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POTS OF EARTHENWARE

by ERIC F. F. BISHOP

ONE of Mr. Bishop's short Palestinian studies seems most appropriate, as before, for launching the QUARTERLY into a new year.

"WE have this treasure", says St. Paul, "in pots of earthenware" (II Corinthians 4: 7). The other reference in St. Paul's writings to "earthenware pottery" is in II Timothy, generally regarded as his last (known) letter. Here the apostle, not over-domesticated, mentions the normal household utensils, some of gold and silver, others of wood or earthenware—some valuable, some cheap (2: 20). It is tempting to think that he recollected the home in Lystra, where Timothy had been brought up by his mother and grandmother. He reminded Timothy of the vessels used by Lois and Eunice whether for ornament, cooking or storage.

Though "earthenware"—ὄστρακινός—only occurs twice and as an adjective, σκεῦος, "pot" or "vessel", is much commoner, in St. Paul as in other New Testament writers. It seems to have been used metaphorically as for material things. Twice the apostle talks about "vessels unto honour", once in the domesticated sense and symbolically in Romans (9: 21) in the Parable of the Potter, who can do as he likes with the clay; and from the same lump make a couple of vessels, one to be treasured and the other for common use, which from much rougher treatment would eventually get scrapped.

St. Paul, from the evidence we have, never writes of himself as a vessel; but he must have known that Jesus had spoken of him by this very word in the vision at Damascus vouchsafed to the disciple Ananias, who had entertained qualms about Saul of Tarsus. "Go! for he is a chosen vessel to bear my Name before nations and kings and the children of Israel" (Acts 9: 15).

In the middle of his ministry he tells the Corinthians that it is possible to have treasures stored up in pots of earthenware. You can just be a container—the kind of jar, as the world has been reminded, that kept the Isaiah scrolls safe and sound in Cave 1 through the best part of two millennia. In some instances it was the jars that suffered, while their precious contents were nothing like as damaged. Some fifty have been pieced together.

The first theory was that jars of this previously unknown type were made especially to hold the manuscripts found in them, but it has become clear that they were *used in daily life* because scores of them have been found in the caves nearby, and one intact in the community center itself.¹

So they were just ordinary containers, where people stored their olives, figs or dates or cereals for the winter; the kind, perhaps, that Timothy remembered had been employed for storage in the home at Lystra. One of the Qumrāni jars actually has the name of its owner (or could it be maker?) on it—his name was John (Hattila). The implication needs no stressing. We have this treasure in pots of earthenware, as has been the case all down Christian history—“the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (II Cor. 4: 6). Earthen vessels to bear the Name that is above every name.

Of course these pots of earthenware were of different sizes—it was a much smaller one at Qumrān that contained the hoard of Tyrian silver coins, and remained intact. But earthenware was used for other purposes—the utensils necessary for the meals of the community, and the extra-porous ones for water-cooling—in use right to current times. They all, however, easily got cracked, and eventually shattered and thrown aside. They became potsherds, the kind of thing that Job picked up to scrape himself, so that even in fragmentation a bit of earthenware could render service as a counter-irritant. There would have been plenty of these lying around the patriarch. The Greek adjective derives from *δοτρακον*, which means potsherd. Dumps of this discarded pottery could be seen scattered about Near Eastern cities—there was certainly one just outside the Dung Gate in Jerusalem during Mandate days. Such rejects could be crushed still further, and in their dilapidation could make walking drier and easier. In Palestine down the ages successive civilizations had developing fashions in their pottery, and it took the observant eye and knowledge of the archaeologist to date them. Some potsherds might be as late as Crusading or Turkish times; others belong to the centuries B.C. Like salt they were trodden under foot of men, not entirely useless.

The Greeks, however, seem to have found another use for their *ostraka*—they were in countless cases just large enough to take some writing—all too commonly to write someone’s name on, which meant the individual was being voted down, as the apostle says he did when he was Saul of Tarsus and voted down the local

Christians. It is through this erstwhile use of potsherds for “scraping” people considered undesirable, that Greek has given English the word *ostracize*. Of course, it was possible to be voted in, and not out, as was the case when Matthias was admitted to the apostolic circle. But it is better for the *ostrakina* not to run the risk of possible relegation to the rubbish dump; and recollect that even a cracked pot can retain the treasure of the centuries, a container of the words of life. Is not the hymn strangely misunderstanding of the apostle’s metaphor when it is interpreted as a “broken and emptied vessel”, for that could hardly be of much value or use to the Master? It must surely be that, with the memories of earthen vessels that turned out to be among those unto honour, of whom the world was not worthy, we too may strive to be in some sort of succession—*ostrakina*—without the sadder connotations of the word; but genuine containers of the “light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ”. Interestingly St. Paul says “the light of the knowledge”. The Near East is more aware of the transition from light to darkness than is the case in the lands of western twilight. It has been suggested that St. Paul was not thinking in this context so much of the cooking-pots or containers of Lystra as of the thousands of earthenware lamps of different shapes and sizes throughout the area, still discoverable in hundreds, cheap but able to have been placed in such a position that (as Jesus said) those who entered in could see the light. A modicum of olive oil and a floating wick; and the light that was revealed on the face of Jesus Christ was “shone before men”! How great and obvious the need for earthen vessels containing light like this; for when all is said and done, is not the knowledge of God in Christ sufficient treasure to be contained in any worthy human vessels?

Redhill, Surrey.

¹ Charles T. Fritsch, *The Qumran Community*, 30 (our italics).