

“It Is Written ...”

Epigraphy and Pauline Exegesis

The use of epigraphic evidence for the exegesis of early Christian literature is a long-standing concern, as was already expressed by Adolf Deissmann. Even today, attempts to take inscriptional sources into greater account have remained fragmentary. Thanks to changed technical conditions and with the knowledge that the language of inscriptions is closer to everyday speech in antiquity than many literary texts, systematic approaches such as that of the “Epigraphical Commentary on the New Testament” promise to broaden our understanding. This is demonstrated by three examples taken from the Pauline epistles: the term *κατάκριμα*, the meaning of *ἁμαρτία*, and the use of *ἀγάπη*, *ἀγαπᾶν*, and *ἀγαπητός*.

Keywords: inscriptions, epigraphy, Pauline letters, judgement, sin, love

1 Adolf Deissmann’s Formative Impetus

It was mainly in connection with the “Religionsgeschichtliche Schule” of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that inscriptions of the Greek and Roman world were first examined more closely. At the turn of the twentieth century, Adolf Deissmann integrated the results of papyrological and epigraphical research into his *Bibelstudien* (1885) and *Neue Bibelstudien* (1887) as well as his famous *Licht vom Osten* (1908; 4th ed., 1923).¹ In these works he described the analysis of the biblical texts in terms

¹ A. Deissmann, *Bibelstudien: Beiträge, zumeist aus den Papyri und Inschriften, zur Geschichte der Sprache, des Schrifttums und der Religion des hellenistischen Judentums und des Urchristentums* (Marburg: Elwert, 1895); id., *Neue Bibelstudien: Sprachgeschichtliche Beiträge, zumeist aus den Papyri und Inschriften, zur Erklärung des Neuen Testaments* (Marburg: Elwert, 1897); id., *Licht vom Osten: Das Neue Testament und die neuentdeckten Texte der hellenistisch-römischen Welt*, 4th rev. ed. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1923); ET: *Light from the Ancient East: The New Testament Illustrated by Recently Discovered Texts of the Graeco-Roman World*, trans. L.R.M. Strachan (New York: Harper, 1927). On Deissmann’s relationship to the “Religionsgeschichtliche Schule,” see G. Seelig, *Religionsgeschichtliche Methode in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart: Studien zur Geschichte und Methode des re-*

of linguistic, literary, religious, and general social history as a crucial objective.²

Deissmann was convinced that the dictionary he considered his *opus vitae* had to be secular, stimulated by the results of historical research into the Greek language.³ In a letter to James Moulton, he mentions having been asked by Moulton to compile the inscriptional evidence for his dictionary. According to Deissmann, this had “a great attraction” (“einen großen Reiz”) but would prevent him from publishing his own dictionary.⁴ In the same year, Albrecht Dieterich, a close friend of Deissmann, wrote:

The language in which the Hellenistic world and early Christianity spoke can and must be researched today from thousands and thousands of inscriptions, from the masses of newly discovered papyri, from the abundance of new documents; the main writings of our religion can only be properly understood on this basis.⁵

It was always important to Deissmann to make the Greek of the New Testament (and also of the Septuagint) recognizable as contemporary Greek and thus to refute a view that granted the biblical texts the status of a special language.⁶ This concerned both the detection of supposed New

ligionsgeschichtlichen Vergleichs in der neutestamentlichen Wissenschaft, Arbeiten zur Bibel und ihrer Geschichte 7 (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2001), 204–211.

2 Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East* (see n. 1), 399.

3 Cf. A. Deissmann, *Die sprachliche Erforschung der griechischen Bibel, ihr gegenwärtiger Stand und ihre Aufgaben*, Vorträge der theologischen Konferenz zu Gießen 12 (Gießen: Ricker, 1898), 25; see also id., *Light from the Ancient East* (see n. 1), 401–409. Deissmann comments on the New Testament dictionaries by Wilibald Grimm and Hermann Cremer: “Was die Inschriften anlangt, so hätten sowohl Grimm als auch Cremer ihnen bereits vieles entnehmen können, dessen Nichtberücksichtigung sich strafen wird” (Deissmann, *Erforschung*, 24). According to his view, “[wird] das künftige Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament [...] in noch höherem Grade als die Grammatik verweltlicht sein, das heißt befruchtet von den Ergebnissen der historischen Erforschung der griechischen Sprache” (25). The project of his New Testament dictionary, which Deissmann was never able to complete due to professional changes and the First World War, has most recently been described by D. du Toit, “Der verhinderte Lexikograph: Adolf Deissmanns Beitrag zur Lexikographie des Griechisch des frühen Christentums,” in *Adolf Deissmann: Ein (zu Unrecht) fast vergessener Theologe und Philologe*, ed. C. Breytenbach and C. Marksches, NovTSup 174 (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 41–65.

4 A. Deissmann, letter to J. Moulton, 12 Jan. 1907, in A. Gerber, *Deissmann the Philologist*, BZNW 171 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010), 402–403.

5 A. Dieterich, letter to A. Jelinek, 21 Nov. 1907, in Gerber, *Deissmann* [see n. 4], 404–405: “Die Sprache, in der die Hellenistische Welt und das Urchristentum redete, kann und muß heute aus tausenden und abertausenden von Inschriften, aus den Massen neuentdeckter Papyri, aus der Fülle neuer Dokumente erforscht werden; die Haupturkunden unserer Religion können erst auf dieser Grundlage richtig verstanden werden.”

6 Cf. du Toit, “Lexikograph” (see n. 3), 54: “Die Beobachtungen zielen in erster Linie darauf, für einzelne Wörter bzw. Syntagmen den Nachweis zu führen, dass sie nicht auf das Neue

Testament hapax legomena in inscriptions, papyri, and ostraca as well as the uncovering of new meanings through these sources. However, this task was never accomplished in the way he had in mind, although almost all of Deissmann's observations have found their way into the dictionary of Walter Bauer.⁷ James Moulton and George Milligan largely adopted what Deissmann had compiled, although the papyri in their still unrivaled lexicon contribute the vast majority of evidence.⁸

2 The Use of Epigraphic Evidence in Dictionaries

The meagre attention paid to inscriptional evidence in comparison to literary sources has hardly changed since Deissmann's time. This can be illustrated by taking a closer look at frequently used dictionaries of New Testament vocabulary: Over the decades only very few inscriptions or papyri were added to explain the meaning of the lemmata, sometimes documentary sources were even removed.⁹ This can be shown, for example, by the entries for ἀγάπη, ἀγαπᾶν, and ἀγαπητός.

Moulton and Milligan listed for ἀγαπᾶν the phrasing ἡγαπημένου ὑπὸ τοῦ Φθᾶ as epigraphic evidence for the love of a deity (OGIS 90, Rosetta,

Testament (und die Septuaginta) beschränkt sind und somit nicht als Belege für ein besonderes 'biblisches' Griechisch herhalten können."

7 W. Bauer, *Griechisch-deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der übrigen urchristlichen Literatur* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1928). It was a thorough revision of E. Preuschen, *Vollständiges griechisch-deutsches Handwörterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der übrigen urchristlichen Literatur* (Gießen: Töpelmann, 1910). Preuschen's dictionary referenced only texts from early Christian literature.

8 J.H. Moulton and G. Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament Illustrated from the Papyri and Other Non-literary Sources* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1929). See on that connection and later developments, e.g., P. Arzt-Grabner, "Neues zu Paulus aus den Papyri des römischen Alltags," *EC* 1 (2010), 131–157, here 131–134. The desire for a "New Moulton & Milligan" has been voiced several times but has yet to be answered; see, e.g., C.J. Hemer, "Towards a New Moulton and Milligan," *NovT* 24 (1982), 97–123; G.H.R. Horsley and J.A.L. Lee, "A Lexicon of the New Testament with Documentary Parallels: Some Interim Entries 1," *Filologia Neotestamentaria* 10 (1997), 55–84; id., "A Lexicon of the New Testament with Documentary Parallels: Some Interim Entries 2," *Filologia Neotestamentaria* 11 (1998), 57–84; G.H.R. Horsley, "Epigraphy as an ancilla to the Study of the Greek Bible: A Propos of A Recent Anthology of Inscriptions," *Bib* 79 (1998), 258–267; id., "Towards a Lexicon of the New Testament with Documentary Parallels," in *Atti del XXII Congresso internazionale di papirologia, Firenze, 23–29 agosto 1998* (Florence: Istituto papirologico "G. Vitelli," 2001), 655–667.

9 On problematic developments in New Testament lexicography, see J.A.L. Lee, *A History of New Testament Lexicography*, Studies in Biblical Greek 8 (New York: Lang, 2003).

196 BCE).¹⁰ The fifth edition of Bauer's *Wörterbuch* additionally mentioned another inscription: Βρουτταράτος, δὸν ἀγαπᾷ ἡ Φαρία Ἰσις (SB 5.8542, around 100 CE).¹¹ Although this was much closer in time to early Christian texts it was deleted in the sixth edition by Barbara Aland and Kurt Aland, who kept only the Rosetta stone as inscriptional evidence.¹² As an example for the meaning of ἀγαπᾷν as "striving for something," Bauer referred to an inscription that passes on popular sayings from Delphi and was found in Mysic Cyzicus/Miletupolis: [φ]ιλίαν ἀγάπα (I.Kyzikos 2, late 4th or early 3rd cent. BCE).¹³

A non-Christian use of ἀγάπη, already cited in Bauer (and later in Danker), but deleted in Aland and Aland, can be found in an epigram on a sarcophagus of a Roman soldier in Tiberias at the Sea of Galilee, which spoke of love for one's native city (ἡ τίς ὑπὸ πάτρης τόσσην ἔσχ' ἀγάπην, SEG 8.11, 3rd cent. CE).¹⁴ A quite similar statement can be found in an inscription from Metropolis in Phrygia (SEG 28.1171; MAMA 4.133, 2nd cent. CE), which mentions the love of the venerated for the people (δῆμόν τε ἀγάπησαν).¹⁵ In Chersonesus (Sevastopol) someone was honored for "showing genuine love" (ἀγάπα<ν> γνασίαν ἐνδεικν[ύ][[μενος, IOSPE³

¹⁰ Moulton and Milligan, *Vocabulary* (see n. 8), 2; see also LSJ, s.v.; further evidence mentioned in LSJ (MAMA 1.176; IG XIV 2317) is Christian.

¹¹ W. Bauer, *Griechisch-deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schrften des Neuen Testaments und der übrigen urchristlichen Literatur*, 5th ed. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1958), s.v.

¹² W. Bauer, *Griechisch-deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schrften des Neuen Testaments und der frühchristlichen Literatur*, 6th ed., ed. K. Aland and B. Aland (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1988), s.v. It was reintroduced in F.W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v.

¹³ This is also included in Aland and Aland as well as in Danker. The widespread nature of this idea is now clear in evidence from far-removed Kandahar, which explicitly encourages the love for friends and fellow members of associations (φίλους καὶ ἑταίρους ἀγαπᾷν, *I.Estrema Oriente* 292.8f., mid-3rd cent. CE); see F. Canali De Rossi, *I.Estrema Oriente*, p. 189. Epigraphic corpora not listed in *SBLHS* are abbreviated according to the "List of Abbreviations of Editions and Works of Reference for Alphabetic Greek Epigraphy" of the Association Internationale d'Épigraphie Grecque et Latine (AIEGL), <https://www.aiegl.org/grepiabbr.html>.

¹⁴ Cf. T. Söding, "Das Wortfeld der Liebe im paganen und biblischen Griechisch," *ETL* 68 (1992), 284–330, here 294; O. Wischmeyer, "Vorkommen und Bedeutung von Agape in der außerchristlichen Antike," in *Von Ben Sira zu Paulus: Gesammelte Aufsätze zu Texten, Theologie und Hermeneutik des Frühjudentums und des Neuen Testaments*, WUNT 173 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 91–115, here 102–103. See also C. Spicq, *Notes de lexicographie néo-testamentaire*, vol. 3: *Supplément*, OBO 22/3 (Fribourg: Editions Universitaires; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978), 15–30.

¹⁵ In both cases, to assume Jewish or Christian influence would be speculative; but see Söding, "Wortfeld" (see n. 14), 295; Wischmeyer, "Vorkommen" (see n. 14), 107.

3.22; *IOSPE* I² 359, 129/130 CE).¹⁶ Apparently the root was used in inscriptions to describe the love for a community.

Scrutiny of databases like that of the Packard Humanities Institute (PHI) furthermore reveals that names which trace back to the root ἀγάπη were quite popular.¹⁷ Naturally, none of this is mentioned in dictionaries, although this frequency of names warrants the conclusion that the use of ἀγάπη κτλ. in everyday language was entirely commonplace.

The dictionaries, however, not only pass over this evidence but also over numerous instances for ἀγαπᾶν and ἀγαπητός:¹⁸ In a grave epigram from Thessalonica dated in the first century CE, the politarch Aristarchos hints that he loved his wife Basileia: ἐ[νθάδ' Ἀρ]ίσταρχ[ος κεῖτ' αἰ] ποτ[ὶ] λ[ι]άρχος [ἐ] <χ>έφρων. | ἔξοχα τόν ρ' ἀγάπη|σε δάμαρ Βασίλει|α Λεώκιν. ζῆ (IG X 2, 1 848). On an epitaph from Heraclea Perinthus in Thrace (1st/2nd cent. CE), one Aimilia Italia is referred to as beloved.¹⁹ Similarly, the following can be found in Caesarea Maritima: Ἀλθῖπις τῇ ἀγαπητῇ συμβίωι (*I. Caesarea Maritima* 149, 2nd/3rd cent. CE). A bilingual inscription from Ephesus refers to one P. Cordius Pharnaces as beloved by many or much beloved (πολλὰ ἀγαπώμ[ενος, *I. Ephesos* 2240A, 2nd/3rd cent. CE). This could indicate a familial context but may well extend beyond that.²⁰ This evidence

¹⁶ This inscription is mentioned by Danker, *Lexicon* (see n. 12), s.v., as evidence for 2 Cor 8:8: [...] τὸ τῆς ὑμετέρας ἀγάπης γνήσιον δοκιμάζων.

¹⁷ See <https://epigraphy.packhum.org/> (last visited 25 May 2023): Agape (12 ×), e.g., *SEG* 47.111 (Athens, early 5th cent. BCE; see Wischmeyer, "Vorkommen" [see n. 14], 102–105); Agapetos (19 ×), e.g., *IG* II² 2051 (Athens, 144/145–148/149 CE); Agapaios (5 ×), e.g., *IG* II² 1632 (Athens, 323/324 CE); Agapion (1 ×), *IG* II² 1568 (Athens, 330 CE); Agapomenos (11 ×), e.g., *IG* II² 2083 (Athens, mid-2nd cent. CE); Agapis (1 ×), *IG* II² 10564 (Athens, 3rd cent. BCE); Agapatis (1 ×), *IG* IV 732 (Hermionis, no date); Agapeta (1 ×), *IG* V 2 92 (Tegea, 4th cent. BCE); Agapenor (1 ×), *ABSA* 56 (1961), 24 no. 61; Agapanour (1 ×), *SEG* 25.664 (Pherae, 3rd cent. BCE); Agapa (1 ×), *I. Vallée Enipeus* 82 (Pharsalus, 5th cent. BCE).

¹⁸ A thorough investigation into the treatment of ἀγαπητός in dictionaries can be found in Lee, *History* (see n. 9), 193–211.

¹⁹ *I. Perinthus* 90: ... τῇ ἀγαπητῇ Αἰ|μιλία Ἰταλία ... See also *I. North Galatia* 14: αἰδοῖται δ' ἀγαπηταὶ ἀνεάζουσι φίλον κῆρ θυ|γάτερες κασίδις τε μόρον πάτρος ("And his modest and beloved daughters and their brother grieve in their dear hearts for the fate of the father ...," trans. Lee, *History* [see n. 9], 203).

²⁰ Agape between children and parents is referred to in an inscription from Messene (*SEG* 52.420, not yet dated). Further evidence for the noun ἀγάπη cannot add more to this impression, e.g., in Athens (*Agora* 17.841, 2nd/3rd cent. CE; see also *I. Tomis* 311 [*SEG* 25.765], 2nd/3rd cent. CE; *I. Knidos* 153 A ll. 4, 7 f., 2nd/1st cent. BCE), but demonstrates the use of the term; cf. Wischmeyer, "Vorkommen" (see n. 14), 101–102. A more general use of ἀγαπᾶν may be found in a letter from Empress Plotina to the Epicureans of Athens, which was preserved in an inscription in Athens, but the evidence for ἀγαπᾶν is uncertain due to the preservation of the stone (*IG* II² 1099, 121 CE).

shows that the semantic contents of ἀγάπη, ἀγαπᾶν, and ἀγαπητός can frequently be identified in the domains of family and friendship. This is also confirmed by their usage in papyri and Hellenistic literature.²¹ None of this documentary evidence is mentioned in the context of “brotherly love” in the fifth edition of Bauer’s *Wörterbuch*, in the sixth edition by Aland and Aland, nor in Danker’s *Lexicon*.²²

One should, however, not reproach these authors of dictionaries for not having consulted more inscriptions. In earlier times, finds tended to be products of chance. Moreover, all of the evidence cannot, of course, be accommodated in a dictionary. Indeed, for the most part the meanings found in inscriptions are also present in literary sources. But in many cases, it is more than questionable whether the language of Greco-Roman authors was actually familiar to the writers and readers of early Christian literature. The vast majority of literate Christ-believers were not acquainted with texts of Plato or Epictetus, Philo or Plutarch, but with letters on papyrus, inscriptions on stone, and ostraca on shards. For financial reasons alone, the world of books in antiquity was accessible only to a small elite, who also read and wrote inscriptions. The majority of literary riches remained closed to most people. It is therefore highly significant how words were used in precisely those day-to-day contexts that are documented in papyri and inscriptions.²³ In my opinion, we are traveling down the wrong path if, for our exegetical questions, we turn mainly to literary evidence and only use inscriptions and papyri as further illustration. The direction should rather be the other way around, namely, from documentary sources to literary ones.

21 Cf. A. Ceresa-Gastaldo, “‘ΑΓΑΠΗ’ nei documenti anteriori al Nuovo Testamento,” *Aeg* 31 (1951), 269–306.

22 On ἀγάπη in the Septuagint, see J.K. Aitken, *No Stone Unturned: Greek Inscriptions and Septuagint Vocabulary*, Critical Studies in the Hebrew Bible (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2014), 68–69; for a general perspective, see also J.A.L. Lee, “The Vocabulary of the Septuagint and Documentary Evidence,” in *Die Sprache der Septuaginta/The Language of the Septuagint*, ed. E. Bons and J. Joosten, *Handbuch zur Septuaginta* 3 (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2016), 82–92.

23 However, I do not want to resurrect Deissmann’s view that early Christianity was an underclass phenomenon; see M. Öhler, “Zwischen Elend und Elite: Paulinische Gemeinden in ökonomischer Perspektive,” in *Receptions of Paul in Early Christianity: The Person of Paul and His Writings through the Eyes of His Early Interpreters*, ed. J. Schröter, S. Buttacaz, and A. Dettwiler, BZNW 234 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2018), 249–286.

3 The Epigraphic Turn in New Testament Studies

Apart from the abovementioned examples in dictionaries, inscriptions have, of course, been consulted in studies on the New Testament and early Christianity. In this regard, the series *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity* (1976–1998) should be highlighted for making accessible relevant sources from, inter alia, Greco-Roman epigraphy. However, this collection of epigraphical and papyrological evidence, deemed relevant to the New Testament and the history of early Christianity (compiled primarily by G.H.R. Horsley and S.R. Llewelyn), only worked with examples and was published at long intervals. In addition, more recent case studies on the history of early Christianity,²⁴ or on themes of the New Testament,²⁵ also show the increasing recognition of the significance of epigraphical evidence.²⁶ More recently, D. Clint Burnett offered five case studies for the importance of inscriptions as background for New Testament exegesis.²⁷

In light of the many subject areas in which inscriptions have either not been taken into consideration or been given inadequate attention, it is evident that an enormous amount of work remains to be done. A major reason for this situation is that the study of epigraphical sources requires extensive research efforts.²⁸ Above all, it presupposes expertise in epigraphical methods, which – given the manifold other challenges of New

24 E.g., J.R. Harrison and L.L. Welborn, *The First Urban Churches*, 4 vols. (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015–2022); L.S. Nasrallah, *Archaeology and the Letters of Paul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

25 E.g., P.A. Harland, *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations: Claiming a Place in Ancient Mediterranean Society* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013); I. Peres, *Griechische Grabinschriften und neutestamentliche Eschatologie*, WUNT 157 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003); J.S. Kloppenborg and R.S. Ascough, *Greco-Roman Associations: Texts, Translations, and Commentary*, vol. 1: *Attica, Central Greece, Macedonia, Thrace*, BZNW 181 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011); P.A. Harland, *Greco-Roman Associations: Texts, Translations, and Commentary*, vol. 2: *North Coast of the Black Sea, Asia Minor*, BZNW 204 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014); J.S. Kloppenborg, *Greco-Roman Associations: Texts, Translations, and Commentary*, vol. 3: *Ptolemaic and Early Roman Egypt*, BZNW 246 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2020); J.R. Harrison, *Paul and the Imperial Authorities at Thessalonica and Rome: A Study in the Conflict of Ideology*, WUNT 273 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011).

26 See also the compilation of L. Boffo, *Iscrizioni greche e latine per lo studio della Bibbia*, Biblioteca di storia e storiografia dei tempi biblici 9 (Brescia: Paideia, 1994).

27 D.C. Burnett, *Studying the New Testament through Inscriptions: An Introduction* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2020).

28 For introductions to epigraphic research, see B.H. McLean, *An Introduction to Greek Epigraphy of the Hellenistic and Roman Periods from Alexander the Great down to the Reign of Constantine (323 B.C.–A.D. 337)* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002); Burnett, *Studying the New Testament* (see n. 27).

Testament exegesis – is only rarely found among New Testament scholars. Over the past years some very fine first results from papyrological sources have become available through the series “Papyrologische Kommentare zum Neuen Testament” (PKNT).²⁹ It demonstrates that significant insights are to be gained from this approach with respect to the composition and reception of early Christian texts. Unfortunately, so far, no comparable work has been done on the vast field of inscriptions.

Within the framework of a research project entitled “Epigraphical Commentary on the New Testament,” an attempt has been made over the past four years to use the epigraphic material to produce a commentary, in this case on 1 Thessalonians.³⁰ The following approach has proven to be very useful:

The point of departure for examining the epigraphical material is to search in various databases, such as the one provided by the PHI or the long-established publications of inscriptions in *SEG*.

Depending on the number of finds, it is of course necessary to filter the results. The team of the “Epigraphical Commentary on the New Testament” decided to do this in the following way:

Should the search in the databases yield a lot of instances of epigraphical evidence, the material will be sorted according to temporal and geographical classifications, as far as possible. Evidence from the first century CE will be treated first. If the results of this analysis are representative, they will be compared to older and more recent inscriptions. In both steps, inscriptions from areas where the Pauline letters were composed or where the addressees lived will be considered first. When the results of a thorough search turn up fewer instances – sometimes, as we will see, there may be only one – only then will those from more remote places and times be considered.³¹

In the process, special attention will be given to the type and genre of inscriptions (e.g., civic decree, building dedication, religious votive, epigraph) and its local usage since technical terms operate differently in various

29 P. Arzt-Grabner, *Philemon*, PKNT 1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003); P. Arzt-Grabner et al., *1. Korinther*, PKNT 2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006); C. Kreinecker, *2. Thessaloniker*, PKNT 3 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010); P. Arzt-Grabner and R.E. Kritznier, *2. Korinther*, PKNT 4 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014).

30 Funded by the Austrian Science Foundation (P 31343). The commentary is prepared by Julien Ogereau, the project itself conducted by Thomas Corsten, Markus Öhler, Joseph Verheyden, and (more recently) Riet van Bremen.

31 Inscriptions that are clearly Christian are excluded from the research; on these, see the database *Inscriptiones Christianae Graecae* (ICG), <https://icg.uni-kiel.de>.

contexts. We will also consider monumental form and material (e.g., marble stele, bronze plate), paleographic features, as well as historical and archaeological contexts. The commentaries will thus investigate the significance of a passage from the perspective of someone immersed in the language and cultural environment of the author and of the audience as evidenced in inscriptions.

4 Reading Pauline Letters through the Lens of Inscriptions

In the following I will try to show, with the help of selected examples from the Pauline literature, that added value can indeed be expected from taking inscriptions into account to understand Paul's letters. This involves both the author's perspective and how the apostle's statements might have been understood in the context of his addressees.

4.1 Κατάκριμα – One Additional Reference for A Rather Rare Word

In Rom 5:16, 18 and 8:1 Paul uses the word κατάκριμα. It is astonishing how rarely this word is attested in antiquity outside of Christian texts.³² It is found twice in Dionysius Halicarnassus (*Ant. rom.* 6.61.2; 13.5.1). In each case, Dionysius is referring to the assessment of a financial penalty, once in tax matters, once as a payment imposed on the legendary savior of Rome, M. Furius Camillus. Papyrological attestations have already been mentioned by Deissmann³³ as well as Moulton and Milligan:³⁴ The latter conclude with Deissmann that the word does not mean "condemnation," as it is frequently translated, but "the punishment following the sentence."³⁵

32 Cf., e.g., M. Wolter, *Der Brief an die Römer*, 2 vols., EKK 6/1–2 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht; Ostfildern: Patmos, 2014–2019), 1.353 n. 52: "Das Wort ist auch der hellenistisch-jüdischen Literatur gänzlich unbekannt und findet sich in der nichtjüdischen Gräzität nur zweimal [...] sowie vereinzelt in Papyri."

33 Deissmann, *Bibelstudien* (see n. 1), 92–93.

34 Moulton and Milligan, *Vocabulary* (see n. 8), 327–328.

35 A search in the database Papyri.info (<https://papyri.info>) yields 34 hits for κατάκριμα, almost all from the first century CE. They always denote penalties or unspecific levies; cf. on this T. Kruse, "Κατάκριμα – Strafzahlung oder Steuer? Überlegungen zur Steuererhebung im römischen Ägypten in iulisch-claudischer Zeit anhand von P. Oxy. XLI 2971, SB XIV 11381, SPP IV p. 70–71, BGU VII 1613 und OGIS II 669," *ZPE* 124 (1999), 157–190, here 158: "Κατάκριμα erscheint [...] immer in Zusammenhang mit Zahlungen."

Of the four records for κατάκριμα in the PHI database, only one is non-Christian. It comes from the temple of Hibis in the Charga oasis (Libyan Desert, 150 km west of the river Nile), which was densely populated in Roman times. The inscription was composed in 68 CE, thus contemporary with the Letter to the Romans, and quotes an edict of the prefect of Egypt, Tiberius Julius Alexander, a Judean by *genos*.³⁶ In ll. 47f. it says:

ταῦτα δὲ καὶ τὰ τοιαῦτα κατακρίματ[α ο]ὐκ ἐπὶ τὴν Θηβαίδα μόνη[ν εὖρον ἐκτεινόμενα]
[οὐ]δὲ ἐπὶ τοὺς πόρρω νομοὺς τῆς κάτω χώρας, ἀλλ<λ>ὰ ...

But these and similar charges I have found do not extend to the Thebais alone, and the nomes of the lower regions, but ...

The edict is, among other things, about reorganizing the imposition of levies and the collection of taxes. The governor wants to end the abuse by tax authorities that confronted landowners with ever new levies, which he considered to be unlawful. This led to uncertainty and multiple protests. The inscription thus refers to fees imposed (κατακρίνειν) by an authority. Together with the literary and papyrological evidence, it is thus clear that κατάκριμα is a term from the fiscal-economic sphere. It does not refer to a “condemnation” but to a sum of money.

When it comes to Rom 5 and 8, it can be shown that the apostle uses terms from the linguistic field of economics to express his theology.³⁷ When he writes of κατάκριμα, he assumes that such fines or levies set by authorities are familiar to the addressees. For the interpretation of the statements in Rom 5 and 8, it follows that, on the one hand, the connection between κατακρίνειν and κατάκριμα already belongs to the field of officially determined taxation. On the other hand, it is also clear that Paul did not understand κατάκριμα as “destruction” but as some punishment to be served.

This is of interest insofar as in Rom 5:16, 18 κρίμα (“judgement”) and κατάκριμα are distinguished: The judgement pronounced on the one, namely, Adam, results in the establishment of a κατάκριμα (5:16), namely, death (5:18). In contrast to this stands the δικαίωμα of Christ, which led to

36 It was first published by Dittenberger in *OGIS* 669 in 1905 (!). The edition used here is E.H.G. White and J.H. Oliver, *The Temple of Hibis in El Khargeh Oasis*, vol. 2: *Greek Inscriptions*, Publications of the Metropolitan Museum of Art: Egyptian Expedition 14 (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1938), 23–45. See Kruse, “Κατάκριμα” (see n. 35), 180–188 (with literature).

37 For a different example, cf., e.g., P. Arzt-Grabner, “Gott als verlässlicher Käufer: Einige Papyrologische Anmerkungen und bibeltheologische Schlussfolgerungen zum Gottesbild der Paulusbriefe,” *NTS* 57 (2011), 392–411.

the δικαίωσις ("justification") for all men. The δικαίωμα is the positive opposite of the κατάκριμα; it establishes the status of being righteous.³⁸

In Rom 8:1 Paul writes: Οὐδὲν ἄρα νῦν κατάκριμα τοῖς ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ. This is frequently translated as "There is no condemnation for those who are through Christ Jesus (or: in Christ Jesus)."³⁹ Against the background of the inscription and the evidence from the papyri and Dionysius Halicarnassus, κατάκριμα does not mean judgement or the act of condemnation but signifies the extent of the penalty. That might not seem to make much of a difference in the end, but in my view, it does. For Paul is not saying in Rom 8:1 that Christ-believers will not be judged at all. They will, as, for example, 2 Cor 5:10 makes clear: "For we must all appear before the judgement seat (βῆμα) of Christ." One could perhaps go so far as to paraphrase Rom 8:1 in the following way: "For those who are ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ, there is no determination of a punishment," because, according to Rom 8:2, they were released (ἡλευθέρωσεν). They do not have to serve a sentence, which according to Rom 5 would be death.⁴⁰

4.2 Ἀμαρτία – A Different Meaning for A Rather Familiar Word

In Christian tradition, the word "sin" is associated with a long theological history. Given the significance of this word, however, it is interesting to note how ἀμαρτία was used in antiquity. Basically, as found in literature, papyri and some inscriptions, the word means "error" or "fault."⁴¹ This can also be found in an inscription from Ephesus (*I.Ephesos* 3217, 113/114 CE):

³⁸ See Wolter, *Römer* (see n. 32), 1.353 n. 54.

³⁹ See, e.g., J.D.G. Dunn, *Romans*, 2 vols., WBC 38A–B (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 1.414; R.N. Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2016), 675; D.J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1996), 470; Wolter, *Römer* (see n. 32), 2.469 ("Verurteilung").

⁴⁰ R. Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 479–480, refers also to the documentary evidence and to the Pauline idea of divine judgement of believers but sees a contradiction between Rom 8:1 and 2 Cor 5:10.

⁴¹ For papyrological evidence, see *P.Lips* 1.119r (212–217 CE?): τῶν ἀμαρτίᾱ[ς] καὶ πονηρίας συνεχῶς διορθουμένων ("making immediately right the errors and bad things"); *P.Louvre* 3.172 (211–217 CE); *P.Oxy.* 8.1119 (253 CE): αὐτὸς ὑπέσχετο ἀντὶ τῆς ἀμαρτίας, ἀγνοίας προ[ό]φασιν ὑποτεμισάμενος, ὑποστήσασθαι τῷ [με]τὰ τοῦτο τὰς λειτουργίας ("himself promised in amends for his error, for which he pleaded the excuse of ignorance, to undertake the burden for the future"); *P.Wuerzb.* 1.3 (200–299 CE); see also *BGU* 4.1141 (13 BCE?): ... ὅτι δὲ ἐν τῇ πρώτῃ μου ἐπιστολῇ οὐθὲν ἀμάρτημα ἔνει ("... that in my first letter was no mistake included"). Cf. A. Papatthomas, *Juristische Begriffe im ersten Korintherbrief des Paulus: Eine semantisch-lexikalische Untersuchung auf der Basis der zeitgenössischen Papyri*, Tyche, Supplement 7 (Vienna: Holzhausen, 2009), 194.

Landowners are accused of damaging water pipes through wrongdoing (ὡς τῇ ἁμαρτίᾳ, B l. 7).

However, the use of ἁμαρτία in most inscriptions is essentially focused on cultic matters.⁴² The term is found in a regulation from Greek Laurium, which is preserved in two versions (*IG II²* 1365 and 1366; late 2nd/early 3rd cent. CE):

ὃς ἂν δὲ πολυπραγμονήσῃ τὰ τοῦ θεοῦ ἢ περιεργάσῃται, ἁμαρτίαν ὀφειλέτω Μηνί | Τυράννῳ, ἣν οὐ μὴ δύνηται ἐξιλάσασθαι.

Whoever is a quarreler or interferes with the property of the God is guilty of an offense against Men Tyrannos, which he cannot be atoned for.⁴³

Both ἁμαρτία or ἁμαρτήματα are also frequently used for offenses mentioned in Lydian and Phrygian inscriptions, the so-called Confession or Propitiatory Inscriptions.⁴⁴ In these texts, persons who have suffered misfortune (especially illness or the death of relatives) make confessions of their wrongdoings on public stelae, combined with praise for the punishing deity and the hope that this – sometimes combined with a sacrifice – will atone for their offenses. One of these inscriptions (Petzl, *Beichtinschriften* 24, 173/174 CE) reads:

Ἔτ(ους) σην' μν(νός) Αὐδναίου ἰβ'. | Ἀσκληᾶς Ἀπολλωνίου | μετὰ τῶν τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ
Ἀπολλωνίδου τέ|κνων Ἀσκληᾶ καὶ Ἀπολλωνίδου Διὶ Σαβαζίῳ | ἀνέθηκε ὑπὲρ ἁμαρ|τίας
ἧς ἤμαρτεν ὁ πα|τήρ μου.

In the year 258, on the twelfth of the month Audnaios. Asklas, son of Apollonios, with Asklas and Apollonides, the children of his brother Apollonides, set up (this stele) to Zeus Sabazios for offenses that my father committed.

This use of ἁμαρτάνειν and ἁμαρτία is the same in Hellenistic papyri that address legal issues and depict the connection between offense and pun-

⁴² Evidence from inscriptions is only rarely considered in dictionaries: In Bauer's fifth edition as well as in Aland and Aland the same two are mentioned, which were already included in Moulton and Milligan, *Vocabulary* (see n. 8). One is from Cyzicus/Miletupolis (*I.Kyzikos* 2), 4th/3rd cent. BCE, reading [ἀ]μαρτῶν μετανόει, not ἁμαρτίαν μετανόει, the other from Laurium (*IG II²* 1366 [*SIG* 1042], ll. 14–16, 2nd/3rd cent. CE; see below). Inscriptions and papyri are unfortunately not treated in D. Büchner, "A Cultic Term (ἁμαρτία) in the Septuagint: Its Meaning and Use from the Third Century B.C.E. until the New Testament," *BIOCS* 42 (2010), 1–17.

⁴³ This is the version in *IG II²* 1366.14–16. See also the edition and commentary in Kloppenborg and Ascough, *Greco-Roman Associations*, vol. 1 (see n. 25), 262–278.

⁴⁴ These inscriptions are collected in G. Petzl, *Die Beichtinschriften Westkleinasiens*, *Epigraphica Anatolica* 22 (Bonn: Habelt, 1994); id., "Die Beichtinschriften Westkleinasiens: Supplement," *Epigraphica Anatolica* 52 (2019), 1–105 (for more recent literature, see *ibid.*, 4–7). It is quite likely that the inscription from Laurium is related to the concepts in Lydia/Phrygia, for here as there it is often about worship.

ishment.⁴⁵ In the Lydian and Phrygian corpus, however, ἁμαρτία not only denotes an offense in general but also signifies a disturbance of the relationship with God: the deity punishes the wrongdoer and only refrains from this punishment after repentance and atonement.⁴⁶

In principle, based on the linguistic findings, it would make sense to translate ἁμαρτία not as "sin" but more neutrally as "transgression." At the same time, however, it must be taken into account, especially against the background of the inscriptions, that ἁμαρτία and ἁμαρτάνειν were usually linked to a cultic context. However, with the exception of the inscription from Laurium, the evidence is limited to a small geographical area. It is therefore rather unlikely that all readers of Paul's letters were familiar with this cultic context.⁴⁷ They would simply understand ἁμαρτία as misconduct, which can of course also occur with regard to God. Familiarity with the Septuagint is not even necessary, especially since this basic text might not have been equally known in all Pauline congregations, at least not at the time of the writing of some letters.⁴⁸

But even where we can assume with good reason that the Septuagint was known to the intended and historical first readers, it is worthwhile in my opinion to assume a less markedly Christian translation of the term. The cultic connotation should not, in my opinion, be entered into the term itself but should only result from the context in which the word is used. Translating ἁμαρτία with "offense" or "mistake" might shake off the ballast of later theological-historical developments, which are attached to the rendering "sin." How different might the letters of Paul sound if instances of ἁμαρτία were translated as referring to an offense or mistake?⁴⁹ To my mind these alienating effects vis-à-vis conventional theological language,

45 See A. Chaniotis, "'Tempeljustiz' im kaiserzeitlichen Kleinasien: Rechtliche Aspekte der Sühneinschriften Lydiens und Phrygiens," in *Vorträge zur griechischen und hellenistischen Rechtsgeschichte*, ed. G. Thür and J. Vlissaropoulos-Karakostas (Köln: Böhlau, 1997), 353–384, here 359; Papathomas, *Juristische Begriffe* (see n. 41), 194.

46 For a close parallel to this idea of cultic wrongdoing and capital punishment by a deity, see 1 Cor 11:29–32: The Corinthians' misbehavior at the Lord's Supper is punished with sickness and death.

47 For an attempt to interpret Galatians against the background of these inscriptions, cf. C.E. Arnold, "'I Am Astonished That You Are So Quickly Turning Away!' (Gal 1.6): Paul and Anatolian Folk Belief," *NTS* 51.3 (2005), 429–449.

48 Cf. M. Öhler, "Reception of the Old Testament in 1 Thessalonians and in Philippians?," in *Paul and Scripture*, ed. S.E. Porter and D.C. Land, *Pauline Studies* 10 (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 350–371.

49 Applicable examples would be Rom 7:7 ("I would not know the offense if not through the law"); 1 Cor 15:3 ("Christ died for our mistakes according to the scriptures"), or 15:56 ("The sting of death is the offense, the power of the offense is the law").

prompted by the material in documentary sources, make it worthwhile to engage with it.

4.3 Ἀγάπη – Once Again

As we have seen above, we can find multiple epigraphic attestations for the use of ἀγάπη, ἀγαπᾶν, and ἀγαπητός. Against this background, it is necessary to ask anew how this expression functions in Paul, this time focusing on 1 Thessalonians.⁵⁰

In 1 Thess 1:3 Paul refers, among other things, to the “labor of love” (κόπος τῆς ἀγάπης), which the addressees are said to have exemplified. In the very next verse he calls them “brothers loved by God” (ἀδελφοὶ ἠγαπημένοι ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ, 1:4), whereas in 1 Thess 2:8 he emphasizes his love for them (ἀγαπητοὶ ἡμῖν ἐγενήθητε). In 1 Thess 3:6 the ἀγάπη of the Thessalonians towards Paul is mentioned, followed by an admonition to love each other (3:12). This last aspect is emphasized a second time and connected with “brotherly love” (φιλαδελφία) in 1 Thess 4:9. Within the metaphorical description of the believer’s armor, the apostle lists the breastplate of πίστις and ἀγάπη (5:8). Finally Paul calls for special ἀγάπη towards the leaders of the community (5:12–13). As we will see, all those instances of ἀγάπη, ἀγαπᾶν, and ἀγαπητός in 1 Thessalonians can be read anew against the background of inscriptions.

In 1 Thessalonians, ἀγάπη κτλ. primarily describe the quality of the relationship between Paul and the Christ-believers in Thessalonica or within the ecclesia. If we may rightly assume that the addressees of the letter were not familiar with the concept of ἀγάπη κτλ. from the Septuagint, it is highly plausible that they found this notion reflected in inscriptions. Indeed, in Thessalonica of all places, a politarch talks about having loved his wife (ἔξοχα τὸν δ’ ἀγάπη|σε δάμαρ Βασίλει|α Λεώκιν, IG X 2,1 848, 1st cent. CE). Other instances cited above from Thrace, Caesarea Maritima, and Ephesus also point to a use of ἀγάπη κτλ. in a familial context. Therefore,

⁵⁰ Cf. J.M. Ogereau, “Πίστις, Ἀγάπη, and Ἐλπίς in 1 Thessalonians: New Insights from Old Stones,” in *God’s Grace Inscribed on the Human Heart: Essays in Honour of James R. Harrison*, ed. P.G. Bolt and S. Kim (Sydney: SCD Press, 2022), 467–483, here 468: “The three terms (which are in no way specific to the Septuagint) might not necessarily have had the theological connotations – i.e. faith (in God), (divine/self-sacrificial) love, (eschatological) hope – that they subsequently acquired in Christian literature and that modern interpreters generally assume. In fact, it is almost certain that the terms did not bear the theological import they now possess and that commentators might be tempted to impose upon them in their exegetical analyses.” On ἀγαπητός, see also Lee, *History* (see n. 9), 193–211, on ἀγαπᾶν, id., “Vocabulary” (see n. 22), 91–92.

when Paul combines ἀγάπη with φιλαδελφία in 1 Thess 4:9, two words of the semantics of love are linked.⁵¹ Presenting his relationship with the addressees as one of a nurse to the entrusted child (1 Thess 2:7) is akin to the attitude that children have towards their parents and vice versa: ἀγαπητοὶ ἡμῶν ἐγενήθητε (1 Thess 2:8).⁵²

It is this background of family and friendship against which the affirmations of ἀγάπη or the corresponding instructions can be understood. Accordingly, in 1 Thess 3:6, the compilation of πίστις and ἀγάπη should perhaps not be read in such a way that trust in God or Christ and the ethic of love are strung together.⁵³ After all, in the same breath, Paul notes with gratitude that the Thessalonian Christ-believers have kept the apostles in good remembrance. A translation of πίστις as "faithfulness" or "trust" in Paul, Timothy, and Silvanus would correspond to the context of family and friendship (ἀγάπη) and the joy about the *memoria* expressed in the following sentence.⁵⁴ Also in 1 Thess 5:8, πίστις and ἀγάπη are tied together (cf. Gal 5:6). Here too, it is quite conceivable that Paul's appeal was understood as one for faithfulness to the message of the apostles, love for all Christ-believers, and hope for salvation from the coming wrath of God. The passage in Phlm 5 can also be read in a similar way: Philemon has

51 The epigraphic instances for φιλαδελφία or φιλαδελφός are mainly epithets. Evidence for a description of persons can be found in epitaphs, e. g., from Illyria, Thessaly, and Thrace: *IApollonia Illyrie* 252 (late 1st/2nd cent. CE); *IG IX 2* 831, 893, 984 (Larissa, Roman period or undated); *IGBulg* 2.796 (Nicopolis ad Istrum and Marcianopolis, undated); 3/2.1756 (Augusta Traiana, after 212); 4.2055 (Pautalia, undated); see also *SEG* 23.109: ἀγαθῇ τύχῃ. | νεῖκην Αὐτοκράτορσι διὰ εὐποδίας | φιλαδέλφοις (Attica, 163/164 CE).

52 See also C. Gerber, *Paulus und seine "Kinder": Studien zur Beziehungsmetaphorik der paulinischen Briefe*, BZNW 136 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005), 285 (without reference to inscriptions). For the slim papyrological evidence for the term ἀγαπητός outside of Christian usage, see Arzt-Grabner et al., *1. Korinther* (see n. 29), 127–128. It is also used in a family context (*P.Oxy.* 50.3555, 1st/2nd cent. CE; 46.3312, 2nd cent. CE). However, a translation with "cherish" ("wertschätzen") does not seem to me to quite capture what it means in this context.

53 For this interpretation, see the commentaries, e.g., T. Holtz, *Der erste Brief an die Thessalonicher*, EKK 13 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag; Zürich: Benziger, 1990), 132–133; U. Mell, *Das Evangelium in einem rhetorischen Brief: Ein Kommentar zum 1. Thessalonicherbrief*, WMANT 166 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2023), 251–252.

54 On the interpretation of πίστις as "faithfulness" or "trust," see T. Morgan, *Roman Faith and Christian Faith: Pistis and Fides in the Early Roman Empire and Early Churches* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), who nevertheless thinks that 1 Thess 3:6f. means πίστις in God (215 n. 13). Cf. Ogereau, "Πίστις" (see n. 50), 457: "As far as the extant evidence goes, πίστις never seems to be used in the sense of 'trust' or 'faith' in a divinity outside of Christian inscriptions." Morgan, *Faith*, 226, points out that πίστις and ἀγάπη are both forms of "relationship-creating activity with cognitive and affective aspects."

shown ἀγάπη and πίστις, love and faithfulness, to both the Kyrios Jesus and all the saints.⁵⁵

In 1 Cor 4:14 Paul draws on the family context of ἀγάπη again and connects it with the metaphor of raising children: as his beloved children (τέκνα μου ἀγαπητά) he admonishes them with ἀγάπη and in a spirit of gentleness (1 Cor 4:21).⁵⁶ Timothy, his beloved and faithful child (μου τέκνον ἀγαπητὸν καὶ πιστόν), is his messenger to jolt the memory of Paul's readers (1 Cor 4:17). Also, the appellation ἀγαπητοί (μου) (Rom 12:19; 1 Cor 10:14; 2 Cor 7:1; Phlm 1), sometimes connected with ἀδελφοί (1 Cor 15:58; Phil 4:1; 1 Thess 1:4), is an attempt to include those addressed in a context of family and friendship so that they are more likely to subscribe to the apostle's demands. Such a context is also evoked in Phlm 16, where Paul insists that the slave Onesimus should become an ἀδελφὸς ἀγαπητός of Philemon.⁵⁷

Another feature in Paul's use of ἀγάπη is the transfer of the context of family and friendship to a person's behavior towards or within a community. Above we have observed three inscriptional references that show individuals being praised for having demonstrated the attitude of ἀγάπη towards their home or city.⁵⁸ With such commendations, values are conveyed and recommended to the readers for replication. Paul's praise for the ἀγάπη shown by Philemon (Phlm 7) and for the effort of ἀγάπη by the Thessalonians (1 Thess 1:3) are also meant to inspire continued practice of this behavior (Phlm 9; 1 Thess 3:12). "Let all things amongst you be done in love!" (πάντα ὑμῶν ἐν ἀγάπῃ γινέσθω, 1 Cor 16:14), and: "Serve one another through love!" (διὰ τῆς ἀγάπης δουλεύετε ἀλλήλοις, Gal 5:13). Thus, ἀγάπη should also prove genuine (2 Cor 8:8), for which an unknown benefactor of the city of Chersonesus was likewise commended (*IOSPE*³ 3.22, 129/130 CE). To this we can add the maxim that ἀγάπη is a virtue to be practiced towards friends and associates (*I.Estrema Oriente* 292.8f.; mid-

55 See Arzt-Grabner, *Philemon* (see n. 29), 180; Morgan, *Faith* (see n. 54), 302. Already in Col 1:4 the phrase has been taken to mean that ἀγάπη is to all the saints, but πίστις is to Christ only; cf. P. Stuhlmacher, *Der Brief an Philemon*, EKK 17 (Zürich: Benziger; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1989), 32–33; M. Wolter, *Der Brief an die Kolosser; Der Brief an Philemon*, ÖTK 12 (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1993), 253.

56 See, e.g., Gerber, *Paulus* (see n. 52), 401.

57 See, e.g., *P.Oxy.* 50.3555 (1st /2nd cent. CE): A slave owner records (ll. 4–8): "I loved my home-born slave girl, whose name is Peina, and nursed her like a daughter in the hope that she would nurse me in my old age" (θεραπεινίδιον μου οικογενέ[ς], | οὐ ἔστιν ὄνομα Πείνα, ἡγάπη|σα καὶ ἐτημέλησα ὡς θυγάτριον(ν) | ἐπ' ἐλπίδι τοῦ ἡλικίας γενόμε|νον ἔχειν με γηροβοσκόν). Cf. Arzt-Grabner et al., *1. Korinther* (see n. 29), 127–128.

58 *SEG* 8.11; 28.1171 (*MAMA* 4.133); *IOSPE*³ 3.22 (*IOSPE* I² 359).

3rd cent. CE). Paul's love ethic participates in expectations that are also expressed in inscriptions.

Of course, ἀγάπη also describes God's relationship with believers (as does πίστις, by the way). The ἀγάπη of a deity is indeed very rarely found in inscriptions. One of them comes from Nubia, it is a dipinto from the temple of Isis in Hieraskyaminos:⁵⁹

τ<ὸ> προσκύνημα τῆς κυρίας Βρουττίας Φαρίας | καὶ τοῦ τέκνου αὐτῆς Ἰούνκου –
μεγίστη δόξα διὰ βίου – | καὶ ὁμοίως τοῦ τέκνου αὐτῆς Μαρκελλου – ἡ λαμπρὰ ἀξία – | καὶ
ὁμοίως Μαξιμίωνος τέκνον – πάσης τῆς παιδείας δόγμα – | καὶ τοῦ πατρὸς αὐτῶν
Μαξίμου – δεξιὸς ἀνὴρ αἰεὶ δόκιμος παιδείᾳ – | καὶ Ἀρέας Σεραπιάδος καὶ Σωστράτου –
ἡλίου ἐπίτευγμα | καὶ Βρουττίου Βρουτταράτος, ὃν ἀγαπᾷ ἡ Φαρία Ἴσις – | ὅλης συν-
γενείας τῆς ἀβασκάντου, ἀνδρείος νεανίας | Μάξιμος ἔγραψα.

The *proskynema* of the mistress Bruttia Pharia and her child Iuncus – the greatest glory of her life – as well as her child Marcellus – the splendid dignity – and also the child Maximion – the reputation of all education – and her father Maximus – a right man, always of respected education – and Area Serapias and Sostratus – the sunny achievement – and of Bruttius, the son of Bruttaras, whom Isis Pharia loves – for the protection of the whole kinship, I, Maximus, a brave young man, wrote this.

This text is an intercession in a pilgrim's inscription, so the use of the language is not local. Rather, the epithet "Isis 'Pharia'" probably refers to the lighthouse Pharos in Alexandria. The love of Isis is directed at a man or rather a child, for unlike the other members of the family, the named Bruttius, son of Bruttaras, has (as yet) no praiseworthy quality to show.

The second evidence of a deity's ἀγάπη for a man is found on the world-famous Rosetta stone (OGIS 90, Memphis, 196 BCE), which contains a decree passed by an assembly of Egyptian priests describing the cult for Ptolemy V Epiphanes and praising his achievements. The inscription is famously written in hieroglyphic, demotic, and Greek (... τοῖς τε ἱεροῖς καὶ ἐγχωρίοις καὶ Ἑλληνικοῖς γράμμασιν ...) and begins in Greek as follows (ll. 1–4):⁶⁰

βασιλεύοντος τοῦ νέου καὶ παραλαβόντος τὴν βασιλείαν παρὰ τοῦ πατρὸς κυρίου
βασιλειῶν μεγαλοδόξου, τοῦ τὴν Αἴγυπτον καταστησαμένου καὶ τὰ πρὸς τοὺς | θεοὺς
εὐσεβοῦς, ἀντιπάλων ὑπερτέρου, τοῦ τὸν βίον τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἐπανορθώσαντος, κυρίου
τριακονταετηρίδων, καθάπερ ὁ Ἥφαιστος ὁ μέγας, βασιλέως καθάπερ ὁ Ἥλιος, | μέγας

59 See, e.g., A. Jördens, "V. Griechische Texte aus Ägypten," in *Hymnen, Klagelieder und Gebete*, ed. J. Bernd and S. Daniel, TUAT.NF 7 (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2013), 273–310, here 302–304; L. Bricault, *Isis Pelagia: Images, Names and Cults of a Goddess of the Seas*, RGRW 190 (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 163 (for the translation). The inscription is dated to around 100 CE; see Jördens, "Griechische Texte," 303.

60 Trans. R.S. Bagnall and P. Derow, *The Hellenistic Period: Historical Sources in Translation*, Blackwell Sourcebooks in Ancient History 1 (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 269–270.

βασιλεὺς τῶν τε ἄνω καὶ τῶν κάτω χωρῶν, ἐκγόνου θεῶν Φιλοπατόρων, ὃν ὁ Ἥφαιστος ἐδοκίμασεν, ὥι ὁ Ἥλιος ἔδωκεν τὴν νίκην, εἰκόνας ζώσης τοῦ Διὸς υἱοῦ τοῦ Ἥλιου, Πτολεμαίου | αἰωνοβίου, ἡγαπημένου ὑπὸ τοῦ Φθαῖ ...

In the reign of the young one – who received the throne from his father – lord of crowns, glorious, the one who established Egypt, and pious towards the gods, superior to his opponents, the one who restored the life of men, lord of the thirty-years' feasts just as Hephaistos the great, king just as Helios the great king of the upper and lower regions, offspring of the Father-Loving Gods, the one whom Hephaistos approved, to whom Helios gave the victory, living image of Zeus, the son of Helios, Ptolemy Ever-Living, beloved of Pthah ...

Ptolemy is praised in this decree for his glory, piety, and achievements. The climax of the aretology is ultimately that he was loved by the highest deity, the creator god Pthah (Greek: Phtha).⁶¹ This is repeated five times within the inscription (ll. 4, 8f., 37, 49). The fact that Pthah's ἀγάπη is mentioned as the last epithet has to do with the significance of the deity Pthah in Memphis on the one hand, but on the other hand there is apparently nothing greater for the authors of this text than to be ἡγαπημένος ὑπὸ τοῦ Φθαῖ.

It is quite probable that in both inscriptions from Egypt ἀγαπᾶν expresses a closeness of family and friendship between deity and man, in the case of Ptolemy V possibly also the sonship of God. This does not apply to everyone. To be loved by a deity places the person in a specific relationship, which enables him or her to perform certain achievements.

The phrase ἡγαπημένου ὑπὸ τοῦ Φθαῖ has its parallels in the Septuagint, for instance in Sir 45:1 (44:23) about Moses: ἡγαπημένον ὑπὸ θεοῦ καὶ ἀνθρώπων.⁶² In 1 Thess 1:4 (cf. 2 Thess 2:13) this is said of the Christ-believers in Thessalonica: They are ἡγαπημένοι ὑπὸ [τοῦ] θεοῦ. Paul goes on to say that the loving esteem of God is shown by the fact that he has chosen them. And it is because they are loved, that they are able to perform the accomplishments that Paul highlights in 1 Thess 1:3. The designation as ἀγαπητοῖ (and not φιλάττοι⁶³) must have seemed natural to the Thessalonians, especially as the threefold qualification of God as Father in 1 Thess 1:1–3 makes the use of ἀγαπᾶν seem logical in the light of the inscriptions.

61 On the worship of Pthah, see A. von Lieven, "Phthas," *DNP* 9 (2000), 973–975. Pthah was considered to be the supreme deity and its cult center was Memphis. Greeks identified Pthah with Hephaestus.

62 Cf. also Sir 46:13; Deut 33:12; Bar 3:37; Dan 3:35.

63 This was a more common term in inscriptions and papyri to express appreciation. The term φιλόθεος, which is seldom attested in inscriptions (cf. *IAM* 5/1.457, Lydia, undated), is used in 2 Tim 3:4.

Of course, the fact that Paul writes of the ἀγάπη of God/Christ/Spirit in many other forms, that he also addresses the Old Testament-Jewish tradition of ἀγάπη for God (Rom 8:28; 1 Cor 2:9 [Old Testament quotation]; 8:3),⁶⁴ and that he describes ἀγάπη in a particularly intensive way as the central attitude between people goes quantitatively and qualitatively far beyond what was associated with ἀγάπη in the pagan world. But, and this is important in the present context, Paul could count on the fact that the readers of his letters, as well as those who followed his oral preaching, were naturally acquainted with the concept of ἀγάπη. This becomes particularly evident in the inscriptions, which help us to better appreciate the range of meanings of the term. In this way, continuities with the Greco-Roman world and particularities of the Pauline ideas become all the more recognizable.

5 Conclusion

The relevance of epigraphical evidence for our understanding of the New Testament derives from the fact that they represent both the language and the cultural-historical world of their times. And although they do so in specific ways, they were comprehensible to their contemporary readers and manifested the linguistic capabilities of their sponsors and creators. Moreover, inscriptions were ubiquitous in Greco-Roman antiquity and offer ample information on text production and reception at large. To study and reappraise this textual and cultural-historical environment is an absolute desideratum in research on the New Testament.⁶⁵ Adolf Deissmann formulated the following in his somewhat emotional final chapter to *Light from the Ancient East*:

Some day, when yet stronger waves of light come flooding over to us from the East, it will be recognised that the restoration of the New Testament to its native home, its own age and social level, means something more than the mere repatriation of our sacred Book. It brings with it new life and depth to all our conceptions of Primitive Christianity. But already perhaps we may say that when theologians engage in the study of inscriptions, papyri, and ostraca of the Imperial period, their work is not the pastime of cranks, but is justified by the imperious demands of the present state of scholarship. For a long time the

64 See on that O. Wischmeyer, "ΘΕΟΝ ΑΓΑΠΗΝ bei Paulus: Eine traditionsgeschichtliche Miszelle," *ZNW* 78 (1987), 141–144.

65 Lee, "Vocabulary" (see n. 22), 86: "All evidence is valuable, but this body of additional and growing evidence [...] gives access to a dimension of the language that was inadequately known before."

theologians were content to don the cast-off garments of the philologists, and to drag with them through the New Testament critical methods that had long been given up by the masters of the scientific study of antiquities, until they fairly dropped to pieces.⁶⁶

It has to be noted that this vision, which is more than a hundred years old, has not yet come true. However, the conditions for tackling this long-standing task are better than ever under the present circumstances. This contribution aimed to show that it would be worthwhile to take this path in New Testament exegesis.

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⁶⁶ Deissmann, *Light* (see n. 1), 394; see also Burnett, *Studying the New Testament* (see n. 27) [Conclusion].