

*THE PROBLEM OF THE ADDRESS IN THE
SECOND EPISTLE OF JOHN.*

ONE result of the disinterment of the rolls and fragments of papyri which lie amongst the sands of Egypt and the ruins of her almost-forgotten cities has been the illumination which they cast upon existing texts and the increased power which they give us of interpreting them. If no single discovery of lost literary documents had been made at Oxyrhyncus or elsewhere, and we had merely collected the stray papers and letters belonging to the common life of a certain number of centuries, we should still have been abundantly repaid for all the trouble of excavating and exploring, and the toil of decipherment, by the introduction which such papers would give us into the every-day life of the Greek world, especially when we are busied with the history of periods and movements concerning which we are deficient in the ordinary apparatus for interpreting what was happening and what was being thought.

The reaction of what has been recovered upon what has been imperfectly understood is conspicuous in the New Testament, and, above all, in those parts which are most popular in character, the epistolary sections. It has been shown, for instance, in this journal, that we can detect in St. Paul's letters a conventional element, which would perhaps never have been suspected if the parallels had not been presented to us in the papyri; and that the manner of composition of these letters, especially where they are replies incorporating the language of previous communications, is often so transparent and so characteristic as to require that whole sections of standard commentaries should be rewritten, and that the criteria of genuineness or falsity should themselves be judged by the parallels which can be produced from recovered documents.

I was interested recently in noticing that a composition as small and insignificant as the second Epistle of John was capable of further elucidation from the study of extant papyri, and that it was possible for us not only to definitely settle the long-disputed question as to whether the letter was written to a woman or a church, but also to make important suggestions as to what manner of woman it was (for it certainly is a real letter written by a real man to a real woman) to whom the missive was sent. That is to say, one more step can be taken in the abstraction of the Epistles of the New Testament from the region of theology and their translation into the (not always adjacent) region of humanity.¹

There are certain letters in the New Testament which may correctly be described as love letters, even though the lovers should be an apostle and a church. If I remember rightly, I once pointed out how Paul, in writing to the Philippians, had stolen the lover's vocabulary, and called his people "loved and longed-for, joy and crown," and the like. But in such expressions Paul is no monopolist; it was a time of fervent charity, and what affected one large-hearted saint may easily be found amongst the other great-hearts of the period; or if, in consequence of the documents being scant, the general proofs of apostolic tenderness and sympathy are incomplete, the imagination, acting under instructions from what is extant, will fill in the blanks

¹ Dr. Westcott, in his commentary on the Epistle, regards the problem upon which we are engaged as insoluble. In his opening sentences he observes, "Whatever may be the interpretation of the individual address in *vv.* 5, 12, the main part of the letter is addressed to more readers than one." Later on he says, "All these notions of a personal address, moreover, are unsupported by such allusions in the letter as might be expected to mark an individual relationship"; and sums up the results of his investigations as follows: "On the whole it is best to recognise that the problem of the address is insoluble with our present knowledge. It is not unlikely that it contains some allusion, intelligible under the original circumstances, to which we have lost the key. But the general tenour of the letter favours the opinion that it was sent to a community and not to one believer."

and supply for us what is lacking to the portrait of the Christian man of the first period.

The second Epistle of John is, like the Epistle to the Philippians, a love letter; that follows from the language throughout; whether it be a friend or a church, whose affection is sought and to whom reciprocity is promised; it can be deduced from the words, "I beseech you (it is not a new command, but the old one which we had from the first) let us love one another." Given such a statement, and a resolute desire not to reduce it to mere platitude, how would the extant papyri elucidate the statement and assist our determination to understand the sentence as it was meant to be taken by the writer? The text of the Epistle from which we were quoting runs as follows:

καὶ νῦν ἐρωτῶ σε, κυρία, οὐχ ὡς ἐντολὴν γράφων σοι καινὴν,
ἀλλὰ ἣν εἶχαμεν ἀπ' ἀρχῆς, ἵνα ἀγαπῶμεν ἀλλήλους.

Here the revising translators give us, "And now I beseech thee, lady," with an American note added suggesting a marginal reading of "Cyria" instead of "lady." But neither of the two boards of revision seems to have suspected that *Kyria* was a term of endearment, and neither a title of dignity nor a proper name; so far from its being translatable in the elevated sense of "Madam," the papyri tell quite a different tale, and explode completely the two notions that the letter is addressed either to a church or to a prehistoric Countess of Huntingdon.¹

For instance amongst the Oxyrhyncus papyri, there is one (No. cxii.) in which a gentleman invites a lady friend (probably a relative) to come from Oxyrhyncus and attend a religious festival. She is to send word whether she will come by donkey or by boat, and arrangements will be made to fetch her. Here is the letter:

¹ The perplexity is, as might be expected, reflected in the text of extant MSS., which suggest at the close of the letter to read *ἐκκλησίας* for *ἐκλεκτῆς*, and some of which add "in *Ephesus*."

Χαίροις, κυρία μου Σεργηνία, παρὰ Πετοσείριος. Πᾶν ποιήσον, κυρία, ἐξελεῖν τῇ κ' τοῖς γενεθλίοις τοῦ θεοῦ, καὶ δήλωσόν μοι ἢ πλοῖφ ἐξέρχει ἢ ὄνφ ἵνα πεμφθῇ, σοι· ἀλλ' ὄρα μὴ ἀμελήσης, κυρία. ἔρρωσθαί σε εὖχομαι πολλοῖς χρόνοις.

How should we translate this thrice-repeated *κυρία*? Should it be the dignified "lady" of the Bible, or the marginal "Cyria" of the American board? The latter is excluded by the fact that the lady's name is Serenia. And as to the former, let us see how Messrs. Grenfell and Hunt would translate it for us.

"Greeting, my dear Serenia, from Petosiris. Be sure, dear, to come up on the 20th for the birthday festival of the god, and let me know whether you are coming by boat or by donkey, in order that we may send for you accordingly. Take care¹ not to forget. I pray for your continued health."

There can be no doubt that this is the right way to translate the letter; and if that is the correct method for an Oxyrhyncus letter of, say, the third century, why should a different method be adopted in St. John and in the first century?

But here is another example from the same collection (No. cxxiii.) somewhat more colourless, where a father writes to his son on some official business. I give the translation, only adding the Greek of expressions that might be doubtful.

To my son, Master Dionysotheon, greeting from your father (*κυρίφ μου υἱφ Διονυσοθέωνι ὁ πατήρ χαίρειν*).

As an opportunity was afforded me by some one going up to you, I could not miss this chance of addressing you. I have been very much surprised, my son, at not receiving hitherto a letter from you to tell me how you are. Nevertheless, sir (*δέσποτά μοι*), answer me with all

¹ The word "dear" has been omitted, accidentally as I suppose.

speed, for I am quite distressed to have heard nothing from you. Please go to my brother Theodorus and make him look after Timotheus, and tell him to get ready for going in to attend. Already the notaries of the other towns have acquainted their colleagues, and they have come in. Let him remember when he enters that he must wear the proper dress, that he may enter prepared. Take care they do not allow us to fail in coming to an understanding with each other, as we know that the same rule applies to all. For the orders which we received were, to wear cloaks when we entered. Therefore let Timotheus, when he comes, come prepared to attend. I salute my sweetest daughter Macaria and my mistress (τὴν δεσποίνην (sic) μοι) your mother and all the family by name (καὶ ὅλους τοὺς ἡμῶν κατ' ὄνομα). I pray for your lasting health, my son (ἔρρωσθαί σε εὖχομαι πολλοῖς χρόνοις, κύριε υἱέ).

The writer of this letter is evidently a stickler for proprieties; his "little brief authority" as a scrivener, or whatever it was, is reflected in the letter; he not only is punctilious himself, but wishes his son to acquire the characteristic and make it permanent. How should we translate the expression *κύριε υἱέ* at the end of the letter? Should it be "sir son," or "honoured son"? That would harmonize with the elevated *δέσποτά μοι*, of the middle of the letter, and with the expression "my lady your mother"; but it is difficult to believe that the writer would express himself so stiltedly in the closing salutations, where affection has clearly got the better of propriety. And I should close the letter with the words "my dear son," in seeking for the nearest English equivalent. And we should then read the opening words, not as in Grenfell and Hunt, "To my son, Master Dionysos" (for *κυρίῳ* belongs with *υἱῶ*, as the close of the letter attests), but "To my dear son, Dionysos," etc.

We thus obtain a parallel to the second Epistle of John,

which opens with ὁ πρεσβύτερος ἐκλεκτῇ κυρία, and returns to the κυρία (of endearment) lower down in the letter; while the parallel is reinforced by the letter to "dear Serenia," from Petosiris, in which the same phenomenon occurs. The reader will have noticed, in passing, the epistolary parallels to the Johannine letters, which are furnished by the closing salutations of the letters referred to.

It may, perhaps, be thought that we have not done full justice to the formalism of the tabularius whose letter we have quoted, and that in conceding the fondness for dignified speech we have practically allowed that the old gentleman might call his son by the title κύριος without betraying any affection. There are parallel cases in our own language where affection is lost in formality. For instance, Macaulay speaks of the letters of Warren Hastings to his wife as being "tender, and full of indications of esteem and confidence, but at the same time more ceremonious than is usual in so intimate a relation. The solemn courtesy with which he compliments 'his elegant Marian' reminds us now and then of the dignified air with which Sir Charles Grandison bowed over Miss Byron's hand in the cedar parlour."

In order to dispel this lingering fondness for a ceremonious interpretation of κύριος, the best way is to reinforce the evidence. Here is another specimen from the recently published Fayum papyri, belonging to the third century, and peculiarly rich in epistolary parallels to the New Testament.

Μύσθης Σεραπάμμωνι τῷ ἀδελφῷ πλείστα χαίρειν. Πρὸ μὲν πάντων εὐχομαί σε ὑγιαίνειν, καὶ τὸ προσκύνημά σου ποιῶ κατ' ἐκάστην ἡμέραν παρὰ τοῖς ἐνθάδε θεοῖς· γεινώσκειν σε θέλω, κύριέ [μου ὄ]τι κτέ.

Then, after a salutation to Eunice, τὴν ἀδελφὴν σου, καὶ

τὸν πατέρα σου, he ends with ἐρρῶσται σε εὐχομαι πανοικεί, κύριέ μου.

Here, then, is a case in which a man addresses his own brother as κύριέ μου, and this time there is no suspicion of an artificial elevation of the speech, so that the expression must be affectionate rather than official.

We shall conclude, then, that *κυρία* in 2 John is a term of endearment, and should be so translated. At the least it should be "dear lady," rather than "lady," and perhaps "dear friend" would be better. It is very nearly equivalent to ἀγαπητὸς in the parallel sentence of the third Epistle, evidently written at the same time. That is conclusive against any other interpretation of the Epistle than that it is a real letter to a real woman. The Church (at Ephesus or anywhere else) is not to be thought of. Dr. Westcott's ambiguous solution of an insoluble problem may be banished.

But if it was a real woman that was addressed, is there anything that can with reasonable probability be affirmed of her, over and above the obvious statements about her children, and her sister, and her sister's children?

I do not know whether it has ever been noticed that this Epistle, small as it is, is streaked with a quotation from the Old Testament. In *v.* 8 the writer says, "βλέπετε ἑαυτοὺς ἵνα μὴ ἀπολέσητε τὴν ἡργασίαν, ἀλλὰ μισθὸν πλήρη¹ ἀπολάβητε.

The writer is quoting from the blessing of Boaz to Ruth, as may be seen by comparing his language with Ruth iii. 12.²

ἀποτίσαι κύριος τὴν ἔργασίαν σου γένοιτο ὁ μισθός σου
πλήρης παρὰ κυρίου θεοῦ Ἰσραήλ.

¹ We should probably restore the indeclinable *πλήρης*, for which there is some stray manuscript authority.

² The parallel is given in Westcott, *ad loc.*, but not so as to identify a quotation, and in the Westcott and Hort New Testament the words are printed in ordinary type.

The parallel would be suggestive if we had merely the allusion to a certain "full reward" or "wages in full," which occurs in the two passages; but the added parallel between *ἐργασίαν* and *ἡργασάμεθα* renders it certain that the writer is drawing on the language of the Septuagint. Now I think we may take it for granted that in such a simple composition as this letter, which is altogether spontaneous in its expressions, except where custom had prescribed the forms of salutation and address, there was nothing to provoke quotation from Ruth, except the provocation of the people involved. The lady addressed must have been a second Ruth, and the writer is addressing her much as Milton did a lady to whom one of his sonnets was dedicated:

The better part with Mary and with Ruth
Thou chosen hast.

Ruth is the typical female proselyte, and the blessing of the full reward is the blessing upon a proselyte, for it is "a full wages from the God of Israel under whose wings thou art come to trust." From which we infer that what provoked the parallelism of the language in the Johannine letter was the fact that the person addressed had come into the fellowship of the Church from without, and was a Gentile Christian. And although we might be tempted at first to suggest (looking at the matter from a modern point of view) that all Christians come into the Church from without, we must remember that this is not the case in the early Church. Here there was a wide gulf for a while between the believing Jew and the believing Gentile, and it took years of teaching and quite a number of oracles to set even the Apostles right on the truth that there was in Christ Jesus neither Greek nor Jew. So that we must not be surprised if the converts amongst the women in the early Church, who had come from without, should be

reminded of their Moabite origin long after they had obtained a place in the fellowship of Israel. "Ye were once Gentiles," says St. Paul to the Ephesians; and Paul was the last man to have unnecessarily remembered or made such a distinction. If he made it, it was because the distinction was commonly recognised.

We infer, then, that St. John's dear friend in the Epistle belonged to the tribe of Ruth, and that this is the reason for the coincidence in language between the Old and New Testaments to which we have referred. May we go a step further, and say that the anonymous lady was not only a Gentile proselyte, and so of the tribe of Ruth, but that she was also, like Ruth (a fact which we easily forget), a widow, and has on this account a second mark of tribal affinity? In favour of this belief there is a concurrence of evidence from two sides: (1) that her children are mentioned, (2) that no allusion is made to her husband, who is not even referred to in the salutations. We can scarcely evade the conclusion that the husband was dead, unless we elect to find him in the beloved Gaius of the third Epistle (an Epistle which certainly was written at the very same time). But against this alternative we have to set the evidence of the salutations, which in the first of the pair of Epistles do not mention Gaius, and in the second Epistle of the pair do not include any greeting from the sister's children to the one who might be assumed to be their uncle. From which it seems a fair inference that the anonymous lady is not the companion of Gaius, but a widow with a family. That is as far as our investigation takes us.

We shall be content if we have shown, or rendered probable, that the anonymous lady was a real person, a Gentile proselyte, and a widow who brought up her children in the faith that she had herself embraced. If she is not to remain anonymous, perhaps she may be called *Electa*. But in that case a difficulty will arise as to the

“elect sister” who is referred to at the end of the Epistle. Perhaps the word *ἐκλεκτῆς* is out of order at this point, though it is omitted, as far as I know, in only a single cursive.

But, in any case, we are not making an exhaustive discussion of the Epistle and its difficulties, and may leave some of the problems to others—a few berries, at least, in the top of the olive tree.

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