

CHARACTERISTICS OF NEW TESTAMENT GREEK

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I.

As recently as 1895, in the opening chapter of a beginner's manual of New Testament Greek, the present writer defined Hellenistic Greek as "*Hebraic* Greek, *colloquial* Greek, and *late* Greek." In a second edition, just published, the first of these three elements has to disappear, and when "*common*" has been substituted for "*Hebraic*," it is soon made clear that the addition of "*late*" makes little difference to the definition. The disappearance of that word "*Hebraic*" from our definitions marks a revolution in the conception of the language in which the New Testament is written. It is not a revolution affecting theories only. It touches exegesis at innumerable points. It demands large modifications in our very latest grammars, and an overhauling of our best and most trusted commentaries. To set forth the nature of these new lights, with reference to the grammar of the sacred books, will be the aim of the present series of papers.

It was of course the isolated position of Biblical Greek which was responsible for the older view. That the Greek Scriptures were written in the **koinh**, the "common" Greek which superseded the dialects of the classical period, was well enough known. But it was most obviously different from the **koinh** of the later literature. It could not be adequately paralleled from Plutarch or Arrian, as little from the Jewish writers Philo and Josephus. Naturally the peculiarities of Biblical Greek came to be explained from its own conditions. The LXX. was "translation Greek," its syntax determined perpetually by that of its original

Hebrew. The New Testament writers were so familiar with the LXX. that its idiosyncrasies passed largely into their own style. Moreover, they used Greek as foreigners, in most cases thinking in Aramaic what they expressed in Greek. Hence this “language of the Holy Ghost,” this “Judaic” or “Biblical” Greek, a phenomenon perfectly explicable by the laws of the science of language, and evidenced by scores of usages which had Hebraism written over their very face and denied every effort of the Purist to dislodge them.

And now all this has vanished, for Biblical Greek is isolated no more. Great collections of Egyptian papyri, published with amazing rapidity by the busy explorers who have restored to us so many lost literary treasures during the last decade, have shown us that the farmer of the Fayûm spoke a Greek essentially identical with that of the Evangelists. The most convincing “Hebraisms” appear in the private letters of men who could never have been in contact with Semitic influences. And lest we should imagine this vernacular peculiar to Egypt, the ever-growing corpus of inscriptions from Asia Minor tells us that there was practically no difference in colloquial Greek wherever it was spoken, except, no doubt, in pronunciation, and in minute points of usage which lie mostly beyond our reach. The Holy Ghost spoke absolutely in the language of the people, as we might surely have expected He would. The writings inspired of Him were those

Which he may read that binds the sheaf,
Or builds the house, or digs the grave;

nor less—as the centenary of the Bible Society so vividly reminds us just now—

those wild eyes that watch the wave,
In roarings round the coral reef.

The very grammar and dictionary cry aloud against those

who would allow the Scriptures to appear in any other style of speech than that understood of the people.

The evidence for this new view starts from the lexical researches of G. A. Deissmann in his now famous “Bible Studies (1895, 1897; E.T. 1901).” It is needless to describe how he showed from the monuments of spoken Greek that scores of words, hitherto assumed to be “Biblical”—technical words, as it were, called into existence or minted afresh by the language of Jewish religion—were, in reality, normal first-century Greek, excluded from literature by the nice canons of Atticizing taste. Some gleanings after Deissmann, all tending to confirm his doctrine, have recently appeared in the *EXPOSITOR*; ¹ and the present writer has also endeavoured to set forth, in the *Classical Review*,² the grammatical side of the case, only briefly adumbrated by the pioneer. Every fresh volume of papyri has exploded some old-established “Hebraism” or secularized some relic of a “Biblical” vocabulary. Let us endeavour, before going further, to see how Hebraisms stand now, and on what principles we are to interpret what remains of this element in the language.

For this purpose we must endeavour to realize the conditions of countries where the mass of the people are bilingual. It would be difficult to find a better object lesson than that which we have at our own doors in the people of Wales. If some leading statesman were to visit a place in the heart of Wales to address a meeting, the people would gather to hear him, though they would take for granted he would speak in English. If he did, they would understand him. But if he unexpectedly addressed them in Welsh, we may be very sure they would be “the more quiet”; and a speaker who was anxious to conciliate a hostile meeting would gain a great initial advantage if he could surprise them with the

¹See the issues for April 1901, February and December 1903.

²The first two papers appeared in February and December 1901.

sound of their native tongue. Now this is exactly what happened when Paul addressed the Jerusalem mob from the stairs of Antonia. They took for granted he would speak in Greek, and yet they made "a great silence" when he faced them with the gesture which indicated a wish to address them. Schurer nods, for once, when he calls Paul's Aramaic speech as a witness of the people's ignorance of Greek.¹ It does not prove even the "inadequate" knowledge which he gives as the alternative possibility for the lower classes, if by "inadequate knowledge" is implied that the crowd would have been unable to follow a Greek speech. They thought and spoke among themselves, like the Welsh, exclusively in their native tongue, but we may well doubt if there were many of them who could not understand the world-language or even speak in it when necessary.² We may compare the situation at Lystra (Acts xiv. 11-18), where the people obviously understood Paul and Barnabas, but would probably have grasped their message much better if they had been able to speak **Lukaonisti**. The imperfect knowledge of Greek which may be assumed for the masses in Jerusalem and Lystra is decidedly less probable for Galilee and Peræa. Hellenist Jews, ignorant of Aramaic, would be found there as in Jerusalem; and the proportion of foreigners would be much larger. That Jesus Himself and the Apostles regularly used Aramaic is beyond question, but that Greek was also at command is almost equally certain. There is not the slightest presumption against the use of Greek in writings purporting to emanate from the circle of the first believers. They would write as men who had used the language from boyhood, not as foreigners painfully expressing themselves in an imperfectly known idiom. Their Greek would differ in quality according to

¹ Jewish People, div. II. i. 48 (=vol. ii. p. 63 of the third German edition).

² The evidence for the use of Greek in Palestine is very fully stated by Zahn in the second. chapter of his *Einleitung i. d. N.T.*

their education, like that of the private letters among the Egyptian papyri. But even the Greek of the Apocalypse itself does not seem to owe any of its blunders to "Hebraism." The author's obvious indifference to concord can be abundantly paralleled from Egypt¹. We do not suspect foreign upbringing in an Englishman who says "between you and I." He would not say "between I and you," any more than the author of the Apocalypse would have said **ἀπο μαρτυρίαν** (i.5); it is only that his grammatical sense is satisfied when the governing word has affected the case of one object.² Close to the other end of the scale stands the learned Rabbi of Tarsus. "A Hebrew, the son of Hebrews," he calls himself, and Zahn is no doubt right in inferring that he always claimed Aramaic as his mother tongue. But he manifestly used Greek from childhood with entire freedom, and during the main part of his life probably had very few opportunities of using Aramaic at all. It is extremely risky to argue with Zahn from "*Abba, Father*" (Rom. viii. 15, Gal. iv. 6), that Aramaic was the language of Paul's prayers: the peculiar sacredness of association belonging to the first word of the Lord's Prayer in its original language supplies a far more probable account of its liturgical use among Gentile Christians.³ Finally we have the Gentile Luke, who may well have known no Aramaic at all.⁴ Apart from what may be directly translated from Semitic sources, we have accordingly no *a priori* reason to expect in the New Testament any Greek which would sound strangely to speakers of the **κοινή** in Gentile lands.

¹ For examples cf. Tb. P. 41 (ii), B.U. 1002 (ii) *bis*, 910 (1/), A.P. 78 (2/), Letr. 149 (2/), etc. All these (abbreviations as in previous papers) are examples of a nominative in apposition to a noun in another case. I have several cases of false concord in gender. **Ἀποστολῆς** is, of course, an intentional *tour de force*.

² We find this sometimes in correct English: e.g. "Drive far away the disastrous Keres, *they* who destroy" (Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, p. 168).

³ Cf. Chase, in *Texts and Studies*, I. iii. 23.

⁴ Cf. Dalman, *Words of Jesus*, 40 f.

To what extent then should we expect to find Jewish writers of Greek colouring their style from influences of Aramaic or Hebrew? Here our Welsh analogy helps us. Captain Fluellen is marked in Shakespeare not only by his Welsh pronunciation of English, but also by his fondness for the phrase "look you." Now "look you" is English: I am told it is common in the Dales, and if we could dissociate it from Shakespeare's Welshman we should probably not be struck by it as a bizarre expression. But why does Fluellen use it so often? Because it translates two or three Welsh phrases of nearly identical meaning, which would be very much on his tongue when talking with his own countrymen. In exactly the same way the good Attic interjection **ἰδοὺ** is used by the New Testament writers, with a frequency quite un-Attic, simply because they were accustomed to the constant use of an equivalent interjection in their own tongue.¹ Probably this is the furthest extent to which Semitisms went in the ordinary Greek speech or writing of men whose native language was Semitic. It brought into prominence locutions, correct enough as Greek, but which would have remained in comparatively rare use but for the accident of their answering to Hebrew or Aramaic phrases. And rarely a word with some special metaphorical meaning might be translated into the literally corresponding Greek and used with the same connotation, as when the verb **נָלַח**, in the ethical sense, was represented not by the exactly answering **ἀπαστρέφω**, but by **περιπατέω**.² But these cases are very few, and may be transferred any day to the other category, illustrated above in the case of **ἰδοὺ** by the discovery of new papyrus texts.

¹ Note that James uses it six times in his short Epistle, Paul eight times (and one quotation) in all his writings. In Acts i.-xii. it appears 16 times; in xiii.-xxviii., only seven, one of which is in narrative, the rest in words of Paul.

² Deissmann, *Bible Studies*, 194.

It must not be forgotten that the instrumental **ἐν** in **ἐν μαχαίρῃ** (Luke xxii. 49) and **ἐν ῥάβδῳ** (1 Cor. iv. 21) were only rescued from the class of "Hebraisms" by the publication of the *Tebtunis Papyri* (1902), which presented us with half-a-dozen Ptolemaic citations for it.¹

There remain Semitisms due to translation, from the Hebrew of the Old Testament, or from Aramaic "sources," underlying parts of the Synoptists and *Acts*. The former case covers all the usages which have been supposed to arise from the over-literal phraseology of the LXX., the constant reading of which by Hellenist Jews has unconsciously affected their Greek. Here of course we have abnormal Greek produced by the effect of Greek-speaking men to translate the already obsolete and imperfectly understood Hebrew. When the Hebrew puzzled them they would take refuge in a barbarous literalness, like a schoolboy translating Virgil. It was ignorance of **רָבָד**, not ignorance of **סֵבֵל**, which was responsible for Aquila's **ἐν κέφαλαίς ἐλάσεν οὐρανὸν καὶ οὐρανὸν καὶ οὐρανὸν καὶ οὐρανὸν**. It is not antecedently probable that such "translation-Greek" would influence free Greek except by supplying phrases for conscious or unconscious quotation: these phrases would not become models to be followed by men who wrote the language as their own. The "pure Hebraisms" which Dalman² finds in Luke's writings are possibly exceptions; but we may perhaps assume that Luke would intentionally assimilate his style to that of the Greek Old Testament in those parts of his story where a Hebraic colour was specially appropriate. The construction of **ἐγενετο** impersonal³ is markedly transformed in a classical direction in *Acts*, partly (we may suppose) because the author wearied of what might seem a mannerism, and partly because the Hebraic colour

¹ EXPOSITOR, Feb. 1902, p. 112.

² *Words of Jesus*, p. 37.

³ See detailed note at the end of this paper.

was less appropriate in a book which moved so largely on a wider stage. That the Greek Evangelist should exhibit the capacity of varying his diction to suit the change of scene is only what we should expect: no other New Testament writer, except the author of *Hebrews*, betrays any conscious attention to Greek ideas of style.

Such then is the issue of the long strife over the "Hebraisms" of New Testament Greek, so far as our present lights enable us to apprehend it. We must not forget the danger of going too far. The deeper knowledge of Palestinian Aramaic, which Dalman's researches have brought us, may disclose traces of imperfectly translated phrases from Aramaic documents; nor could the bald literalism of parts of the LXX. remain wholly without influence on the style of Evangelists and Apostles. We must allow for possible Semitisms from these very different sources, and must be more careful to distinguish them than scholars before Dalman were wont to be. But the papyri have finally disposed of the assumption that the New Testament was written in any other Greek than the language of the common people throughout the Greek-speaking lands. With this fact as a basis, we shall endeavour in the successive papers of this series to describe the main features of the common Greek of daily life, in so far as its grammatical structure bears upon the unique literature which survives to glorify the "degenerate" speech of provincial Hellenists in the first century A.D.

NOTE ON THE HEBRAISMS WITH **egeneto**.

The impersonal **egeneto**, answering to the narrative ׀ָ׀ָ׀ָ׀ָ, is in the New Testament very rare outside Luke's writings, in which the supposition of a Hebrew original is seen to be impossible (Dalman, p. 33). There are three constructions :—(a) **egeneto h#qe**, (b) **egeneto kai h#qe**, (c) **egeneto (au#on) el qei#**. In the Gospel we find in W.H. *text* 22 cases of (a), 11 of (b), and 5 of (c); in the Acts there are 17 of (c), but none of (a) or (b). (Blass gives one of (a) from the **b** text, and finds (b) in v. 7; but since the latter construction is isolated in *Acts*, it seems much better to make

diasthma subject of the verb.) It may be added that the construction occurs predominantly in connexion with **εἰ**, and especially **εἰ τ&?c.** inf., which is another of Dalman's Hebraisms. In the (a) passages 10 out of 22 have **εἰ τ&?** and 4 have **εἰ** with a noun: in the (b) 8 have **εἰ τ&?3 εἰ**, and there is no other occurrence (W.H. *margin* in ix. 28 being the only exception); while in the (c), in the Gospel, only xvi. 22 is without **εἰ**. Mark has the (a) construction twice, both times with **εἰ**, and Matthew five times, in the phrase **εγενετο οτε ετελεσεν κτ.λ.** We have one case of (b) in Matthew (ix. 10—a time clause and **καὶ ἰδού**), and one of (c) in Mark (ii. 23—also ii. 15 with **γινεται**). It seems to follow that the phrase originated in temporal sentences like our phrase, so much beloved of novelists, "It was in the days of . . . that . . ." This is the (c) form, but we could use the paratactic (a), or even (b), without transgressing our idiom. Greek idiom is affected by the substitution of **εγενετο** for **συνεβη** which in the (c) construction would be normal. But I do not feel sure that (a) was foreign to the vernacular. It is found in the modern speech: cf. Palli's version Matt. xi. 1, **καὶ συνεβηκε, σαν τε ἰωσὴ . . . , εὐγε . . .**, etc. (In Athenian vernacular **συνεβη οτι η#γε** is idiomatic: in the country districts, I am told, **εὐγε να>εβη** is more common.) At the same time it must be allowed that the correspondence with Hebrew is exceedingly close in (a) and (b). Driver (Tenses § 78) describes the 'תִּי' construction as occurring when there is inserted "a clause specifying the circumstances under which an action takes place,"—a description which will suit the Lucan usage everywhere, except sometimes in the (c) class (as xvi. 22), the only one of the three which has no Hebrew parallel. We must infer that the LXX. translators used this locution as a just tolerable Greek which literally represented the original; and that Luke (and to a minute extent Matthew and Mark) deliberately recalled the Greek Old Testament by using the phrase. The (c) construction appears to be a fusion of this with the normal Greek **συνεβη c. acc. et inf.** Its rarity in Luke's Gospel and marked development in Acts even suggests that it was his own coinage. The solitary LXX. parallel (W.M. 760 n), 2 Macc. iii. 16, has **η#** which may be an independent attempt to bring the Greek nearer to the familiar Hebrew. In Mark ii. 23 we might explain its isolated occurrence as a primitive assimilation to Luke vi. 1; note that so early a witness as the combination B C D does assimilate the infinitive here (**διaporeuesqai** for Mark's **παρapor.**). There only remains Mark ii. 15 **γινεται κατακεισqai αυτον . .** Here the parallel Matt. ix. 10 has the (b) form, no doubt diverging from (a) only to bring in the writer's favourite **καὶ ἰδού**. Is it possible that Mark originally had simply **καὶ κατακειται αυτος**? If so, **γινεται** will be due to a blending of Matthew's **εγενετο** with the present tense of Mark: the later MSS. made the assimilation more complete by changing the tense.

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(To be continued.)

Elements of New Testament Greek, First Edition, 1913. The two books by John Williams White, *The Beginner's Greek Book*, 1895, and *The First Greek Book*, 1896, have also been consulted with profit, especially as regards the form of presentation. Among reference works, the new grammar of J. H. Moulton, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, edited by Wilbert Francis Howard, especially Part ii of Vol. I. And both the Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament of Grimm-Thayer and Moulton and Geden's Concordance to the Greek Testament have been found absolutely indispensable throughout. The advanced student will find much useful material in the large work of A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, 1914. *Analytical Greek New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981. Identifies all the grammatical characteristics of every word of the GNT in the order of appearance. Use it only when you're utterly stuck. [2]. Louw, Johannes P. *Semantics of New Testament Greek*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982. Rather technical and demanding discussion of lexical semantics, i.e. how words convey meaning, as it affects the study of the NT.

The Greek in the New Testament is the so-called koine 'common language'. Based originally on the Greek of Athens, it was circulated throughout Alexander the Great's empire. Languages acquired by many non-native speakers are generally simplified, as was the koine. Morphological categories were lost, such as the dual and the optative, though forms of them may occur in written texts. Sentences were greatly simplified, as noted below. Yet many forms remain, especially for verbs. A difficulty with Greek that may put off learners is the maintenance of an older form of the alphabet tha