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The Contribution of Archaeology to the Interpretation of the New Testament

By RAYMOND F. SURBURG

(Concluded)

VI

THE inscriptions and papyri have furthermore helped New Testament students see the great contrast between Christianity and the other religions of the empire. The Lord Caesar is in definite opposition to the Lord Christ. The papyri reveal the fact that the divine names "Lord" and "Savior" were applied by the Roman emperors to themselves. The abler among the Roman emperors endeavored to strengthen and convert ancient popular worship into worship of the state and its head.²⁰¹ Already in 195 B.C. there is evidence of this patriotic deification of the Roman state, as is apparent from the worship of the *Dea Roma* in Smyrna. This divine worship was further strengthened by the popularity of the empire in the provinces. The city of Pergamum had a temple dedicated to Rome and Augustus as early as 29 B.C. Walker writes concerning the emperor worship: "This worship, directed to the ruler as the embodiment of the state, or rather to his 'genius' or indwelling spirit, spread rapidly. It soon had an elaborate priesthood under state patronage, divided and organized by provinces, and celebrating not only worship but annual games on a large scale. It was probably the most highly developed organization of a professedly religious character under the early empire, and the degree to which it ultimately affected Christian institutions awaits further investigation."²⁰²

In the inscriptions and papyri one can follow the development of emperor worship and see how ultimately there would be a clash

²⁰¹ Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929), p. 8.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, pp. 8, 9.

between it and Christianity. Every student of Roman history is familiar with the fact that in a general way the Roman emperors were tolerant of a variety of heathen religions, practiced by the peoples they had conquered, even providing for a number of foreign deities in the Pantheon at Rome. Why, then, were the Christians persecuted in the first century? The answer is to be found in the exclusive claims made by Christianity for its religious tenets. The characteristic difference between Christianity, the national religions, the Mystery cults, and the later Roman emperor worship is clearly stated by St. Paul, who writes: "We know that an idol is nothing in the world and that there is none other God but one. For though there be that are called gods, whether in heaven or in earth (as there be gods many and lords many), but to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by Him."²⁰³

The title "Lord" is applied hundreds of times in the New Testament to Jesus. His lordship is emphasized in the preaching of the Apostles. Thus St. Paul asserts: "For we preach not ourselves but Christ Jesus the Lord" (2 Cor. 4:5). St. Peter affirmed before Cornelius: "He is Lord of all" (Acts 10:36), and exhorted the congregations of Asia Minor: "Sanctify the Lord God in your hearts" (1 Peter 3:15). The phrase "Great Lord and God," used by St. Paul (1 Tim. 2:13), appears in an inscription of 2 B.C. as a title of Caesar Augustus.²⁰⁴ The title "Son of God," *divi filius*, is used frequently of Augustus in the inscriptions. The teachings of the New Testament about the deity of Christ and the various titles applied to Christ are a direct and positive denial of the declarations of the Roman emperor, who, as the inscriptions testify, pretended to be Lord and God. Hence friction between the Roman government and the Christian religion became inevitable. The Emperor Domitian, the brother and successor of Titus, followed in the footsteps of Titus, who during his brief reign of two years decreed that he and his whole family, inclusive of his immediate ancestors and immediate descendants, should be worshiped as

²⁰³ 1 Cor. 8:4-6.

²⁰⁴ Cobern, p. 127. Cf. *supra*, n. 162.

gods.²⁰⁵ He erected a temple to the *divi* (i.e., the god emperors present and those to come) in the Campus Martius. A priestly college was established to foster the worship of the Flavian house. Domitian demanded that in all state documents he should be addressed as Lord and God.²⁰⁶

It was doubtless this obsession of Domitian which had much to do with the persecutions the Christians experienced in the last decade of the first Christian century. Scholars like Ramsay²⁰⁷ and Sweet²⁰⁸ consider Rev. 2:13 as a definite reference to persecutions and martyrdom occasioned by the refusal of the Christians to recognize the divinity of the emperor.²⁰⁹

Archaeological evidence shows how just prior to the coming of Christ the power and confidence in the heathen deities had been shaken. Many priests of paganism themselves ridiculed the rites they publicly performed. In his analysis of this situation Prescott writes: "The ferment caused by such expectation can be traced over all the known world. It is very marked in the inscriptions which still remain."²¹⁰ There grew up a great expectation and longing for a new and better order of things. With the growth of the empire and with the majesty associated with its head, the emperor, there arose the conception of the emperor as the future savior of the world. An inscription dated by Ramsay as coming from 9 to 4 B.C. describes the birthday of Augustus as follows:

This day has given the earth an entirely new aspect. The world would have gone to destruction had there not streamed forth from him who is now born a common blessing. Rightly does he judge who recognizes in this birthday the beginning of life and of all powers of life; now is that ended when men pitied themselves

²⁰⁵ M. Rostovzeff, *A History of the Ancient World* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1928), II, 228.

²⁰⁶ Samuel Dill, *Roman Society from Nero to Marcus Aurelius* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1905), pp. 614, 615; James C. Muir, *How Firm a Foundation* (Philadelphia: National Publishing Company, 1941), pp. 272, 273.

²⁰⁷ W. M. Ramsay, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia Minor*

²⁰⁸ Louis Matthews Sweet, *Roman Emperor Worship* (Boston: Richard G. Badger, 1919), p. 137.

²⁰⁹ Rudolph Knopf, Hans Lietzmann and Heinrich Weinel, *Einführung in das Neue Testament* (Berlin: Verlag Alfred Töpelmann, 1949), pp. 391, 392. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1904), p. 294.

²¹⁰ W. W. Prescott, *The Spade and the Bible* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1933), p. 199.

for being born. . . . From no other day does the individual or the community receive such benefit as from this natal day, full of blessing to all. The providence which rules over all has filled this man with such gifts for the salvation of the world as designate him the Savior for us and for the coming generations; of wars will he make an end, and establish all things worthily. By his appearing are the hopes of the forefathers fulfilled; not only has he surpassed the good deeds of men of earlier time, but it is impossible that one greater than he can ever appear. The birthday of God has brought to the world glad tidings that are bound up in him. From his birthday a new era begins.²¹¹

According to Ramsay, this inscription was not merely a collection of complimentary sentences, but it represented the sincere desire of the Roman populace at the very time Christ was born.²¹² In the light of this inscription and the knowledge possessed by the modern historian of the religious yearnings of millions in the Roman Empire just before the beginning of the Christian era, a wondrous signification is given to the angelic announcement to the Bethlehem shepherds: "Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people; for there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

Archaeology has finally also shed valuable light on the form of the original books of the New Testament. The manuscripts of the New Testament have been chiefly preserved in two forms, the roll and the codex.²¹³ The papyrus roll was made by gluing together, side by side, separate sheets of papyrus and then winding the long strips around a stick, thereby producing what has been called in Latin a *volumen* (i. e., that which is rolled up). The normal length of a papyrus roll was thirty feet. Each of the books of St. Luke would have required a roll 31 to 32 feet long. Possibly this is the reason why St. Luke issued his Gospel and Acts in two volumes. The papyrus roll, however, was inconvenient

²¹¹ Quoted by James Iverach, "Caesarism," *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, III, 55.

²¹² Ramsay, *Letters to Seven Churches*, p. 54.

²¹³ Cf. the articles by Henry A. Sanders, "Beginnings of the Modern Book," *Michigan Alumnus Review*, XLIV (February 1938), 95—111. C. C. McCown, "Codex and Roll in the New Testament," *Harvard Theological Review*, XXXIV (October 1941), 219—250.

to use. It was difficult for missionaries to find passages in a roll. In the fourth century the codex form became common.²¹⁴

Till recent times all early Christian writings were believed to have been placed on papyrus rolls; only with the change from papyrus to vellum in the fourth century were the Christian authors supposed to have followed suit in using the codex type.²¹⁵ Recent archaeological discoveries, however, have shown the erroneous nature of this conclusion. Papyrus codices, according to the newly discovered evidence, were in use in the second and third centuries. One of the most unexpected discoveries of recent years was a scrap of a single page of a papyrus codex of Numbers and Deuteronomy bound together with a number of New Testament books.²¹⁶ The Chester Beatty Papyri, comprising papyri codices, prove indisputably that second- and third-century Christians were using leafbooks long before the time when the great codices were written on vellum. Statements by the Roman writer Martial, made by him in A.D. 84, indicate the practice of using codices of parchment for the recording of literary works.²¹⁷ Sanders of the University of Michigan considers the leafbooks to have been in use in the time of Augustus. McCown maintains that when the earliest books of the New Testament were being composed, the roll was not the only means used in the publication of books.²¹⁸ Before the end of the first century a new form of book was developed in the Graeco-Roman Empire—the codex, or leafbook. The earliest examples, according to Kenyon, are Christian copies indicating that they were among the first to employ the codex.²¹⁹

The development of the codex was providential, for when St. Paul's Letters were collected toward the end of the first century, they could be put into a handy volume instead of two rolls.²²⁰

²¹⁴ Bruce M. Metzger, "Recently Published Papyri of the New Testament," *The Biblical Archaeologist*, X (May 1947), 27.

²¹⁵ C. C. McCown, "The Earliest Christian Books," *The Biblical Archaeologist*, VI (May 1943), 24.

²¹⁶ This comes from the second century according to Edgar J. Goodspeed, *New Chapters in New Testament Study*, p. 17.

²¹⁷ McCown, loc. cit.

²¹⁸ Ibid., p. 25.

²¹⁹ Kenyon, p. 18.

²²⁰ C. C. McCown, "The Earliest Christian Books," *The Biblical Archaeologist*, VI (May 1943), 31.

A little later the Gospels and the Book of Acts were combined and included in one volume. Christian missionaries could refer to this or that proof-text quickly as a result of the adoption of the codex. In view of the fact that the codex was well known in Rome in the first century, McCown thinks it is possible that the "Roman Gospel" (Mark) was written on a codex. This hypothesis would also account for the missing words at the end of Mark. In a roll it was the beginning that was liable to break off; in a codex it was the last page.²²¹

Among archaeological discoveries having a bearing on the New Testament are the fragments of lost apocryphal Gospels, Acts, Revelations, and other writings using New Testament names and materials.²²² The chief value of the apocryphal literature lies in the contrast it presents to the authentic New Testament. In the spurious Gospels one encounters a fantastic and pretentious style, often puerile and indelicate. If these, in turn, are contrasted with the writings of the New Testament, written for the most by men "unlearned and uneducated," a great difference will be seen. The New Testament has been considered in all ages as "the crown of religious literature."²²³ Caiger contends this difference can be satisfactorily explained only on the ground that the New Testament books are divinely inspired, the genuine Word of God.²²⁴

In conclusion it may be pointed out how archaeological discoveries emanating from Palestine, Syria, and Egypt have helped to discredit the view which considered Christianity one of a number of religious sects current in the Roman Empire at the turn of the Christian era. Albright, for instance, concludes: "Christianity thus appears in the light of archaeology as a unique historical phenomenon, like the faith of Israel, which had preceded it."²²⁵

Seward, Nebr.

²²¹ Ibid., p. 30.

²²² Cobern, pp. 219—240.

²²³ Caiger, "Archaeology's Contribution to New Testament Knowledge," *The Story of the Book*, p. 1489.

²²⁴ Ibid., p. 1489.

²²⁵ Albright, *The Archaeology of Palestine*, p. 249.