

STEPHEN R. LLEWELYN

ΣΔ, A CHRISTIAN ISOPSEPHISM?

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## ΣΔ, A CHRISTIAN ISOPSEPHISM?

*P. Oxy.* XXXVI 2785 (IV AD) is a letter of recommendation written by the πρεσβύτεροι of Herakleopolis to Sotas, presumably resident at Oxyrhynchus. The text introduces two persons, Taion who is a baptised, full member of the church (cf. ἀδελφὴν ἡμῶν l.4), and a catechumen under instruction in Genesis. The letter follows a set form which is attested in all by nine papyri.<sup>1</sup>

At the end of the letter and after the final farewell the writer adds the letters σδ. Their interpretation has posed a difficulty. Recognising that the form of sigma indicated a number (i.e.  $\sigma\delta = 200 + 4$ ) Rea concluded that the two letters represented a 'Christian slogan written cryptically'. Support for this interpretation is found in those parallel letters of recommendation which also contain an isopsephism, i.e.  $\varphi\theta = 99 = \acute{\alpha}\mu\eta\nu$  in *P. Oxy.* VIII 1162, *SB XVI* 12304 and *P. Oxy.* LVI 3857. The difficulty has been to identify the word or expression indicated by the number. Rea notes the possibility of a mistake (e.g.  $\sigma\pi\delta = 284 = \theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$  or  $\acute{\alpha}\gamma\iota\omicron\varsigma$  or  $\acute{\alpha}\gamma\alpha\theta\acute{o}\varsigma$ ) but he dismisses it as unfounded here. Tibiletti<sup>2</sup> suggests that the number may either represent an isopsephism or the letter's registration number, i.e. copies of letters were made and registered. Treu holds that it is an isopsephism but again is unable to offer a solution.

Solutions to the number can be sought in a variety of ways. First, one might seek to generate all phonetically possible combinations of letters which add to 204. Amongst these one would first choose those that make sense and then in turn those which are appropriate to the letter's context as well as the number's location in the letter. The task proves to be too daunting as natural languages only use a small proportion of the phonetically possible combinations of sounds available to them. Second, one might use a Greek lexicon to generate all possible morphemes. The problem here is that the number may not represent just one word but a string of words or an expression. Again the number of possible combinations of words is just too great to contemplate, not to mention that either syntactically or semantically most would be incomplete, impossible or nonsensical.

The third possible method and the one adopted here is to search an appropriate corpus of literature. As it can be reasonably assumed that the isopsephism represented a term or expression belonging to Christian linguistic usage, the Greek bible is a suitable corpus with which to begin. A program to search for words or strings of words (up to a maximum of five words and ignoring punctuation and verse divisions)<sup>3</sup> whose letters add to 204 is easily written. But there is a

<sup>1</sup> For a list and synopsis of the form of these letters of recommendation see K. Treu, 'Christliche Empfehlungs-Schemabriefe auf Papyrus' in *Zetesis. Bijdragen ... E. de Strijcker* (Antwerp/Utrecht, 1973), 629-36, and M.G. Sirivianou, *P. Oxy.* LVI 3857 (pp.112-4).

<sup>2</sup> G. Tibiletti, *Le lettere private nei papiri greci del III e IV secolo d.C.* (Milan, 1979), 191, reproduces the text of the *ed. pr.* in which πρεσβ( ) was completed as πρεσβ(ύτερε), i.e. in agreement with Σώτα. The problem posed by this solution is to explain why the letter was found at Oxyrhynchus when Sotas was πρεσβύτερος of Herakleopolis. Rea entertains the suggestion that the extant letter was only a copy. The solution to the reading of πρεσβ( ) was provided by K. Treu, 'Christliche Empfehlungs-Schemabriefe auf Papyrus', 634-5. On the basis of parallel letters of recommendation he concluded that the term should be read as πρεσβ(ύτεροι), i.e. in agreement with προσαγορεύομεν. The advantage of this reading, as Treu observes, is that (a) the additional and unnecessary designation of the addressee is removed, (b) the otherwise absent designation of the senders is supplied and (c) the letter was sent from Herakleopolis to Oxyrhynchus. In other words, there is no longer any need to postulate that the letter was a copy.

<sup>3</sup> A maximum of five words was chosen for the obvious reason that there is an upper limit to the size of a string which can satisfy the condition that its letters add to 204. Only one string of five words

problem with this approach, for not all possible words or expressions will be generated. Only those occurring in the Greek bible will be found. Importantly, words and expressions which are found in the creeds and liturgies of the church and which may equally have been used as cryptograms will not be considered here.

Be that as it may, the following table of possible solutions was generated from a computer reading of the Greek bible. A great many solutions can be dismissed on syntactic grounds as incomplete and/or requiring punctuation. Others can be eliminated as either inappropriate and non-sensical given the position and assumed function of the isopsephism.<sup>4</sup> Of some interest is the term εἰρηνικά (Deut. 20.11, 23.6, Judith 7.24, Psalm 34.20, Sir. 4.8 and Jer. 9.7). In all occurrences the function of εἰρηνικά is nominal and the direct object of a verb of speech (λαλέω, ἀποκρίνομαι or προσαγορεύω). Moreover, in each passages paralleled in the Masoretic text (i.e. Deut. 20.11, 23.6, Psalms 34.20 and Jer. 9.7) it translates שָׁלוֹם, the usual Hebrew salutation. Unfortunately, however, the solution is problematic. In none of the passages does εἰρηνικά actually function as a salutation. Indeed, the salutation was rendered in the LXX translation by εἰρήνη σοι, εἰρήνη σοι πληθυνθείη or some similar expression (Judges 6.23, 19.20, 1 Chron. 12.18, 2 Esdras 4.17, 5.7, Psalms 121.8, 124.5, 127.6, Dan. 3.31 and 4.34). For the use of εἰρήνη in the closing salutation of a letter see 1 Pet. 5.14 and 3 John 15. In *P. Heid.* IV 333 l.31 (V AD) εἰρήνη is used in the letter's *inscriptio*.<sup>5</sup> The term's adjectival form is also problematic, as Prof. D. Hagedorn (per litt., 1.9.1995) observes: 'Ich kann nicht glauben, daß man שָׁלוֹם in einer solchen Formel mit εἰρηνικά statt dem zu erwartenden εἰρήνη wiedergegeben haben sollte. Daß in größerem Kontext in Verbindung mit λαλεῖν usw. auch einmal das Adjektiv vorkommen kann, ist nicht erstaunlich, aber in einer derartigen Formel ergibt dies doch keinen Sinn.'

#### Words and expressions<sup>6</sup> whose letters add to 204

ΑΒΙΑΘΑΡ ΟΙ	ΑΚΟΗΝ ΕΝ	ΑΠΕΛΛΗΝ	ΒΑΡΕΙ ΚΑΙ ΕΝ
ΑΔΙΚΑ ΜΗ ΜΟΙ	ΑΛΛΑ ΔΟΞΗ	ΑΠΗΓΓΕΙΛΕΝ ΔΕ	ΒΑΣΑ
ΑΓΑΠΗΝ ΙΝΑ	ΑΛΛΑ ΚΑΙ ΕΜΕ ΙΝΑ	ΑΡΠΑΖΕΙ	ΓΑΔΔΙ ΚΑΙ ΑΠΟ
ΑΓΑΘΟΝ Ο	ΑΛΛΗ ΔΟΞΑ	ΒΑΑΛ ΚΑΙ ΕΔΕΙΞΕΝ	ΓΑΣ
ΑΓΙΟΝ Ο	ΑΛΛΟΓΕΝΕΙ	ΒΑΙΘΗΛ ΕΚΕΙ ΓΑΡ	ΓΗΝ Η ΔΟΞΑ
ΑΙΘΑΝ ΚΑΙ ΑΙΜΑΝ	ΑΝ ΕΚΛΙΠΗ	ΒΑΛΑΝΟΝ	ΔΑΝΙΗΛ ΚΑΙ Ο

satisfies that condition in the Old Testament (καὶ ἐμιάνθη ἡ γῆ καί, Lev. 18.25), whilst none satisfies it in the New Testament. Punctuation and verse division were ignored as neither formed part of the original text.

<sup>4</sup> For example, ἄλλη δόξα (1 Cor. 15.41) seems irrelevant in view of the expression's context in the Pauline letter. ἐδόθη ἡμῖν (Isa. 9.5) might be relevant for the passage was understood as a prophecy about the birth of the messiah, yet the citation is incomplete. ἔλεγον Ἄγαθὴ ἡ γῆ (Deut. 1.25) represents part of the report of the scouts regarding the land of Canaan. However, one is at a loss to understand why it might function as an isopsephism. Similar arguments can be found to apply to ἐν ἀκριβείᾳ (Sir. 16.25), ἐν ῥῆμα (Matt. 27.14), ῥῆμα ἐν (Acts 28.25), ζῆ δὲ ἐν ἐμοί (Gal.2.20) and καὶ λέγει μοι (Tobit S 2.14, Cant. 2.10, Rev. 10.9, 17.15, 19.9, 10, 22.9, 10).

<sup>5</sup> As Makarios, the writer of *P. Heid.* IV 333, belongs to a Samaritan sect, Hagedorn infers that εἰρήνη translates שָׁלוֹם. For other examples of papyri (dated after the Arab conquest) using εἰρήνη see *P. Heid.* IV, p.235.

<sup>6</sup> Verse references are omitted for brevity. The interested reader can find most occurrences in a concordance.

ΔΕ ΑΠΗΓΓΕΙΛΕΝ	ΕΝ ΡΗΜΑ	ΚΑΙ ΑΝΔΡΙ Η	ΛΕΓΟΜΕΝΑ
ΔΕ ΗΜΕΡΑΙ ΚΑΙ	ΕΠΑΙΡΗ	ΚΑΙ ΑΠΑΣ ΚΑΙ	ΜΑΔΙΗΝΑΙΟΙ
ΔΕ ΚΟΡΕ	ΕΠΕΙ ΓΑΡ	ΚΑΙ ΑΡΑΜ ΚΑΙ	ΜΑΡΑΛΑ ΚΑΙ
ΔΕ ΚΡΙΝΕΙ	ΕΠΗΞΑΝ	ΚΑΙ ΔΑΝΙΗΛ Ο	ΜΕ ΑΝΗΡ
ΔΕ ΠΕΡΙ	ΕΠΙ ΟΖΑ ΚΑΙ	ΚΑΙ ΔΟΞΗ ΚΑΙ	ΜΕ ΕΙΠΕΝ ΔΕ
ΔΕ ΡΕΒΕΚΚΑ ΚΑΙ ΑΙ	ΕΠΙΒΑΙΝΕΙ ΚΑΙ	ΚΑΙ ΕΔΕΞΑΜΗΝ	ΜΕ ΕΙΠΕΝ ΔΕ
ΔΙΑΒΟΛΗ ΚΑΙ ΜΗ	ΕΡΓΑΖΗ ΟΙ	ΚΑΙ ΕΓΕΝΗΘΗ ΕΠ	ΜΕ ΗΡΑΝ
ΔΙΑΝΟΙΑΝ Η	ΕΞΕΓΕΛΑ ΕΠΙ	ΚΑΙ ΕΙΠΕΝ ΑΓΑΓ ΕΙ	ΜΗ ΕΙΚΟΝΑ
ΔΙΔΟΝΑΙ ΕΝ	ΖΗ ΔΕ ΕΝ ΕΜΟΙ	ΚΑΙ ΕΙΠΕΝ ΕΙΗ	ΜΗ ΛΙΚΜΑ ΕΝ
ΔΡΑΓΜΑ ΕΝ	Η ΕΠΑΓΓΕΛΙΑ ΗΝ	ΚΑΙ ΕΚ ΔΑΒΙΡ ΚΑΙ	ΜΗΝΙ ΕΝΙ ΚΑΙ
ΕΑΝ ΔΕ ΚΛΑΠΗ	Η ΠΕΙΡΑ	ΚΑΙ ΕΚΛΕΙΠΕΙ Η	ΝΑΖΑΡΕΘ ΚΑΙ
ΕΔΕΞΑΜΗΝ ΚΑΙ	ΗΜΕΡΑ ΕΜΕ	ΚΑΙ ΕΜΙΑΝΘΗ Η ΓΗ	Ο ΑΗΡ ΕΚ
ΕΔΟΘΗ ΗΜΙΝ	ΗΜΕΡΑΝ	ΚΑΙ	Ο ΔΑΝΙΗΛ ΚΑΙ
ΕΓΕΝΗΘΗ ΚΑΙ ΕΠ	ΗΜΙΝ ΑΔΙΚΙΑΝ	ΚΑΙ ΕΘΗΚΑΝ ΟΙ	ΟΙ ΔΕ ΑΔΙΚΟΙ
ΕΓΓΙΕΙ ΑΝΗΡ ΔΕ	ΗΜΙΝ ΠΑΙΔΑ	ΚΑΙ ΛΕΓΕΙ ΜΟΙ	ΟΙΔΕΝ ΕΑΝ ΔΕ
ΕΓΓΙΕΙ ΠΛΗΝ	ΗΝ ΕΚΚΛΙΝΑΙ	ΚΑΙ ΜΑΙΝΑΜ ΚΑΙ	ΟΙΚΗΜΑ ΕΝ
ΕΙΠΕΝ ΒΑΛΑΚ	ΗΡΑΜ ΒΑΑΝΑ	ΚΑΙ ΜΑΚΑΡΙΑ	ΟΝΕΙΔΗ ΜΗΔΕ
ΕΙΡΗΝΙΚΑ	ΘΕΛΕΙ ΠΝΕΙ	ΚΑΙ ΜΑΡΑΛΑ	ΟΘΕΝ Ο
ΕΚΜΙΑΝΘΗΝΑΙ	ΘΕΟΝ Ο	ΚΑΙ ΠΑΛΛΑΚΑΙ	ΠΑΓΟΝ
ΕΛΑΒΕΝ ΘΑΡΑ	ΘΡΙΞ ΕΚ	ΚΑΙ ΘΑΡΑΛΑ ΚΑΙ	ΠΑΛΛΑΘΗΝ ΕΚ
ΕΛΕΕΙ ΚΑΙ ΕΛΕΓΞΕΙ	ΙΑΡΙΒ ΚΑΙ ΓΑΔΑΛΙΑ	ΚΑΙ ΡΑΜΑ ΚΑΙ	ΠΑΛΛΑΚΑΙ ΚΑΙ
ΕΛΕΓΟΝ ΑΓΑΘΗ Η ΓΗ	ΙΕΡΑΜΗΛΙ	ΚΑΙΝΗ ΔΙΑΘΗΚΗ ΕΝ	ΠΕΡΙ ΔΕ
ΕΛΘΕΙΝ ΕΠΙ	ΙΝΑ ΑΡΘΗ ΕΚ	ΚΑΙΝΗΝ ΕΞ	ΠΛΑΓΙΟΙ
ΕΜΙΑΝΘΗΝ ΚΑΙ	ΙΝΑ ΜΗ ΕΠΙ	ΚΑΙΟΜΕΝΗ	ΠΟΔΙ ΕΚΕΙ
ΕΜΟΙ ΚΑΙ ΜΗ	ΚΑΙ ΑΓΑΘΗ ΚΑΡΔΙΑ	ΚΕΚΟΛΛΗΚΑ	ΡΗΜΑ ΕΝ
ΕΝ ΑΚΡΙΒΕΙΑ	ΔΙΑ	ΚΕΚΡΑΓΕΝ	ΣΑΒΑ
ΕΝ ΒΑΙΘΗΛ ΚΑΙ ΗΝ	ΚΑΙ ΑΙ ΚΟΙΛΙΑΙ ΑΙ	ΚΝΙΔΟΝ	
ΕΝ ΕΜΟΙ ΕΙ ΔΕ	ΚΑΙ ΑΜΑΡ ΚΑΙ	ΛΕΓΕΙ ΜΟΙ ΚΑΙ	

Other solutions also prove to be problematic. The negative result of the search is not, however, entirely fruitless, for probabilities have shifted in two important respects. First, if one continues to maintain that σδ is an isopsephism, then its solution must be sought in the creeds and liturgies of the church. Moreover, as a large proportion of vocabulary belonging to the religious register has already been searched, my guess is that the letters most probably represent an expression and not just one word. Second, it is now more probable than it was before that σδ, as it presently stands in the papyrus, is not an isopsephism. One can take more seriously other explanations. For example, Rea's suggestion that the letters are a mistake may need to be reconsidered.