

BREAKING OF THE CONTRACT OF WORK AS MENTIONED IN THE GOSPELS

A unilateral breaking of the contract of work by a hired worker is mentioned in the parable of the prodigal son. A similar fact concerning a shepherd can be found in the speech in which Our Lord compares Himself to a good shepherd.

The prodigal son, whose occupation was to feed swine, abandoned his work because he was hungry and the farmer did not give him food. The recollection of abundance of bread which hired servants enjoyed in his father's house urged him to give up work to which he had bound himself. (Lk. xv.6-20.)

In a similar way the shepherd, who had a flock of sheep under his care, broke his contract of work. In that case the reason was the danger of an attack of a wolf. Seeing the wolf coming, the shepherd, who cared more for his own safety than for that of the flock, took to flight and thus allowed the wolf to carry away one sheep and to scatter others. (Jn. x.12-13.)

The Gospels do not say whether the workers' action was authorized by local customs. Nothing is also said about the possible consequences of such an action.

Neither of those two cases can be interpreted as a struggle for conditions of work better than those foreseen in the contract. A strike with this aim is known to have taken place in Asia Minor (Dio Chrysostomus xxxiv.21-3).¹ Breaking of the contract of work as a means in the struggle for higher wages was also resorted to, according to the Talmud, by members of those families who prepared shewbread and incense for the temple of Jerusalem, as well as by the singer Hygros (*Joma* III. 11 [38a]). After the wages had been raised they carried out their work normally.

In the cases mentioned in the Gospels the work was given up completely and the place of work was forsaken. This brings us to the customs which were observed in Egypt.

According to Philo many people in Egypt abandoned their work in order to avoid paying too high taxes, and ran away from their dwelling-places leaving behind their property and families, which resulted in the depopulation of villages and cities (*De spec. leg.* § 30

¹ W. H. Buckler, *Labour Disputes in the Province of Asia Minor*. Anatolian Studies presented to Sir William Ramsay, 1923, pp. 27 ff. (inaccessible). M. Rostovtzeff, *Gesellschaft und Wirtschaft im römischen Kaiserreich*. Leipzig 1929, VOL. I, p. 317, note 44. T. R. S. Broughton, *Roman Asia. An Economic Survey of Ancient Rome*, ed. T. Frank, VOL. IV (Baltimore, 1938), p. 810.

[326 M]). The confirmation of these words can be found in numerous papyri.¹

Papyri contain records of certain people giving up their work and taking to flight (*ἀναχώρησις*). Pap. Cair. Zen. 59310 (230 B.C.) records the flight of a man who fed pigs. In the papyrus SB 7984 Pataikion informs Zeno about the flight of goatherds. In the papyrus Lond. Inv. 2095 two other shepherds, Asclepiades and Apollonides, threaten to run away unless they get their wages. Pap. Cair. Zen. 59329 tells us of the flight of Atpheus, who in this way wanted to avoid paying taxes in money and in kind. In the papyrus Pap. Cair. Zen. 59080 Jollas the weaver complains of the behaviour of the slave Bia who maltreats everybody. He also tells Zeno that he would gladly run away from her and come over to him, but Zenodoros does not want to let him go lest the work should be interrupted. According to Pap. Cair. Zen. 59466, Pasis fled for fear of a process which had to take place under circumstances unfavourable to him.² Pap. Oxy. II 252 (A.D. 19–20) contains a report on the flight of a weaver.³

Cases when larger groups of workers broke the contract are also known. According to Pap. Cair. Zen. 59230, Zeno is afraid that workers employed in the brick-kiln will run away. PSI 502 (257 B.C.) reports that peasants did not want to accept excessively hard conditions of lease proposed to them by Panakestor. They fled to the temple and by their perseverance brought Panakestor to accept their conditions (PSI 502).⁴ Pap. Cair. Zen. 59245 says that farmers whose land had been given to soldiers fled to the temple of Isis in Memphis.⁵ BGU I, 159 (A.D. 216) speaks about a great number of people running away from villages because of too hard labour required from them.⁶

It happened that whole villages were deserted. In A.D. 312 the village Teadelphia was completely empty, and it was even feared that officials who had to collect taxes in corn would run away too (Pap. Flor 36).⁷ In A.D. 359 almost all the inhabitants of the village Philadelphia left their homes (BGU 909).⁸ In A.D. 207 peasants from

¹ For strikes in Egypt (*ἀναχώρησις*) see M. Rostowzew, *Studien zur Geschichte des römischen Kolonates*. Leipzig, 1910, pp. 51, 74, 205 ff. M. Rostovtzeff, *Gesellschaft*, VOL. II, p. 301, note 50 and literature quoted there. L. Mitteis—U. Wilcken, *Grundzüge und Chrestomathie der Papyruskunde*. Leipzig, 1912, VOL. I, p. 324 f. A. Swiderek, "La Société indigène en Egypte en IIIe siècle avant notre ère d'après les archives de Zenon", in *The Journal of Juristic Papyrology*, VII—VIII (1953–4), pp. 267 f. and literature quoted there.

² Swiderek, "La Société", pp. 267 f.

³ L. Mitteis—U. Wilcken, *Grundzüge*, VOL. II, p. 250 (No. 215); cf. VOL. I, p. 196.

⁴ See J. Manteuffel, *Ze swiata papyrusow*, Wrocław, 1950, pp. 36 f.

⁵ Swiderek, "La Société", p. 268.

⁶ L. Mitteis—U. Wilcken, *Grundzüge*, VOL. II, p. 485 (No. 408).

⁷ M. Rostowzew, *Kolonat*, p. 206; L. Mitteis—U. Wilcken, *Grundzüge*, VOL. I,

p. 325.

⁸ L. Mitteis—U. Wilcken, *Grundzüge*, VOL. I, p. 325; VOL. II, pp. 449 f. (No. 382); M. Rostowzew, *Kolonat*, p. 209.

Soknopaiu Nesos left their village and their work because of a poor harvest, heavy taxes and forced labour imposed on them (Pap. Gen. 16).¹

In a similar way people working in mines and quarries gave up work and ran away. PSI 822 says that workers in an alabaster quarry are on strike.²

The examples given above as well as many others³ show that for many reasons people not only gave up their work, but even abandoned their homes, took refuge in a temple or dispersed in neighbouring villages. These were farmers who wanted to avoid paying heavy taxes or carrying out forced labour, also workers and craftsmen, separate or in groups, whose aim was to force their employers or state officials to pay their wages or to give them food. There were also cases when workers aimed at obtaining better conditions of work.

As far as it is known to the present writer, no papyrus mentions any case of abandoning work by workers whose life was endangered by wild beasts. On the other hand, some papyri mention cases when workers gave up work and ran away because they had not been given food.

In PSI 421 canal keepers threaten flight unless they get wages and corn.⁴ We learn from the papyrus Petrie 42 C 1 = II, 2, 8 that 140 people interrupted work without, however, leaving the mine. They are short of corn. The ration given them at the beginning of their work being exhausted, they are deprived of "what is necessary".⁵

The prodigal son was in want, but "no man gave food unto him". So "rising up he came to his father" abandoning the herd and his dwelling-place. Thus the behaviour of the prodigal son resembles closely that of canal keepers, miners and other hired workers in Egypt in cases when they were refused "what is necessary".

Such a way of acting was not found anywhere outside Egypt,⁶ and it is known that big herds of pigs, kept by special servants, were raised in Egypt.⁷ It seems therefore that the far country into which the prodigal son went, where he fed swine and from where he fled back to his father, was Egypt.

But raising pigs and feeding them in big herds was not a speciality of Egypt only. The Gospel speaks also of a herd of swine on the

¹ L. Mitteis—U. Wilcken, *Grundzüge*, vol. I, p. 325, vol. II, pp. 416 f. (No. 354). M. Rostowzew, *Kolonat*, pp. 168 f.

² M. Rostovtzeff, *Gesellschaft*, vol. I, p. 301, note 50.

³ Among other papyri speaking of abandoning work (*ἀναχώρησις*) see, for instance, P. Petrie, III, 43, 3 = II 9, 2.3 (K. Fitzler, *Steinbrüche und Bergwerke im ptolemäischen und römischen Aegypten*, Leipzig, 1910, pp. 41 ff.); P. Teut I, 26; I, 41; I, 48, 24 ff.; I, 61 b, 35 ff.—72, 352 f. (119 and 114 B.C.). P. Hibeh 7 (245 B.C.). BGU 475. BGU 902. P. Flor. 19. P. Oxy. 705 III, 69 ff. cf. Rostowzew, *Kolonat*, pp. 74, 206.

⁴ See Swiderek, "La Societé", p. 268 and literature quoted there.

⁵ Fitzler, *Steinbrüche*, p. 47.

⁶ Rostowzew, *Kolonat*, p. 74.

⁷ Swiderek, "La Societé", p. 238 f.

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eastern side of the Lake of Gennesaret.¹ It is therefore possible that the prodigal son went into those parts of the country. In such a case our Lord's parable might serve as a proof that the Egyptian *ἀναχώρησις* was known and occasionally practised in Palestine, or at least on the eastern side of the Lake of Gennesaret.

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¹ M. J. Lagrange, *Evangile selon saint Marc*, 5th edn., Paris, 1929, p. 135 f. cf. *Revue Biblique* (1908), p. 549, note I. S. Krauss, *Talmudische Archaologie*, Leipzig, 1911, VOL. II, p. 112.