

Archaeology and the New Testament

F.F. Bruce

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1. PAPYRUS DISCOVERIES

In 1920 a miscellaneous lot of Egyptian papyri was bought for the Rylands Library in Manchester. About fifteen years later, while some of these were being examined by an Oxford scholar, Mr. C. H. Roberts, one tiny scrap of papyrus attracted his attention. It proved to be a fragment of a very early Greek copy of St. John's Gospel. One side of it contained John xviii. 31-33, and the other side contained verses 37 and 38 of the same chapter. This proved that the fragment was part of a copy of the Gospel written in ordinary book-form (or codex-form, to use the technical term) and not in the form of a roll. But more than that: when expert papyrologists examined the fragment to determine its age, they concluded from the style of writing and other features that it must have been written in the first half of the second century A.D., at a time (to quote the Rylands Librarian, Dr. H. Guppy) "when the ink of the original autograph can hardly have been dry. This must be regarded as the earliest fragment by at least fifty years of the New Testament." As the Fourth Gospel was traditionally written down in Ephesus at John's dictation about A.D. 100, this fragment shows that it was

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known in Egypt in a very short time after it was first produced.

This illustrates the chief way in which archaeological research illuminates the New Testament. New Testament archaeology is less picturesque than Old Testament archaeology; it is not so much concerned with the excavating of ancient cities and the disinterring of potentates who have lain for millennia in their graves; but its importance for illustrating and confirming the Biblical record is just as great.

Papyrus was a plant whose inner bark was dried in strips, which were then gummed together so as to form conveniently-sized sheets and rolls of writing material. People wrote on it with reed-pens, and the ink they used was compounded of charcoal, gum and water. Papyrus, though very convenient as a writing-material, was not at all durable; when exposed to damp it rotted quickly. So, while it was in common use in many parts of the ancient world, papyrus documents have survived only in such environments as the dry sand of Egypt and the volcanic ash of Herculaneum. Papyrus documents have been discovered belonging to all ages of ancient Egyptian history, but we are at present interested in 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 Lower Egypt. This Greek-speaking popula-

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tion was literate in all its strata. The common people wrote letters and kept the ordinary commercial accounts of daily life on pieces of papyrus; and for odd jottings some of them found an even handier writing medium in broken pieces of unglazed pottery—*ostraca*, as we call them.

These scraps of papyrus and pieces of pottery soon found their way to the rubbish-dumps, where they lay undisturbed for centuries. It was towards the end of the last century that scholars began to take an interest in them. Unlike the papyri containing literary texts, of which many were also found, the papyri which threw most light on the New Testament were those written by ordinary people in their everyday vernacular. For it was realized before long that this everyday vernacular presented remarkable similarities to the kind of Greek in which much of the New Testament was written. Scholars had long recognized that the Greek of the New Testament was different in several respects from the Greek in which the great classical authors had written, but they were not sure how to account for the difference. One German scholar in 1863 referred to New Testament Greek as “a language of the Holy Ghost”, specially produced for the purpose of recording the New Testament revelation. In England, Bishop Lightfoot saw what New Testament Greek really was. In 1863 he declared his belief “that if we could only

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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 decades later to the vernacular papyri, they discovered that the “language of the Holy Ghost” was the language of the common people.

The pioneer in comparing the language of the New Testament with that of the vernacular papyri was a German scholar, Adolf Deissmann. The study was taken up by others, among whom we may name two British scholars, J. H. Moulton and George Milligan, who between them produced a monumental work, *The Vocabulary of the New Testament illustrated from the Papyri and Other Non-literary Sources* (completed in 1930), in which the results of this comparative study are made accessible to the student.

There was at first a quite 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 mundane affairs, although much of it (as we might expect) has a Semitic flavour not found in the Egyptian papyri. But there is also a large literary element in the New Testament for which we must seek

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parallels in the later Greek writers;¹ and in order to understand what we may call the theological vocabulary of the New Testament we cannot dispense with the *Septuagint*, the translation of the Old Testament into Greek made in Alexandria in the third and second centuries B.C.

¹ See E. K. Simpson, *Words Worth Weighing in the Greek New Testament* (Tyndale Press, London, 1944). 7 [http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/words_simpson.pdf]

But to return to the papyri. Great excitement was roused towards the end of last century by the discovery of two papyrus fragments at a place in Egypt called Oxyrhynchus, containing some Sayings of Jesus. Some of these were similar to Sayings preserved in our Gospels, while 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." These papyrus fragments were not portions of a continuous Gospel, but of a list or lists of isolated Sayings of Jesus, each introduced by the words, "Jesus said." The fragments themselves belong to about A.D. 140. The substance, though not the diction, of these Sayings has affinities with the teaching of Jesus contained in St. John's Gospel. One of these is quoted by an early Alexandrian Father, Clement (about A.D. 200), as coming from "The Gospel according to the

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Hebrews," a work which was current in Egypt in the early Christian centuries.

In 1931 the news was published of the discovery, of a collection of Biblical papyri which have come to be known as the "Chester Beatty Papyri" after the name of an American collector. This collection consists of portions of eleven papyrus codices, three of which in their complete state contained most of the New Testament. Two of these three, containing respectively (1) the Four Gospels and Acts, and (2) Paul's nine letters to Churches and the Epistle to the Hebrews, were written in the first half of the third century A.D.; the third, containing the Book of Revelation, belongs to the second half of the same century. Even in their present mutilated state, these papyri bear most important testimony to the early history of the text of the New Testament, as they are a century and more older than the Vatican and Sinaitic Codices, our two most valuable New Testament manuscripts.

A more recent discovery consists of some papyrus fragments published in *Fragments of an Unknown Gospel and other Early Christian Papyri*, by H. I. Bell and T. C. Skeat (1935). These fragments, dated by papyrologists not later than A.D. 150, apparently belonged to a manual designed to teach people the Gospel stories, and obviously based on all four of our Gospels. This means not only that each of our Gospels by itself was in existence by

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that date (a fact which we know on other grounds); but also that the Fourfold Gospel as we have it was known and used as an authoritative collection.

2. INSCRIPTIONS

Another, and very different, form of documentary evidence is that of inscriptions cut in the stonework of public buildings, monuments, and the like. Quite a number of these throw light on the New Testament narrative. At the Greek city of Delphi, which was included, in the Roman province of Achaia, an inscription was discovered some years ago containing a proclamation by the Roman Emperor Claudius (A.D. 41-54), which enabled us to fix definitely the time at which Gallio was proconsul of the province. His period of office seems to have been the year beginning in July, A.D. 51. As he was proconsul of Achaia during Paul's stay in Corinth (Acts xviii. 12),

this gives us a fixed point from which we can determine other dates in the lifetime of Paul, both backwards and forwards.

In Acts xvii. 6 we are told that when Paul was at Thessalonica, his opponents laid information against him and his friends before. “the rulers of the city.” The literal rendering of the title used by Luke for these officials is *politarchs*. This word is not found in any classical author, but it is found in some nineteen inscriptions ranging between the second century B.C. and the third century A.D. In the

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majority of these inscriptions the word *Politarch* is used of magistrates in Macedonian cities, and in five of them Thessalonica is the city referred to. Thessalonica had five or six *politarchs*—five at the beginning of the first century A.D., and six in the middle of the second century.

It has often been pointed out that Luke is particularly careful to give the officials who figure in his narrative their proper titles, and this is one out of many such examples. Another has reference to the title of the leading citizen of Malta in Roman times, who is mentioned in Acts xxviii. 7 as Publius, “the chief man of the island,” or, more literally, the first man of the island. Inscriptions both in Greek and in Latin have been found which show that “first man” (Gk. *prōtos*, Lat. *primus*) was actually his technical title.

The story of the riot in Ephesus in Acts xix. represents the *ecclesia* or citizen-body of that town as meeting in the theatre. That it did in fact meet there is shown by an inscription in Greek and Latin found in the theatre which records that a Roman official, Vibius Salutaris, presented a silver image of Artemis (“Diana” of the English Bible) 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 part played in the riot by Demetrius the silversmith,

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“who made silver shrines for Diana” (Acts xix. 24). The ruins of the Ephesian theatre itself were excavated some years ago, and it is estimated that the theatre must have had room for 25,000 people. It was, of course, an open-air theatre, like all theatres in Greek and Roman lands.

In Acts xiv. 11 we read that, when Paul and Barnabas visited Lystra in Asia Minor in the course of their first missionary journey and healed a lame man, the people of the town shouted in their native Lycaonian tongue, “The gods are come down to us in the likeness of men.” Then they proceeded to identify the two visitors with two deities, calling Barnabas Zeus (whom the Romans called Jupiter) and Paul Hermes (the Roman Mercury), “because he was the chief speaker.” But why these two gods in particular? Because these two gods had a traditional association with that part of Asia Minor. The Roman poet Ovid tells a legend of 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, however, came to light in 1910, when Professor 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 Professor Calder, along with Professor W. H. Buckler, found in the same vicinity a stone altar dedicated to the

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to the Emperor Tiberius and his mother Livia, the widow of Augustus, and that fixes the date of the dedication between A.D. 14 (when Tiberius became Emperor) and A.D. 29 (when Livia died). Luke's reference to "Lysanias the tetrarch of Abilene" in A.D. 27 is, therefore, entirely correct.

The other matter where Luke's accuracy has been called in question is more important. It is his statement, with regard to the census made at the time of the birth of Christ, that "this enrolment (A.V. taxing) was first made when Quirinius (A.V. Cyrenius) was governor of Syria" (Luke ii. 2). Now we know that Quirinius became governor of Syria in A.D. 6 and held a census then which led to a rebellion in Palestine. This is the "taxing" referred to in Acts v. 37; but it took place much later than the birth of Christ, which must be dated not later than 4 B.C., the date of the death of Herod the Great (Matt. ii. 1; Luke i. 5). What then? Has Luke confounded two separate enrolments? So it has been widely thought. But the combined evidence of inscriptions found in Italy and Syria shows conclusively that Quirinius was Roman governor of Syria twice, A.D. 6 being the second-time, that his earlier governorship of Syria was given him in order that he might carry on a war against the Homanadenses, a mountain tribe of Asia Minor, and that this war must be dated between 10 and 7 B.C. Tertullian (about A.D. 200) tells us that

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Christ was born when the governor of Syria was Sentius Saturninus, i.e. between 8 and 6 B.C. The fact is, that though Saturninus was the regular governor, Quirinius appears to have been appointed as an extraordinary governor (or *legatus Pro Praetore*, to use the Latin term) for a special military purpose. Luke does not say that Quirinius organized the census on this earlier occasion, but simply that it took place when Quirinius was governor of Syria.

Luke's description of the manner in which the census was carried out, by every one going to his own city, is illustrated by Deissmann from an edict of A.D. 104, in which Vibius Maximus, Roman Prefect of Egypt, gives notice: "The enrolment by household being at hand, it is necessary to notify all who for any cause whatsoever are outside their nomes [administrative divisions of Egypt] to return to their domestic hearths, that they may also perform the customary dispensation of enrolment and continue steadfastly in the husbandry that belongs to them."

Luke, however, is not the only New Testament writer to be illustrated by inscriptions. Paul, writing his Epistle to the Romans from Corinth about the beginning of A.D. 57, sends greetings to Rome from some of his companions, and adds, "Erastus the chamberlain of the city (i.e. the City Treasurer) saluteth you" (Rom. xvi. 23). In the

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course of excavations in Corinth in 1929, Professor T. L. Shear uncovered a pavement bearing the inscription: "Erastus, procurator and aedile, laid this pavement at his own expense." The evidence indicates that this pavement existed in the first century A.D. and makes it likely that this Erastus was none other than Paul's friend.

Another inscription at Corinth mentions the market-place or “shambles” referred to by Paul in 1 Corinthians x. 25 (Gk. *makellon*). In Corinth, too, the judgement-seat of Gallio (Acts xviii. 12) is now pointed out, but its identification is not so certain.

3. SACRED SITES

The identification of “sacred sites” is a further branch of New Testament archaeology, and a fascinating one at that. But, while we can usually be sure of the general location of the places where our Lord and His Apostles lived and worked, it is rarely possible to fix the scenes of some of the great events of New Testament times within a matter of square yards. Nazareth we know, and Capernaum we know, but where in either city was the house where our Lord stayed? The Sea of Galilee is still there, and the site of the Capernaum harbour is now known, for some of the stones of the harbour-work were uncovered several years ago when eucalyptus trees were being planted on the spot to counteract

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the malarial effects of the marshy land thereabout. The geographical features of the Holy Land are still what they were in Biblical times, and from them one can frequently picture “what must have been,” to quote the title of a chapter in Dr. W. M. Christie’s fascinating book, *Palestine Calling*. Sychar’s well, where Jesus talked to the Samaritan woman about the living water, is still there, though a chapel has been built over it; and the neighbouring village of Askar still preserves the name of Sychar.

But when we come to buildings and more exact identification of sacred spots, we are more often at a loss. Tradition goes far back in many cases, but not far enough. The cave in Bethlehem which is now pointed out as the stable where Jesus was born was so pointed out in the time of Justin Martyr, who was born in Samaria about A.D. 100. It may be the place, but we cannot be sure. Even more problematical are the sacred sites in Jerusalem. Jerusalem was twice destroyed by Roman armies after the time of Christ, once in A.D. 70 and again in 135. The second destruction brought about an almost complete breach in the Christian tradition of Jerusalem. There was no continuity between the Jewish-Christian Church of Jerusalem before A.D. 135 and the Gentile-Christian Church of Aelia Capitolina (as the city was re-named) after that date. So, what with the destructions and this lack of continuity, there was little chance of true

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traditions of sacred sites in the city being handed down from one Christian generation to another.

The Temple site, of course, is readily identifiable, being now occupied by the sacred Moslem precinct of the Haram-esh-Sherif, where the primitive altar-rock may still be seen cropping out. The Mount of Olives is still where it was, with the Garden of Gethsemane at its foot. The Pool of Siloam still stands south of the Temple area as it did when our Lord sent the blind man to wash there (John ix. 11), and the Pool of Bethesda (John v. 2) can be identified with a fair measure of certainty in the north-east area of Old Jerusalem (the area called Bezetha in the first century A.D.), where it was discovered as a result of excavations near the Church of St. Anne in 1888.

(Others, however, but with less probability, identify the Pool of Bethesda with the Virgin's Fountain from which the Pool of Siloam is supplied.)

But the most important question, so far as Jerusalem is concerned, is the place of our Lord's Crucifixion and Resurrection. The traditional site of both is covered by the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The Garden of the Resurrection, it will be remembered, adjoined the place where Jesus was crucified (John xix. 41). The Church of the Holy Sepulchre occupies the site which the Emperor Constantine about A.D. 330 accepted as the true site of Christ's Passion and Resurrection and on which

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he erected a memorial basilica. But how much farther back the tradition goes is doubtful. It may go back to the Emperor Hadrian's time (A.D. 135), but even if it does, can we be sure that it goes back another hundred years?

The answer depends in part on the identification of the walls of Jerusalem in the time of our Lord. That He suffered "outside the city wall" is certain (compare Heb. xiii. 12). Now Josephus, the Jewish historian, enumerates three walls as standing before the fall of the city in A.D. 70, each of the later two enclosing more of the city on the north side than its predecessor did. The latest of these was built by Herod Agrippa I ("Herod the king" of Acts xii. 1) between A.D. 41 and 44, and so was not standing at the time of the Crucifixion (A.D. 30). Considerable traces of this wall have been uncovered in the course of building operations, especially within the last twenty-five years, and show that it lay well to the north of the present-day "North wall" of Jerusalem. (The present-day "North Wall" follows the line of Hadrian's Wall of 135.) The earliest wall practically bisected the city as it ran from west to east, from Herod's palace to the Temple area. But the crucial question is the location of Josephus's second wall, the wall restored by Nehemiah and later by Herod the Great, for it was outside this wall that "the place which is called Calvary" must have lain. And as more and more

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discoveries are being made, it becomes increasingly probable that the traditional site lay inside this wall, and must therefore be given up. Such is the conclusion hesitantly reached by the Editors of the new *Westminster Historical Atlas to the Bible* (1945).

If the Church of the Holy Sepulchre can no longer be accepted as the true site, the next claimant to be so regarded is "Gordon's Calvary" (so called after its identification by General Gordon). This is a rugged cliff of limestone outside the present north wall of the city, which—to-day at any rate, whatever it may have looked like in the first century—represents a striking resemblance to a skull. (Golgotha represents the Aramaic word for "skull"; *Calvary* the Latin word.) Near by, too, is the "Garden Tomb," discovered in 1867, where an Anglican service is held at sunrise on Easter Day. This tomb, a sunken chamber excavated in the rock, is said to be of typically Jewish construction, and its date may well be early first century. We may regret that certainty about the exact site of our Lord's temporary resting-place seems unattainable, but the exact location is not of primary importance; wherever it lay, "He is not here, for He is risen."

We have space to mention one only of the other early centres of Christianity—Rome. Rome has an advantage over Jerusalem in that there was no breach of continuity in the tradition of Roman Christianity. It can be traced back without a break

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to the reign of the Emperor Claudius. Some of the monuments which St. Paul may have seen as he entered the city survive to our day, although many of the landmarks which he got to know during his two years' detention in Rome from A.D. 60 to 62 (Acts xxviii. 30) were probably destroyed in the Great Fire of A.D. 64. But some reasonably authentic relics of the persecution of Christians which followed the Fire have been found. During the rebuilding of St. Peter's in Rome in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, excavations led to the discovery of a number of bodies wrapped in linen bandages and placed in stone coffins. With these were discovered some stone chests filled with burnt bones and ashes. An account of the discovery was written at the time (1626) by a Canon of the Basilica named Ubaldi, and put away in the archives of the Vatican, where it was found about 1890. Its evidence makes it very probable that the bodies wrapped in linen were those of early bishops of Rome, and that the ashes were the remains of Christians put to death in Nero's gardens, on the site of which St. Peter's stands.

Archaeological evidence fully supports the tradition that both Peter and Paul were martyred in Rome. That Peter actually spent his last days there is certain, although we have to admit, with a recent Roman Catholic writer, Prof. Jacques Zeiller, that "of Peter's life in Rome we know for

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certain only the last act, his martyrdom." The tradition of his twenty-five years' episcopate in Rome is late, unsupported, and indeed untenable. But Rome was pretty certainly the "Babylon" from which he wrote his First Epistle about A.D. 63 (1 Peter v.13). Gaius, a Roman presbyter of about A.D. 200, refers to what he calls the "trophies" of Peter and Paul, on the Vatican hill and the Ostian road respectively. The latter site is now marked by the Church of San Paolo fuori le Mura. The bodies of executed criminals were given up to their friends for burial under Roman law, and it is very likely that the place of burial of the two apostles would be preserved in the memory of the Roman Christians. The evidence of archaeology on both these sites increases this likelihood, and it further supports the tradition that at one time, probably during the persecution of Valerian (A.D. 158), the bodies of the two apostles were taken from their tombs and hidden for a time in a place called *Ad Catacumbas*, on the site of the Church of San Sebastiano on the Appian Way. In the Middle Ages the underground galleries near this church were the only early Christian cemeteries known, and from them the name "catacombs" was extended to others which were discovered from the sixteenth century onwards.

Other early catacombs are those called the "Cemetery of Priscilla" and the "Cemetery of Domitilla." These contain funerary inscriptions

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bearing some of the names mentioned by Paul in Romans xvi, but several of these names were quite common, and we cannot be altogether sure that the persons named in the catacombs are in

every case those referred to by Paul. The Catacomb of Priscilla is also the burial place of Pudens and his daughter—possibly the Pudens of 2 Timothy iv. 21. The Catacomb of Domitilla is noteworthy because it is called after a member of the Imperial Family. Roman historians tell us that the Emperor Domitian (A.D. 81-96) had his cousin Flavius Clemens, possibly the heir-presumptive, executed and the latter's wife, Flavia Domitilla, banished on a charge of "Judaism and atheism." The evidence of the catacomb makes it plain that this was simply another way of saying "Christianity." Christianity had obviously made extraordinary progress in Rome since Nero's time.

Another early visitor to Rome was Simon the sorcerer, of whom we read in Acts viii. 9-24. He is said to have founded an heretical sect in Rome and opposed the apostles. Justin Martyr (about A.D. 150) says he was honoured as a god in Rome, and that a statue was erected in his honour bearing the inscription SIMONI DEO SANCTO ("To Simon the Holy God"). Though Simon probably did receive divine honours, the story of the inscription seems to be a mistake, based on a misreading of an old Roman dedication which still exists:

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SEMONI SANCO DEO FIDIO ("To Semo Sancus the god of oaths"). Simon's followers probably regarded this or a similar inscription as providentially applicable to Simon, and used it for their worship.

* * *

There are many books in which these subjects can be pursued further. Of these the many works of Sir William Ramsay are of first importance; we may mention his *Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament* (1915) and *St. Paul the Traveller and Roman Citizen* (1920). Sir George Adam Smith's *Jerusalem* (2 vols., 1907), and *Historical Geography of the Holy Land* (1930) are also of the highest value. In the field of papyrus and other manuscript studies must be named A. Deissmann's *Bible Studies* (1899) and *Light from the Ancient East* (1927), and Sir Frederic Kenyon's *Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts* (1939) and *The Bible and Archaeology* (1940). Other useful books—to mention only a few—are A. G. Mackinnon's *The Rome of St. Paul* (1930), G. H. Dalman's *Sacred Sites and Ways* (1935), S. L. Caiger's *Archaeology and the New Testament* (1939), and *The Westminster Historical Atlas to the Bible* (1945), edited by G. E. Wright and F. V. Filson.

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