

**Albrecht Gerber, *Deissmann the Philologist*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010, 649 pp + xxiii, ISBN 978 3 11 022431 3, € 139.95**

Reviewed by E.A. Judge

This rich and massive study keeps one in suspense. It is like a monumental excavation report, unexpectedly diverse in its finds, unearthing far more than the title might lead one to expect. Indeed, as with many an honest excavation, the ostensible purpose is left frustratingly unsatisfied. Yet it has a clear structure. It reflects three seasons of the expedition as it were, or at any rate establishes three strata on the site. Their interconnections, if any, are open to dispute.

Albrecht Gerber (Gerber) has defined three stages in the intellectual life and public career of Gustav Adolf Deissmann (Deissmann), born in the duchy of Nassau (now part of the federal state of Hessen) in 1866, the very year in which it passed under Prussian control. He died in 1937 as the retired professor of New Testament (appointed 1908) in the Faculty of Protestant Theology, Berlin. His public life spanned the Wilhelmine Empire and the Weimar republic, from Bismarck to Hitler. His most famous work was *Light from the Ancient East* (Berlin 1908, English trans. 1910).

Because Gerber's work is not a full biography one may find oneself repeatedly stranded for lack of a simple curriculum vitae, though there is a family tree. Likewise one may quickly be lost without a map of important locations. The *Grosser Shell-Atlas* does not even register Deissmann's birthplace (Langenscheid), while for his father's next posting as pastor (Erbach) one has six places of the same name to choose from.

Yet the sheer weight of detailed documentation is surely the most valuable aspect of the work. Only a little over half the space is used for the three soundings in their chronological order. Even there the constant citation of sources woven into the narrative, or in sometimes extensive footnotes, tips the balance of the whole in favour of the sources. The vast Appendices and Addenda give the text of nearly a hundred documents on Deissmann, including a thirty-page self-portrait. Gerber has quarried twenty-five archives in eight different countries. There are 250 documents referred to in all. The names of 400 other people are indexed, mostly contemporary with Deissmann, in which case dates of birth and death are given.

For anyone who sees the Berlin of Mommsen and Einstein as the high point in defining our standards in every academic discipline such a collection as this is precious. It gives us personal insight on a direct and even daily basis as it were. Gerber has not needed to give introductory or background explanations of things. We are there in the midst of it all as it happens. The same goes for the many glimpses we are given into the now remote world of a pastor's life, both pious and learned, in provincial town

or village. Can a modern German tell you, for example, why some Protestant scholars must be addressed as *D. Dr.* (and not merely 'doctor'), or why it matters to be entitled a *Geheimer Konsistorialrat*? Gerber does not stoop to tell you either. You are now where such things are simply taken for granted.

The thorough-going Germanness of the work gives it a special authenticity. Source phrases are embedded in the English syntactically. One reads the sentences as a coherent whole, bilingually. When complete paragraphs are cited from the original they also constitute an integral stage in the presentation, and their sense will not have been extrapolated into the following English section. Gerber has been admitted into the family circle of Deissmann. The book is dedicated to his late son, Gerhard Deissmann, who had opened the door for Gerber.

An element of mystery is cast over the whole scene by the headings applied to its major components. The title of the book itself 'Deissmann the philologist', repeats the title of only one of its nine chapters. Moreover, Deissmann was never formally identified as a student or as a teacher in that faculty. He was enrolled at Tübingen in the Faculty of Theology, and attended only their lectures, as his certificates show (pp 421–423). As professor in both the Heidelberg and the Berlin Faculties of Theology he lectured only on their curriculum, as his diaries register in detail for the years 1904 to 1935.

For the whole book along with each of the three main parts, its general conclusion, and a fourth part (Appendices and Addenda), Gerber presents a portrait of Deissmann by way of frontispiece:

p vii: bronze bust (1936), frontispiece for the book

p 5: photograph (c. 1895–98) for Part 1

p 125: photograph (1926) for Part 2

p 207: oil painting (1930) for Part 3

p 371: family photograph (1934) - 'General conclusion'

p 381: bronze plaque at Langenscheid (1962) for Part 4

This picture gallery presents a figure of ageless consistency, solemn, a little guarded, and not a dramatic lecturer. Some students suggestively called him 'the sheikh'.

The first puzzle heads the portrait for Part 1:– Δύο τάλαντά μοι παρέδωκας. Presumably this is a totem for Part 1. But it is neither identified nor translated (Matt. 25:22 'You gave me two talents'). That text of course continues, 'Behold, I have earned two more'. So will these be for Parts 2 and 3? For Part 1 we must ask, were the two talents applied to himself by Deissmann, or are they offered (for him) by Gerber? Although I read the book eagerly from cover to cover, and have prowled around it since over many months, I am still unable to pick up the key.

My best guess is that Gerber uses it to hint at the conflict of interest in Deissmann's twenties between Theology

and Philology ('Classics'). His father had insisted on enrolment in Theology. But Deissmann printed on his own visiting card that he was a student in both faculties. It was notorious (and still so in my time) that German students bonded in faculty groups against each other (much as with college boats in Cambridge). The serious part in Deissmann's case is that his pioneering philological approach to the New Testament on the basis of the papyrus documents (then first being published en masse) put him at odds with Theology. He was hand-picked for the Berlin chair by his eminent predecessor (Bernhard Weiss) who correctly sensed a paradigm shift, but had to endure public denunciation of Deissmann in the theological press.

The outcome however was for Deissmann 'the philologist' both deeply frustrating, and even tragic. He allowed himself to be taken from Heidelberg to centre-stage in the imperial capital in the belief he would be free to concentrate on the new dictionary of Biblical Greek demanded by his own discovery of its common (*koine*) character, the ordinary discourse of the day, and not a distinctively spiritual register. It was never to be completed. Deissmann was dragged by the times into radically different commitments (Parts 2 and 3). In early 1945, Gerber believes, the precious card index for the dictionary was used as winter fuel by the Red Army officers briefly quartered in the family home, where the widow had until then been still in residence.

The structure of this fascinatingly complex book is best grasped by the titles of the nine chapters and sixty sections into which it is sharply divided (pp xxi–xxiii). Each is an intensely detailed exploration of a specific facet of Deissmann's affairs. I list here the nine, with one tantalising section heading in each case.

### **Part 1 (116 pp)**

1. Deissmann the discoverer (pp 7–60)
  - 1.3 The formula ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ ('in Christ Jesus').
2. Deissmann the lexicographer (pp 61–103)
  - 2.4 Berlin: a crucial decision
3. Deissmann the philologist (pp 104–122)
  - 3.2 Deissmann's philological background

### **Part 2 (80 pp)**

4. From the study to realia (pp 127–154)
  - 4.1 Study tour 1906: Anatolia, Greece and Crete
5. The Ephesian excavations (pp 155–206)
  - 5.2 Raising awareness and funding

### **Part 3 (168 pp)**

6. From postclassical Greek to *Sozialpolitik* (pp 209–244)
  - 6.5 Belgian invasion, and first cracks in confidence
7. *Evangelischer Wochenbrief* and *Protestant Weekly Letter* (pp 245–282)

### 7.4 Changing perspectives in the *Wochenbriefe*

8. Ecumenical humanitarianism (pp 283–342)
  - 8.2 War theology and the German God
9. From zenith to eclipse (pp 343–376)
  - 9.5 Epilogue to an anachronistic life

Each of the nine chapters has a separate conclusion, as well as the general one. I will identify a key point in each, with my own comment.

1. The discovery of the common character of biblical Greek has been broadly vindicated. Yet Deissmann's initial dissertation on the 'in Christ' formula (which he took as implying 'Christ mysticism') is now side-stepped by the semantic break-down of the actual instances of the formula in the Macquarie thesis of D.J. Timms, mentioned but not evaluated in Gerber's footnote 65, and omitted from his index. Also omitted from the index is the 1991 claim of Stuart Pickering that 'by the late 1900s ... some 40,000 [papyri] had been published', which Gerber (footnote 75) says 'appears excessive'. But this is because Gerber is referring to 'the last two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century', his eye tricking him into reading 'late 1900s' as the same period. Pickering is of course correct for the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century ('late 1900s'). The latest estimate (2009) is 50,000.

2. Deissmann's plan for a new kind of lexicon of biblical Greek was intended as his life's work, which is why it had often to give way to more urgent demands. He was more ready to help with Moulton and Milligan's *Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament* than to co-opt a partner himself who might have seen his own project through to completion.

3. Deissmann grew out of his youthful ambition to be a classical philologist, yet did not become a mere theologian. He established the sub-discipline of postclassical Greek as vital to New Testament studies.

4. Two study tours to the Middle East formed a watershed in his academic and personal life. His romantic attachment to 'the world of the New Testament' fuelled his need to break out of the confines of academic study.

5. This led the Austrian excavators of Ephesus to ask him to join four seasons of their work (1926–1929), and he chaired the trustees of this costly enterprise until his death, with access to American and German funding.

6. Out of his research into the social history of early Christianity grew a political conscience in support of Naumann's social principles, which by 1914 Deissmann was directing more to international understanding.

7. Throughout the war Deissmann produced a personal weekly letter for carefully targeted people abroad. It was increasingly critical of both sides, and after the war he was established as a worldwide ambassador for peace.

8. Deissmann distanced himself from the neo-Lutheran

doctrine of the two kingdoms (*Zweireichelehre*). For a God-chosen nation the war had become a holy one, to fulfil God's inscrutable will for the rest of mankind. But for Deissmann his mystical trust in God's love began to stir in him the desire to help in reuniting the alienated world through the unity of the church.

9. Nominated twice for the Nobel Peace Prize, several times an honorary doctor abroad, and finally rector of the University of Berlin, Gerber considers none of this would have been possible without Deissmann's fundamental work in the early Heidelberg period (1897–2008), which had launched him into the international arena with his philological researches. But the loss of very many of his students in the war left him with no successor to it. Four years into the Nazi 'standardisation' (*Gleichschaltung*) he died 'of a broken heart'.

### **General Conclusion (pp 373–376)**

'Deissmann emerges as an atypical humanitarian internationalist ... who cannot be "pigeon-holed" without distorting his true persona.' 'His work ... has been widely underestimated or misunderstood by post-WW II scholarship' 'Deissmann's slide into virtual oblivion ... was a "side effect" of WW II.' Deissmann 'should not be characterised narrowly (or *merely*) as "a theologian", nor, indeed as an ecumenist ... he was an intellectual pragmatist.'

'not a free thinker, but ... highly independent in his thinking'

'not a pacifist, but ... a passionate peacemaker'

'not a devout Lutheran, but ... a pietistic believer in the Pauline Christ-mysticism'

'not a nationalistic *Bildungsbürger*, but ... a patriotic *Gebildeter*'

'not a stereotypical ecumenist, but ... an altruistic latitudinarian ...'

Gerber thus concludes with a finely calculated description of a committed intellectual. The philologist has finally been left unmentioned. Gerber's mastery of the widely dispersed sources will establish his work as the necessary point of reference in studies of various fields. Deissmann deserves wider recognition in particular for his re-floating of the archaeology of Ephesus, highly productive in our time.

Gerber has developed the remarkable achievement of this book in connection with G.H.R. Horsley of the University of New England, whose own lexicographical interests led to contact with the family of Deissmann, and who once let the world know that the 'lost' Deissmann ostraca were safely kept in the Nicholson Museum at Sydney.

It is fitting maybe for an Antipodean rediscovery to suspect 'a slide into oblivion' (p 373), but Deissmann's pupil Emil Bock need not be thought to have 'verified' Deissmann's 'obscurity' in 1959 (p 361). Bock's own New Testament publications suggest that his professional interest had gravitated away to the curriculum needs of the Rudolf Steiner schools. The standard German reference works of the fifties recognise Deissmann's ongoing importance. Note for example the Pontifical Biblical Institute's K. Prümm, *Religionsgeschichtliches Handbuch* (Rome 1954) and Carl Schneider's *Geistesgeschichte des antiken Christentums* (Munich 1954). In the *Neue Deutsche Biographie* (1956) H. Strathmann states that amongst German theologians only Deissmann's senior colleague Harnack (1851–1930) was more famous worldwide.

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