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Fields, Districts, Plots in Palestine

by Eric F. F. Bruce

Mr. Bishop's gift for bringing his topographical acquaintance with Palestine to bear on the meaning of the New Testament text is by this time well known to our readers. We are glad to inaugurate a new year once more with a further study of this kind.

THE article on *Field* by Professor G. B. Eager in Hastings' *Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels*, first published seventy years ago, reads as if the writer had had some personal contact with Palestine or one of her neighbours. The paragraphs which follow are in some sense both tribute and appendix. There is a reference at the close to "to-day among the Arabs".¹ It is from here that we venture to resume the story, adding Arabic to Arabs.

Dr. Eager naturally mentions the three Greek words, which have at times been rendered "field" in the older versions, not invariably with consistency. The first, *agros*, is usually "cultivated land"; the second, *chōrion*, seems more specific with Gethsemane or "the parcel of ground" near Jacob's well; while the third, *chōra*, also occurs in this Johannine context, but must surely imply a wider area than just "fields". It is one of the Greek words that found its way into Arabic as *District*, though how far back in history it might be unwise to dogmatize.

"Field" is a term of wider significance in English than any of the Greek nouns—perhaps reaching its geographical *ne plus ultra* in mine-fields below the waves while finding a niche in the realms of war and sport, which Arabic with its more logical bent would not employ; though in the world of simile or metaphor usage might be identical; and why not, with the Gospels radiating so much oriental life and thought? "The Field is the World".

Years ago in Jerusalem there was a prayer used in public worship in English and Arabic addressed to our Lord as having "walked these holy fields" in the "days of His flesh". The fields were never far from Him in life or imagination. Pilgrims still who visit Bethlehem at least see the Shepherds' Fields two miles below the Church of the Nativity, even if they don't worship in the very spot—a spot that takes us back in history to Boaz and Ruth, who "gleaned in the field until even".² The shepherds are described by St. Luke as *agraulountes* "out in the field" (RSV). If the singular is rightly

¹ HDCG, vol. I, 591.

² Ruth 2: 17. Boaz is not forgotten.

understood the participle might support the tradition of the shepherds being three generations of one family, so that they would be looking after their own flock in their own field:³ but "out in the fields" (NEB) would seem more likely, caring for the flock in case of attack by wild animals—the men were bivouacking in the open country the great night of the Nativity. They were having their *sahra*⁴—an experience somewhat similar to the last night in the ministry of the Lord with the Eleven on Olivet.

There are over thirty occurrences of *agros* in the N.T., all but one in the Gospels—one which may be the key to the interpretation of some of the evangelic passages.⁵ In the first printed edition of the N.T. in Arabic there are only three instances where the Semitic form common to Hebrew and Arabic is not employed. The modern English versions—RSV, NEB and the Jerusalem Bible—indulge in a variety of renderings: *field*, *land*, *farm*, *estate*, *country-side*, *country round about* and *piece of land*. In their consideration of the three Greek words Moulton and Milligan remark that, though Luke does have *chōra* where *agros* might have been expected, "it looks as if for some reason *agros* was a favourite word with translators from Hebrew and Aramaic".⁶ Synoptic repetition reduces the number slightly, while there are no instances of *agros* in the Fourth Gospel.

The first Markan occurrence is after the healing of the demoniac on the other side in the "district" of the Gerasenes, when the herdsmen told what had happened in the city (Jerash or somewhere else) and *tous agrous*, which must surely mean "fields", for it was day-time and the men would be out working. It is true that in the two following instances (the second anarthrous) *agroi* occurs in juxtaposition with "villages". Vincent Taylor suggests *hamlets* as in other places.⁷ This is what Arabic has; and Arabic goes largely by the "feel". "Farm" does not have quite the needed ring; and "country" hardly fits the landscape. The next Markan reference concerns the sacrificial demands on discipleship—the willingness to give up (ancestral) *lands*, with the O.T. story of Naboth the Jezreelite in interpretation.⁸ This is what Barnabas

³ This is implied in the picture behind the altar in the underground church in the Fields.

⁴ The root means to "spend the night awake"; and has given its name to the neighbouring village of Bait Sahūr.

⁵ Mark 5: 14; 6: 36, 56; 10: 29, 30; 16: 12; Matthew 6: 28, 30; 13: 24, 27, 31, 36, 38, 44; 19: 29; 22: 5; 24: 18, 40; 27: 7, 8, 10; Luke 8: 34; 9: 12, 15: 15, 25; 17: 7, 21, 36; 23: 26; Acts 4: 37.

⁶ *Vocabulary of the Greek Testament*, 7.

⁷ *The Gospel according to St. Mark*, 283.

⁸ I Kings 21: 3. The story serves to "prove the power of local customs" (A. C. Welch in the article in HDB III, 471).

the Cypriot did with his *lands* or *fields* (*estate* seems too grandiose). Naboth wouldn't surrender his bit of land on the Great Plain (Esdraelon). It was in the twenties of this century that a tiny plot the other end of the Plain near Affuleh was finally taken from the holder through *force majeure*. Land in a family has always meant something, however distant the possessor. At one time the C.M.S. acquired land on both sides of the Great North Road on the crest of Mount Scopus; but there were plots here and there which the mission could not buy; and the project of a college was abandoned not only because of finance, but because the owners thousands of miles away refused to part with their ancestral possessions. May not this have been the case with Simon of Kyrenia (whether or not he was a Cypriot like Barnabas)? He was on the way back from seeing his own *land*, when on reaching Jerusalem his services were requisitioned for the carrying of the Cross.

In between comes the note in the Story of the Triumphal Entry, with the mention of the *stibades* gathered by the crowds. "A litter of straw, rushes or leaves"⁹ (Vincent Taylor) is attractive though why should not the wild flowers, lupins and anemones, be counted in, with which the fields were carpeted in the Palestinian spring? They said it that day with flowers plucked from the *country-side*.¹⁰

Whatever is meant by *stibades*, the suggestion that wild flowers were included in the carpeting serves as a transition to the Matthean references to *agros*, with "the lilies of the field" with which the Heavenly Father has decked the grass—in fact both destined for the oven. "The grass withereth, the flower fadeth". In the long run the *krina* are one with the "grass of the field" they have brightened for a spell. *Field* still seems the natural rendering in this context. In the parabolic chapter too, with six instances of *agros*, *field* must remain with the missionary touch in the interpretation of the "Tares of the Field". There seems no reason, however, why anyone should not plant a grain of mustard-seed anywhere on his *land* especially for birds as the shade would help to keep them away from more cultivated ground.¹¹ Would not the same hold good for the "Hid Treasure"—an unlikely *bit of land* which no one would suspect, as has been known in more modern times? In Luke 14: 18 NEB and the Jerusalem Bible appear justified in rendering "*a piece of land*" in the Parable of the Supper; and this should surely apply in the Matthean parallel, when one of the invited guests excused himself by going off to his own *piece of land*. In the Discourse on the Last Things it may be an open question as to whether someone on his

⁹ Vincent Taylor, *op. cit.*, 456. Perhaps "gleanings" might suit.

¹⁰ Cf. my *Jesus of Palestine*, 213.

¹¹ At times a mustard-seed plant will grow in unlooked for places, as on a "plot of land" opposite our home in Jerusalem.

land or in his *field* was advised not to take time to pick up his “cloak”;¹² and similarly the couple one of whom might be caught away.

It is when we reach the closing scene in the life of Judas that *field* is rightly retained, with the transliterated Hebrew or Aramaic of the Greek in Acts—the sister word in the generic Arabic.¹³ It became a particular *plot of land* for the interment of strangers.

In St. Luke apart from the participle in description of the shepherds near Bethlehem it is not until we reach the greatest short story that *agros* is used independently of the other synoptists. The Prodigal, having reached the *chōra*, was sent off into *lands* probably beyond the outskirts of the town to look after pigs scavenging whatever they could. (In Mandate times and before, pigs were only to be seen in the neighbourhood of Druze villages or those which had a Druze community as Shef Amru in Galilee.) It might be that the elder brother was occupied on family *land* though nearer home and with no pigs in the vicinity, whatever the anarthrous *agro* means in the context.

It is this parable which involves the right understanding and rendering of *chōra*.¹⁴ Did St. Luke know it as having at times some political designation? It was in the Bethlehem (sub)-*District*, a centre for Baduin tribes down to British days, that the Shepherds' Fields were situated. In the case of the Prodigal may not *makran* serve as a key to the best rendering as to his destination? The same word reappears in the testimony to the clear Palestine atmosphere when the father spotted him on the horizon. A phrase like “some distance off” might suit both the contexts—both the *District* where the younger brother hired himself out and where the father recognized him. The remaining instance of *agros* in St. Luke comes in the parable of the servant returning from the *field*, where he had been ploughing or shepherding, which with the article may be further witness to St. Luke's accuracy.

The other synoptists are content with the Greek all-purposes word, perhaps knowing instinctively whether the reference pointed to arable land or the more open country-side or, as in the case of Simon of Kyrenia and Barnabas, some ancestral domain which Passover or other Feast in Jerusalem afforded the opportunity of visiting when they came over from Cyprus.

¹² Presumably the ‘*abāyah* easily discarded and usually made of camel hair.

¹³ *Hagl*—the guttural being omitted as with other Semitic letters by the Greeks.

¹⁴ Mark 1: 5; 5: 1, 10; 6: 55; Matthew 2: 12; 4: 16; 8: 28; Luke 2: 8; 3: 1; 8: 26; 12: 16; 15: 13, 14, 15; 19: 12; 21: 21; John 4: 35; 11: 54, 55; Acts 8: 1; 10: 39; 12: 20; 13: 48; 16: 6; 18: 23; 26: 20; 27: 27; James 5: 4.

St. Luke's other instances of *chōra* are usually clearly geographical or political—sometimes both—the *District* of Trachonitis controlled by Herod Philip or the *District* of the Gerasenes on the Trans-jordan side of the Lake or the Markan *District* of Judaea and Samaria—very much as in previous or subsequent centuries. In the Johannine description of the early “whitening” crops on the Plain of Askar (Sychar) it was surely the whole *District* round about to which our Lord bade the disciples lift up their eyes. The same word would apply to the *chōra* near the desert to which our Lord repaired after the Raising of Lazarus. So too the *Magi*.¹⁵

In the occurrences in Acts *district* suits most of the contexts—though in Caesarea St. Peter is a little more specific in his reference to Judaea. Later there is the *District* of Tyre and Sidon, the pair of cities that have stuck together. At the close of the first Pauline journey it was the *District* round Antioch where the word of the Lord was spread. The next tour led the apostles through the *District* of *Phrygia and Galatia*, perhaps a political unit too. The same *District* is mentioned a few chapters later. In his defence before Agrippa St. Paul mentions the *District* of Judaea for the last time. In the majority of instances there would seem to be some political implication in the use of *chora*, natural for anyone familiar through travel with the ways of Government in an area of the world where Greek was the *lingua franca*, so much so that as history progressed and Arabic assumed the mantle of Greek, the Arabs could do nothing better than take over the well-understood Greek term with *kūrah*. The occurrence in James on the other hand is perhaps the one undisputed place for the rendering *fields*.

If *chōra* in many contexts can be acknowledged to have a ring bordering on the political entity of a specified area, it is interesting to note that Van Dyck in his (standard) Arabic version of last century employed the transliterated *kūrah* in all but three places while the far more inconsistent translation of Erpenius uses the word in the Sychar passage as against Van Dyck. The Roman Catholic version, however, relying on the Vulgate has no mention of *kūrah* but a variety of words founded on the assumed understanding of *regio* in the specific context, there being one passage where *ager* is used. Might it not be that Jerome's consistency in the use of *regio* parallels that of Van Dyck fifteen centuries later with *kūrah*? Was there some understanding of local (government) and linguistic usage stretching back from Van Dyck and Jerome to St. Luke? The use of *chōra*, *regio*, *kurah* by the three scholars for the “region and shadow of death” where light shone with the dawn of Jesus' ministry in Galilee is metaphorical and prophetic.

¹⁵ If the origin of the Wise Men be reckoned Teman or Yemen.

There are fewer instances of *chōrion*¹⁶ than of the other two words—the last being in the plural in reference to ‘the “plots of land” (J.B. “estates”) owned by the Primus of Malta, presumably ancestral possessions. But the earliest disciples sold theirs, in some cases houses, giving the proceeds to the apostles, though one couple defaulted. There are the occurrences further back in Christian history. St. Luke calls *Akeldama* a *chōrion*, with the name of Judas attached. But the *plot* that Jacob reserved for Joseph was remembered down the generations; while the *chōrion* whose name was Gethsemane has been embedded in Christian history since the Passover moon rose high over Olivet one Thursday evening long years ago.

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¹⁶ Mark 14: 32; Matthew 26: 36; John 4: 5; Acts 1: 18, 19; 4: 34; 5: 3, 8; 28: 7.