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NEW TESTAMENT STUDIES AND DOCUMENTARY PAPYRI.
INTERACTIONS AND NEW PERSPECTIVES

Abstract

The present contribution offers a few exemplifications of the directions in which the study of documentary papyri may interact with and assist the study of the New Testament. The papyrological record provides the opportunity to analyze the lexical phenomena occurring in the earliest Christian texts in the most appropriate context of contemporary *koine* uses. However, papyrological evidence constitutes also the most fruitful venue to observe the socio-cultural dynamics that are the background of many New Testament passages, but are often left implicit as it is usual for all literary texts. Hopefully, a more sustained attention to documentary papyri will allow to overcome the methodological and ideological problems generated by traditional treatments of the New Testament as “unique” or secluded from the remnant of the ancient intellectual experience and literary production.

Keywords

New Testament, Biblical Greek, Sociolinguistics

I. Introduction.

The relationship between documentary papyri and New Testament studies dates back a long time, practically to the last decades of the nineteenth century, when the new papyrological discoveries started to excite the best intellectual minds of Europe and its always competing governments. Many scholars understood immediately the remarkable advantages that the study of the New Testament could reap from the new crop of texts, first of all from a linguistic point of view, but also – in some more penetrating intellects, as in the case of Adolf Deissmann – in order to reconstruct more adequately the social environment in which the earliest Christian texts were composed. Truly pioneering studies were produced in the first decades of the last century¹.

¹ Works that still deserve not only to be mentioned, but read attentively are A. DEISSMANN, *Bibelstudien. Beiträge zumeist aus dem Papyri und Inschriften, zur Geschichte der Sprache, des*

However, in the central decades of the century this collaboration stopped. First of all, papyrology became such a complex discipline from a technical point of view that mastering it alongside the ever-increasing amount of scholarly literature on New Testament topics was extremely difficult, if not altogether impossible. Moreover, the reaction against some of the excesses of the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* and the crisis of the German liberal theology had consequences that were even more significant than the just mentioned disciplinary difficulties. In particular in Germany, the retreat into the neo-orthodox positions of dialectic theology brought about a renewed emphasis on the uniqueness of the New Testament that could not sit well with approaches underscoring the fundamental identity between the language and social imagery of the Christian texts and of documentary papyri.

Thankfully, the state of affairs seems to have changed significantly in the last two decades. First of all, it appears that most of the technical problems have been overcome, chiefly through the development of electronic databases as DDbDP, which now allows systematic searches of documentary papyri in a fraction of the time and with a degree of completeness unthinkable before. Additionally, the character of New Testament studies as a discipline is experiencing a remarkable transformation, as it is becoming less and less tied to theology and is striving to assume a profile that would put it on an equal footing with other sectors of the humanities.

In the following pages I will try to sketch some of the ways in which the study of documentary papyri has contributed and can still contribute more to the understanding of the New Testament. Moreover, I will also try to highlight some of the more enticing disciplinary issues and ideological stakes that are raised by the comparison between these two bodies of evidence².

Schrifttums und der Religion des hellenistischen Judentums und des Urchristentums, Marburg 1895; ID., *Neue Bibelstudien. Sprachgeschichtliche Beiträge, zumeist aus den Papyri und Inschriften, zur Erklärung des Neuen Testaments*, Marburg 1897; and ID., *Licht vom Osten. Das Neue Testament und die neuentdeckten Texte der hellenistisch-römischen Welt*, Tübingen 1908 (with many reeditions in the 20 following years). One must also consider the still enormously influential contribution of J.H. MOULTON-G. MILLIGAN, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament, Illustrated from the Papyri and Other Non-Literary Sources*, London 1930.

² Two systematic works in progress need to be mentioned here: the series *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity*, which has produced ten volumes since 1981 surveying the papyrological and epigraphical materials published between 1976 and 1992 in their relationship to the study of Judaism and early Christianity, and the *Papyrologische Kommentare zum Neuen Testament*, led by Peter Arzt-Grabner, of which already three volumes – on *Philemon*, *1 Corinthians* and *2 Thessalonians* – have appeared. For recent updates, see also P. ARZT-GRABNER, *Neuigkeiten aus der Papyrologie*, «Early Christianity» 3 (2012), pp. 111-115.

II. Lexicography.

Where documentary papyri are more immediately useful for the study of the New Testament is in providing the way to obtain a more accurate assessment of how Greek words were employed at the very least in the ancient eastern Mediterranean. Earlier studies – in particular those of the already mentioned Adolf Deissmann and James Moulton – have rendered almost common knowledge the notion that documentary papyri would attest to everyday parlance in opposition to the Greek of literary texts, which would in turn be not much more than an artificial construct of the more sophisticated and small literate elites of antiquity. The second part of the preceding statement could be accepted with some caution, but the first half can be received only with significant qualifications. In fact, Deissmann's frankly extremist position can be understood – and relativized – only on the backdrop of the intellectual and ideological climate in which he fought his battle in favor of documentary papyri³. Deissmann's desire to show that the New Testament provided the means to hear the voice of the common people unencumbered by aristocratic posturing and institutional religiosity was grounded in his own idea of what constituted the essence of Christianity⁴. Indeed, this assumption brought the great scholar to turn a relatively blind eye on the rhetorical and socio-cultural constructedness of the very documentary papyri that he studied so in depth.

In truth, as any papyrologist could attest, the category of documentary papyri is quite a mixed bag, since the label embraces a very heterogeneous array of texts, varying from public edicts and decrees, all the way to the most private letters passing through a host of legal genres (as contracts, accounts, wills, *et cetera*). Therefore, it is difficult to argue for the fact that these very diverse writings can represent adequately the everyday language of ancient low-class men and women: legal documents, which constitute the bulk of documentary papyri, certainly did not correspond to everyday speech any more than contracts and wills mirror our common way of talking today⁵. Even private letters,

³ See the useful, but too brief, assessments in A. WIFSTRAND, *Epochs and Styles: Selected Writings on the New Testament, Greek Language and Greek Culture in the Post-Classical Era*, Tübingen 2005, pp. 71-77, and L. RYDBECK, *The Language of the New Testament*, «Tyndale Bulletin» 49 (1998), pp. 361-368, even though the latter's proclivity to speak of a «Jewish Greek» should give pause to the reader.

⁴ On Deissmann's intellectual and political figure, see now the masterful A. GERBER, *Deissmann the Philologist*, Berlin 2010.

⁵ However, on the issue of the existence of a specialized legal terminology in antiquity, see the nuanced assessment of J. HENGSTL, *Griechische Papyri und Ostraka*, in K. ERLEMANN-K.L.

which were frequently composed and written in antiquity – and not only then – by professional scribes, are best treated as stylized texts controlled to a significant degree by specific sets of rules of expression and rhetorical construction.

Nevertheless, it is definitely true that documentary papyri are the only substantive means at our disposal to escape the boundaries of elite literary production and consequently to try to have at least a partial look at ancient people's lives not exclusively from the perspective of the highest echelons of ancient society. This is the opportunity provided by the study of the papyrological record that figures more frequently in New Testament studies – particularly in commentaries of biblical books – but much work still remains to be done. I will try to illustrate what I mean by way of a handful of examples, two drawn from the Synoptic Gospels and one from Paul.

a.

Our first example will come from a famous Synoptic passage, the Lord's prayer, which is extant in two very similar versions in the Gospels of Matthew (6:9-13) and Luke (11:2b-4). It is well known that both versions of the prayer contain a request for the remittance/forgiveness of debts/sins and the very ambiguity of its formulation has traditionally led many exegetes to suggest that – behind the two surviving Greek versions – once stood an Aramaic one, which would now be lost⁶. Indeed, one finds out that Aramaic possesses a term, *hoba*, that would cover both the semantic domains associated with «debt» and «sin». In a recent – and otherwise insightful – analysis of the development of the concept of sin in biblical and post-biblical times, Gary Anderson states this point quite forcefully: «the terms that Matthew uses to describe the forgiveness of sins would have struck a Greek speaker as unusual»⁷.

However, a look at the papyrological evidence reveals that such terminology might not have sounded «unusual» at all. We possess a significant number of Ptolemaic amnesty decrees that Egyptian sovereigns used to promulgate at key moments during their reign, for instance at their enthronement or after a remarkable military victory. Obviously, these documents have a very distinct formulaic

NOETHLICHS (Hrsg.), *Neues Testament und Antike Kultur. 1. Prolegomena-Quellen-Geschichte*, Neukirchen 2004, pp. 119-124.

⁶ Καὶ ἄφεσ ἡμῖν τὰ ὀφειλήματα ἡμῶν, ὡς καὶ ἡμεῖς ἀφήκαμεν τοῖς ὀφειλέταις ἡμῶν («And remit us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors», Mt 6:12) and καὶ ἄφεσ ἡμῖν τὰς ἁμαρτίας ἡμῶν, καὶ γὰρ αὐτοὶ ἀφίομεν παντὶ ὀφείλοντι ἡμῖν («And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us», Lk 11:4).

⁷ G.A. ANDERSON, *Sin: a History*, New Haven 2009, p. 31.

character. The terminology that Anderson finds so puzzling for an ancient Greek speaker is conveniently displayed in a fragmentary exemplar dating to the second century BCE (PKoeln 7.313 [Oxyrhynchus?], lines 13-22):

[... ἀφίησιν δὲ καὶ τοὺς ἄλλους κ[αὶ] τοὺς μισθωτὰς
 [... καὶ τοὺς γεωργούντας τὴν βασιλικ[ή]ν γῆν τῶν ὀφει-
 λημάτων τῶν ὄντων πρὸς τὴν σιτικῆ[ν] μίσθωσι καὶ τὸ χω-
 ματικὸν τῆς αὐτῆς γῆς ἕως τοῦ ις (ἕτους) χωρὶς τῶν
 μισθωτῶν
 τῶν εἰς τὸ πατρικὸν μεμισθωμένων. ἀφίησιν δὲ καὶ τὰ ὀφει-
 λόμενα
 [... ἀργυρικῶν προσόδων ἕως τοῦ αὐτοῦ χρόνου χωρὶς τῶν]
 [...] ἀφίησιν δὲ καὶ τοὺς κυρίους τῶν κατὰ κακ
 [...]ημένων ἀμπελώνων καὶ παραδείσων κα[ὶ]
 [...]καὶ βαλανείων τὰ ἀναγραφόμενα ὀφείλεσθαι
 πάντα ἕως τοῦ κ (ἕτους). ἀφίησιν δὲ καὶ τοὺς ὀφείλοντας πρὸς
 τὸ [...]

«(The king) releases among the others also the lessees (...) and cultivators of the royal land from the debts they owe for the lease in kind and for the dike-tax of the same land up to the 16th (year) apart from the lessees who have hereditary leases. He releases also from what is due (...) for the tax in cash up to the same time apart from (...). He releases also the owners of (...) vineyards and orchards and (...) and baths from all the registered payments owed up to the 20th year. He releases also those who are in debt to the (...)».

These are few lines from an actual amnesty decree, promulgated by the king Ptolemy V on the occasion of his definitive victory over a native rebellion that took southern Egypt away from Greek control in the first decades of the second century BCE⁸. In this section of the edict, the sovereign releases – using the verb ἀφίημι – all his subjects from the taxes – indicated as ὀφείλημα – that they are bound to pay in exchange for the right to cultivate royal land⁹. The

⁸ The introduction to the PKoeln edition of the text (p. 64) has a detailed description of the chronology of the events that followed the defeat of the Egyptian king Chaonnophris on 27th August 186 BCE and later led to the proclamation of the amnesty.

⁹ Interestingly enough, these taxes are forgiven only up to the 16th year of reign of Ptolemy V, which corresponds to 190/189, three years before the actual victory of 186 BCE (the same happens in PTebt 1.5, which we are going to examine below; on this, see again the comments in PKoeln 7, p. 72).

same terminology appears for the release from those taxes that are due on the produce of orchards and vineyards in lines 19-22.

The language used in the decree resembles so closely the wording of the Lord's Prayer that it is quite easy to see how unnecessary Anderson's and others' appeal to an Aramaic basis is. There is indeed hardly any foundation for the assumption that a Greek-speaking reader of this text would have had any trouble in identifying here the "religious" meanings of «forgiveness» and «sins»¹⁰. On the contrary, the language of remittance and debts was arguably a very direct clue for Greek readers and hearers to recognize that the prayer speaks about God and his eschatological intervention using words and concepts that were commonly employed in the Hellenistic world to speak about sovereigns and their *basileia*. The latter term is traditionally translated as «kingdom», but its range of meanings goes well beyond a material reference to the land under the rule of a king and encompasses the theoretical notion of «just» and legitimate sovereignty. In fact, *basileia* is a complex ideological and philosophical construction, designed to legitimize monarchic regimes by showing that the sovereign is in charge because he or she better than anyone else can provide for the two prominent needs of the subjects: safety (by defeating the enemies of the country) and welfare (by offering relief in situations of need, as in the case of excessive indebtedness, famine, and so on). It is interesting to note that both these sides of the Hellenistic *basileia* are actually attached by the Gospels to the «kingdom of God». Thus, several texts announce the defeat of demonic forces in connection with the arrival of God's *basileia*¹¹ and, in the very same text of the Lord's Prayer, a request for bread immediately precedes that for debt relief¹². Admittedly, singling out specific "religious" elements in these contexts is quite difficult, partly because the notion of «religion» becomes something detached from «politics» or «economics» only (if at all) in modern times. On the contrary, the very concept of Hellenistic *basileia* operates across the divide between the human and the divine realms (and therefore invites its

¹⁰ «Matthew's version of the Our Father makes sense only if we assume that the wording reflects an underlying Semitic idiom. [...] The author of Matthew's Gospel, in contrast to Luke, chose to provide a literal translation. The result was a linguistic formulation that would have sounded odd to a native Greek speaker who did not recognize the underlying Semitic idiom» (ANDERSON, *Sin cit.*, p. 32).

¹¹ For instance, in the conclusion of the famous answer to the charge that Jesus' exorcisms are accomplished with the help of Beelzebul in Mt 12:25-28 // Lk 11:17-20.

¹² Τὸν ἄρτον ἡμῶν τὸν ἐπιούσιον δὸς ἡμῖν σήμερον («Give us today our daily bread», Mt 6:11) and τὸν ἄρτον ἡμῶν τὸν ἐπιούσιον δίδου ἡμῖν τὸ καθ' ἡμέραν («Give us each day our daily bread», Lk 11:3).

adaptation to the Israelite God that one finds exemplified in the Lord's Prayer). Human and divine sovereigns alike are conceived as the guarantors of a just balance in the world order and, whenever they issue edicts as those here examined, they are simply acting out the roles that they are expected to fulfill in this ideological scenario¹³.

Even the Lukan ἀμαρτία («sin») – which is frequently interpreted as a translational variant of the Matthean ὀφείλημα («debt») on the basis of the already mentioned presence of an alleged Aramaic substratum – is perfectly understandable in light of Hellenistic amnesty decrees. It is still possible to explain the redactional variant introduced by Luke as an attempt to “spiritualize” – certainly in the sense of the “religious” meaning advanced by Anderson – the request for debt relief, but again there is no need to imagine a misunderstanding of an ambiguous Semitic *Vorlage*. A single example should suffice to illustrate the point. Among the papers of the village scribe Menches, who lived in the Egyptian Fayum at the end of the second century BCE, we can find several copies of the first lines of another amnesty decree that the *komogrammateus* kept in his archive. Here is the beginning of SB 8.9899 (118 BCE)¹⁴:

Βασιλεὺς Πτολεμαῖ[ος] καὶ βασίλισσα Κλεοπάτρα ἡ ἀδελφὴ
καὶ βασίλισσα Κλεοπάτρα ἡ γυνὴ ἀφίᾳσι τοὺς ὑπὸ τὴν
βασιλείαν πάντας ἀγνοημάτων ἀμαρτημάτων
ἐγκλημάτων καταγνωμάτων αἰτιῶν πασῶν
τῶν ἕως θ τοῦ Φαρμοῦθι τοῦ νβ (ἕτους) πλὴν τῶν
φόνου[ι]ς ἑκουσίοις καὶ ἱεροσυλίας [σ]υνεχομένων.

«King Ptolemy and queen Cleopatra the sister and queen Cleopatra the wife release all the subjects to their *basileia* from errors, crimes, accusations, condemnations, and charges of all kinds up to the 9th of Pharmouthi of the 52nd year except for those guilty of willful murder or sacrilege».

This amnesty decree was promulgated in 118 BCE by the three sovereigns who were reigning jointly over Egypt, after a civil strife that had lasted for several years and had significantly weakened the Ptolemaic control over the

¹³ On the performative character of these amnesty decrees (with special attention paid to the examples preserved in the two *Books of Maccabees*), see J. MA, *Seleukids and Speech-Acts. Performative Utterances, Legitimacy, and Negotiation in the World of the Maccabees*, «Scripta Classica Israelica» 19 (2000), pp. 71-112.

¹⁴ The two copies of this *incipit* have been also republished in the collection of Ptolemaic royal ordinances as CORDptol 53bis and 53ter.

country. The amnesty decree – extant also in PTebt 1.5 in a fuller form – was issued to celebrate their renewed agreement and the period of peace that was expected to follow it. In fact, the harmony did not last for long, but mostly because both Ptolemy VIII and Cleopatra II died shortly thereafter, in 116 BCE.

As far as the language of this official statement is concerned, it is worth noting that it spells out that the benefits of the sovereigns' political acts will extend to all «those who are under the *basileia*» (οἱ ὑπὸ τὴν βασιλείαν). In this context it would be meaningless to translate the term with «kingdom» as it is frequently done for the New Testament occurrences of the term. On the contrary, in this case, *basileia* clearly refers to the abstract quality that – as we have seen above – characterizes the “good” sovereign in his or her dealings with the subjects and that, in turn, constitutes the ideological foundation for the sovereign's right to rule. Moreover, the beginning of an amnesty decree shows that such texts did not focus only on financial debts and taxes. On the contrary, criminal violations figured prominently there. It is possible to see from this snippet that crimes of any kind – apart from a few exceptions considered particularly heinous – were indeed mentioned in an extremely prominent position. The redactor of the *Gospel of Luke* might have simply chosen to insert another element taken from the language of these documents in his reworking of the Lord's Prayer. That ἀμαρτία is selected here – instead of the cognate and more common ἀμάρτημα – is probably due to the fact that the first term rang more Septuagintal to Luke's ear, since, in turn, these very same amnesty decrees had originally influenced the way in which the first translators of the Hebrew Bible introduced ἀμάρτημα in their work to indicate «sins» and other violation of the Israelite Law¹⁵.

b.

The second example comes from an only apparently minor lexical specificity in one section of the canonical Gospels. It is worth starting this treatment by noting that New Testament scholarship has long since established that three of the four canonical Gospels – the so-called “Synoptics” (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) – exhibit a close literary relationship. In particular, already 150 years ago, German exegetes demonstrated that Matthew and Luke had independently used the material present in the Gospel of Mark. Moreover, since the remaining – non-Markan – material included in Matthew and Luke shows striking simi-

¹⁵ On this point, see A. PASSONI DELL'ACQUA, *La terminologia dei reati nei προστάγματα dei Tolomei e nella versione dei LXX*, in B.G. MANDILARAS (ed.), *Proceedings of the XVIII International Congress of Papyrology, Athens 25-31 May 1986*, Athens 1988, II, pp. 335-350.

larities both in order and wording, to this has been added the hypothesis that the redactors of these two Gospels used another source, which was originally called Q – from the German *Quelle* – and is now often designated as the Sayings Gospel (since its content is mostly constituted by non-narrative materials)¹⁶. On the basis of this *consensus*, in the most recent decades the focus of much scholarly work on Q has moved to the analysis of its theology and of the socio-cultural profile of those people who might have put the writing together. Since the Sayings Gospel was used by Matthew and Luke – both dated to the final decades of the first century CE – Q can be placed only a few years after Jesus' death and it is thus one of the most ancient Christian texts. Moreover, it is worth adding that the place of origin of Q is most probably Galilee and that the collection included many of the most beloved Christian texts, such as the already mentioned Lord's Prayer or the Beatitudes. Such observations well justify the high degree of scholarly attention that this text has attracted in recent years.

A comparison between the language of Q and documentary papyri highlights a series of very interesting lexical phenomena that in turn lead to some significant conclusions about the socio-cultural profile of the author(s) of the Sayings Gospel. Many exegetes have already noted that Q presents several phrases and images that are typical of everyday life in the countryside and this is one of the reasons that have led to hypothesize that the text was redacted in the context of rural villages in Galilee.

Since the space at our disposal here is limited, it is worth starting with the observation that the Sayings Gospel includes several pericopes in which the dominant imagery is that of storing grains or other produce of the land. Within these texts, Q employs a range of words to designate the place in which the actual storing takes place. In particular¹⁷, the Sayings Gospel has *θησαυρός* – and its derivative verb *θησαυρίζω* – in two places. The first one is Q 6:45, a short proverb in which the «good person» and the «evil person»

¹⁶ For more detailed information about the research on the Sayings Gospel Q, see the extensive treatment in J.S. KLOPPENBORG VERBIN, *Excavating Q. The History and Setting of the Sayings Gospel*, Minneapolis 2000.

¹⁷ The other term more often used in Q is *ἀποθήκη*, which occurs in Q 3:17 («His pitchfork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn on a fire that can never be put out»), on the mouth of John the Baptist, and in 12:24 («Consider the ravens, they never sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet God feeds them»). In documentary papyri, this term occurs only very rarely (four times before the end of the first century CE: P^{Tebt} 3/1.703 [around 210 BCE], P^{GissUniv} 1.10 [145-116 BCE], P^{Oslo} 3.150 [I CE], and SB 16.12495 [I CE]) and always with reference to the storage of liquids, wine or oil.

are opposed: while the first takes «good things» out of his «good θησαυρός», the other does the opposite¹⁸. The second occurrence is in another brief pericope, Q 12:33-34, in which readers are once more presented with the choice between two opposite forms of behavior, one designated as negative and the second indicated as positive. They should not «thesaurize» θησαυροί on earth, since these are exposed to corruption and theft, but instead focus their attention on «heavenly» θησαυροί, which are immune to any form of destruction¹⁹.

An interesting feature of the second passage is the fact that the θησαυρός envisaged in Q 12:33 is clearly a granary or, at least, a place in which land produce is to be preserved²⁰. This use is at variance with almost the entire classic and literary Greek record, in which the term designates what is expected by a modern reader, a place in which gold, silver, and other valuables are kept safe. Hence, it is worth wondering where from the Sayings Gospel took the idea of θησαυρός as a «granary». That Q might have been influenced by a use in the *Septuagint* is obviously an appealing possibility, but probably not right for the case of θησαυρός. Indeed, the overwhelming majority of the occurrences of the term in the Greek translation of the Bible refer very clearly to «treasures» as places in which precious metals and other durable goods are stored²¹. The handful of *Septuagint* passages, in which θησαυρός indicates deposits for grains or other land produce, are hidden in places that are by no means relevant

¹⁸ Ὁ ἀγαθὸς ἄνθρωπος ἐκ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ θησαυροῦ ἐκβάλλει ἀγαθὰ, καὶ ὁ πονηρὸς ἄνθρωπος ἐκ τοῦ πονηροῦ θησαυροῦ ἐκβάλλει πονηρά. The texts of the Sayings Gospel are taken from J.M. ROBINSON-P. HOFFMANN-J.S. KLOPPENBORG (eds.), *The Critical Edition of Q*, Leuven 2000.

¹⁹ Μὴ θησαυρίζετε ὑμῖν θησαυροὺς ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, ὅπου σὴς καὶ βρώσις ἀφανίζει, καὶ ὅπου κλέπται διορύσσουσιν καὶ κλέπτουσιν· θησαυρίζετε δὲ ὑμῖν θησαυροὺς ἐν οὐρανῷ, ὅπου οὔτε σὴς οὔτε βρώσις ἀφανίζει, καὶ ὅπου κλέπται οὐ διορύσσουσιν οὐδὲ κλέπτουσιν· ὅπου γὰρ ἐστὶν ὁ θησαυρὸς σου, ἐκεῖ ἔσται καὶ ἡ καρδία σου.

²⁰ Both the Greek terms σὴς and βρώσις are notoriously difficult: they are rarely used, but, since the first one refers to insects and the second one is etymologically tied to the idea of «eating something away», it stands to reason to conclude that what is at issue here is not the destruction of precious metals or valuable objects.

²¹ For instance, a series of verses in the historical books refer – employing very formulaic phrases – to the sovereigns' act of tapping into their θησαυροί, when financial resources are needed to arm soldiers or forge political alliances; see the actions ascribed to Asa, the king of Judah, who tries to turn away the king of Damascus from his ties with the king of Israel, in 3 Kings 15:18 (καὶ ἔλαβεν Ἀσα τὸ ἀργύριον καὶ τὸ χρυσίον τὸ εὑρεθὲν ἐν τοῖς θησαυροῖς τοῦ οἴκου τοῦ βασιλέως καὶ ἔδωκεν αὐτὰ εἰς χεῖρας παίδων αὐτοῦ, «Then Asa took the silver and the gold that were found in the treasures of the palace of the king and gave them into the hands of his servants»).

and, even more importantly, that reflect administrative structures datable to the Ptolemaic or, at best, to the Persian periods²². The latter observation will have a great significance for the conclusion of the present argument, but, before moving on to this, it is worth summing up briefly what is the role played by *θησαυρός* in Egyptian documentary papyri.

There, *θησαυρός* scores a very high number of occurrences and – as stated above – almost the entirety of them refer to places used for the storage of land produce, a peculiarity that is shared – as we have seen – with Q. The Egyptian *θησαυροί*, however, are so frequently mentioned in the papyrological record because they occupy an enormously significant position in the administrative structure of the managing and exploitation of land resources²³. Both private and public granaries are places in which the produce is stored not simply for the direct and differed consumption by the producers, but also for the payment of taxes or rents due on yearly harvests, for the borrowing of seeds to be planted at the beginning of a new season, and for the transportation of the surplus from the villages to the nome centers and then to the capital.

The crucial bureaucratic functions that are attached to the institution of the Egyptian granary generate a remarkable paper trail designed to keep track of the diverse amounts of grains or other produce stored at different times in different locations. Therefore, literally hundreds of receipts – oftentimes inscribed on cheap *ostraka* – have survived from almost every Egyptian period to attest to the amounts of produce deposited by Egyptian farmers. Here is a very simple example – OWilck 767 (Thebes, 14th August 2 CE) – that is datable to roughly the same period in which the Sayings Gospel was composed:

Μεμέ(τηρκεν) Λυσίμαχος
' Απολλωνίου εἰς τὸν

²² An exemplary case is the list of administrators of David's properties in 1 Chr 27:25-28, where one encounters a mention of a certain Jonathan ἐπὶ τῶν θησαυρῶν τῶν ἐν ἀγρῶ καὶ ἐν ταῖς κόμαις καὶ ἐν τοῖς ἐποικίοις καὶ ἐν τοῖς πύργοις («appointed onto the treasuries in the fields and in the villages and in the farmsteads and in the towers»), followed by the names of two managers of the treasuries of the wine and the treasuries of the oil. With the same meaning, see also Ne 10:39-40; 12:43; 23:12.

²³ G. GERACI, *Granai nell'Egitto ellenistico e romano: problemi tipologici, lessicali, funzionali e metodologici*, «MEFRA» 120 (2008), pp. 307-322, offers a detailed description of the architectural layout of Egyptian «granaries», but is also careful to emphasize that these are not only buildings, but true administrative institutions, which are to a significant extent not tied to a material location. On the varied typologies of granaries, see also the classic work by A. CALDERINI, *ΘΗΣΑΥΡΟΙ. Ricerche di topografia e di storia della pubblica amministrazione nell'Egitto greco-romano*, Milano 1924.

τῆς διοικ(ήσεως) θησαυρὸν) ὑπ(ὲρ) δημοσι(ων)²⁴
 γενη(μάτων) λα (ἔτους) με()ου Καίσαρος (πυροῦ) (ἀρτάβας)
 δέκα ἑπτὰ ἡμισυ τρίτ(ον),
 ὁμοίω(ς) Μεσο(ρῆ) κα (πυροῦ) (ἀρτάβαν) μίαν δίμοι(ρον)
 (γίνονται) (πυροῦ) (ἀρτάβαι) ιθ <
 (ἔτους) λα Καίσαρος Μεσο(ρῆ) κα.
 ἔγρα(ψα) Διονύ(σιος) σιτολλ(όγος).

«Lysimachos, son of Apollonios, has measured into the granary of the administration from the public produce of the 31st year of (...) Caesar seventeen artabas and a half and a third of wheat; likewise on the 21st of Mesore one artaba and two thirds; the total being nineteen artabas. On the 21st of Mesore in the 31st year of Caesar. I, the sitologos Dionysios, wrote this receipt».

The document needs little commentary, but it is worth remarking here that μετρέω («measuring») becomes in this context an almost technical verb, as it is employed routinely in bureaucratic writing of all sorts to indicate the concrete act of counting the amount of grain that is deposited into the θησαυρός or is borrowed out of it. Interestingly enough the same term occurs in the Sayings Gospel as well, in particular in Q 6:38, a wisdom instruction in which it is easy to hear the undertone of the agrarian transactions that took place around the θησαυροί²⁵.

Sometimes rents, which were due in kind on leased land, or taxes, which were levied on yearly harvests, were paid by measuring out the appropriate amounts on the floors of public θησαυροί (or of their semi-public equivalents as in the case of the granaries of temples). This is occasionally stipulated through a specific clause in contracts of land lease, as in the following case of SB 16.12539 (Tebtynis, 22nd September 26 CE²⁶), lines 20-22, concerning the lease of a plot of 4 aruras from Sokrates to Horos:

²⁴ Following Wilcken's reading in the *editio princeps*.

²⁵ Ἐν ᾧ μέτρῳ μετρεῖτε μετρηθήσεται ὑμῖν («With the measure you use to measure out, it will be measured out to you»). On the socio-economic implications of this saying, see now the comments of J.S. KLOPPENBORG, *Agrarian Discourse and the Sayings of Jesus. "Measure for Measure" in Gospel Traditions and Agricultural Practices*, in B.W. LONGENECKER-K.D. LIEBENGOOD (eds.), *Engaging Economics. New Testament Scenarios and Early Christian Reception*, Grand Rapids 2009, pp. 104-127. Of course, the present treatment suggests that the sayings might have been intended – at least within the context of Q – more for a group of village bureaucrats than generically for «those who were in a position to lend» (as correctly maintained by KLOPPENBORG, *Agrarian cit.*, p. 127).

²⁶ For this date, see BL 9.286.

Τὰ δὲ σημαϊνόμενα ἐκφόρια τῶν τριῶν ἐτῶν κατ' ἔτος ἀπολήμ-
(ψεταί)

ὁ κρατῶν Σωκράτης ἐν μηνὶ Παῦνι κατ' ἔτος ἐν Θεογονίδα ἐν
θησαυρῷ μέτρῳ θησαυροῦ <με>μετρημέ(να).

«The agreed upon rent for the three years will be received every year
by the owner Sokrates in the month of Pauni every year in Theogonis in
the granary, measured out using the measure of the granary»²⁷.

That public granaries played this administrative role is attested throughout the centuries covered by the Egyptian papyrological record and can be attributed to a certain extent to the uniformity afforded to lessors and lessees alike by the availability of a standard μέτρον in the θησαυρός²⁸. Interestingly enough, the same wording and the same practice are attested for the Land of Israel at roughly this time in one of the Hebrew documentary papyri dating to the Bar Kokhba revolt and discovered at Wadi Murabba'ât. PMur 24 contains six fragmentary deeds of loan that are probably the copies entered in an official archive by the *parnas* Hillel, acting as manager of the land passed from imperial control to the ownership of Simon bar Kosiba, the chief of the Jewish resistance²⁹. The contracts – all dating to the winter of 134 CE³⁰ – prescribe that the lessees will pay their rents (or taxes) in kind *mdd'l gg 'wsrh* («measuring out on the roof of the granary»), as written in the best preserved column C at line 17, of the residence of Bar Kosiba in Herodium. The formula is for all in-

²⁷ See also the edition of the papyrus in F.W. JENKINS, *A Land Lease from the Michigan Collection*, «StPap» 21 (1982), pp. 23-30. A very similar wording is probably found in another deed of lease, PIFAQ 1.1 (Tebtynis, 24th October 27 CE), lines 17-20 (that is however in need of reconstruction at this point, for which see BL 6.54), and in the deed of loan PBerlMoeller 4 (Philadelphia, 14th November 3 CE, republished also as SB 4.7340 and CPJ 2.411) for six artabas of grain that are stipulated to be repaid in the θησαυρός of the village in lines 12-20.

²⁸ The public θησαυρός is called «royal» (βασιλικός) in documents dating to the Ptolemaic period (as, for instance, the deed of lease BGU 14.2383 [Tholtis, 215/214 BCE], lines 7-10), while it is «public» (δημόσιος) in Roman equivalents (as in POxy 1.101 [2nd October 142 CE], lines 27-34). The reasons for the payment of rent (ἐκφόρια) to the public granary are difficult to establish, as these were mostly dealt with on the threshing floor: it might be simply due to the convenience of specific landowners, in particular when the latter were also required to pay the yearly tax.

²⁹ On the administrative figure of the *prns*, a calque of the Greek προνοητής, see H.M. COTTON, *Ein Gedi Between the Two Revolts*, «Scripta Classica Israelica» 20 (2001), pp. 138-154, here pp. 151-152.

³⁰ This dating according to H. ESHEL, *The Dates Used during the Bar Kokhba Revolt*, in P. SCHÄFER (ed.), *The Bar Kokhba War Reconsidered. New Perspectives on the Second Jewish Revolt against Rome*, Tübingen 2003, pp. 93-105.

tents and purposes the same that one encounters in the above-mentioned papyri, notably in the technical use of «measuring» and moreover of *'wsrh*, the very Hebrew term that – as seen above – is almost systematically rendered in the *Septuagint* with the Greek *θησαυρός*³¹.

It is easy to conclude from these observations – and from other analyses of the lexical characteristics of the Sayings Gospel – that the socio-cultural background for Q is more appropriately located among the small village elites that possessed at least a rudimentary knowledge of Greek and were familiar in particular with the idiom of the administration. In the case of the use of *θησαυρός* to indicate granaries and, more specifically, public storage places for land produce, one must think that first-century Galilee had officials performing activities parallel to those of the Egyptian *sitologoi*³². In all likelihood, as indicated above, such a bureaucratic structure was established in the Land of Israel at the very least when the region had been under Ptolemaic control for almost one hundred years during the III century BCE. It is at these figures of bureaucrats – and to their fellow *komogrammateis*, village elders, and even scribes for hire – that one must look to understand the socio-economic interests, intellectual proclivities, and political allegiances that shaped the earliest traditions concerning Jesus and the movement of his followers³³.

c.

A third interesting example may come from the Pauline use of the term *ἀρραβών*, which appears – in the genuine letters – in *2 Cor* 1:22 and 5:5, where Paul assures his addressees that God has given them the «security» of the Spirit³⁴. Without the papyrological record, one could understand this as a use

³¹ For the subsequent administrative use of the term in early Rabbinic writings, see M. JASTROW, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature*, London 1903, *sub voce* *'wsrh*, I, p. 32, who tellingly translates it as «treasury-department of the Roman government».

³² The position of *sitologos* was a compulsory service already under the Ptolemies and continuing under Roman rule, with the main responsibilities of drawing regular reports on the activities of the *θησαυροί* and of issuing receipts to those who conferred grains to the granaries. On the *sitologia* as a liturgy, see N. LEWIS, *The Compulsory Public Services of Roman Egypt*, Firenze 1997, p. 45 and – more in detail – the various studies collected in Z. ALY, *Essays and Papers. A Miscellaneous Output of Greek Papyri from Graeco-Roman Egypt*, Athens 1995.

³³ More on this in G.B. BAZZANA, *Kingdom and Bureaucracy. Village Scribes and Political Theology in Q*, forthcoming.

³⁴ Ὁ καὶ σφραγισάμενος ἡμᾶς καὶ δοὺς τὸν ἀρραβῶνα τοῦ πνεύματος ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις ἡμῶν («[God] who put his seal on us and gave us his Spirit in our hearts as a first installment») and ὁ δὲ κατεργασάμενος ἡμᾶς εἰς αὐτὸ τοῦτο θεός, ὁ δοὺς ἡμῖν τὸν

peculiar to Paul, maybe even – admittedly with a stretch³⁵ – as an example of that chimeric «biblical Greek» influenced by Semitic languages³⁶, to which I will come back in the next section. However – in a recent contribution – Peter Arzt-Grabner has clearly demonstrated that no one of these hypotheses is tenable³⁷. The Greek term ἀρραβών is routinely employed from the early Ptolemaic era up to Roman times in contracts drawn to confirm the selling of various items, slaves, and even the contracting of services. Here is an example – BGU 11,2111 (Arsinoite, beginning of II CE), lines 2-17 –, presented by Arzt-Grabner in the above mentioned article:

Πεθεὺς Ἀρτεμιδώρου Πέρσης]
 τῆς ἐπιγούης Σοῆρι Πεθέως [μετὰ]
 κυρίου τοῦ ἀνδρὸς Ὁρου τοῦ Τ[...]
 χαίρειν. ὁμολογῶ ἔχειν παρὰ σοῦ παρα-
 χρήμα διὰ χειρὸς [ἐ]ξ οἴκου κεφαλαίου
 δραχμᾶς δ[ια]κοσίας ἀρραβῶν]α ἀναπόρι-
 φον ἀπὸ ἀργυρίου δραχμῶν ἑπτακοσίω[ν]
 τῆς συνεφωνημένης τιμῆς <τῆς> ὑπαρ-
 χούσης μοι ὠνητῆς παρὰ Ἡρω[ί]ος]
 τοῦ Ἡρωνος δούλης Θερμοθα[ρ]ίου]
 ὡς ἔτων εἴκοσι τεσσαράων, οὐλὴ μῆ-
 λω ἔξ ἀριστερῶν, ταύτην τοιαύτην
 [ἀναπόριφον π[ι]λῆ]ν ἐπαφῆ[ι]ς κ[α]ὶ ἰ[ε]ρᾶς]
 νόσου, καὶ ἐ[π]ἀναγκον ἕως τῆς [ἐπ]-
 τακαιδεκάτης [τοῦ] Ἐπειφ μηνὸς τοῦ
 ἐνεστῶ[τ]τος... ἔ]τους

«Petheus, son of Artemidoros, a Persian of the *epigone*, to Soeris, daughter of Pethis, [with] the guardian, the husband, Horos, son of [...], greetings.

ἀρραβῶνα τοῦ πνεύματος («He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a first installment»).

³⁵ There are indeed a few occurrences of the word in classical Greek already with the technical meaning that it will have later in the Egyptian papyri. For instance, Isaeus (*De Cirone* 23) – speaking of the preparation for a burial – says that a certain character ἐωνῆσθαί τι τῶν εἰς τὴν ταφήν, τῶν δὲ ἀρραβῶνα δεδωκέναι («had bought some of the things required for the burial, while he had given an advanced payment for others»).

³⁶ Indeed, the Greek ἀρραβών is probably a loanword coming from the eastern Mediterranean; on this, see the references in J. BEHM, *sub voce* ἀρραβών, in *Theologisches Wörterbuch des Neuen Testaments*, I, cols. 474-475.

³⁷ P. ARZT-GRABNER, *Gott als verllässlicher Käufer: Einige Papyrologische Anmerkungen und bibeltheologische Schlussfolgerungen zum Gottesbild des Paulusbrieife*, «New Testament Studies» 57 (2011), pp. 392-414.

I declare that I received from you immediately from hand to hand in house the sum total of 200 drachmas, as not refundable downpayment for the 700 silver drachmas that is the agreed-upon price of the slave Thermoutharios, who is my property and whom I bought from Heron, son of Heron. She is 24 years old, has a scar on her left limb. The sum is not refundable unless in case of leprosy or the sacred disease. And you are compelled until the seventeenth of the month Epiph of the current [...] year».

This is the receipt – in the form of a letter – through which a seller, Petheus, declares that he has received from the buyer, Soeris, the ἀρραβών of 200 drachmas for the purchase of the young slave Thermoutharios. The transaction will be finalized within a stated amount of time through the payment of the remainder of the price for the slave, fixed at 700 drachmas³⁸.

However, the significance of papyrological pieces such as this one goes beyond the understanding of the lexical domain and context in which Paul employed the term ἀρραβών. I want to sketch briefly only two directions that hint at promising venues for further research. First, the papyrological record helps considerably to clarify how Paul is using his metaphors and how his rhetorical choices might have been received by his audiences. In the case of ἀρραβών, it is possible to see – following Arzt-Grabner’s observations – that Paul invokes such an image, because he wants to emphasize the reliability and trustworthiness of God’s saving intervention for the benefit of humans. Since the contractual instrument called ἀρραβών was understood by Paul’s hearers and readers as a commercial surety, which would have bound both the seller and the buyer to respect their obligations, it fits perfectly the context of the two passages of *2 Corinthians* mentioned above. There, Paul exhorts his addressees to be confident, because God has given a trustworthy ἀρραβών. Obviously, there are always gaps and missing links in any type of metaphorical transposition – gaps and missing links that different hearers and readers might have filled in different ways on the basis of their diverse cultural experiences and social locations. For instance, Paul’s gesture remains unclear on several points: who is supposed to be the seller, to whom the ἀρραβών is given, and the role played by the Spirit in all of this. Should one take the «work of the Spirit» – as it appears in the two verses in *2 Corinthians* – as a service for whose payment God gave an ἀρραβών, a first installment, as Arzt-Grabner seems to suggest³⁹? Or is the

³⁸ On the legal and economic aspects of the slave market in Roman Egypt, see J.A. STRAUS, *L’esclavage dans l’Égypte romaine*, ANRW, II, 10.1 (1988), coll. 841-911.

³⁹ «Dies wäre auch aufgrund der Ausdrucksweise ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις ἡμῶν in 2 Kor 1.22 naheliegend: der Geist soll ‘in unseren Herzen’ wirken. Die Ausdrucksweise, dass ‘Gott das An-

Spirit itself the ἀρραβών that is given by God as first installment in the purchase of the Corinthians themselves, an image that would be consistent with the tone used elsewhere by Paul in speaking of salvation as God buying the saved in the same way a master would buy slaves⁴⁰?

Second, this and other observations drawn from documentary papyri are fundamental in any attempt to locate Paul's figure in its appropriate social environment, a task that would be hardly achievable if one had only literary sources to compare with the genuine epistles. Many other times, Paul uses in a correct – even though metaphorical – way a remarkable selection of phrases and concepts that are derived from the legal and economic parlance of his time. Again, Arzt-Grabner – in his meticulous study of the language used by Paul in the brief letter to Philemon – has been able to show that the apostle demonstrates a good familiarity not only with the terminology of slavery, but also with the technical formulae of those apprenticeship contracts whose clauses are preserved in a large number of papyri. It is intriguing to see that the closest affinities detected by Arzt-Grabner are with contracts detailing the responsibilities and requirements for apprentices in weaving⁴¹. This would perfectly fit the information – preserved in *Act* 18:3 – about Paul's professional activity as a tent-maker. Obviously, one should refrain from hurrying to make of Paul a handworker representing the lowest social layers, as Deismann famously did. The degree of education that Paul certainly possessed speaks against such a conclusion and, moreover, such a high degree of familiarity with the formulae of apprenticeship contracts is difficult to imagine in the case of a simple hired laborer. More reasonably, Paul was – or had been, before devoting his life to the evangelization – an entrepreneur, a weaver who had himself written and negotiated contracts for apprentices and for hired labor⁴².

geld für den Geist in unsere Herzen/uns gibt', wäre in diesem Fall dahingehend zu deuten, dass Gott eine nicht genannte Summe als Angeld für den Geist bezahlt hat und dass er, uns' mit dieser Anzahlung bereits den Geist oder zumindest einen Teil davon gegeben hat. Mit dem geleisteten Arrhabon ist der Geist bereits, in unseren Herzen' wirksam» (ARZT-GRABNER, *Gott* cit., p. 413).

⁴⁰ Ο γὰρ ἐν κυρίῳ κληθεὶς δοῦλος ἀπελεύθερος κυρίου ἐστίν, ὁμοίως ὁ ἐλεύθερος κληθεὶς δοῦλος ἐστὶν Χριστοῦ. Τιμῆς ἠγοράσθητε· μὴ γίνεσθε δούλοι ἀνθρώπων («For whoever was called in the Lord as a slave is a freed person belonging to the Lord, just as whoever was free when called is a slave of Christ. You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of human beings», *1 Cor* 7:21-22). More on the complex use of images related to slavery in Paul in J.A. HARRILL, *Slaves in the New Testament. Literary, Social, and Moral Dimensions*, Minneapolis 2006.

⁴¹ P. ARZT-GRABNER, *Neues zu Paulus aus den Papyri des römischen Alltags*, «Early Christianity» 1 (2010), pp. 131-157.

⁴² J. HENGSTL, *Zur Ehrfarungsprofil des Apostels Paulus aus rechtshistorischer Sicht*, in P. ARZT-GRABNER/CH.M. KREINECKER (Hrsg.), *Light from the East. Papyrologische Kommentare zum Neuen Testament*, PHILIPPIKA, 39, Wiesbaden 2010, pp. 71-89.

III. Sociolinguistics.

Since Deissmann's seminal work on those papyri and inscriptions that were available more than a hundred years ago (the number has increased vertiginously since), papyri have been the richest source of evidence for those who deny the actual existence of the scholarly constructs usually called «Jewish Greek» or «biblical Greek». The label «Jewish Greek» was very popular a century ago and presupposed that the Jews in the Greco-Roman world came to use a Greek that was so inflected by their Semitic native idiom that it could be identified as a specific dialect alongside the common *koine* Greek⁴³. However, this idea is by now almost completely abandoned because obviously the two authors who could count as the main representatives of this «Jewish Greek» outside the Bible – Josephus and Philo – cannot by any means fit the bill. However, the label «Jewish Greek» – at least among New Testament scholars – has been replaced by either «biblical Greek» or «translation Greek». Both these no less unfortunate and hypothetical constructs are grounded on the assumption that the *Septuagint* and the New Testament were written employing a specific variety of the Greek language, governed by peculiar semantic, grammatical, syntactic, and/or stylistic structures⁴⁴. Postulating such a high degree of linguistic specificity is certainly excessive even for the *Septuagint* (which is not the focus of the present paper and which would require a more detailed treatment), but is totally uncalled for as far as most of the New Testament books are concerned. Indeed, already Deissmann employed successfully papyrological evidence to show that lexical uses and grammatical structures in the New Testament – apart from such exceptional cases as, for instance, that of the *Apocalypse of John* – are entirely consistent with phenomena observed in regular *koine* Greek. It is important to emphasize here that such elements as Aramaic loanwords or the so-called «septuagintisms» – which have anyway been shown to be very few in the recent studies of Silva and Wilcox⁴⁵ – cannot be relied upon to establish the existence of a specific dialect.

In large part, this should be considered a debate of the past (indeed, it is

⁴³ The racial and imperialistic underpinning of such a theory cannot be overemphasized.

⁴⁴ See the general remarks in S.E. PORTER, *The Greek Language of the New Testament*, in *Handbook to Exegesis of the New Testament*, Leiden 1997, pp. 99-130, and G.H.R. HORSLEY, *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity. Linguistic Essays*, Macquarie University 1989, pp. 5-40; 49-65.

⁴⁵ M. SILVA, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning: an Introduction to Lexical Semantics*, Grand Rapids 1983, and M. WILCOX, *Semitisms in the New Testament*, ANRW, II, 25.2 (1984), coll. 978-1029.

quite difficult to find the above mentioned labels explicitly put forward in recent publications): one could therefore easily be tempted to dismiss the impact that papyrological materials might have on our appreciation of the New Testament and of other early Christian texts in sociolinguistic terms. However, it is equally easy to find recent books or articles in which authors solve textual or interpretive problems by marshaling linguistic evidence that is drawn exclusively from canonical books. Admittedly, this widespread phenomenon illustrates the persisting danger produced by notions as those of «Jewish» or «biblical» Greek even when these are used in a covert way. Moreover, this state of affairs confirms that papyrological materials have a lot to offer to New Testament studies.

Let us consider an example that might bring some clarity on the issue at hand. The *Gospel of Mark* presents a syntactical structure that is almost entirely based on coordination accompanied by a striking absence of subordination between clauses and sentences. In particular, every reader of the Gospel is struck by the apparent simplicity with which the author builds long sequences of clauses connected only by a repetitive – and often quite ambiguous – use of the conjunction καί. Many commentators used to conclude from the observation of this phenomenon that the Greek of Mark shows a significant influence of a Semitic *Vorlage*, since – as it is apparent from even a cursory reading of the Hebrew Bible – such a paratactic structure is widespread in Hebrew, a language in which the coordinating conjunction *waw* is abundantly used and takes on several different syntactic functions⁴⁶. However, scholars who had paid attention to “popular” *koine* Greek and, in particular, to the syntactical structures detectable in documentary papyri had pointed out early on that this alleged Markan specificity is not at all exceptional for the period at the turn of the eras. Indeed, already James Moulton – in his prolegomena to a grammar of the New Testament, heavily dependent on his previous study of the papyrological record – had singled out this feature of Markan syntax as paradigmatic of those phenomena that did not require any appeal to a hypothetical Semitic *Vorlage* to be explained⁴⁷. It is tragi-

⁴⁶ This opinion is advanced in the very influential contribution of N. TURNER, *The Style of Mark*, in J.H. MOULTON (ed.), *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, IV, *Style*, Edinburgh 1976, pp. 11-30, here p. 19. See also the treatments in J.C. DOUDNA, *The Greek of the Gospel of Mark*, Philadelphia 1961, and E.C. MALONEY, *Semitic Interference in Marcan Syntax*, Chico 1981.

⁴⁷ «In itself the phenomenon proves nothing more than would a string of “ands” in an English rustic’s story – elementary culture and not the hampering presence of a foreign idiom that is being perpetually translated into its most literal equivalent» (MOULTON, *Grammar* cit., I, *Prolegomena*, p. 12). On the same point, see also M. REISER, *Syntax und Stil des Markusevangeliums im Licht der hellenistische Volksliteratur*, Tübingen 1984.

cally ironic – as noted by Horsley⁴⁸ – that, after Moulton’s untimely death, the continuation of his work of a lifetime was assigned to Nigel Turner, who had a completely opposite opinion on the nature of the New Testament and on the sources that had to be taken into consideration to study it.

Furthermore, it is important to ask why a hypothesis that has been so clearly refuted in the past still figures in respected and widely read commentaries and critical contributions on the Gospel of Mark. It would be wrong to think that such a state of affairs – and, more in general, the marginalization of documentary papyri in the field of New Testament studies – be due only to an alleged scholarly laziness or to the strength of disciplinary boundaries. There are significant ideological stakes at play here: primarily the desire to keep the Christian authoritative books cordoned off from the “contamination” of Greco-Roman literature in order to preserve the idea of their “uniqueness”. Moreover, in the specific case of Mark’s allegedly Semitizing Greek, one can detect also a growing concern to keep the Gospel «Jewish» and – in so doing – to reaffirm indirectly the «Jewishness» of the historical Jesus⁴⁹. The problem is quite complex in the case of Mark, since this text has been often invoked as the expression of a rather anti-Jewish form of Gentile Christianity (it should suffice to think about the saying preserved in Mk 7:15, which seems to reject in strong terms the possibility of ritual contamination originated from external sources). In particular, conservative exegetes struggle to keep together the need to present the Gospel – and the historical Jesus – as recognizably «religious» and «Jewish» (using a definition of Judaism grounded on a religious essentialization) and, at the same time, have the same Jesus reject all those «religious» traits that the Christian tradition has condemned because they would be «too»

⁴⁸ G.H.R. HORSLEY, *The Syntax Volume of Moulton’s Grammar*, in *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity* cit., V, Macquarie University 1989, pp. 49-65.

⁴⁹ The discussion around the Jewishness of Jesus and how it has become a fixture of contemporary exegesis, while retaining its connection to specific religious and ideological agendas, is too complex to be dealt with here. A very clear introduction to the stakes at play in these ongoing debates can be found in W.E. ARNAL, *The Symbolic Jesus. Historical Scholarship, Judaism, and the Construction of Contemporary Identity*, London 2005. The above-mentioned concern is transparent in the work of some more conservative authors, as, for instance, the influential B. WITHERINGTON III, *The Gospel of Mark. A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, Grand Rapids 2001: «Casey takes core samplings from various portions of the Gospel [...] and provides a battery of arguments for seeing the rather awkward and sometimes even redundant Greek of these sections as examples of translation Greek. [...] He has made quite clear that if one really wishes to understand the historical Jesus, a much more serious effort must be made to deal with the Aramaic substratum of the arguably authentic Gospel traditions» (here p. 17, with reference to M. CASEY, *Aramaic Sources of Mark’s Gospel*, Cambridge 1998).

Jewish⁵⁰. Such a state of affairs underscores the fact that the easy solution of attributing the role of marking «Jewishness» to the use of a certain language or of a certain style is ultimately unsatisfactory, in part because – as we have seen for the case of Markan parataxis – it is not supported by the evidence and in part because it appears to be nothing more than an anachronistic superimposition of modern language ideology⁵¹.

In this perspective, a remarkable bone of contention has become – at least in the last two decades and in the field of New Testament studies – the issue of the linguistic makeup of Galilee in the first century CE⁵². Obviously, Egyptian papyri cannot contribute directly to the solution of such a problem, but – on the basis of the meager Galilean evidence at our disposal – one can safely formulate a few hypotheses grounded in controlled comparisons. There is no reason to doubt that the primary means of communication in Galilee at this time was Aramaic, but one should also account at the very least for the use of Greek as an administrative language already under the Herodians and assuredly when the region passed under direct Roman control after the death of Agrippa I in 44 CE. Where papyrological materials come very handy is in trying to understand how this bilingual – or trilingual⁵³ – society worked. Indeed, at least for the two first centuries of Ptolemaic domination, Egypt presented a very similar sociolinguistic scenario, with Greek used for administrative purposes and by the ruling elites and Demotic as the everyday means of communication of the vast majority of the population. Naturally, papyri can provide only a textual

⁵⁰ See, as a telling example, the circular conclusion in M.E. BORING, *Mark. A Commentary*, Louisville 2006: «Combined with the fact that Mark's tradition is of ultimately Semitic origin, and that both tradition and redaction reflect a Hellenistic context, it becomes very difficult to use Mark's language as evidence that the author himself had Aramaic as his mother tongue, though it is likely that both tradition and author are located in a context where Aramaic is spoken» (here p. 24).

⁵¹ «Language ideology», in this context, refers to secondary and tertiary (in this case, scholarly) rationalizations and justifications of perceived language structures and uses with reference to their fundamental implications in relations of domination; for a more detailed theoretical discussion, see G.B. BAZZANA, *Neo-Marxism, Language Ideology, and the New Testament*, «Bible and Critical Theory» 8 (2012), pp. 16-26.

⁵² The secondary literature on Galilee and on the various facets of its cultural makeup is by now impossible to manage in this limited space: for initial information, one can see S. FREYNE, *Jesus, a Jewish Galilean. A New Reading of the Jesus-Story*, London 2004; M.A. CHANCEY, *Greco-Roman Culture and the Galilee of Jesus*, Cambridge 2005; and M.H. JENSEN, *Herod Antipas and Its Socio-Economic Impact on Galilee*, Tübingen 2006.

⁵³ For the possibility of Hebrew spoken alongside Aramaic and Greek, see now S.E. FASSBERG, *Which Semitic Language Did Jesus and Other Contemporary Jews Speak?*, «Catholic Biblical Quarterly» 74 (2012), pp. 263-280.

record and hence our knowledge of speakers' choices and preferences must remain an approximation. However, on the other hand, documentary papyri are the only way at our disposal to try to grasp the actual habits, choices, and constraints of non-elite writers and readers in the ancient world. The study of papyrological materials from a sociolinguistic point of view can yield meaningful results for those scholars who are interested in the interaction among linguistic choices, cultural influences, and social practices⁵⁴.

In order to achieve these goals, the most significant and useful pieces of evidence are provided by ancient "archives", those lucky instances in which the papers collected by a single individual or a family have been preserved together through the centuries or have been patiently reassembled by papyrologists. Only one brief example should suffice to illustrate the role that such collections might play. A very important archive of the Ptolemaic period is constituted by the papers traditionally connected to the knight Dryton and recently republished by Katelijn Vandorpe⁵⁵. The archive comprises mostly legal documents, which originated with Dryton – a Cretan soldier who took residence in Pathyris in Upper Egypt (the least Hellenized part of the country⁵⁶) in the second century BCE –, his wife Apollonia/Senmonthis, and their children. The archive is bilingual and, by tracing the passage from one language to the other, one can make very interesting sociolinguistic observations. Thus, Dryton appears as a "real" Greek colonizer: he serves in the Ptolemaic army, he writes his marriage contracts and wills in Greek, and he is generally proud of his linguistic heritage (among the other papers, we even have a copy of a Greek love poem, PDryton 50). His wife Apollonia/Senmonthis is equally of Greek ascendancy, but her family has been already partially Egyptianized, since – as she does – her father used two names, one Greek and the other Egyptian. Moreover, Apollonia is a very active businesswoman and we have a number of deeds of loan coming from her. Interestingly, Apollonia has her contracts written in Demotic, but – when a new office of the *agoranomos*⁵⁷ is opened in Pathyris –

⁵⁴ See, for instance, W. CLARYSSE, *Bilingual Papyrological Archives*, in A. PAPAConstantinou (ed.), *The Multilingual Experience in Egypt, from the Ptolemies to the Abbasids*, Burlington 2010, pp. 47-72.

⁵⁵ K. VANDORPE, *The Bilingual Family Archive of Dryton, His Wife Apollonia, and Their Daughter Senmouthis (P.Dryton)*, Brussels 2002.

⁵⁶ As seen above, this region was the center of a strong resistance to Ptolemaic rule in the second century BCE: see now A.E. VEISSE, *Les "révoltes égyptiennes". Recherches sur les troubles intérieurs en Egypte du règne de Ptolémée III à la conquête romaine*, Leuven 2004.

⁵⁷ On the peculiar role of this official in the Egyptian administrative structure, see U. YIFTACH-FIRANKO, *Law in Graeco-Roman Egypt: Hellenization, Fusion, Romanization*, in R. BAGNALL (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Papyrology*, Oxford 2009, pp. 541-560.

she quickly switches to Greek, even though this requires her to enter into economic transaction under the supervision of a κύριος (a «guardian», which is not otherwise required for women under the traditional Egyptian law). It appears that – at least for Apollonia – personal and financial independence is relatively less important than being seen as using Greek, which works as a marker of her belonging to the dominating elite⁵⁸. However, when the archive moves into the hands of the next generation (to Senmouthis and her sisters), the situation changes significantly. Demotic becomes again the dominant language and official documents – both financial deeds and marriage contracts – are almost exclusively redacted in the Egyptian traditional idiom. The analysis of this evidence – and of other similar instances – brings into relief the ways in which socio-political factors intersect the relationship between languages and shape bilingualism to sketch a picture that is quite different from and more varied than the traditional linear development involving the victory of Greek over the progressively disappearing native languages.

Even though we possess less detailed information, there is little doubt that the situation in Galilee – and in the Land of Israel in general – was not that different from the one obtaining in Egypt in the early Ptolemaic period. A significant help in establishing such a conclusion comes – in this case as well – from the study of the few surviving papyrological archives. A very nice example is provided by the archive of Babatha, a collection of private and legal documents that a Jewish woman from Maoza – in the Roman province of Arabia neighboring Judaea – brought with her when she fled her home during the second Jewish war of 132-136 CE⁵⁹. The documents comprising this archive are for the most part certificates of ownership of land connected with Babatha's marriages and with a lawsuit concerning the legal guardianship of her underage son following the death of her husband. The sheer number of different languages used in the archive is remarkable, as seventeen texts are in Greek, nine in Greek with Aramaic/Nabatean subscriptions and signatures, seven in Nabatean, and three in

⁵⁸ See K. VANDORPE, *Apollonia, a Businesswoman in a Multicultural Society (Pathyris, 2nd-1st Century B.C.)*, in H. MELAERTS-L. MOOREN (éd.), *Le rôle et le statut de la femme en Égypte hellénistique, romaine et byzantine: actes du colloque international, Bruxelles-Leuven, 27-29 novembre 1997*, Turnhout 2002, pp. 325-336.

⁵⁹ The papers have been discovered at Wadi Murabba'ât and at Nahal Hever together with other writings dating to the Bar Kokhba period. They were initially published with the Qumran documents, but they do not have anything to do with those manuscripts. See the editions in N. LEWIS (ed.), *The Documents from the Bar Kokhba Period in the Cave of Letters, I, Greek Papyri*, Jerusalem 1989; and Y. YADIN-J.C. GREENFIELD-A. YARDENI-B.A. LEVINE (eds.), *The Documents from the Bar Kokhba Period in the Cave of Letters, II, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Nabatean-Aramaic Papyri*, Jerusalem 2002.

Aramaic. This diverse composition, however, somewhat hides the fact that the use of different tongues and scripts is clearly related to different functions and communicative needs. For instance, all the Nabatean documents antedate the transformation of the old Nabatean kingdom in the Roman province of Arabia; when the official bureaucratic language switched from Nabatean to Greek in conjunction with the annexation of the region to the Roman empire, the idiom used preferentially by Babatha and the other people figuring in the archive changed accordingly. This shows that linguistic choices were – in this case at least – predominantly functional to securing a better access to the legal system, in particular in the case of Babatha’s lawsuit. On the contrary, it is quite clear that the main spoken tongue for almost all those who make an appearance in the documents was Aramaic, a state of affairs that is borne out by the numerous signatures and subscriptions in that language⁶⁰.

As far as suitable models for the understanding of these phenomena are concerned, it seems that code-switching – more than hybridization – provides fruitful tools to make sense of the functional relationships obtaining between the different tongues used in the ancient eastern Mediterranean⁶¹.

IV. Diverse social profiles and groups in the papyri.

The latter point leads one to add a few remarks on what is quite possibly the biggest benefit that historical research in general might draw from the study of documentary papyri. Indeed, the particular conditions of preservation of this record enable historians to gain a relatively direct access to social groups who otherwise would be completely “erased” from the historical memory. It is appropriate to start with a famous example and then move on to something that could hopefully be more significant for the purposes of the present discussion.

A few years ago, Peter van Minnen identified – in the subscription of a papyrus preserved in the Berlin collection – a single scribbled word that – he argued – had been penned by the very hand of the queen Cleopatra VII⁶². PBingen 45 (23rd Feb-

⁶⁰ For a more detailed analysis, see H.M. COTTON, *The Languages of the Legal and Administrative Documents from the Judaean Desert*, «ZPE» 125 (1999), pp. 219-231.

⁶¹ As suggested recently by A. WALLACE-HADRILL, *Rome’s Cultural Revolution*, Cambridge 2008.

⁶² P. VAN MINNEN, *An Official Act of Cleopatra (With a Subscription in Her Own Hand)*, «AncSoc» 30 (2000), pp. 29-34, and, with further observations, ID., *Further Thoughts on the Cleopatra Papyrus*, «APF» 47 (2001), pp. 74-80. Obviously, the identification has spurred a debate, on which see the nuanced position of K. ZIMMERMANN, *P. Bingen 45. Eine Steuerbefreiung für Q. Cascellius, adressiert an Kaisarion*, «ZPE» 138 (2002), pp. 133-139, and the more negative position of F.

ruary 33 BCE) is a short document that grants perpetual exemption from taxes on the cultivation of land possibly to Publius Canidius, one of Marc Antony's most important generals. The document was arguably prepared in the royal chancery and the queen appended a quick *γινέσθωι* – as it was the habit of Ptolemaic sovereigns – before the note was handed down to the copyists and then disseminated to the lower officials in the various Egyptian nomes. In the case at hand, while one may appreciate the exceptional importance of such a finding, one must also note that, even if this document were to be erased, our knowledge of the famous queen would not be severely damaged. At least – as Peter van Minnen observes – this brief word can contribute a little bit to counteracting the enormous historical influence of the slanderous Augustan propaganda that depicted Cleopatra as a monster of lust and political intrigues. On this basis, one can try to reimagine a scenario in which the queen can be conceived again as a very active and attentive sovereign as far as the management of her kingdom was concerned⁶³.

The example of Cleopatra's handwriting draws attention towards a significant way in which documentary remains on papyri might contribute to historical research. Indeed, these artifacts provide the opportunity to look at the actual writing of human beings who lived in the ancient world, an opportunity that is unfortunately lost for almost all the major literary authors, whose work is usually preserved in copies made by people who lived at best several centuries after them. As observed above, this may be relatively inconsequential for someone like Cleopatra, for whom we possess even too many – or too biased – pieces of information from literary sources. However, the state of affairs is radically different when one comes to touch on those segments of the ancient society which were either marginalized or even straightforwardly silenced in the literary works produced by the elites.

Two examples might suffice to clarify this line of reasoning. First of all, obvious candidates for erasure – both in ancient society and literature – were slaves: many scholars have routinely observed that their presence must have been pervasive in the ancient world and that, nevertheless, we do not actually “see” slaves as pervasive presences in our literary sources. This state of affairs is partly due to our own bias, since our eyes are trained not to catch something so disturbing (which could irreparably stain our idealized imagination of the classical past), but in equal part these human beings are effectively “erased”

MORELLI, *La raccolta dei P. Bingen*, «CE» 77 (2002), pp. 312-321 («credo che essa sia piuttosto quella di un segretario o di un impiegato dell'amministrazione», here p. 315).

⁶³ In this perspective, it is quite puzzling to read the just mentioned note of Federico Morelli, in which the Italian papyrologist asserts the inauthenticity of the signature, because a grammatical mistake would be inconceivable for a Ptolemaic queen.

from their representations by the ancient authors themselves. However, documentary papyri may actually provide a slightly different point of view. This does not mean that many documents preserved on papyrus were produced by enslaved people: for one thing these texts as well were produced by an elite, that is by those who were in possession of the relatively rare skills of writing and reading. Moreover, for obvious reasons, these statements cannot apply to the countless papyri that document transactions of various kinds (selling, inheriting, manumitting, and so on), in which enslaved persons are again objectified in the form of merchandise or heirlooms. The present treatment will be focused on those few and fortunate instances in which it is actually possible to retrieve the handwriting or even the socio-cultural profile of actual slaves.

A case that has received some amount of attention in the recent past is that of Epagathos, an enslaved man who managed the estate of the legionary Lucius Bellenus Gemellus between the end of the first and the beginning of the second century CE in the Fayum village of Euhemeria. His archive – comprising more than 80 documents – was excavated by Grenfell and Hunt in one of their many fortunate expeditions and is usually attributed to Gemellos. However, this very attribution is another instance of scholarly erasure, since the archive should be more correctly named after Epagathos, who kept together the documents that are – for the most part – letters addressed to him by his master⁶⁴. In recent years, Giuseppina Azzarello has been able to identify through paleographic analysis those documents – a few annotations at the bottom of contracts and a couple of accounts – in the archive, which were probably written by Epagathos himself⁶⁵. This allows one not only to see that Epagathos could write (as expected for the manager of an estate), but also to tease out other very interesting insights. Again, Azzarello has identified Epagathos' name and his handwriting on the back of a roll that comes from the same village of Euhemeria and carries a long section from the second book of the *Iliad*. If the Italian papyrologist is right, one could see here Epagathos copying some Homeric verses to exercise his – sometimes literary, sometimes cursive – handwriting and even jotting down some other poetry, possibly from memory⁶⁶. The enslaved Epagathos shows a remarkable interest in the most widely read poet of antiquity and – at

⁶⁴ For the archive – covering the period 94-110 CE – and the secondary literature on it, see the very rich webpage of the Leuven Homepage of Papyrus Archives (at <http://www.trismegistos.org/arch/detail.php?tm=134&i=1>, accessed on 06/05/2013).

⁶⁵ G. AZZARELLO, *Alla ricerca della "mano" di Epagathos*, «APF» 54 (2008), pp. 179-202.

⁶⁶ EAD., *P.B.U.G. inv. 213: Un nuovo frammento del rotolo omerico di Londra, Manchester, Washington e New York (= Mertens-Pack³ 643) nella collezione di Giessen*, «APF» 53 (2007), pp. 127-141.

the same time – reveals his attraction to the very hallmark of that civilization that was depriving him of his most basic human rights.

The second instance of erasure that is partially rectified by the survival of papyri is that of women. Their presence in this type of documents has received sustained attention in the last few years, particularly as far as women's letter writing is concerned⁶⁷. In this case, it is relatively easy to identify women's handwriting and to study its socio-cultural characters as Azzarello has done for Epagathos's case described above. For instance, one can see in PGissApoll 1 the fluency and sophistication of a letter dictated by Eudaimonis, the mother of the *strategos* Apollonios from Hermopolis, who has left a big archive comprising more than 200 documents and dating around the time of the Jewish revolt in Egypt⁶⁸. However, when Eudaimonis comes to pen a letter all by herself, the appearance is different – as in PGissApoll 2⁶⁹ – and the result looks much clumsier, even though clear and grammatically correct. Eudaimonis was definitely a member of the cultural and socio-economic elite, a conclusion that is confirmed by her family ties to a *strategos*, the amount of control that she wields on the family weaving enterprise in Hermopolis, and even by her handwriting. The latter is the typical style of those ancient writers who were rich enough to afford professional scribes and as a consequence – while well acquainted with the basic skill – appeared clumsy when they actually had to put an entire text down on papyrus⁷⁰. Her letters reveal that Eudaimonis and the other women in the family managed the weaving activity, while Apollonios was far away in Upper Egypt to discharge his duties as a *strategos*. Such an amount of financial freedom and responsibility is not unusual for women in the Greco-Roman period and is attested for the Jewish world outside Egypt by the important finding of the already mentioned archive of Babatha, dating to roughly the same period of that of Apollonios⁷¹. Obviously, the position of these women within society cannot be characterized as one of equality, but, as I hope this brief survey of documents has shown, any analysis should rest on a careful intersection of gender with other factors of difference such as class, status, ethnic-

⁶⁷ Above all, one has to mention here R.S. BAGNALL-R. CRIBIORE, *Women's Letters from Ancient Egypt, 300 BC-AD 800*, Ann Arbor 2006 (with its invaluable on-line edition published in and continuously updated since 2008).

⁶⁸ A photograph of the papyrus can be seen at the on-line edition of BAGNALL-CRIBIORE, *Women's* cit., A7.16. For the archive of Apollonios, the LHPA has a webpage at <http://www.trismegistos.org/arch/detail.php?tm=19&i=6>.

⁶⁹ *Id.*, *Women's* cit., A7.17.

⁷⁰ R. CRIBIORE, *The Women in the Apollonios Archive and Their Use of Literacy*, in MELAERTS-MOOREN (éd.), *Le rôle et le statut* cit., pp. 149-166.

⁷¹ H. COTTON, *Women and Law in the Documents from the Judaean Desert*, *ibid.*, pp. 123-147.

ity, and so on. In this direction, the contribution of documentary papyri can be fundamental in delineating a more complex and nuanced picture.

It is clear that such a renewed picture is much needed in New Testament studies, as many scholars have pointed out that too many exegetes and theologians find convenient to accept at face value the prescriptive image of women offered in the elite literary works. Under the pressure of the otherwise laudable goal of employing the authority of the Christian Scriptures to advance the role and the status of women in contemporary society, New Testament scholars too often marginalize those sources – as, for instance, documentary papyri – that would show how ancient society at large was actually less segregated and unequal than is allowed by literary depictions. Since the Jesus traditions are not very pro-active in advancing women rights, this move provides a convenient means to emphasize even the little bits attributed to Jesus when these are posited on the backdrop of Greco-Roman and Jewish societies painted in the darkest of colors. The danger here is not so much that of an anachronistic historical reconstruction, but much more that of perpetuating odious prejudices as, for instance, that of a «Jewish mind» inherently misogynistic and oppressive towards women⁷².

V. Conclusions.

The present contribution has offered a few exemplifications of the directions in which the study of documentary papyri may interact with and assist the study of the New Testament. The papyrological record provides the opportunity to analyze the lexical phenomena occurring in the earliest Christian texts in the most appropriate context of contemporary *koine* uses. In addition papyrological evidence constitutes the most fruitful venue to observe the socio-cultural dynamics that are the background of many New Testament passages, but are often left implicit as it is usual for all literary texts. Hopefully, a more sustained attention to documentary papyri will allow to overcome the methodological and ideological problems generated by traditional treatments of the New Testament as “unique” or secluded from the remnant of the ancient intellectual experience and literary production.

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⁷² This state of affairs is denounced in the starkest terms, for instance, in A.J. LEVINE, *The Misunderstood Jew. The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus*, San Francisco 2006, chapters 4-5; see also the discussion in E. SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA, *Jesus and the Politics of Interpretation*, New York 2000, pp. 115-142.