NEGLECTED GREEK EVIDENCE FOR EARLY JEWISH LITURGICAL PRAYER

by

PIETER W. VAN DER HORST

In 1935 the British papyrologists H.I. Bell and T.C. Skeat published their well-known work *Fragments of an Unknown Gospel.* It was the publication of Papyrus Egerton 2, which contained large fragments with fascinating portions of a hitherto unknown early Christian Gospel text that drew a great deal of attention from the scholarly world. The concentration of the ensuing debate on Pap. Egerton 2 diverted attention from the other, smaller Greek texts published in the same volume, Papyri Egerton 3-5, all three of them being regarded by their editors as early Christian texts, as the subtitle of their book clearly indicated. It is the purpose of this paper to draw attention to one of these neglected texts, Pap. Egerton 5, described by Bell and Skeat as a “Leaf from a Liturgical Book”. It is a single leaf from a codex, measuring 19 x 17 cm, with 17 lines of text on both sides, to be dated to the end of the fourth or the beginning of the fifth century C.E. Where in Egypt it was found is unknown; the papyrus is now in the British Library. The editors say it is from a Christian liturgical book, even though they admit that its text is “if anything, more difficult than most of the earlier finds to identify” (56). The claim that it is from a Christian liturgical book that this papyrus leaf derives is, as we shall presently see, debatable. The papyrus contains some prayers, the text of which in the translation by the first editors runs as follows:

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3. *Fragments,* 59. For corrections to their translation see further below.

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A. (1) sanctify, sustain, gather, govern, (3) establish, glorify, confirm, pasture, (4) raise up (?), enlighten, pacify, (5) administer, perfect—the people (6) which Thou hast established, the peculiar people, (7) the people which Thou hast ransomed, the people which (8) Thou hast called, Thy people, the sheep of (9) Thy pasture. Thou art the only physician (10) of our ailing souls, keep us in Thy joy (?), heal us (11) in sickness, cast us not away (12) as unfit to receive Thy healing. The word (13) of Thy mouth is the giver of health.

B. (14). These things we beg of Thee, Master; remit (15) whatever we have done amiss, check (?) whatever leads (?) us (16) to sin, neither record against us all that we (17) have done unlawfully. Forgiveness of sin (18) is the expression of Thy long-suffering; it is a fair thing, (20) o Immortal, not to be wrath with mortals, doomed to destruction, (21) short-lived, inhabiting a toilsome world. (22) Never dost Thou cease to do good, for Thou art bountiful, (23) Thou givest all, taking nought, for (24) Thou lackest nothing; every righteous thing is Thine, unrighteousness (25) alone is not Thine. Evil is that which Thou wouldst (26) not, the child of our imaginations. (27) Receive from us these psalmodies, (28) these hymnodies, these prayers, these supplications, (29) these entreaties, these requests, these (30) confessions, these petitions, these thanksgivings, (31) this readiness, this earnestness, these vigils, (32) these [. . .], these couchings upon the earth, these (33) prayerful utterances. Having a kindly (34) master in Thee, the eternal King, (35) we beseech Thee [to behold?] our pitiful state . . .

Here, unfortunately, the text breaks off, in the middle of the prayer. The letters A and B in the upper margins of verso and recto respectively might be taken to be page numbers, but the occurrence of the letter B at the end of line 13 seems to point in another direction. If the prayer in the middle of which the first page (verso) begins is prayer A, the header may have been added to indicate that fact, just as B may well have been added as a header to the second page (recto) to indicate that this page continues the text of prayer B which had started at line 14 of the previous page. So it would seem that we have here the last 13 lines of prayer A and the first 21 lines of prayer B. However, the abrupt ending of text A and the equally abrupt beginning of text B seem to militate against the assumption that we have to do here with the complete text of liturgical prayers, the editors say. They compare for this numbering of prayers the Byzantine Prayers of the Faithful (Eúχαι πιστῶν) and suggest that “the papyrus contains some part of the