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## GREEK IDIOM IN THE GOSPELS

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IT USED to be said in Oxford — it was Canon Cheyne who told me — that R. H. Charles regarded the Book of Enoch as the most influential book in Palestine during the first century. It was doubtless an overstatement, but significant nevertheless. And the Book of Enoch declares that the fourth of the Fallen Angels was the one “who instructed mankind in writing with ink and paper, and thereby,” it goes on, “many sinned from eternity to eternity and until this day. For men were not created for such a purpose, to give confirmation to their good faith with pen and ink” (69 9, 10).

Such was the Jewish point of view in the first century before Christ. It would be hard to put the wickedness of literary composition more bluntly. To write books was wrong. The author only escapes his own condemnation by the violent figment that he is really Enoch, the seventh from Adam, and wrote far back in primordial antiquity, when the world was young; not, however, for that generation, but for a remote one which was to come (1 2). In the second century before Christ, Ecclesiastes takes much the same view of writing: “My son, take warning: of making many books there is no end” (12 12).

In the Greek world, on the other hand, it is enough to say that one minor Greek writer, Nicolaus of Damascus, in the last days of Herod the Great, produced one work which in bulk exceeded the Hebrew Scriptures, the total extant product of Hebrew literary genius through a thousand years.

This is the background of philological study of the Gospels. They were written when Judaism was definitely discouraging and condemning the writing of books, while Greeks were producing them at a rate that was positively excessive. So far apart

were Jews and Greeks in and about the first century, on their own evidence, in this matter of literary composition. It is not strange therefore to find the four gospels full of Greek idiom, though this is often denied. The following examples are significant.

1. *The genitive absolute.* This occurs not less than one hundred and thirty-two times in the gospels. When Delitzsch translated the New Testament into Hebrew, he could find no similar Hebrew construction to use, and resorted to a clause.

2. *The genitive of the father's name, or patronymic genitive:* Judas of James, meaning Judas, son of James (Lk 6 16; cf. Mt 10 2, 3; Mk 2 14; 3 17, 18; Lk 6 15, etc.). This is a familiar Greek idiom, occurring constantly in the papyri (*Hibeh Papyri*, I, 35:2; 37:2 etc.), sometimes forty times in a single papyrus — *Tebtunis Papyri* 98 (B. C. 112). Aramaic used the word "son (of)" (ܩܝܢ), as in Bar-Jonah, Bar-Timaeus, etc., in the gospels. Specialists in Greek do not deny the presence of Aramaic idiom in the gospels.

3. *The genitive masculine singular article in the sense of "the son of."* This Greek idiom is of frequent occurrence in the papyri, before the name of a grandfather, *Σαραπίων Ἀλκίμου τοῦ Ἀρποκρατίωνος* (*Fayum Towns* 23:1). It occurs seventy five times on a single page of Luke (3 23-38). It is not susceptible of imitation in Semitic, since the article when it occurs in Semitic is not a separate word but a prefix, and is not inflected.

4. *The use of measures of distance* may also be considered a definitely Greek idiom in the gospels. The Jews were vague about distances. I cannot learn that they had any exact measures of distance. A Sabbath Day's journey is of course really an admission of the fact. They had in the first century no hour, and no mile, and no era (or system of chronology) of their own. How then would they express in Hebrew or Aramaic that Emmaus was sixty stadia from Jerusalem (Lk 24 13) and why would they need to tell the Jews of Jerusalem a fact they must all have known? Bethany is described as fifteen stadia from Jerusalem (Jn 11 18). Would this have meant anything to Jerusalem Jews, and would they not all have known how far

it was to Bethany anyway? A distance of twenty five or thirty stadia is mentioned in Jn 6 19. How could an Aramaic writer express himself in such terms? It seems quite plain that he would not do so. These ways of expressing distance are idiomatic Greek, not expressible in Aramaic, except as Aramaic might use loan words borrowed from the Greek. But I know of no such loan words as old as the first century.

5. *The way of giving a person's age.* This is expressed in Hebrew and in Aramaic by the use of "son of"; "Noah was son of five hundred years" (Gen 5 32); Darius is spoken of in Aramaic as being "about the son of sixty two years" when he took the kingdom (Dan 5 31). This idiom never appears in the gospels, where the usual Greek idiom, familiar from countless occurrences in the papyri, is found; the genitive of (so many) years, often preceded by ὥς: Mk 5 42; Lk 2 42; 3 23 (ὥσει); 8 42); cf. *Tebtunis Papyri*, II, 376:32; 380:33, 34, etc. This is clearly Greek, not Aramaic, idiom.

6. *The expressions Σὺ λέγεις, Σὺ εἶπας, Ὑμεῖς λέγετε in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.* Aramaic retranslation fails to explain these difficult idioms, though if they were of Aramaic origin it should help us with them. It is practically certain that they are as a matter of fact strong Greek affirmatives.

7. *Γράμματα οἶδεν* (Jn 7 15). In Greek documents this expression is of constant occurrence in the sense of knowing how to read and write. It was evidently so understood in this passage in John by the later scribes who, to meet the charge of illiteracy brought against Jesus, introduced into the text the interpolation in Jn 7 53—8 11 (the Adulteress), which described Jesus as writing upon the sand. One scribe inserted it at 7 36 in order to bring it as close to the charge as possible, while others placed it at the end of John. Any volume of Greek papyrus documents gives abundant illustration of this usage; it is enough to cite from *Oxyrhynchus Papyri* I, to go no further, a dozen instances (53:16; 67:24; 69:23; 72:37; 76:36; 77:30; 83:27; 85:24; 86:26; 91:40; 101:59; 106:24). It would be easy to assemble a list of hundreds of such references for this phrase, which means "to know ones letters." I have myself verified a hundred and fifty

instances of it in Greek papyri. I am not aware of any occurrence of it in any other sense. It never means "to be a man of letters."

8. *The gospels also have ways of speaking which can hardly be reconciled with an early Judean origin.* "The Jews" are spoken of more than sixty times in John in contradistinction from Jesus and his disciples; though these latter were just as truly Jews as his opponents were. This can hardly be thought a Jewish form of expression. It shows plainly that a Greek-speaking Gentile is writing — and at a time when, and a place where, Church and Synagogue were at war.

9. *John repeatedly refers to usages, customs and practices of the Jews as though they were unfamiliar to his readers,* who are evidently not residents of Palestine. The water jars at Cana were "for the ceremonial purifications practiced by the Jews;" the pool of Bethzatha is located "in Jerusalem, near the Sheep-gate," as though the reader would not know its location (5 2); the Passover is explained as "the Jewish festival," (6 4); the Jewish burial customs are described, as if unfamiliar to the reader (19 40). The distances of Bethany and Emmaus are also carefully given in John and Luke, as though the readers of the gospels would not know how near the city they were, and given in Greek stadia, as we have seen (Jn 11 18; Lk 24 13). These explanations would not be given in Aramaic books, written in and for Palestine.

10. *In Mk 7 3, 4 the ceremonial rules of "the Pharisees and all the Jews"* are spoken of and described as though strange to the reader. No one in Palestine would write in Aramaic in this way.

11. But above all, *the reference in Jn 6 53-56 to eating Christ's flesh and drinking his blood* is impossible in an Aramaic gospel written in Jerusalem in the first century; nothing could be more repugnant to Jewish ways and feelings. Words such as these would horrify Jewish residents of Jerusalem, then or now. The Jews were, and still are, utterly opposed to the drinking of blood, which the Law repeatedly forbade. It would be difficult to imagine a sentence less likely to have been written in a Jewish-Christian circle anywhere, at any time. No Jewish evangelist could have recorded it.

Other Greek expressions questioned by Aramaic scholars I have discussed elsewhere;<sup>1</sup> they need not be repeated here. But one further Aramaic suggestion may be considered.

12. Jn 1 2, "*It was he that was with God in the beginning,*" is dismissed as "quite useless," and thrown into the following sentence. But the reference is to Gen 1 1-3, which raises the question, To whom did God say "Let there be Light!" and afterwards "Let us make man!" (1 26)? The question was answered in the Book of Wisdom (9 1, 9): "Who created all things by your word (*ἐν λόγῳ σου*) and by your wisdom formed man." "And with you is Wisdom, which knows your works, and was present when you made the world." The fourth evangelist is familiar with these statements. He hastens to identify the Logos with that divine Wisdom, that was with God in the beginning. This is the force of the emphatic *οὗτος*: "It was *he* that was with God in the beginning!" So far from being useless, or a mere time-defining clause, this is a great affirmation, fit to stand with v. 1 itself. For the evangelist, Jesus is the incarnation of that divine Word or Wisdom to which God spoke at the creation, "in the beginning." It is not superfluous or commonplace but embodies one of the great basic ideas of the Fourth Gospel.

But of course the gospels are full of Greek idiom; one might as well deny Greek idiom to Homer. One key to the gospel diction is afforded by the Greek papyrus documents of New Testament times. But the gravest difficulty with the Aramaic theory is not in philology but in history and interpretation. The advocates of the Aramaic origin of the Gospels fail to perceive the great purpose of John — to set the figure of Jesus in a grander perspective, drawn from Paul, and made acceptable to the Greek mind.

<sup>1</sup> For other Greek idioms and institutions reflected in the Greek gospels, see my *New Chapters in New Testament Study*, pp. 147-51; 1937.