

PISTIS SOPHIA AND THE COPTIC LANGUAGE.

I.

THE arguments which I have ventured to use in this JOURNAL (*J. T. S.* xxiii 271 ff: xxvi 391 ff) to prove that *Pistis Sophia* is not a translation from the Greek, but a Coptic 'original' work, have not convinced Prof. C. Schmidt of Berlin, but they have elicited from him a very interesting and valuable defence of the traditional view.¹ In one important respect the controversy is proceeding along the lines I hoped it would go—that is to say, upon the general history of Coptic Christianity and literature. I still think that this is a very obscure, though interesting, subject, and that certain things about 'Coptic' are assumed rather than satisfactorily established. Before, therefore, leaving the matter I should like to put forward my doubts about the full legitimacy of the Coptic language itself.

First of all, let me make clear to the non-Coptic scholar the very peculiar nature of the Coptic idiom. For this purpose we have to go to written documents: the priests of the Coptic Church can still read enough Coptic to chant the service, but it is in no sense a living tongue: I am raising the question whether, in the full sense of the word, it ever was alive. We must, in any case, go to books and writings.

The speech of Ancient Egypt was a peculiar tongue with certain features akin to Semitic, but in the main quite distinct. As everybody knows, the Egyptians were among the first of men to reduce their language to writing; cumbrous and imperfect as it is, the system of signs which used to be called Hieroglyphics does represent, so far as it goes, the way that the Egyptians talked. A cursive form of this writing, generally called Demotic, was in use in Ptolemaic times and during the first two centuries of the Christian era. But 'Coptic' is what may be roughly called 'Egyptian' written with Greek letters, eked out by half a dozen extra signs for the non-Greek sounds. At the first glance an ancient Coptic MS, such as *Pistis Sophia* itself, or the ancient MS of the Acts in the British Museum, looks very much like a Greek text written in uncials.

It might be supposed that no question could arise about the general nature of Coptic. It might be thought to be a mere question of script that 'Demotic' was the Egyptian language written in debased Hieroglyphics, while 'Coptic' was the same in a Greek transliteration. But

¹ *Die Urschrift der Pistis Sophia* von Carl Schmidt (*ZNTW* xxiv 218-240).

the matter is not quite so simple. The really extraordinary thing about Coptic is the freedom with which Greek words are used in it, not only Greek nouns and verbs, but also Greek particles. I give here as an example a literal translation from the tale of Horsiesius (see *J. T. S.* xxxiii 314), with the Greek words retained as they stand in the text.

Faustos.—Heli the Priest, and why did He destroy [him] with his sons in their sins? *καίπερ* he gave instruction to them many times they did not listen to him. Should father *οὖν* die for son?

Horsiesios.—Dost thou know not that they will inquire of the shepherd about the sheep? Well, *πόσω μᾶλλον* his vessels he alone, should he *ἀμελεί* them that they rob them? Heli *γάρ*, by their giving the *λαός* unto him [it was] that he might watch over them, *ἀλλὰ οὐδὲ* again his sons too he did not give instruction to them as a hard one *ἀλλὰ* as a negligent.¹

This is, of course, from a literary work. I give another example from a letter, from the collection recently published by H. I. Bell and W. Crum.² The collection in question is a bundle of letters written between 330 and 340. They are mostly in Greek and relate to monks and other believers belonging to the Meletian schism, but three of them are in Coptic. Here is one (p. 92):—

Hatre of Eagle Island who writes to his Father Paeiēw greeting him much. In the Lord *χαίρε*. I greet [*names*] and all the Brethren that are with thee *κατὰ* their names. I greet [*more names*]. I greet you (pl.) much in the Lord, desiring to see your face like the face of *ἄγγελος*. *ἐπειδὴ*³ I spoke, then, to thee on the day when thou didst come unto us about the fashion of a *λεβιτών*,⁴ now if *οὖν* it be possible make it *κατὰ* thy wish. . . . I know *μὲν* that thou art a good man, *ἀλλὰ* have mind of me also and do thou pray for me.

In the rest of the letter there occur *ἐπιστολή*, *γάρ*, *ἦ*, and in the address *ἀπόδος*, *ὁμολογητήσ* and *παρά*.

Nothing could be simpler than this 'epistle', but it is evidently written in the same language or jargon as the extract from the tale of Horsiesius. Its interest lies in its date: it is the earliest piece of Coptic to which a direct date can be given, i. e. about ten years after the Council of Nicaea, not very much more than a generation after there is reason to believe this language came into being. What sort of persons really used it? If *οὖν* it be difficult to understand how

¹ See W. Crum *Papyruscodex* (Horsiesius), S. 69.

² *Jews and Christians in Egypt* (Greek Papyri in the British Museum), edited by H. Idris Bell, with three Coptic texts edited by W. E. Crum (British Museum, 1924).

³ Written *επειτε*.

⁴ The cloak worn by Egyptian monks (Butler's *Historia Lausiaca* ii 89): we learn from this passage that it is fem., as Thomas Edwards stated long ago.

a monastic tailor could express himself in this style, then *πρόσω μάλλον* is it difficult to believe that the villagers and peasants of Egypt really talked and bargained and made love to their fellows in it.

II.

Let us now return to Prof. Schmidt's paper. He quotes my remark that very likely the most idiomatic native style of Coptic was the least literary, and continues (p. 219): 'Here Burkitt touches a problem which, so far as I know, has hitherto not been clearly envisaged by Coptic scholars, that is to say whether Greek only invaded the Coptic language when the population of Egypt became Christian, so that it was only from that period this peculiar mixed language took its rise. It should be clearly recognized that from the days of the Ptolemies the native tongue had been much repressed by the Greek immigrants, especially in Lower and Middle Egypt. Greek was the language of the government and of legislation down to the Byzantine age; Greek was the language of scholars and literary men. The superiority of Greek culture must even have struck the Egyptian nationalists, and so it is quite comprehensible why representatives of the higher classes, such as Manetho and Chaeremon, should have composed their works in Greek, because it was only in this way they could attract a large enough circle of readers. But the peasant population also could not avoid the influence of the raising of general culture, however doggedly they might cling to the religion of their fathers. Their poorer mother-tongue was enriched by borrowings from the Greek vocabulary. A further impulse in the same direction was supplied by the mixture of the Hellenic and Egyptian races, which in the course of six centuries could not have been without influence on the language of everyday life. *It is true that this Graeco-Egyptian mixed dialect has found no literary embodiment, for the Egyptian peasant remained the same un-literary person that he was before.*¹ He had to betake himself to a letter-writer in the town or village, who would write the required documents or letters either in Demotic or in Greek. Demotic, the official language for writing (*Schriftsprache*) in the Graeco-Roman period, knows no mixture with Greek; where necessary, documents were prepared in two parallel texts.'

Prof. Schmidt goes on to say that during the 2nd century Christianity in Egypt was wholly Greek: it spread almost exclusively in the towns, among Greeks and half-Greeks and Jews: 'No documents of Christian character from the 2nd century in Egyptian language have yet come to light, and it is not probable that such documents will come to light'.²

¹ My italics.

² p. 220.

Accordingly he cannot accept a 2nd-century date for the earliest Coptic versions of the Bible. According to him the change only came through the influence of Antony in Middle Egypt (about 270) and of Pachomius (died 346) in Upper Egypt. Further, Prof. Schmidt draws attention to the account of Hieracas in Epiphanius (*Haer.* 67), as a possible name of influence in the adaptation of Christian literature for the native Christians of Egypt (p. 221).

One other extract from Prof. Schmidt must be added. On p. 223 he pleads for an earlier date for Hieracas than Harnack allows (viz. born 275); Schmidt would say the second half of the 3rd century. 'That is just the time in which I would put the employment (*Verwendung*) of the Egyptian popular dialect for Christian propaganda. . . . A specimen of this popular dialect from a heathen pen is to be found in the Magical papyrus of London and Leiden,¹ a text belonging to the great group of Magical papyri found in Egypt, which are mostly in Greek. But this one is written in Demotic cursive, and its peculiar characteristic is that a series of Greek words are taken up into the Demotic text, which then are repeated as glosses in a Greek transliteration. In these some of the special extra letters used in Coptic occur'. Schmidt agrees with Griffith and Thompson in placing the papyrus as late as the 3rd century.

I do consider that the London-Leiden papyrus is a most decisive factor in the question, but I do not think Prof. Schmidt's description of it would quite prepare a reader for what he finds in the text and transliteration by Griffith and Thompson. The Egyptian text, of which there are twenty-nine columns, is almost wholly pure Egyptian. One or two names of *materia medica* (such as Mandragora)² appear in transliteration, but there is nothing in this text like the indiscriminate use of Greek words in Coptic, and above all no Greek particles. The scribe knew how to write Greek, for he three times gives Magical invocations in Greek, viz. cols. iv 9-19, xv 25-28, xxiii 9-20, the middle one of these being given also an entirely Egyptian translation, written in Demotic.³ My point is, that in this specimen of what Prof. Schmidt calls the popular dialect there is no syntactical mixture of Greek and Egyptian, as there is in Coptic. A few technical terms are transliterated, but that is all.

Christian Coptic, on the other hand, presents this peculiar mixture from the beginning, as the examples already given sufficiently shew.

¹ F. Ll. Griffith and Herbert Thompson *The Demotic Magical Papyrus of London and Leiden* (London, Grevel & Co., 1904).

² Col. xxiv, l. 18: *m'nt'rgwrw*. 'Ivy' is written κισσοϋ (l. 10), and also *gyss'os* in Demotic (l. 22).

³ The third of these Invocations is that referred to in *J. T. S.* xxvi 397.

In the letter that follows the one I quoted (Bell and Crum, p. 95), where the writer wanders into pious reflexions in a Biblical style, in addition to μέν, ὥς and ὥστε we have πίστις, ἀγάπη, βίος, γραφή, καρπός. Now it is usually said that Coptic adopted all these words because it was a language so much poorer than Greek, but it is ridiculous to suppose that the language of an agricultural people had no word for 'fruit' or 'produce' and was obliged to adopt καρπός to supply the defect. As a matter of fact there is such a native word in Coptic (*utah*), but in this letter καρπός is used, because in the Coptic Bible καρπός is so often adopted as a loan-word from the Greek.

The two formative elements in Christian Coptic, as I view the matter, were the influence of the original Coptic Bible (i. e. probably the Psalter and the Gospels) together with the influence of the professional scribe upon an unliterary folk.

It must not be forgotten that all the Coptic that survives, whether in books or tombstones or ostraca, is the work of persons who have learned to *write*, and therefore had been to some sort of school. The native Egyptian who wished to learn to write had to learn the Greek letters, and he learned with them all the lore connected with Greek handwriting. He did not have to learn the difficult Greek language, with its complicated accident and syntax, or the art of building up its linked periods. But besides his letters he did no doubt acquire a smattering of Greek: if we may judge from the result, the Copt who had learnt to write liked to put in as much Greek as he knew. Very often it is tautological; he would write *palin on*, each word of which meant 'again'. After all he was a Christian, the Oracles of God were written in Greek, and there was every reason that he should put in as much Greek as his hearers would understand. As he was really an Egyptian his stuff remained essentially non-Greek.

The public for which this curious jargon was first composed consisted mainly of monks, or rather devotees, who had left the world. The ultimate origin of the Coptic Bible seems to have been to provide a common Psalter that the Brethren could recite together when they met for worship. So far as we can gather, it was their only literature, and so it became their mode of expression. The artificial life of the Laura and the Cells nourished the artificial style of the literature, so that οὐ μόνον it did not seem ξένον or odd that all sorts of Greek terms were put in at will, ἀλλὰ καὶ these tags also became part of the natural language of these men, like the special slang of a public school-boy. Fresh Greek words and phrases might come in from time to time, as fresh Greek theological works were similarly translated, but the main source was the Bible. Revisions of the Bible were indeed made, but there is little evidence that it was much corrected from fresh Greek

MSS: the changes seem chiefly to have been made to adapt the spelling to the local pronunciation of native words.¹

I said at the beginning of this paper that I have doubts as to the full legitimacy of the Coptic language. I do not mean by this to doubt that the speech of the Egyptian peasantry at the time of the Arab invasion was a real, though degraded, descendant of the speech of the Pharaohs. But I do not think it was Coptic, if by 'Coptic' is meant a language in which Greek words, including the most exotic particles, are used freely. Nor, again, do I mean that there is not a genuine body of Coptic literature. It may not be of the highest literary quality and it is of an exclusively theological character. But the sentences are often well expressed, and even with all the Greek particles the ancient Egyptian idiom can tell a plain tale well, as may be seen in *Horsiesius*, or in the story of how the Spirit came down and coalesced with the boy Jesus in *Pistis Sophia* (p. 109 f).² But I do think it was artificial, that it was the language of the school and not of the people, and that that is the main reason why the fellahin of to-day have altogether abandoned the language of their ancestors. The Latin liturgy, the Syriac liturgy, the Armenian liturgy, may be couched in what is now an antique classical tongue, but once it was the speech of the people, and there are still populations who cherish these liturgies and speak modern dialects of the languages in which they are recited. I do not believe that the language of the Coptic liturgy and Bible was ever the real language of the people: it was from the beginning a more or less literary jargon.

III.

One special point may be noticed here. Prof. Schmidt holds, as I do, that the remarkable Sahidic text of Job does not prove the Coptic Bible to be a work of the 2nd century or even of the 3rd. But with regard to this text he uses the word 'pre-Origenian' (p. 224). This epithet, as I explained in *Encyclopaedia Biblica* 5027 (Text and Versions § 63), is a misnomer, for the Sahidic Job is definitely Origen's revised text of the LXX with the passages under asterisk omitted. The question of Origen's posthumous theological reputation in Egypt does not arise: these post-Hexaplar texts did not circulate under Origen's name, nor was Origen's learning or textual good faith called in question by his opponents. The Sahidic Job is what it is, as Prof. Schmidt himself says,

¹ e.g. they said *erof* for 'to him' in most parts of Egypt, but it was *elaf* in the Fayyum. Most of the peculiarities of Coptic 'dialects' seem to me to be of this nature.

² The 'pages' of *Pistis Sophia* in this article are the pages of the Askew MS, given also in Mr Horner's translation.

because the Coptic translator used the Greek MSS which were available. As a matter of fact Egypt, in textual as in many other matters, was old fashioned and behind the age: consequently at the time of the Mohammedan invasion (to name a definite point in history) the Coptic Churches were using a form of Biblical text which in the rest of the Christian world was antiquated. To put the matter the other way round, Egyptian Biblical texts that from their internal textual character seem to belong to the 3rd century must really be dated in the 5th or 6th century, because in certain respects the cultural development of Coptic Christianity lagged behind that of the rest of Christendom.

IV.

I have laid stress on this matter of textual criticism because I think it provides an analogy for the question of the date and origin of *Pistis Sophia*. I must now say a few words on the linguistic proofs brought forward by Prof. Schmidt to prove that it is a translation. At the outset, however, I must point out how very little we really differ. According to Schmidt, *Pistis Sophia*, a late and comparatively unintelligent production of syncretistic Graeco-Egyptian Gnosticism, composed in Greek, was translated into Coptic by a not always intelligent translator. According to Burkitt, *Pistis Sophia*, a late and comparatively unintelligent production, was composed in Coptic, the sources being partly Greek and partly Coptic works belonging to the later stages of Gnosticism in Egypt. I cling to the theory that the work, or rather works, preserved in the Askew Codex are more explicable as a Coptic by-product of Gnosticism than as a stage, however degraded, in what may be called Christian-Alexandrian thought.

Prof. Schmidt makes the point that Introductions are usually the actual composition of authors and editors, and he claims that the opening words of *Pistis Sophia* read like a translation from the Greek. It is what he calls *eine lange feingegliederte Satzkonstruktion* (p. 237), which he reconstructs as follows:—

Ἐγένετο δὲ μετὰ τὸ Ἰησοῦν ἀναστῆναι (οἱ ἐγερθῆναι) ἐκ νεκρῶν καὶ διατριβῆναι ἕνδεκα ἔτη διαλεγόμενον τοῖς μαθηταῖς καὶ διδάσκοντα αὐτοῖς μόνον μέχρι τῶν τόπων τοῦ πρώτου ὄρου . . . εἶπεν (Ἰησοῦς) τοῖς μαθηταῖς αὐτοῦ κτλ.

I must confess that this does not sound to me like original Greek: it sounds to me like what it is, a translation into Greek from some foreign language. First of all, ἐγένετο δὲ is a queer way for a real Greek work to begin. The Greek Bible, both in Ezekiel and Jonah, begins with καὶ ἐγένετο when such an exordium is required. The Coptic of *Pistis Sophia*, however, starts off with ἀκούσθε δε: no doubt the writer

thought it sounded biblical. Then, again, *καὶ διατριβῆναι* is an adaptation to Greek syntax which is not in the original: the Coptic is *ⲁⲫⲱ ⲁϣⲓ* (followed by '11 years'), which as it stands is *καὶ διέτριψεν*, just like *καὶ ἐποίησεν* in Rev. i 6, and *καὶ ἔπλυναν* in Rev. vii 14. Moreover, the dots indicate six and a half Coptic lines of trailing construction. I cannot imagine any Greek, who could write a book, composing this introductory sentence, though I can well believe that a Copt might think it was something like the beginning of a biblical work.

With regard to the vocabulary, Schmidt lays stress on the fact that *Pistis Sophia* sometimes has the Coptic word, sometimes the Greek transliteration, e. g. we find sometimes 'their 8-form', sometimes 'their 8-schema'. But the very same change between *smot* ('form') and *σχήμα* in transliteration is found in *Agathonicus* 82 and 83.¹ And is not an exact parallel found in Prof. Schmidt's own paper? On p. 236 he uses *Satzbau*, on p. 237 *Satzkonstruktion*.

Of the Greek phrases in *Pistis Sophia*, for which (according to Schmidt) the 'translator' had found no suitable equivalent (p. 239), two at least come straight out of the Sahidic New Testament, viz. *ἐκκεροϋς* (= 1 Cor. xii 27 Sah.) and *οὐκ ἐξεστει* (= Matt. xiv 4, xxvii 6 Sah.).² And if *ἀραρη* (p. 351 *b* = Schmidt 381, l. 9) really corresponds to *ⲁⲣⲁ ϩ̅*, as Schmidt suggests (p. 239), is this Greek? Does it not look much more like a Copt trying to use Greek particles?³

V.

The last instance given by Prof. Schmidt to prove that errors in the Coptic of *Pistis Sophia* shew it to be a translation is concerned with the interpretation of 'Mammon' in Lk. xvi 9. This is so interesting in itself that I give the passage in full. Jesus had explained to the disciples that if a soul know even one of the twelve names of the Dragon of the Outer Darkness it will escape the worst torments and be put in a place of comparative ease (*Pistis Sophia*, pp. 298-299). Thereupon Mary says, 'My Lord, this is the word Thou saidst to us formerly in a parable "Make you a friend out of the Amonas (*sic*) of wickedness, that should ye leave he may take you within the habitations for ever." What then is the Amonas of wickedness, if not the Dragon of the Outer Darkness?' (p. 300 *a*).

¹ In Crum's *Papyruscodex* p. 23, ll. 24 and 28; the same MS as *Horstsius*.

² I am quite willing to believe that *οὐκ ἐξεστει* (so spelt, e. g. Mk. vi 18) was really part of the vernacular speech. Legislation was in Greek, so it corresponds to 'Verboten'.

³ The sentence in question is *ἀραρη οὐκ ὀρθῶς εὐψηπεν· χῆ ἄμοι.*, meaning 'Is it then a thing one ought to do, or not?'

Now obviously this is not derived directly from the Sahidic text of Lk. xvi 9, which has a correct translation of the Greek. But neither is it a correct representation of the Greek itself. Here indeed, if anywhere, *Pistis Sophia* is reporting the genuine Gnostic speculation of an earlier age, of the age indeed of Irenaeus. The Third Book of Irenaeus' great work sets forth the true Apostolical tradition, in opposition to Gnostic fancies. It sets forth the origin of the Four Gospels, of the correct tradition of the unbroken chain of witnesses at Rome, where the true Documents of the Faith, the Old and New Testaments, are preserved (*adv. Haer.* iii 1-5)¹. In chap. vi it is shewn that no other is called God in these Scriptures but the Father and His Word. In chap. 7 the Pauline phrase 'the God of this world' (2 Cor. iv 4) is explained away. The next chapter is entitled 'What is Mammon?' At first sight it seems a curious side-issue. Irenaeus does not quote Lk. xvi 9 in this context, only Matt. vi 24, but his procedure becomes far more rational and interesting if we may suppose that he has in view 'Gnostics' who actually understood *Mammonas* (however spelt) to be the Dragon of the Abyss, with whom it was worth while to make friends.

Moreover, just before explaining that 'Mammon' is not God or Lord, Irenaeus refers to 'Render unto Caesar', adding the remark *Caesarem quidem Caesarem nominans*, i. e. Jesus meant the Emperor, not some quasi-divine Being. But in *Pistis Sophia* (p. 267 a) this famous saying is interpreted to mean that something is given by the soul after death to Adamas and the 'Rulers', while the true honour and glory it gives to those of the region of the Light.

I do not suppose that Irenaeus (*adv. Haer.* iii 8) is referring to *Pistis Sophia*, but I think it likely that the bizarre explanations of the texts about Caesar and Mammon given in *Pistis Sophia* were ultimately derived from Gnostic explanations of the Gospel, which (so far as these passages go) were as old as Irenaeus, and of course were not made by Copts but by Alexandrians.

This explanation of 'the Mammonas of ἀδικία' I have treated at full length because of its intrinsic interest. So far as it goes, it does not make for my general thesis, but neither does it directly favour Prof. Schmidt. I have never supposed that the only sources of the authors of the treatises in the Askew Codex were the Coptic Bible and their own imaginations. On the contrary, the free imagination of the writers played but a little part, because (as I view the matter) it was feeble and limited. I imagine that the writers had read some of the Books of Jēu in Coptic, and some 'Gnostic' sources which were originally Greek. These Gnostic works taught the fate of the soul after death: the Canonical Scriptures were believed by these writers to mean the

¹ Harvey's numeration.

same as the esoteric Gnostic works, but the real meaning had been hidden 'in a parable'.

There is no sign that the Askew MS came out of a monastery: the monasteries were no doubt hostile to this sort of doctrine. Nor, again, is it likely that it was the work of a priest, for other and more effective mysteries than those which ordinary Christian priests perform are described with gusto. At a guess I would suggest a succession of physicians, a source which may be held to be indicated by the interest in astrology and in the processes of birth. Very likely, during the later Middle Ages, when Coptic was forgotten and the volume unreadable, it was regarded by its owners as a lucky talisman, and so survived intact, unlike most Coptic MSS, into the 18th century, when it finally found a home in a civilized land.

The argument that most strongly moves me still to maintain the Coptic origin of the treatises in the Askew Codex (viz. the Three Books which treat more or less of *Pistis Sophia*, and the untitled, but earlier, Fourth Book at the end) is that I can better understand the late development of this curious farrago of half-understood Gnostic lore as a backwater in a backward isolated community, such as the Christendom of Upper Egypt, than as a survival of the Greek-speaking Alexandrian Gnostic schools, which at a much later date was thought worthy of translation into the dialect of Upper Egypt. Large parts of the book, including all the to us intolerable repetitions, seem to me fundamentally non-Greek. What there is valuable in it is derived no doubt from Greek, or rather Levantine, thought, but it is only here and there that this element comes to the surface.

Further, I have in this paper expressed my doubts that Coptic is a real language at all. It seems to me a literary dialect, elaborated by a society whose members learned to read and write after having more or less cut themselves off from the world. This dialect was indeed the only means of writing and of literary expression for Egyptians who could not write Greek, and so it was more or less used by that minority of the population who had any need of letters. When the Greeks were driven out of Egypt, in the 7th century, Coptic had every opportunity of becoming a real national language, but it was too artificial to last. A remnant of the Egyptians hold fast to the Christian faith of their fathers, but their language for centuries has been not Egyptian of any kind, but Arabic.

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