

The Minister's Use of His Greek New Testament

A.T. Robertson

SOME KNOWLEDGE OF GREEK POSSIBLE TO ALL

It ought to be taken for granted that the preacher has his Greek Testament. This statement will be challenged by many who excuse themselves from making any effort to know the Greek New Testament. I do not say that every preacher should become an expert in his knowledge of the New Testament Greek. That cannot be expected. I do not affirm that no preacher should be allowed to preach who does not possess some knowledge of the original New Testament. I am opposed to such a restriction. But a little is a big per cent on nothing, as John A. Broadus used to say. This is preeminently true of the Greek New Testament.

There is no sphere of knowledge where one is repaid more quickly for all the toil expended. Indeed, the Englishman's Greek Concordance almost makes it possible for the man with no knowledge of Greek to know something about it, paradoxical as that may sound. That would be learning made easy, beyond a doubt, and might seem to encourage the charlatan and the quack. It is possible for an ignoramus to make a parade of a little lumber of learning to the disgust and confusion of his hearers. But the chief reason why preachers do not get and do not keep up a fair and needful knowledge of the Greek New Testament is nothing less than carelessness, and even laziness in many cases. They can get along somehow without it, and so let it pass or let it drop.

THE LANGUAGE OF THE COMMON MAN

The New Testament is written in the vernacular *Koiné*, which was the language of the common people as well as of the cultured in the first century A.D. The papyri which have been unearthed by many thousands in Egypt give us vivid pictures of the life of the age. We thus catch the people in their business and pleasures. We have love letters, receipts or bills, marriage contracts or divorce decrees, census rules and tax lists, anything and everything. The New Testament is shown beyond a doubt to be a monument of the same vernacular *koiné*. The same words jump at us in the most unexpected places. The book that is in the vernacular of its time has an appeal to men of all times and need not be a sealed book because written in Greek.

If one will read Cobern's *New Archaeological Discoveries* he will be able to see how much the papyri have helped us in our knowledge of the New Testament. Then let him read Milligan's *The New Testament Documents*, his *Greek Papyri*, and his charming new volume, *Here and There Among the Papyri*, and his interest will be deepened. If he will go on and read Deissmann's *Bible Studies* and his *Light from the Ancient East*, he will have a glowing zeal to push his Greek to some purpose.

THE REAL NEW TESTAMENT

The real New Testament is the Greek New Testament. The English is simply a translation of the New Testament, not the actual New Testament. It is good that the New Testament has been translated into so many languages. The fact that it was written in the *koiné*, the universal language of the time, rather than in one of the earlier Greek dialects, makes it easier to render into modern tongues. But there is much that cannot be translated. It is not possible to reproduce the delicate turns of thought, the nuances of language, in translation. The freshness of the strawberry cannot be preserved in any extract. This is inevitable. We have, no doubt, lost much by not having the original Aramaic sayings of Jesus, though He often spoke also in Greek.

But the New Testament itself was composed by its authors in Greek, unless Matthew wrote his Gospel first in Aramaic. Papias says that he wrote *Logia* (probably the Q of criticism) in Hebrew (Aramaic). Some progress has been made by Dalman (*The Words of Jesus*) and others in the effort to reproduce the original Aramaic employed by Jesus. Dr. C. F. Burney now claims (*The Aramaic Origin of the Fourth Gospel*) that the Fourth Gospel was originally written in Aramaic as Dr. C. C. Torrey (*Composition and Date of Acts*) argues for Acts 1–15. In the main we have to rely upon the reports in the Greek New Testament which are wonderfully vivid and vigorous.

TRANSLATION NOT ENOUGH

The preacher cannot excuse himself for his neglect of Greek with the plea that the English is plain enough to teach one the way of life. That is true, and we are grateful that it is so. The Bible is in the vernacular and has entered into the very life of the modern man. It is impossible to overestimate the influence of the King James Version upon the language and life of the English speaking world. Prof. William Lyons Phelps of Yale will have nothing to do with recent translations because of the literary charm of the Authorized Version. But words are living things and, like all life, are constantly changing. Dictionaries run out of date quickly, not merely because of new ideas and new words, but because the old words change their meanings. The Psalmist said that he would "prevent" the morning, not stop the light from coming as one wishes he could do in the short summer nights, but get up before the morning. So "let" is even used in the Authorized Version for "hinder" instead of "allow."

It was for this reason among others that the revisers undertook to make a new translation of the English Bible. The American Revisers have revised that. Then we have Weymouth's Translation of the New Testament, The Twentieth Century New Testament, and Moffatt's brilliant New Translation of the New Testament. We shall have many more. They will all have special merit, and they will all fail to bring out all that is in the Greek. One needs to read these translations, the more the better. Each will supplement the others. But, when he has read them all, there will remain a large and rich untranslatable element that the preacher ought to know.

THE PREACHER A BIBLE SPECIALIST

We excuse other men for not having a technical knowledge of the Bible. We do not expect all men to know the details of medicine, law, banking, railroading. But the preacher cannot be excused from an accurate apprehension of the New Testament. This is the book that he undertakes to expound. It is his specialty, and this he must know whatever else he does or does not know. Excuses for neglecting the New Testament are only excuses after all. Dwight L. Moody made himself at home in the English Bible, and he shook the world. Spurgeon made himself efficient in Greek and Hebrew in spite of insufficient schooling. John Knox studied Greek when over fifty. Alexander Maclaren's *Expositions of Holy Scripture* are the wonder of modern preachers because he steadily throughout a long life pursued his Hebrew and Greek studies. He had consummate genius and he added to it fullness of knowledge by means of laborious scholarship. One notes the same careful scholarship in the preaching of Dr. J. H. Jowett. A popular preacher like Dr. G. Campbell Morgan is a close and laborious student of Greek New Testament grammar.

ORIGINALITY IN PREACHING

Every preacher wishes to be original. That is a proper desire, within limits. One does not care to be bizarre or grotesque. He cannot, if loyal to Christ, be original in his creed. But he can be individual in his grasp of truth and in his presentation of his message. Originality is relative after all. The ancients have stolen all our best ideas from us. But one can be himself. That is precisely what people like most about us.

Now, the Greek New Testament has a message for each mind. Some of the truth in it has never yet been seen by anyone else. It is waiting like a virgin forest to be explored. It is fresh for every mind that explores it, for those who have passed this way before have left it all here. It still has on it the dew of the morning and is ready to refresh the newcomer. Sermons lie hidden in Greek roots, in prepositions, in tenses, in the article, in particles, in cases. One can sympathize with the delight of Erasmus as he expressed it in the Preface of his Greek Testament four hundred years ago: "These holy pages will summon up the living image of His mind. They will give you Christ Himself, talking, healing, dying, rising, the whole Christ in a word; they will give Him to you in an intimacy so close that He would be less visible to you if He stood before your eyes."

Many who saw Jesus in the flesh did not understand Him. It is possible for us all to know the mind of Christ in the Greek New Testament in all the fresh glory of the Galilean Gospel of grace. The originality that one will thus have is the joy of reality, the sense of direct contact, of personal insight, of surprise and wonder as one stumbles unexpectedly upon the richest pearls of truth kept for him through all the ages.

ENRICHMENT OF ONE'S OWN MIND

The trouble with all translations is that one's mind does not pause long enough over a passage to get the full benefit of the truth contained in it. The Greek compels one to pause over each word long enough for it to fertilize the mind with its rich and fructifying energy. The very words of the English become so familiar that they slip through the mind too easily. One needs to know his English Bible just that way, much of it by heart, so that it will come readily to hand for comfort and for service. But the minute study called for by the Greek opens up unexpected treasures that surprise and delight the soul.

Three of the most gifted ministers of my acquaintance make it a rule to read the Greek Testament through once a year. One of them has done it for forty years and is as fresh as a May morning to-day in his preaching. One of them is a man of marked individuality and he has added to undoubted genius the sparkling exuberance from the constant contact of his own mind with the Greek text. There is thus a flavor to his preaching and speaking that makes him a marked man wherever he appears upon the platform. He makes no parade of his learning, but simply uses the rich store that he has accumulated through the years. He brings out of his treasure things new and things old. And even the old is put in a new way. Light is turned on from a new angle of vision. The old has all the charm of the old and the glory of the new.

GRAMMAR AS A MEANS OF GRACE

The doctor does not complain at the details of his science. He has to know the minutiae of nature's handiwork. Nothing is too small for his investigation. He must know the laws of life, the ways of the cell, the habits of the bacilli and microbes that help and endanger human life, the value of all kinds of medicine, the idiosyncrasies of the individual, the wonders of the ductless glands and their influence on personality. Nothing is too small in order that one may save life. Surely the life of the soul is as important as that of the body. Scientists have high regard for the ways of nature. The microscope has done more for the prolongation of human life than has the telescope. Astronomy has become a science of grandeur and glory, but disease has been conquered largely through the revelations of the microscope. Generalities are the peril of the preacher who has a fine scorn of technicalities. One must be able to make the proper generalization out of a mass of details, but he is no theologian who is not first a grammarian, as Dr. A. M. Fairbairn said. The preacher who ridicules word studies merely exposes his own ignorance. The lexicon may point the way to life. The preacher is of necessity a student of words. He is the interpreter of language and employs language to convey his interpretation of life to the minds of men. They understand his words in their own sense, not in his. He understands the New Testament in his own sense, not in that of the writers, unless forsooth he has managed to grasp the fullness of that meaning.

Thus there are all sorts of pitfalls for the preacher as the exponent of the message of the New Testament. If the blind guide leads the blind, they will both fall into the ditch. One simply has to know his parts of speech if he is to keep out of the ditch and avoid dragging his followers after him. Schisms have arisen around misinterpretations of single words. Grammar is a means of grace. One may, indeed, break grammar if he can break hearts, provided his grammar smashing concerns unessential details not vital to the sense. Theological and philosophical crudities have always played an important part in the history of heresy.

THE TOOLS AND THE MAN

Civilized man has triumphed over brutes largely by the use of tools. They do not make the man, but the man makes the tools. As man makes progress, he continually improves his tools and his use of them. This is true in war, railroads, agriculture, everything. The man who has the best tools, other things being equal, will do the best work. Efficiency is largely skill in the use of the right tools. The modern preacher in his study is a man with his tools. If he does not have the right tools upon his desk, he cannot produce rapid results and as high grade work as he otherwise may. A man of parts without tools may surpass a dunderhead with good implements for work. That is beside the point. The man of genius with the best tools will do far more and far better work than he can do without such implements of service. No preacher can be satisfied with less than the best that is in him. One can usually tell the quality of a preacher's work by looking at the books in his library.

Dr. Jowett says in his *The Preacher; His Life and Work*: "I would urge upon all young preachers, amid all their reading, to be always engaged in the comprehensive study of some one book of the Bible. Let that book be studied with all the strenuous mental habits of one's student days." That is the way to grow as a preacher. That is the way that Jowett grew. "You will see every text as colored and determined by its context, and indeed as related to vast provinces of truth which might otherwise seem remote and irrelevant. And you will be continually fertilizing your minds by discoveries and surprises which will keep you from boredom." How can a man who can get the best tools be content to use any others? How can he be willing to have the best tools and not use them?

LEARNING TO USE THE GREEK

It is possible for one to teach himself the elements of Greek so as to get a great deal of benefit from the study of the Greek New Testament. Davis's *Beginner's Grammar of the Greek New Testament* is a good book for one who knows no Greek at all. A man of average intelligence and culture can go through this little book without a teacher. In a few months he will be reading the Gospel by John with some comfort. If he will then secure Bagster's *Analytical Lexicon of New Testament Greek*, he will find every form in the New Testament given in alphabetical order and explained for a beginner. It will then be a matter of perseverance. It is an open road for one at this stage to get a Westcott and Hort Greek Testament with a lexicon, or he can get Souter's *Pocket Lexicon of the Greek New Testament* or Abbott-Smith's *Manual Lexicon*. He can get a limp-back copy of the Westcott and Hort or of the Nestle edition that he can carry in his pocket and pull out whenever he has a moment of leisure. He can add now to this equipment Robertson's *Short Grammar of the Greek New Testament* and by degrees get ready for a more extended study of the Greek New Testament. One does not have to be a gifted linguist to follow a course of study like this. It requires only a half hour a day and the determination to stick to it steadily, and one will win out and be glad of it all his life. So will his hearers.

NEW HELPS FOR THE STUDENT

There is less excuse than ever for the man with college and seminary training who does not turn his knowledge of Greek to tremendous account. His tools are far superior to those of a former generation. The critical and grammatical commentaries of Meyer served their day well and have been revised and brought up to date in the German editions. One who knows German can also use Zahn's commentaries and those by Holtzmann, and Lietzmann's *Handbuch*. But the English student of the Greek New Testament has perhaps better commentaries on the whole. Those who have Ellicott will still find his comments of value, and certainly that is true of the great commentaries of Lightfoot and of Westcott in the valuable series so ably carried on by Swete, Milligan, Mayor, and Robinson (the Macmillan Commentaries). The International Critical series challenges comparison with the best in any language. The Expositor's Greek Testament is a distinct advance on Alford, and that is saying a good deal. The Cambridge Greek Testament for schools is a model series for brief and scholarly exposition.

We still lack a new lexicon to take the place of Thayer which makes no use of the papyri, but the *Vocabulary of the Greek Testament Illustrated from the Papyri and Other Non-literary Sources*, by Moulton and Milligan will, when completed, go a long way toward supplementing Thayer until some one shall give us a new lexicon. Souter's *Pocket Lexicon of the New Testament* is useful and convenient as is Abbot-Smith's *Manual Lexicon of the New Testament*, which gives a good deal of fresh information not in Thayer.

The death of Caspar René Gregory postpones indefinitely a new edition of Tischendorf's *Novum Testamentum Graece*, but some one will some day perform this greatly needed service. The untimely death of James Hope Moulton leaves his Grammar of New Testament Greek incomplete. The Prolegomena (Vol. I) was published in 1906. Accidence (Vol. II) he nearly finished before his death, and it was published. Syntax (Vol. III) unfortunately he had not done, and this is the most important part of all. However, in his Prolegomena he made many syntactical remarks which very well outline his general attitude. He rendered an imperishable service by his work on the papyri in illustration of the Greek of the New Testament. Debrunner has revised Blass's *Grammatik des neutestamentlichen Griechisch*, but English students have only 1.

Thackeray's translation of the original. Radermacher's short *Neutestamentliche Grammatik* is also untranslated. Burton's *New Testament Moods and Tenses* is still of real worth. Robertson's *Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light*

of Historical Research covers the entire grammatical field in one large volume of over 1500 pages now in the fourth edition.

There is, therefore, ample opportunity for the student who wishes to pursue his Greek studies. The books mentioned above will lead one on to monographs without number. A dip into the papyri can be had in Milligan's *Greek Papyri*. This book will tempt one to go on and read widely in the *Oxyrhynchus Papyri* of Grenfell and Hunt and in other fascinating volumes that are now at one's command. Deissmann's *Licht vom Osten* is now in the fourth thoroughly revised edition.

THE CHARM OF THE GREEK

The high schools and the colleges may drop the Greek out of the curriculum in obedience to the demand of a utilitarian age. But the changing whims of modern educators cannot change the eternal charm of the Greek language. Chancellor West of Princeton University has published a remarkable volume of papers called *The Value of the Classics*. In this volume prominent men in various walks of life bear witness to the value of Greek in preparing them for great enterprises in modern life. The study of language has a value all its own as a mental discipline.

The most perfect vehicle of human speech thus far devised by man is the Greek. English comes next, but Greek outranks it. The chief treasure in the Greek language is the New Testament. Homer and Thucydides and Aeschylus and Plato all take a rank below Paul and John and Luke. The cultural and spiritual worth of the Greek New Testament is beyond all computation. In the Renaissance the world woke up with the Greek Testament in its hands. It still stands before the open pages of this greatest of all books in wonder and in rapture as the pages continue to reveal God in the face of Jesus Christ.