was manifested in flesh, but how could it confirm the claim that life and salvation are available as God's free gift to those who believe in him? It may throw greater light than we possess thus far on the place where he

F.F. Bruce, "Archaeological Confirmation of the New Testament," Carl F.H. Henry, ed., *Revelation and the Bible. Contemporary Evangelical Thought*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958 / London: The Tyndale Press, 1959. pp.319-331.

---

was crucified and buried; it can add to our knowledge of the significance which his death and burial, together with his resurrection, had for his followers in the early Christian centuries; but how can it confirm the validity of that significance? In our gratitude for the aid which archaeology affords to Biblical studies, let us bear in mind its limitations, and not try to make it prove more than it can. Christianity is a historical revelation; archaeology can illuminate the history, but it is not by means of archaeology that the revelation itself is apprehended as truth.

[p.407]

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

W. F. Albright, "Recent Discoveries in Palestine and the Gospel of St. John," in *The Background of the New Testament and Its Eschatology* (edited by W. D. Davies and D. Daube; C. H. Dodd Festschrift), pp. 153-172. Cambridge University Press, 1956.

E. M. Blaiklock, *Out of the Earth*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1957.

F. F. Bruce, "Qumran and Early Christianity," in *New Testament Studies* 11 (1955-56), pp. 176-190.

M. Burrows, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*. New York: The Viking Press, 1955.

A. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East* (English translation). London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1927.

J. Finegan, *Light from the Ancient Past*. London: Oxford University Press, 1946. Pp. 209-352.

W. M. Ramsay, *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1915.

R. Syme, "Galatia and Pamphylia under Augustus: the Governorships of Piso, Quirinius and Silvanus," in *Klio* XXVII, 1934, pp. 122-148.

---

© 1958, 1986 Carl F.H. Henry. Reproduced by kind permission of Dr Carol Henry Bates.

Prepared for the Web in April 2009 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>

---

