

A BRIEF NOTE ON MATTHEW'S GOSPEL AS A CLASSICAL DOCUMENT

An online scan of today's undergraduate and graduate reading lists in the classics, gives an intimate glimpse at the curriculum in play inside ivory tower halls. Most certainly, in your perusal of ancient authors, you would come across some outstanding gold and silver age writers. That being the case, it is a less remarkable phenomenon that the Greco-Roman classics have experienced a small scale renaissance in the last fifteen years. After all, we are attracted to their personalities and literature.

Pound for pound they are the best—at least, at what they composed, and as a common courtesy, we bow and genuflect at their offerings to so many aspects of society. To speak in real terms, I would make this ambitious gambit and iterate there was a time when the Greeks and Romans were set up as exemplars of a culture of betters; especially when contrasted with other ancient societies. But now, by and large, this ideology has given way to an interdisciplinary approach when interpreting the customs of peoples of the past.

This blending of multiple approaches has given us multi-culturalist scholars gifted with insights into multiple genres. However, the upshot is accompanied by one physical handicap; and this relates to what is conspicuously absent in today's classical arena. As shocking as this may seem, and much to the dismay of many, the Bible (as a classical document), yet, remains outside of the pale of this resurgence of classical studies; a book that sweeps us away in a maelstrom of local histories and first hand witnesses, is for the most part, largely ignored.

Hellenism's foundation, upon which Christian pillars are erected, is now viewed with an ample amount of skepticism. I posit, that of the many reasons for this, three may be cited as causes for this predicament, and they are noted as follows: (1) In comparative terms, Western Civilization was, in former times, ascribed virtues that were not deemed suitable when commenting on the contributions of other so called pagan societies. (2) The Greeks and Romans graded themselves and their morality in light of historical figures, and evaluated their conduct accordingly. Many today are uncomfortable with judging and assessing the character of other cultures—calling this procedure out of bounds. (3) The influx of immigrants in North America has made Christianity, as a nation's civic religion, untenable as the sole ethical model for the modern academic.

If for no other reason than the languages involved—Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek and Latin, the Bible demands our attention. A.T. Robertson—a deceased, but reputed Greek scholar, in his 1450 page tome ‘*A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in light of historical research*’ gives us data to ponder; nearly 100 biblical descriptive Latinisms in words, phrases and expressions of similar ilk are laid out for a reader’s analysis.

From individual place names unto civil, military and domestic terms, the tiny Roman province of Israel illustrates its own internal character through textual strata encompassing more than one thousand years. Discussing Israel’s external influences requires us to critically face two thirds of the Hebrew Scriptures and all of the New Testament reports. Thus, throughout the whole of biblical manuscripts, readers encounter areas as far ranging as Africa, Europe, Asia, the Far East and Near East.

So, how can an ‘interdisciplinary’ approach to the Mediterranean region exist apart from a strict and impartial inclusion of multi century level texts of the early phases of classically biblical days of yore? No other ancient surviving documents impart so much vintage information. It is to our own detriment that we have persistently neglected, in modern times, this plentiful vein of gold. In fact, I am unfamiliar with any other book in the ‘Western Canon,’ which demands mastery of such kaleidoscopic material for its proper elucidation and dissemination.

Viewing this whole topic critically, the academic establishment needed to move away from traditional methods of old. There was little room to breathe, let alone, publish innovative ideas without being branded a heretic of questionable designs. Of all departments, the classics thrive on the basis of revisions. This is one scientific method that permits a continual reconfiguring of our perceived notions about the writers—poets, satirists, tragedians—of yesteryear.

It is for this reason I suggest that as a rule, classicists have been conservative in textual study, and have normally concluded the golden years of Latin classics with the death of Augustus in AD 14. I propose that the goal posts be moved forward to cover the era stretching from 90BC unto 110AD. This allows the rich literary inventions of the Greco-Roman peoples to mirror Second Temple era texts—with all their quixotic features.

The Canon of Judeo-Christian Scripture is a trove for the Assyriologist—who studies Babylonian and Persian documents, along with cuneiform tablets, Egyptologist—who examines Hieroglyphics, and its African connections, Phoenician experts—who specialize in Canaanite myth & ritual, The Rabbincist--delving into the intricacies of oral and written torah concepts, and also, for those who strive to understand the impact of

ancient Greece and Rome upon civilization. That grand document called the bible musters vast amounts of reasonable classical age histories.

To pick one book of the many within the bible's pages, take Matthew's Gospel for instance, the corpus of his material gives us Hebrew syntax in Greek dress. Furthermore, the publican-Matthew provides many Latin adornments too. Actually, by late second century AD, Matthew--in Latin, was conceived as a first reader for those being introduced to Christianity's Latin patois.

Representing the common Latin vernacular of the everyday working person, it clearly and plainly tells its stories. From what may be gathered from analyses of the Koine Greek New Testament, Matthew's Gospel also signals the uniqueness of individual pericopae by means of its use of peculiar terms. By way of example let us look to Matthew 26:18:

CONTEXT

Jesus is now preparing for his final moments with the disciples just prior to his death at the hands of Jewish and Roman authorities. So, in a desire to celebrate one final Paschal meal with his students he tells his students to look for a place in which to arrange for this Passover ritual. {English glosses conceal an important philological point in Greek}

ENGLISH AND GREEK (TRANSLITERATED) TEXT

And he said, Go into the city to such a man, and say unto him, The Master saith, My time is at hand; I will keep the Passover at thy house with my disciples.

Ho de eipen, upagete eis ten polin pros ton deina, kai eipate auto, O didaskalos legei, O kairos mou eggus esti pros se poio to pascha meta ton matheton mou.

PHILOLOGICAL NOTES

In Matthew and Luke's Gospels, the point man in the narrative is referred to as 'deina,' a unique word, rare but mentioned in the classical orators; one that has this singular instance in all the New Testament. In classical Greek, Aristophanes employs 'deina' in what may be described as a colloquial manner: Demonstrative in the sense of that (one), such and such (person). The ancient writer Demosthenes utilizes it for political purposes: as one who points a finger with possible sneer. Classical dictionaries (LSJ) display it jokingly with reference to '{that} son-of-a-gun...

EXEGESIS

On purely evidentiary grounds we can assume that the unknown man of the scenario may have been known by Jesus and disciple alike. This 'deina' is, in some way or another, an acquaintance who understood the needs of Jesus and his groundbreaking new sect. Even 2nd century Syriac, glossed deina as *phe'laan*—a specific, and/ or particular person of note and repute.

By returning to certain perimeters of scripture in the educating of scholars and clergy, a new intellectual intoxication can be inspired, and our contemporary conventions might well be supplanted by a more

thorough and rigorous style of text critical examination. Using biblical documents to buttress classical instruction may impede the current fast pace of specialization, but, should also, further the genius of a general studies. Generalists are needed, and are able to view the historical documentary landscape from multi-perspectival vantage points.

Over 100 years ago chairs of ancient languages, often, included Semitics—bible based linguistics—in their core offerings. It was central, they believed, to the development of humans; with our fixation for humanism and its freedom for the whole man I would suppose this to be a no brainer. Fast forwarding to our present day advancements, imagine the improvements that could be made in this neo classical age by radically restructuring our ideologies; if classics departments and seminaries hired bonafide linguists. The time is ripe for ingenuity, but who will initiate the forward motion needed to move the classical train onward?

The writings of the New Covenant were originally written in classical Greek. Whatever tag may be attached to the dialect; *Koine*—Mandarin, a simplified form of *Attic*—derived from late Hellenistic use, or the seedlings of a deformed style of *katharevousa*—calling for a return to the purity of Greek, as a document it deserves a full scale study. Matching early Greek papyri with early and late epistolary scriptures creates natural tensions needed for progressive studies in morphology and phonetics. Anna Murpago Davies has ably demonstrated that prior to the 2nd and 3rd century BC there was no standard Greek language. That each area spoke different dialects for administrative purposes is a given, so good dialectologists (assisted by comparative philological skills) can tell us much about various strains embedded in Greek and Latin texts.

If I may interject a personal note here: As a pastor, getting behind the scenes of a verse and understanding its setting is paramount. If I cannot cause my parishioners to ‘see’ the same thing(s) in the text, which I ‘see,’ then the time spent is fruitless in the end. From a more secure testimony, I enjoy and employ a more or less synchronic {Gk.*sun chrono*} approach. To study locutions in their exact time frames fascinates me. My grounding in ancient languages, also, facilitates an ability to see scriptural segments peripherally—multi-dimensionally.

Incorporating the canon of the bible into the reading list apparatus, once again, ensures that proper tools will be available in our retrospections of papyri, ostraca and other inscriptions of the past. To be able to control a mass array of materials is as essential as is concentrated efforts in select areas of study. Change of this type guarantees that the future of Semitics

and Classics will be secure. And will grant us much needed opportunities to forge ahead with unparalleled critical scholarship.

***APPENDIX ON THE TRIAL OF JESUS IN MATTHEW 27**

In a textual analysis of the story of the crucifixion of Christ, an outline of the events, add significant weight to my call for a general synthesis of material, and its relation to classical tongues and its literature. A number of Latinist scholars provide excellent chapters to scan to supplement a reader's Roman law review. But most of these books rarely interact with local legal traditions. So I raise a few questions below to stimulate you to further study. It is only by continuing readings in other fields, and then, beyond our areas of specialty can we assimilate and disseminate relevant data when needed.

RABBINIC LAW—Oral and Written

1. The limits of Jewish law {1}
2. Temple transactions {2-10}
3. Lawful and unlawful uses of blood monies {6}
 - a) Is it blood money because Judas betrayed Jesus or because Judas put himself to death?
4. The care of items-properties bought with blood monies {7-9}
5. Jewish burial practices {57-61}
 - a) In what corpus of Jewish law do we find information that regulates the handling of the dead?

ROMAN JURISPRUDENCE—The Twelve tables and more

1. The role of the provincial governor in tribunal session {2,11,19}
 - a) What restrictions were placed on him and what training was required of him for the proper carrying out of his duties?
2. The rights of the accused if he is a non Roman citizen {11-14}
3. The growth of Roman traditions amid Jewish feasts times {15-18}
 - a) The development of the release of the prisoner
4. Wives, mobs, hunches, the 'superstitious element' and their influences on official decrees. {19-25}
5. A full scale study of a Judeo-Roman crucifixion {26-53}
 - a) Under Roman law who may be penalized in this way?
 - b) What were the specifics relative to one's guilt for this type of death?
6. Proper and improper uses of the Roman guard {27-31,65}

The above outline is a mini store house, and supplies some excellent lead topics for continuing studies. Topics, which, in my humble opinion, must be grappled with in order to be able to clearly open up the meanings of dramatic narratives. Literary interpretation, as a method of explication, is the missing link in the chain of analyses. We all know many who can annotate with a fastidiousness rarely seen, but, the common man speaking vulgar—daily—language is in need of help when attempting to understand texts foreign to his environment.

One model worth adopting, which I believe would render pertinent data in syntactical studies, is to engage one's self in a few minor collations of narrative sources. Since we are speaking of Matthew's Gospel for use in classical forums, we can start by scrutinizing the death of Caesar and Jesus. The impact made by the two of them in history is profound; in many ways so profound as to be unbelievable.

Although they are to be interpreted on wholly different grounds from each other, there can be no doubt about their legitimate places in history, and our necessity for studying classical events from the past; if in fact we are true scholars. Both of them claimed 'Sonship' (of one kind or another) as a justifiable right in their relationship to God; in Caesar's case, in relation to gods. Therefore, a deitic element would naturally permeate their lives and the stories written which encapsulate parts of their lives.

So, by taking the four texts of the Gospels, Matthew's Latin text of Jesus' death in particular, and conducting comparative philological studies with the sources of Caesar's betrayal and murder, further notes may be made on the uses of Latinisms of the Augustan—Gold age period, and on specific morphemes used within the span of a century.¹ Similarity in descriptions of the manner in which the deaths occurred may also credit our historical accounts with respect to those dark areas of our ignorance in ancient story telling.

I am not sure how you read history, but from all I read I can tell that Caesar's death had immediate implications for the entirety of Rome. His demise affected Rome's substructure from the bottom up. Now though, few even know much Julius Caesar outside of a Shakespearean drama. His voice is silent to many these days. Jesus, on the other hand, died with few throughout the empire knowing of his crucifixion at all. But from a 'now' perspective, we can discern how his death was understood, and affirm its continuing effects upon each generation; and from a religious point of view, how, His death has shaped and carved out niches in Western societies extant today.

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¹ The Christian term *Rapture* is designated to refer to a catching away. This usage is justified and corroborated by Martial: On the Spec. 18 (16), and 22 (19) where *raptus* is the Latinism for 'one snatched away.' C.f. Martial, epigrams. Loeb Classical Library, edited by D.R. Shackleton Bailey.