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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 differ-

ence 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 over-

hauling 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 κοινή, the “common”

Greek which superseded the dialects of the classical period,

was well enough known. But it was most obviously

different from the κοινή 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

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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

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who would allow the Scriptures to appear in any other

style of speech than that understanded 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 de-

scribe 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 re-

cently 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 sec-

ularized 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 condi-

tions 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.

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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” know-

ledge 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 Λυκαονιστὶ. 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.*

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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 “Hebra-

ism.” 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

ἀπὸ ὁ μάρτυς ὁ πιστός (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. Ἀπὸ ὁ ὤν 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.

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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 dis-

sociate 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 ἰδού is used by the New Testament writers, with

a frequency quite un-Attic, simply because they were accus-

tomed 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 הלך, in the ethical sense, was represented

not by the exactly answering ἀναστρέφεσθαι, but by

περιπατεῖν.2 But these cases are very few, and may be

transferred any day to the other category, illustrated above

in the case of ἰδού, 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.

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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 uncon-

sciously 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 אֶת, not

ignorance of σύν, which was responsible for Aquila's ἐν

κεφαλαίῳ ἔκτισεν ὁ θεὸς σὺν τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ σὺν τὴν γῆν. 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 ἐγένετο 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.

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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 “Hebra-

isms” 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 Dal-

man 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 ἐγένετο.

The impersonal ἐγένετο, answering to the narrative וַיְהִי, is in the

New Testament very rare outside Luke's writings, in which the supposi-

tion of a Hebrew original is seen to be impossible (Dalman, p. 33). There

are three constructions :—(*a*) ἐγένετο ἦλθε, (*b*) ἐγένετο καὶ ἦλθε, (*c*) ἐγένετο

(αὐτὸν) ἐλθεῖν. 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

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διάστημα subject of the verb.) It may be added that the construction

occurs predominantly in connexion with ἐν, and especially ε'ν τῷ c. inf.,

which is another of Dalman's Hebraisms. In the (*a*) passages 10 out of

22 have ἐν τῷ, and 4 have ἐν with a noun: in the (*b*) 8 have εν τῷ, 3 ἐν,

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 ἐν. Mark

has the (*a*) construction twice, both times with ἐν, and Matthew five times,

in the phrase ἐγένετο ὅτε ἐτέλεσεν κ.τ.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 γίνεται). 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 ἐγένετο for συνέβη which in the (*c*) con-

struction 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 συνέβηκε, σὰν τέλιωσε . . . , ἔφυγε . . ., etc. (In Athenian

vernacular συνέβη ὅτι ἦρθε is idiomatic: in the country districts, I am

told, ἔτυχε νὰ ἔλθῃ 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 וַיְהִי 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 every-

where, 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. trans-

lators used this locution as a just tolerable Greek which literally repre-

sented 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

σθνέβη *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 ἦν which may be an indepen-

dent 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 (διαπορεύεσθαι for Mark's παραπορ.). There

only remains Mark ii. 15 γίνεται κατακεῖσθαι αὐτόν . . 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 κατάκειται αὐτός? If so, γίνεται will be due to a blending of

Matthew's ἐγένετο 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.)*

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