EDITORIAL

A serious information gap has developed recently which has significant ramifications for the study of the language and the social setting of the New Testament. It stems from specialisation that has increased significantly in recent decades. Dr R. Lawrence has drawn attention to the problem in areas germane to the New Testament. He notes that ‘developments in the field of archaeology have seldom been communicated beyond the discipline...the two groups of scholars had clearly become isolated through the definition of archaeologists as “not historians” from the 1970’s...Similarly, ancient historians had lost touch with their archaeological colleagues.’

This difficulty has arisen partly because of the use of highly sophisticated scientific instrumentation regarded as essential to archaeology and results in highly complex reports. Archaeologists see their discipline as a ‘science’, hence their disclaimer.

An allied problem, which also has important consequences for New Testament language and culture, developed much earlier. Epigraphists and papyrologists can no longer speak readily to other disciplines. The former group of professionals are inheritors of a nationalism that developed in a mad late eighteenth and nineteenth century scramble for rights to unexplored sites in the Mediterranean regions governed by European and the Ottoman Empires. Inscriptions published by different nations had no agreed set of conventions and this has created seemingly insuperable difficulties.

Papyrologists have an internationally agreed set of conventions for their discipline, a field of study which is critical for understanding New Testament Greek. However, the fruits of their endeavours have not flowed into the critical study of New Testament language, as they did so effectively nearly 100 years ago in A. Deissmann’s day.

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2 Epigraphy has developed along ‘idiosyncratic lines’ and ‘there have gradually emerged distinctive national approaches to how epigraphy is researched and published’ according to G.H.R. Horsley and J.A.L. Lee, ‘A Preliminary Checklist of Abbreviations of Greek Epigraphic Volumes’ Epigraphica LVI (1994), 130. After almost 200 years they are seeking to remedy the problem by providing a first step in publishing what they can only designate as ‘a preliminary checklist’.
3 G.H.R. Horsley and J.A.L. Lee are presently engaged in a major revision of Moulton and Milligan’s dictionary of non-literary sources.
If the end result is that those who work in these specialised areas of ancient evidence are going their separate ways and the published results of their endeavours are not easily accessible to those in allied fields, then what hope is there for the appropriate use of this material for New Testament study? Yet, like any other corpus it is essential to examine its documents in the social, political and religious contexts from which and to which they were written. An appreciation of its first-century Jewish and Graeco-Roman horizons is needed if teachers are to apply the text responsibly to identical situations in the many twenty-first century cultural horizons of world-wide Christianity.

Some texts, when illuminated by what is known about their original context, can be released from what has become in some instances their ‘Babylonian’ captivity by ecclesiastical and academic traditions. These were and are ‘bound’ when read through Western philosophical and cultural eyes without their primary contexts. Today more New Testament scholars walk over the same heavily trodden corpus than in previous generations, with increasingly diminishing returns. Yet external resources remain largely untapped.

The problem is that while we have unprecedented access to ancient extra-biblical literature through CD Roms, not many New Testament scholars feel confident to deal with it. Our forebears of a century ago did so with relative ease. At the most exciting time for New Testament studies with almost all extra-biblical material available on CD Roms for the first time in the history of scholarship, many wrongly feel they cannot use it unless trained as historians.

The ninth volume of New Testament Documents Illustrating Early Christianity (Eerdmans) will be published next year. For two decades ancient historians have produced a mine of information from recently published papyri and inscriptions with translations and comments based on the most recent scholarship specifically for New Testament scholars. It is user friendly and helps overcome our information gap, but sadly has not been widely used. In this issue six articles aim to illustrate how useful ancient sources can be. Hopefully it will encourage others into venturing into the rich harvest field of literary and non-literary sources.

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4 The series The Book of Acts in its First-century Setting (Eerdmans and Paternoster, 1993-) harvests the vast extant material of the ancient world with the help of over sixty specialists. This is another educative tool for New Testament scholars to use in order to begin to see how to master ancient evidence.