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CHARACTERISTICS OF NEW TESTAMENT GREEK. (Pt. 3)

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III.

WE proceed to examine the history of the vernacular

Common Greek. Some features of its development are

undoubted, and may be noted first. The impulse which

produced it is, beyond question, the work of Alexander the

Great. The unification of Hellas was a necessary first

step in the accomplishment of his dream of Hellenizing the

world which he had marked out for conquest. To achieve

unity of speech throughout the little country which his

father's diplomatic and military triumphs had virtually

conquered for him, was a task too serious for Alexander

himself to face. But unconsciously he achieved it, as a by-

result of his colossal schemes, and the next generation found

that not only had a common language emerged from the

chaos of Hellenic dialects, but a new and nearly homo-

geneous world-speech had been created, in which Persian

and Egyptian might do business together, and Roman

proconsuls issue their commands to the subjects of a mightier

empire than Alexander's own. His army was in itself a

powerful agent in the levelling process which ultimately

destroyed nearly all the Greek dialects. The Anabasis of the

Ten Thousand Greeks, seventy years before, had doubtless

done something of the same kind on a small scale. Clearchus

the Lacedaemonian, Menon the Thessalian, Socrates the

Arcadian, Proxenus the Boeotian, and the rest, would find it

difficult to preserve their native brogue very long free from

the solvent influences of perpetual association during their

march; and when Cheirisophus of Sparta and Xenophon of

Athens had safely brought the host home, it is not strange

that the historian himself had suffered in the purity of his

Attic, which has some peculiarities distinctly foreshadowing

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the. Κοινή.1 The assimilating process would, of course, go

much further in the camp of Alexander, where, during pro-

longed campaigns, men from all parts of Greece were tent-

fellows and messmates, with no choice but to accommodate

their dialect in its more individual characteristics to the

average Greek which was gradually being evolved among

their comrades. In this process naturally those features

which were peculiar to a single dialect would have the

smallest chance of surviving, and those which most success-

fully combined the characteristics of many dialects would be

surest of a place in the resultant “common speech.” The

process was of course only begun in the army. As Hellen-

ism swept victoriously into Asia, and established itself on

all the shores of the eastern Mediterranean, the mixture of

nationalities in the new-rising communities demanded a

common language as the medium of intercourse, and the

Greek of the victorious armies of Alexander was ready for

the purpose. In the country districts of Greece itself, the

dialects lived on for generations; but Greece mattered com-

paratively little by this time for the great Hellenising

movement to which the world was to owe so much, nor

were the dialects which strikingly differed from the new

Κοινή those spoken by races that counted for anything in

the movement. History gives an almost pathetic interest to

an inscription like that from Larissa, engraved at the end

of the third century B.C., where the citizens record a rescript

from King Philip V., and their own consequent resolu-

tions:—2

Ταγευόντουν Ἀναγκίπποι Πετθαλείοι κ.τ.λ., Φιλίπποι τοῖ

1 Cf. Rutherford, *New Phrynichus*, 160-174. The same may be said of

the language of the lower classes in Athens herself in the fifth century

B.C., consisting as they did of immigrants from all parts. So [Xenophon]

*Constitution of Athens* 11. 3:—“The Greeks have an individual dialect, and

manner of life and fashion of their own, but the Athenians have what is

compounded from all the Greeks and barbarians.” The vase-inscriptions

abundantly evidence this. (Kretschmer, *Entstehung d. Koinh*<, p. 34.)

2 See Michel, *Recueil d'Inscriptions Grecques*, no. 41, or other collections.

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Βασιλεῖος ἐπιστολὰν ἀπυστέλλαντος πὸτ τὸς ταγὸς καὶ τὰν   
πόλιν τὰν ὑπογεγραμμέναν·

Βασιλεὺς Φίλιππος Λαρισαίων τοῖς ταγοῖς καὶ τῆι πόλει  
χαίρειν (and so on in normal Κοινή).

The old and the new survived thus side by side into the

imperial age, but Christianity had only a brief opportunity

of speaking in the old dialects of Greece. In one corner

alone did the dialect live on. To-day scholars recognize

but one modern idiom, the Zaconian, which does not

directly descend from the Κοινή. As we might expect, this

is nothing but the ancient Laconian, whose broad *ā* holds

its ground still in the speech of a race impervious to litera-

ture and proudly conservative of a dialect that was always

abnormal to an extreme. Apart from this the dialects died

out entirely. They contributed their share to the resultant

common Greek, but it is an assured result of Modern Greek

philology that there are no elements whatever now existing,

due to the ancient dialects, which did not find their way

into the stream of development through the channel of

the Common Dialect of more than two thousand years

ago.

So far we may go without difference of opinion. The

only serious discussion arises when we ask what were the

relative magnitudes of the contributions of the several

dialects to the new resultant speech. That the literary

Κοινή was predominantly Attic has been already stated, and

is of course beyond doubt. But was Attic more than one

among many elements assimilated in the new vernacular?

It has always been taken for granted that the intellectual

queen of Greece was the predominant partner in the busi-

ness of establishing a new dialect based on compromise

between the old ones. This conclusion has recently been

challenged by Dr. Paul Kretschmer, a brilliant comparative

philologist, previously distinguished for his studies on the

language of the Greek vase-inscriptions and on the dialects

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of the Greeks’ nearest neighbours.1 In his tractate entitled

*Die Entstehung der* Κοινή, published in the Transactions of

the Vienna Academy for 1900, he undertook to show that

the oral Κοινή contained elements from Boeotian, Ionic and

even North-west Greek to a larger extent than from Attic.

His argument affects pronunciation mainly. That Boeotian

monophthongizing of the diphthongs, Doric softening of

b, d and g, and Ionic deaspiration of words beginning with

*h*, affected the spoken language more than any Attic influ-

ence, might perhaps be allowed. But if we restrict ourselves

to features which had to be represented in writing, as con-

trasted with mere variant pronunciations of the same written

word, the case becomes less striking. Boeotian may have

supplied 3 plur. forms in - san for imperfect and optative,

but they do not appear to any considerable extent outside

the LXX.: the New Testament probably knows them not,

and they are surprisingly rare in the papyri.2 North-west

Greek has the accusative plural in -ες, found freely in

papyri and (in the word τέσσαρες) in MSS. of the New

Testament also the middle conjugation of εἰμί, and the

confusion of forms from – άω and –έω.) verbs. Doric gives us

some guttural forms from verbs in - ζω, and a few lexical

items. Ionic supplies a fair number of isolated forms, and

may be responsible for many -ω or –ῶ flexions from -μι

verbs, and some uncontracted noun-forms like ὀστέων or

χρυσέῳ. But the one peculiarly Attic feature which

Kretschmer does allow, the treatment of original *ā* as con-

trasted with Ionic on one side and the rest of Greek dialects

on the other, is so far-reaching in its effects that we cannot

but give it more weight than any of the rest. And while

the accidence of Attic may bequeath to the vernacular much

matter which it shared with other dialects, one may ques-

1 *Die griech. Vaseninschriften*, 1894; *Einleitung in die Geschichte der*

*griech. Sprache*, 1896.

2 See *Class. Rev.* xv. 36, and the addenda in xviii. 110 (March 1904).

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tion whether the accidence of any single dialect would

present anything like the same similarity to that of the

Κοινή as the Attic does. We can hardly resist the conclu-

sion of the experts that Kretschmer has failed to prove his

point. At the same time we may allow that the influence

of the other dialects on pronunciation may well have been

generally underestimated. Kretschmer of course declares

that Attic supplied the orthography, except for those un-

educated persons to whom we are so much indebted for

evidence of pronunciation. Consequently, he says, when

the Hellenist wrote χαίρει and pronounced it *chéri*, his

language was really Boeotian and not Attic.1 It is obvious

that the question does not seriously concern us, since we

are dealing with a language which for all its vernacular

character comes to us in a written and therefore largely

Atticized form. For our purpose we may assume that we

have a Greek which includes important contributions from

various dialects, but with Attic as the principal factors

although we have hardly anything in it in which Attic

showed a marked idiosyncrasy.

At this point it should be observed that pronunciation is

not to be passed over as a matter of no practical importance

for the modern student of Hellenistic. The undeniable

fact that phonetic spelling—which during the reign of the

old dialects was a blessing common to all—was entirely

abandoned by the educated generations before the Christian

era, has some very obvious results for our grammar and

textual criticism. That αι and ε, ει (ῃ) and ι, οι and υ were

identities for the scribes of our MSS. is certain.2 The

scribe made his choice according to the grammar and the

1 Against this emphasizing of Boeotian, see Thumb, *Hellenismus*, 228.

2 On the date of the levelling of quantity, so notable a feature in

Modern Greek, see Hatzidakis in Ἀθηνᾶ for 1901 (xiii. 247). He decides

that it began outside Greece and established itself very gradually. It

must have been complete, or nearly so, before the scribes of X B wrote.

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sense, just as we choose between *kings*, *king’s* and *kings’*, or

between *bow* and *bough*. He wrote σύ nominative and σοί

dative; λύσασθαι infinitive and λύσασθε imperative; φιλεῖς,

εἶδον indicative, and φιλῇς, ἴδω subjunctive; βούλει verb,

but βουλῇ noun. But there was nothing to prevent him

from writing ἐξέφνης, ἐφνίδιος, ἀφειρημένος, etc., if his anti-

quarian knowledge gave in; while there were times when

his choice between (for example) infinitive and imperative

(as Luke xix. 13) was determined only by his own or per-

haps a traditional exegesis. It will be seen therefore that

we cannot regard our best MSS. as decisive on such ques-

tons, except as far as we may see reason to trust their-

general accuracy in grammatical tradition. Westcott and

Hort may be justified in printing ἱνα. . . ἐπισκιάσει in

Acts v. 15, after B and some cursives; but the passage is

wholly useless for any argument as to the use of ἵνα with a

future. Or, let us take the constructions of οὐ μή as exhibited

in Moulton-Geden's concordance (for W.H. *text*). There are

73 occurrences with aor. subj., and 2 more in which the -σω)

might theoretically be future. Against these we find 8 cases

of the future, and 14 in which the parsing depends on our

choice between ει and ῃ. It is evident that editors cannot

hope to decide here what the autographs had. And if they

had the autograph before them, it would be no evidence

as to the author's grammar if he dictated the text. To this

we may add that by the time א and B were written *o* and ω.

were no longer distinct in pronunciation, which transfers

two more cases to the indeterminate list. It is not there-

fore simply the overwhelming manuscript authority which

decides us for ἔχωμεν in Rom. v. 1. Were the versions and

the patristic authorities wanting, we might have some diffi-

culty in proving that the orthography of the MSS. went back

to a very ancient traditional interpretation. It is indeed

quite possible that the Apostle's own pronunciation did not

distinguish them sufficiently to give Tertius a clear lead

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without making inquiry.1 In all these matters we may

fairly recognize a case nearly parallel with the editor's

choice between such alternatives as τίνες and τινές in Heb.

iii. 16, where the tradition varies. The modern expositor

feels himself entirely at liberty to decide according to his

view of the context.

Before passing on from the dialect question it may be

well to make a few more remarks on the nature of the con-

tributions which we have noted. Some surprise may have

been felt at the importance of the elements alleged to have

been brought into the language by the “North-west Greek,” 2

a dialect which lies altogether outside the literary limits.

The group embraces, as its main constituents, the dialects

of Epirus, Ætolia, Locris and Phokis and Achaia and is

known to us from inscriptions, in which those of Delphi

are conspicuous. It is the very last we should have ex-

pected to influence the resultant language, but it is soon

observed that its part (on Kretschmer's theory) has really

been very marked. The characteristic Achaian accus.

plur. in -ej successfully established itself in the common

Greek, as its presence in the vernacular of to-day sufficiently

shows. Its prominence in the papyri 3 indicates that it was

making a good fight, which in the case of τέσσαρες had al-

ready become a fairly assured victory. In the New Testa-

ment, τέσσαρας never occurs without some excellent author-

ity for τέσσαρες :4 cf. W.H. App. 150. Moreover I note

in Rev. i. 16 that A has ἀστέρες—with omission of ἔχων,

1 o and w were confused in various quarters before this date: cf Schwei-

zer, *Pergam*. 95; .Nachmanson, *Magnet. Inschr.* 64; Thumb, *Hellenismus,*

143.

2 Brugmann, *Griech*. Gram.3 17.

3 See *Class. Rev.* xv. 34, 435, xviii, 109, I must acknowledge a curious

mistake I made there in citing A. Thumb for instead of against Kretsch-

mer's argument on this point.

4 John xi. 17 X D; Acts xxvii. 29 and Rev. ix. 14, א ; Rev. iv. 4 x A

(and so W.H. marg.) ; vii. 1 A *bis*, P *semel*.

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it is true, but that may well be an effort to mend the gram-

mar. It is of course impossible to build on this but taking

into account the obvious fact that the author of the Apoca-

lypse was still decidedly ἀγράμματος at Greek; and remem-

bering the already described phenomena of the papyri, I

should be greatly surprised if his autograph did not exhibit

accusatives in -ες, and not in τέσσαρες alone. The middle

conjugation of εἰμί, is given by Kretschmer as a North-west

Greek feature, but the Delphian. ἦται and ἔωνται are balanced

by Messenian ἦνται, and Lesbian ἔσσο, which looks as if

some middle forms existed in the earliest Greek. But the

confusion of the –άω and –έω verbs, which is marked in the

papyri 1 and New Testament and is complete in Modern

Greek, may well have come from the North-west Greek,

though encouraged by Ionic. I cannot attempt to discuss

here the question between Thumb and Kretschmer, but an

*à priori* argument might be pleaded for the latter in the

well-known fact that from the third to the first century B.C.

the political importance of Ætolia and Achaia produced an

Achaian-Dorian Κοινή, which yielded to the other Κοινή about

a hundred years before St. Paul began to write: it seems

antecedently probable that this dialect would leave some

traces on that which superseded it. Possibly the extension

of the 3rd plur. -σαν, and even the perfect -an, may be due

to the same source2: the former is also Boeotian. The

features we have been mentioning have in common their

*sporadic* acceptance in the first century Hellenistic, which

is just what we should expect where a dialect like this con-

tends for survival with one that has already spread over a

very large area. The elements here tentatively set down

to the North-west Greek secured their ultimate victory

through their intrinsic advantages. One (-άω and –έω verbs)

1 See *Class. Rev*. xv. 36, 435, xviii. 110.

2 It is found in Delphian (Valaori, *Delph. Dial*. 60) rather prominently

both in indic. and opt. The case for -an (*ibid*.) is weaker.

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fused together two grammatical categories which served no

useful purpose by their distinctness; another (accus. in -ες)

reduced the number of separate forms to be remembered, at

the cost of a confusion which English bears without difficulty,

and even Attic bore in πόλεις, βασιλεῖς, πλείους, etc.;

while the others both reduced the tale of equivalent suffixes

and (in the case of -σαν) provided a very useful means of

distinction between 1st sing. and 3rd plur.

We come to securer ground when we bring in the part

taken by Ionic, for here Thumb and Kretschmer are at one.

The former observes that only the establishment of an en-

tirely new type can be conclusive for our recognition of a

particular dialect as the source of some modern phenomenon.

The nouns in –ᾶς –ᾶδος and –οῦς –οῦδος are by this principle

recognized as an undeniable debt of Modern Greek to Ionic

elements in the Κοινή. Like the other elements which came

from a single ancient dialect, they had to struggle for ex-

istence. We find them in the Egyptian Greek, but in the

New Testament -ᾶς makes gen. –ᾶ, as often even in Asia

Minor, where naturally -ᾶδος is at home.1 Kretschmer

gives as Ionic elements in the Κοινή the forms κιθών (=χιτών)

and the like, psilosis (which the Ionians shared with their

Æolic neighbours), the uncontracted noun and verb

forms alluded to already, and the invasion of the –mi verbs

by thematic forms (contract or ordinary). He does not

accept the declension σπεῖρα σπείρης, normal in the Κοινή

from the first century B.C., as due to Ionism, but to the

analogy γλπωσσα γλώσσης. To his argument here we

might add the consideration that the declension -ρ*ă* -ρης is

both earlier and more stable than –υῖα –υίης, a difference

which I would connect with the fact that the combination

ιη was barred in Attic at a time when rh (from ρ*Fā*) was no

longer objected to (contrast ὑγιᾶ and κόρη): if Ionic forms

1 It is in a minority both at Pergamon and at Magnesia: Schweizer

139 f., Nachmanson, 120.CHARACTERISTICS OF NEW TESTAMENT GREEK. 319

were simply taken over, εἰδυίης would have come in as early

as σπείρης.

But this discussion may be left to the philological journals,

for we must endeavour to bring the generalities to a close to

make way for a survey of the syntax in its several divisions.

What concerns the student of the written vernacular is

rather the question of dialectic varieties in itself than in its

previous history. Are we to expect persistence of Ionic

features in Asia Minor, and will the Greek of Egypt, Syria,

Macedonia and Italy differ dialectically to an extent which

we can detect after two thousand years? Speaking gener-

ally, we may reply in the negative. Dialectic differences

there must have been in a language spoken over so large an

area. But the differences need not in theory be greater than

those between British and American English, which when

written conceal the main differences, those of pronuncia-

tion. The analogy of this modern *Weltsprache* is in fact

very helpful for our investigation of the old. We see how

the educated colloquial closely approximates everywhere

when written down, differing locally to some extent, but in

vocabulary and orthography rather than in grammar. The

uneducated vernacular will differ more, but its differences will

still show least in the grammar. The study of the papyri

and the Κοινή inscriptions of Asia Minor shows us that we

have essentially the same phenomena in Hellenistic. There

are few points of grammar in which the New Testament

language differs from that which we see in other sources of

common Greek vernacular, from whatever province it comes.

We have already mentioned cases in which what may have

been quite possible Hellenistic is used beyond the limits of

natural Greek because of coincidence with Semitic. Apart

from these, we have a few small matters in which the New

Testament differs from the usage of the Papyri. The

prominence of οὐ μή is the most important of these, for

certainly the papyri lend no countenance whatever to any

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theory that οὐ μή was a normal unemphatic negative in Hel-

lenistic. I must return to this when the negatives come to

be discussed; but meanwhile I may note that in the New

Testament οὐ μή seems somehow necessarily connected

with “translation Greek”—the places where no Semitic

original can be suspected show it only in the very emphatic

sense which is common to classical and Hellenistic use.

Among smaller points are the New Testament construction

of ἔνοχος c. gen. of penalty, and the prevailing use of

ἀπεκρίθην for ἀπεκρινάμην: in both of these the papyri

agree with the classical usage, but that in the latter case the

New Testament has good Hellenistic warrant is shown by

Phrynichus (see Rutherford, p. 186 ff.), and by the modern

Greek ἀποκρίθηκα.

The whole question of dialectic differences within the

spoken Κοινή is judicially summed up by our greatest living

authority, Dr. Albert Thumb, in chap. v. of his book on

Greek in the Hellenistic age, already often quoted. He

thinks that such differences must have existed largely, in

Asia Minor especially, but that writings like the Greek

Bible, intended for wider circulation, employed a *Durch-*

*schnittsprache* which avoided local individualisms. (The

letters of St. Paul would not be an exception, though

intended for single localities, for he would not be familiar

with the peculiarities of Galatian or Achaian, still less of

Roman Κοινή). To the question whether our authorities

are right in speaking of a special Alexandrian Greek, Thumb

practically returns a negative. For nearly all the purposes

of our own special study, Hellenistic Greek may be regarded

as a unity, varying almost only with the education of the

writer, his tendency to use or ignore features of literary lan-

guage, and his dependence upon sources in a foreign tongue

which could be either freely or slavishly rendered into the

current Greek.

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