THE CONCEPT OF SPIRIT IN PAPYRUS LETTERS OF THE THIRD AND FOURTH CENTURY: PROBLEMS POSED BY P. HARR. 107

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From writers such as Clement and Origen, who were engaged in the doctrinal controversies of the late second and third centuries, we are informed about the ideas which engaged learned people, Christian and non-Christian, in centres such as Alexandria at that time. Major papyrus publications — some of them, like the Nag Hammadi material, very rich sources of information — are deepening our knowledge of the religious climate in Egypt in a period of change. If, however, one looks for evidence of the ordinary person’s religious experience, or reaction to the changes taking place from the second to the fourth century, there is far less material to act as a guide. Private letters give our only direct insight into the sentiments of the average person. Those papyrus examples which have come down to us are only chance survivals of thoughts or experiences not intended for posterity. Moreover, it is comparatively unusual for such letters to express personal thoughts and feelings, since letter writing, for the lesser educated at least, was usually for a specific purpose.

Tibiletti in 1979 published a list of Greek private letters on papyrus from the third and fourth centuries, with asterisks indicating whether in his judgement each letter was clearly Christian or not, or if the matter were undecided. Of the more than five hundred letters listed, only one from the third century, P. Harr. 107, refers to the concept of spirit. That there are not more is disappointing but not surprising since unequivocally Christian letters are comparatively rare before the early fourth century when Constantine’s edicts allowed Christians to express their sentiments without fear.

P. Harr 107 has been the focus of some controversy. It is from Besas to his mother Maria, and reads as follows:

1 To my most revered mother Mary, Besas (bids you) rejoice greatly in God. Before all things I pray to the
2 Father God of truth and to the Spirit, the comforter,
3 that they may preserve you in soul and
4 body and spirit — for the body, health, for the spirit,
5 joy, and for the soul life everlasting. For your part, if ever you

1. G. Tibiletti, Le lettere private nei papiri greci del III e IV secolo d.C. tra paganesimo e cristianesimo (Milan 1979), 6-22.
15 find someone coming my way, do not hesitate to write to me about your health, so that I may hear and rejoice. So do not neglect to send me the garment for the Paschal festival and send to me my brother. I greet my father and my brothers. 25 I pray for your (pl) lasting health.

Verso: From Besas.

We can infer little about the author. The original editor, Powell, regarded the hand as 'boyish', though somewhat untutored or inexperienced might be a better way to describe it. These qualities may be Besas' own: though the practice of employing scribes for private letters is well attested, this hand does not seem like that of an accomplished letter writer or professional scribe. His name, derived from the god Bēs, does suggest that he is an Egyptian though it does not provide an indication of his religious beliefs. Any connection with one Besas, a martyr during the Decian persecution, must remain highly speculative, as must the possibility of our Besas' connection with the associates of Origen.

The content of the letter raises several interesting issues which have provoked scholarly attention. Among them are such questions as the milieu of the letter: is it Manichaean, Jewish, Gnostic, orthodox Christian or Christian with a leaning towards Origenism? The significance of the phrase 'Father God of truth' (τῷ πατρί θεῷ τῆς ἀληθείας) is tied up with arguments about the milieu. The presence of the idea of the spirit as comforter (τῷ παράκλητῳ πνεύματι) and the trichotomy soul, body, spirit (ψυχῇ καὶ σώμα καὶ πνεύμα) which occurs twice, though with the order varied (lines 8–9, 10–12), are the other main issues of concern here, though they do not exhaust the interest or the controversy of this papyrus.

2. The Rendel Harris Papyri of Woodbrooke College, Birmingham, ed. J. E. Powell (Cambridge 1936) (Hereafter P. Harr.) My colleague S. R. Pickering supplied the palaeographical observations made here and in nn.4–6.
3. Farouk Farid, 'Paniskos: Christian or Pagan? (P. Mich. III. 214–221)', Museum Philologum Londiniiense 2 (1977), 109–117. The argument is here advanced that it may be the scribe who influences the religious formulas.
4. Mr Pickering bases this judgement on the spidery and variable hand, the fact that the lines are abnormally close together and the many corrections and omissions of letters.
5. A possible alternative explanation to that of youth or poor education to account for the many errors in the document is that Besas, or the writer, was Coptic speaking.
Given the uncertainties over the extent and development of Christianity in Egypt during the first three centuries of our era, this papyrus almost provides a microcosm of the debate: Gnostic? Jewish? Manichaean? heretical? orthodox Christian? The weight of scholarly opinion has come down in favour of orthodox Christian, but we are then left with the tantalising question of why there is no mention of the Son. The remainder of this paper will be primarily concerned with a discussion of this problem and with a proposal for its solution.

Any possible Manichaean links can now be swiftly disposed of. Without wishing to make any connection from his observation, Powell pointed out in the original edition that Mani called himself παράκλητον πνεύμα (literally παράκλητος refers to one who stands by another’s side, hence a helper or comforter). Powell dated our papyrus to the third century (with a query). Subsequently Naldini redated it to the beginning of the third century, while Bell preferred around 200. Either earlier dating would make any Manichaean connection impossible, as Mani’s dates are 216–276/7.

It can on occasion be difficult to determine if a given papyrus is Christian or Jewish — where, for example, we have monotheistic formulae coupled with Old Testament allusions, as examples dealt with by van Haelst will bear out. In our papyrus the mention of a practical item, the garment for the Paschal festival (τό ίμάτιον εις την έορτήν τοΰ πάσχα, lines 19–20) could refer to a Jewish or a Christian celebration. The name Maria (line 2) can be Christian or Jewish; where it is Jewish the form Μαρίαμ is often though not necessarily found. Since neither of these features is exclusively Jewish, and since other indications point strongly to Christianity, the Jewish possibility need not be further considered here.

It may be somewhat artificial to take the possibility of a Christian milieu and a Gnostic one separately. C. H. Roberts has argued that the Egyptian

8. See e.g. discussions by H. I. Bell, Cults and Creeds in Graeco-Roman Egypt (Liverpool 1953) 78–105; C. H. Roberts, Manuscript, Society and Belief in Early Christian Egypt (Oxford 1979), 1-25.
9. See below, n.20.
10. P. Harr. (1936), 107, p.89 n.1.
church was permeated by Gnosticism from the beginning, and given the complexity and different expressions of Gnosticism it would be rash indeed to assert that this document was free from Gnostic influence. The phrase 'Father God of truth' (line 5) and the linking of the Father and the Spirit could reflect the kind of thinking found, for instance, in the Gospel of Truth. Gnostic thought with its tendency at times to downgrade the importance of Jesus could also possibly explain the invocation of just the Father and the Spirit, without the Son. Tardieu gives examples of the identification of the Holy Spirit with 'Mother' (sometimes = Sophia (wisdom) in Gnostic thinking). While the author may not be a stranger to Gnostic speculation, his emphasis is on the practical side — a garment for the Paschal festival (line 19).

Though there may well be certain associations between Gnosticism and the milieu of this document, the orthodox Christian setting is the one in which this document is best placed. The case for a purely Gnostic setting was at first argued by Ghedini but subsequently withdrawn. The weight of scholarly opinion favours a Christian setting and it is significant that Wipszycka, who subjected the letters in Naldini's collection to very stringent examination, regarded the phrase έν θεώι (in God, line 3) as a sure criterion of Christianity.

The other indications of the Christian belief of the author taken together, add up to a strong case. While it is dubious to depend on one indication, or on a general atmosphere of piety to determine the religious provenance of a letter, we have here a number of indications. The monotheistic θεός may be found in documents of Christian, Jewish or pagan background, and coupled with prepositions like σύν (with) or παρά (before) provides no clue as to the religion of the author (or scribe). The idea of being in God however is one introduced in the New Testament, and is, as

17. English translation in James M. Robinson et al., The Nag Hammadi Library in English (San Francisco 1977). See for example ‘Father of truth’ 1.3 (p.37); ‘The Father reveals his bosom — now his bosom is the Holy Spirit’ (p.41); ‘the truth is the mouth of the Father; his tongue is the Holy Spirit’ (p.42). Note however that Jesus is not omitted from this Gospel.
20. See the arguments and works cited by J. O’Callaghan, ‘Sobre la interpretación de P. Harr. 107’, Aegyptus 52 (1972), 152-7. References to discussion up till c. 1968 are collected in M. Naldini. Il Cristianesimo in Egitto (Florence 1978), 76-78.
Wipszycka's judgement indicates, found only in papyri which are clearly Christian or strongly argued to be so.\textsuperscript{22}

The mention of a ‘paraclete Spirit’ is, though not exclusively, Christian,\textsuperscript{23} firmly anchored in the New Testament, for example Jn 14.26 ὁ δὲ παράκλητος, τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον (‘the paraclete [or comforter], the Holy Spirit’).

The trichotomy ‘soul, body, spirit’ suggests 1 Thess. 5.23 and is close enough to be classed as a ‘verbal echo’ rather than a mere ‘reminiscence’.\textsuperscript{24}

In our papyrus it occurs twice, with the order different the second time (lines 8–9, 10–12). The first order, ψυχή, σώμα, πνεῦμα is typical of Egyptian liturgies\textsuperscript{25} and it is the judgement of Brightman after discussing examples from the liturgy that ‘not only is the trichotomy referred to with singular frequency, but the terms are always in this order ψυχή, σώμα πνεῦμα.’\textsuperscript{26} The liturgical link may well have been prominent in the mind of Besas, who may possibly even have been a catechumen (line 19),\textsuperscript{27} but it is not clear why the order was varied in the subsequent lines. The first order is also found in Origen.\textsuperscript{28} Brightman speculates on why the trichotomy was so popular in Egypt — both in the liturgy and in Origen — and raises the possibility of a link with the old Egyptian idea of body, soul and \textit{ka}.\textsuperscript{29} It does appear too in a couple of later papyri, P. Oxy. 1161 (4th century) and P. Coll. Youtie 91 (5th/6th century).\textsuperscript{30}

Besas’ prayers for his mother — for health, joy or gladness and everlasting life (lines 10–11) would all fit well in a Christian context, and can be paralleled from New Testament vocabulary, though this again is not conclusive by itself.\textsuperscript{31}

All the indications, taken together, do point strongly towards a Christian milieu, and yet there is no mention of the Son. Attempts have been made to see the Son in the phrase τῆς ἀληθείας (line 5), taking lines 5–6 as ‘the father of Truth’, the ‘Truth’ being Jesus.\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{22.} M. Naldini, \textit{op. cit.}, (n.20), 16.
\textsuperscript{23.} See above, p.2 and n.10.
\textsuperscript{25.} Powell, (cf. n.10) refers here to F. E. Brightman, \textit{Journal of Theological Studies} 2 (1900/01), 273–4.
\textsuperscript{26.} Brightman, \textit{ibid.}, 273.
\textsuperscript{27.} Catechumens were baptised in a special ceremony at Easter. The fact that the point of the letter is to ask about the cloak for the Easter festival is suggestive but not conclusive.
\textsuperscript{28.} Origen \textit{in Exod.} iii 3 (II. 137c); cf. \textit{in Rom.} i.5. (IV.466), ix.25 (IV 654D).
\textsuperscript{29.} Brightman, \textit{op. cit.}, 274.
\textsuperscript{31.} Cf. for example \textit{εὐθυμέω} Jas. 5.13; \textit{εὐθυμος} Acts 27.36; ζωήν αἰώνιον Jn. 4.36.
\textsuperscript{32.} G. Ghedini, \textit{Aegyptus} (1940), 210.
Against this, it may be pointed out that τῆς ἀλήθειας (of truth) depends on θεό (god) and not πατρί (father), and ‘Father of Truth’ would not be a natural interpretation of the Greek word order. It would in any case be a very sophisticated concept for a letter of this kind, and quite out of keeping with the remainder of it.

It is the first complete reference to the Trinity in a papyrus letter which presents us, I believe, with the probable answer to the problem posed by the omission of the Son in P. Harr. 107. This letter is quite different in many respects from that of Besas. It emanates from a circle of Meletian monks at Hathor. The letters reveal such matters as the organization of the monastery (P. Lond. 1913), conflict between the Meletian monks and Athanasius and his followers (P. Lond. 1914), and the monks’ network of help for brothers who suffered misfortune (P. Lond. 1915–1916). No. 1917 is long, somewhat incoherent (not only because of the gaps in the text!), strange in its spelling and confused about cases and genders. Probably the writer, Horion, was a Copt — there are Coptic letters in the archive. The letter is a rather breathless and confused request for the intercessory prayers of the one whose name appears here as Apa Paiêou (Pegeus in P. Lond. 1913). The writer, who does not, as is the usual custom, give his own name in the greeting, begins his letter with a clear inclusion of all three persons of the Trinity.

‘To the most genuine and most enlightened, most blessed, beloved and in God’s keeping and filled with the Holy Ghost (πνεύματος άγίου) and most valued in the sight of the Lord God, Apa Paiêou, greeting in our Master Jesus Christ.’

The rarity of the trinitarian formula in a letter of this period is a source of interest; of even more interest is the writer’s concern to make his profession of belief (lines 14–16):

‘By all means therefore, beloved, most genuine, and most worthy in the sight of the Lord God, with zealous entertainment of the Holy Ghost in God’s keeping, by night and day entreat God the Lord of all — they that are in the Son being in the Father, and he that is in the Father is in the Son. . . .’

Not only is the second mention of the Trinity striking, but also the writer’s concern to express — however clumsily — his notion of the relationship between the Father and the Son. He is emphasizing, in this rather

35. Lines 1–2. Bell’s translation is used here and in the succeeding quotations from this letter.
curious manner, the equality of the Father and the Son, at a time when the Arians were implicitly or explicitly making the Son of lesser degree than the Father. A theological analysis of his position does not concern us here, the point being that by the mid 330s, when the Arian controversy was engaging people at all levels in society and Arians were the subject of restrictive legislation,\(^\text{36}\) this monk feels that he should spell out his position. Before the beginning of the trinitarian controversies in the late 3rd and early 4th centuries, one might conclude that it was simply not perceived as necessary to fill out a statement such as the one in P. Harr. 107.\(^\text{37}\) If Besas were writing within a Christian frame of reference, he was following sound New Testament tradition in directing his prayer to the Father, and further if he as a Christian were writing to his mother who presumably shared or at least understood his beliefs, there was no need to fear a challenge. In short, the historical background, and the changes resulting particularly from the aftermath of the Council of Nicaea, explain the different formulae adopted, in admittedly different circumstances of writing, by these two rather unsophisticated men.

It is tantalizing that our glimpses of the ordinary person’s concept of the Spirit in relation to the Trinity are so few for such a crucial period of religious change. Nevertheless these few ‘soundings’ enable us to see how people reacted to the religious changes in late Antiquity.

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37. Tibiletti, *op.cit.*, (n.1), 114.