Hilarion's Letter to his Wife Alis (P Oxy 744)

A New Suggestion to Solve Its Problem

by

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Hilarion, probably a laborer from Oxyrhynchos, had moved to Alexandria in search of work. At home he had left a wife, a child, and probably a mother in law. He was apparently living with some other friends from his home town, who were returning to Oxyrhynchos. He takes the opportunity of sending with them a letter to his wife (dated 17 June 1 B.C.). The letter was in part an answer to his wife's message to him conveyed by a common friend of theirs, Aphrodisias, who was visiting Alexandria.

   In his letter Hilarion promises to send his wife money as soon as he has received his pay (ὀψώνιον, on this word, see Chrys C. Caragounis, "ΟΨΩΝΙΟΝ: A Reconsideration of Its Meaning", *NovT* 16 (1974) p. 35-57).

   Thereafter he goes on to say something about the expected family situation that has baffled scholars. The text runs as follows:

ἐὰν πολλὰ πολλῶν τέκῃς, ἐὰν ἦν ἄρσενον ἄφες, ἐὰν ἦν θήλεα ἔκβαλε. What Hilarion wrote, of course, looked more like this:

ΕΑΝ ΠΟΛΛΑΠΟΛΛΩΝ ΤΕΚΗΣ ΕΑΝ ΗΝ ΑΡΣΕΝΟΝ ΑΦΕΣ ΕΑΝ ΗΝ ΘΗΛΕΑ ΕΚΒΑΛΕ (I have separated the words (except for the second and third words) to make the reading easier).

   The expression πολλὰ πολλῶν has proved an insoluble problem. My suggestion is that the phrase is a natural mistake to make for a barbarous speaker of Greek. What he probably meant was πολλαπλῶν, plural genitive of πολλαπλᾶ (πολλαπλοῦς, -ῆ, -οῦν) = "multiple" [children]. But this word, being a more literary term, was misunderstood by our uneducated friend. For an insensitive speaker of Greek it would have been quite easy to add the letter o after the second π, and since the word πολλά (or πολλῶν) is spelt with a double λ to write that letter twice (i.e. πολλαπλῶν > πολλαπ°λῶν > πολλαπολῶν >

πολλαπολλῶν).[1] There is some evidence in the papyrus that πολλὰ πολλῶν was intended as one word in the fact that while there is some space between most words, there is none between πολλὰ and πολλῶν. Further, its position between the conditional particle and its verb indicates that πολλὰ πολλῶν (or πολλαπλῶν) is a modifier of the verb τέκῃς. Naturally, this verb takes an accusative object, but in inscriptions and papyri there occur also instances with the genitive and dative owing to attraction (e.g. *SEG* 35.213, 13 (250 B.C.): Εὐτυχιανοῦ οὗ ἔτεκεν Εὐτυχία, cf. four lines further down (line 18): Εὐτυχιανός, ὃν [ἔ]τεκεν Εὐτυχία; similarly *SEG* 38:1837, A 27 (III-IV A.D.) Θεοδώρου, ὃν ἔτεκε Τεχῶσις (accusative) but further down in line B 55 and 56 Θεοδώρου, οὗ ἔτεκ[εν] Τεχ[ῶσις] (genitive); *Hesperia Suppl.* 6:383, 2, I, 27 (I A.D.): Φιλοστρά[τ]ας ἧς ἔτεκε Γοργιππία (genitive) but seven lines further down at II, 34): Φιλοστράταν ἣν ἔτεκε Γοργιππία (accusative); *SB* 1:4947, 7 (III A.D.): ἐμοὶ Πτολεμαίῳ ᾧ ἔτεκεν Θασεῖς (dative), but four lines further down (line 11): ἐμὲ τὸν Πτολεμαῖον, ὃν ἔτεκεν Θασεῖς (accusative); see also LXX Isa 51:8): ἀπὸ πάντων τῶν τέκνων σου, ὧν ἔτεκες). These cases, though no exact parallels, illustrate how an uncouth person might be capable of the present construction. In any case, strict syntax would be too much to ask of this author. (Though not very likely, πολλὰ πολλῶν might also have been intended as a reference to *more than* one child (πολλά) *of more than* one kind (πολλῶν), i.e. male and female children).[2] In other words, Hilarion is concerned about his wife giving birth to multiple children, i.e. twins, triplets, etc.

   This interpretation finds support in the following considerations:

   The phrase ἐὰν ἦν might be, as Deissmann thought, "a popular anticipation of the fact" (A. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, p. 169, n.6.), but the ἦν

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[1] That such fluctuations of adding or subtracting a vowel or a consonant took place is shown by e.g. *Col. Zenon* 39.6 (III B.C.): παλιόν instead of παλαιόν, and *Ägyptische Urkunden aus den königlichen Museen zu Berlin*, 68: Τραγειανοῦ instead of Τραειανοῦ. This is the phenomenon of *synizesis*, whereby, for example, a syllable which has ι or ε or ει or αι is pronounced together with the following vowel, e.g. o: thus from παλαιός we get παλjος > παλιός. The same phenomenon occurs when the first syllable has a palatal while the second a guttural. This is the reason why the i-sound (= ει) turns to a guttural γ: thus Τραειανός > Τραγιανός, ὑάλινον > γυάλινον. The phenomenon is witnessed already in early Hellenistic times and occurs frequently in *Neohellenic* (See Jannaris, *Historical Grammar*, §155 and for Neohellenic, Tsopanakis, *Νεοελληνικὴ Γραμματική*, 3rd ed. 1998, § 128-37, 184, 225).

[2] Tabachovitz's solution (*Eranos* 59 (1961), 45-48) by means of Platon, *Timaios* 29 c: ἐὰν οὖν, ὦ Σώκρατες, πολλὰ πολλῶν πέρι θεῶν κτλ., which he renders "Wenn ich *vielleicht* nicht imstande sein sollte, hinsichtlich der Gotter …" would give to our passage the translation: "If you perhaps give birth, if it is a male let it [live]" etc. Our text , however, does not seem to imply any doubt about the giving of birth, but as to whether the child[ren] will be male or female.

might also have been intended as a subjunctive (ᾖ) after ἐάν. In that case, the ν was a ν ἐφελκυστικόν, written to avoid a hiatus with the following word which begins with a vowel. Strictly speaking the ν ἐφελκυστικόν should not appear in the second ἐὰν ἦν, where ἦν precedes a word beginning with θ, but this may have been influenced by the previous ἦν: ἦν ἄρσενον ... ἦν θήλεα.

    The form ἄρσενον is a neuter singular nominative of the later ἄρσενος, -ον (for an example, see *CIJ* 802), while the form θήλεα is a neuter plural nominative (of τὸ θήλεον) (see Platon, *Kritias* 110 c: ζῷα θήλεα; *SEG* 34.750 11.2 (III B.C.): τὰ ἄρσενα καὶ τὰ θήλεα [σώματα]). The construction ἦν θήλεα (verb in the singular with plural subject) is, of course, Attic, but such relics of classical usage occur in later, popular Greek up to the present day as revered fossils of the past.

    What Hilarion then would be saying to his wife is:
"If you give birth to multiples, if there is a boy let it [live], but if they are girls, expose [them]".