

Was John 8:1-12 an Original Account of the Gospel of John?

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Summary

The textual variant of the story of the woman caught in adultery is one of the most interesting problems of New Testament textual criticism. All scholars have to examine the available external and internal evidence concerning a given textual variant. As a part of this process, scholars may attempt to follow the generally accepted practices of textual criticism, although they may apply them in some slightly different ways. Some scholars prefer to accept the Alexandrian text family's oldest codices as authoritative regarding this story's non-Johannine origin, while others have developed a hypothesis that attempts to explain the story's marks of authenticity by suggesting an Alexandrian corruption hypothesis. This hypothesis seems plausible, but it has not yet been verified to this author's satisfaction. Regardless of one's position about this variant, caution is still advisable regarding building doctrine based on this passage.

Introduction

To be sure, the story of the woman caught in adultery is one of the more interesting and provocative stories in the Gospel of John. Perhaps this is part of why there is a legitimate problem concerning whether the story was actually included in this gospel by John or not. In the climate of evangelicalism today, apologetics are at the forefront, and many of us are very concerned about corrupting the true nature of biblical religion and the sacred text that this religion is based on. This apologetical concern manifests itself in the sometimes heated discussions of recent times about Bible translations. In fact, some of our Bibles may put this story in parentheses to show that it may not be legitimate and/or may include footnotes indicating its questionable origin. In light of this, it is important for us to give some consideration to this question. Was the story included in the gospel that was written by John? Or was it added at some late point by someone else? I will endeavor to answer this question in this presentation, so that we can adequately include it in our study of this great gospel.

The Basics of Textual Criticism

Today, we depend on copies of the Scripture in order for us to know what was actually written by the origin authors. The fact is, however, that these copies are not perfect. As a result, the texts do not always agree. This is particularly true of the New Testament writings, as there were far many more copies of them and they were not always kept by a central governing body. This stands in contrast to the process of the transmission of the Old Testament text (Geisler & Nix, 1986, pp.467-468). The transmission of the New Testament resulted in four major textual families of copies, the largest two families being the Alexandrian text family and the Byzantine text family. (Greenlee, 1964, pp. 117-118, included by Geisler & Nix, 1986, p. 460) We use the term *textual criticism* to refer to the process by which we attempt to "Restore the text" to the original copies, based on the copies of the originals that we have, with all their variants. One of the passages that there is a significant variant is the passage in question, John 7:53-8:11. Generally, the Byzantine copies include the story, whereas the Alexandrian copies do not.

If we are to make a valid determination as to whether this story was in the original copy written by John or not, we should ensure we are following a sound process to reconcile these differences. There are two topics to address in regards to this process. First, what types of evidence are there for us to consider? Second, what is the process that should be followed in order to resolve a particular variant?

There are two types of evidence involved in textual criticism, and these types of evidences parallel the evidence types we use for determining the author of a book. There is external evidence and there is internal evidence. External evidence addresses physical aspects to the copy in question, whereas internal evidence addresses internal aspects to the copies themselves. There are three kinds of external evidence for a variant. (The following discussion follows the basic outline of Geisler and Nix, 1986, pp. 476-478) The first external evidence is the chronological date of the manuscript or text family. This refers to how far back the variant is shown to have existed, based on the manuscript text family. The second external evidence is the geographical placement of the variant. This addresses, for example, whether the variant existed just in Egypt or whether it existed everywhere. Finally, the third external evidence type is the genealogical relationship of text families. In reality, this criteria is an important type of external evidence. Genealogy relationships must be established so that critics can determine whether to favor one variant or another based on the text family alone. This issue will prove to be a critical point in our consideration of the text at hand. In addition to external evidence, internal evidence also exists in the discussion of textual criticism. There are two key divisions of internal evidence according to Geisler and Nix. First, there is transcriptional evidence, which pertains to the likelihood or unlikelihood of a variant to have been accidentally created by a scribe. Secondly, there is intrinsic evidence, which concerns whether we believe the author was intending one variant or another. This is the most subjective type of evidence, and this element is unavoidable. Nevertheless, the considerations about “what makes sense” in the text can prove to tip the scales significantly in one direction or another.

Having established the types of evidence, there is also a process that scholars generally follow to resolve a variant. To be sure, this is not an easy task. Geisler and Nix note, “[T]he consideration of all the external and internal factors involved in the process of textual criticism is not only a technical science, but it is also a delicate art.” (pg. 478) Gleason Archer (1974), as quoted by Geisler and Nix, has put forward the following list of rules to be followed in textual criticism:

1. The older reading is to be preferred.
2. The more difficult reading [from the Scribes perspective] is to be preferred.
3. The shorter reading is to be preferred.
4. The reading that best explains the variants is to be preferred.
5. The reading with the widest geographical [textual] support is to be preferred.
6. The reading that most conforms to the style and diction of the author is to be preferred.
7. The reading that reflects no doctrinal bias is to be preferred. (pp. 57-60)

Archer (1974) also “cautiously suggests that, should a conflict occur, *priority* should [follow the rules in the order listed.]” (paraphrase by Geisler and Nix, 1986, p. 478, emphasis theirs) Geisler and Nix also agree in their own words several points that are reflected in this list. First, they point out that while external evidence is to be preferred, because it is more objective, the final decision must address both

types of evidence. Second, they also admit that because of the “art” nature of this practice, it is possible that scholars may simply disagree.

I do not suggest that this is an infallible guide for us to follow, and in fact our discussion of this issue will point out that not everyone will agree to follow this process in the exact same way. Nevertheless, a general framework is needed for us in order to adequately evaluate this variant in the Gospel of John.

Arguments For and Against the Johannine Origin of John 7:53-8:11

Having established a basic framework for how textual criticism is done, I will now discuss the arguments against the Johannine origin of John 7:53-8:11 and the arguments for the Johannine origin.

Arguments against Johannine Origin

The majority of textual critics today consider this story as not originating from John. This is reflected on a basic level by the various ways that most modern Bible translations either note or mark that this story may not be an authentic part of the Bible, even though it is still included in most of our Bibles.

Laney summarizes the arguments against the Johannine origin as follows. First, the fact is that the story is indeed absent from the oldest manuscripts we have of the New Testament. Second, the story is claimed to be “foreign to the context” of John 7 and 8. Thirdly, the story is also claimed to be “linguistically incompatible” with the rest of the Gospel of John. (1992, p. 151)

Recalling the basic process of textual criticism, the first rule on the list I cited was that the “older reading is to be preferred.” As a result, it is not surprising to find one scholar, in light of the story’s absence from our earliest manuscripts, write that “[t]he chief problem usually identified in John 7:53-8:11 is its weak external attestation.” (Burge, 1984, p. 142) Specifically, the “earliest known Greek manuscript to contain [this story] is Codex D (5th-6th cent.).” (Geisler & Nix, 1986, p. 485, citing Metzger, 1964, p. 50) This is in contrast to the earlier codices Vaticanus and Sinaiticus from Alexandria, dating to the 4th century, which omit the story. (Geisler and Nix, pp. 391, 392) Some other evidence against the Johannine origin include, among other things, a lack of Greek commentary on the passage until later dates, the placement of the story in some manuscripts at locations other than Chapter 8, and markings in certain manuscripts that indicate the account is not valid, much like the modern translations are marking the story today. (Geisler and Nix, p. 485) Nevertheless, the story’s absence from our oldest manuscripts seems to play a central role in many scholarly decisions about the story’s origin. Metzger summarizes his position by stating “[t]he evidence for the non-Johannine origin of the periscope of the adulteress is **overwhelming.**” (1971, pg. 219, emphasis mine)

Arguments for Johannine Origin

In spite of the large consensus cited before, some scholars have concluded that the evidence still supports the story’s inclusion in the Gospel of John at chapters 7 and 8.

Carl Laney himself appears to favor this position in his discussion of the issue in his commentary on the Gospel of John. (1992, pp. 152-154) Touching on the same three items he presented as arguments against its authenticity, he suggests that (1) The story actually does feature Johannine stylistic traits, (2) The story fits within the context of John 8, and (3) The textual data against the story is not as strong as some scholars make it out to be.

In light of the way the textual data is considered to be conclusive by those against the story's authenticity, further needs to be said about how scholars for the story's inclusion deal with the textual issues. Zane Hodges, as referenced by Laney (1992, p. 153), provides extensive arguments for the story as being a part of the original autographs. First, and most significantly, Hodges develops a hypothesis that aims to explain why the Byzantine text family is superior to the Alexandrian text family. He suggests the parent of the manuscripts that support the story's omission were willfully corrupted by willful removal of the story. This stands in contrast to the opposite view which believes the story was added at some point. (Hodges, 1979, pp. 322-324) This hypothesis is rooted in a discussion about a "conservative tendency" (c.f. pp. 320-322) that became established after A D 200, which sought to avoid alterations to the text. By establishing that after A D 200 the text alteration was not the normal practice, Hodges suggests that the original corruption of the story was much earlier than the dates of our oldest manuscripts. As a result of this assertion, Hodges flings the door open for a hypothesis that the Alexandrian family may have been corrupted, and not the Byzantine family. Second, Hodges believes that "[i]t is not easy to dismiss lightly this massive manuscript witness [of at least 450 manuscripts] to the pericope." (p. 326) He suggests that the manuscript witnesses for inclusion are in fact "evidence for the pre- A D 200 state of affairs." (pp. 325-326) Finally, Hodges addresses citations and mentions of the story that do not appear to be discussed by Metzger. (pp. 330-331) These citations come from Jerome and Augustine, both of whom lived in the 5th century, and both mentions are favorable to the story's inclusion.

In light of these textual considerations, as well as the discussions mentioned about the stylistic and contextual issues surrounding the story, it seems that a reasonable case may be made for the story's authentic origin as being written by the Apostle John himself.

Evaluation of the Origin of John 7:53-8:11

From my studies, Geisler and Nix appear to be correct when they note that "[t]his passage...presents one of the most interesting and perplexing problems in New Testament textual criticism." (1986, pg. 484) Perhaps a critical element is that this story "has all the earmarks of historicity." However, historicity is not the basis of inspiration or canonicity. The writing had to be divinely inspired in its original form in order for it to be the Word of God. As a result, it is important for us to reach some kind of decision regarding this textual problem, for the text of Scripture is at stake.

I believe that Zane Hodges, and others in his camp, do raise valid concerns that appear to be overlooked by Metzger and those who argue firmly that the story was a later addition. I favor agreement with the pro-Johannine camp in its assessments concerning the linguistic and contextual issues about this story. The story does not appear out of place in John 7 and 8. Additionally, there does appear to be support from patristical writings that suggest the story may have been valid, and some of this support appears to be not adequately discussed by Metzger and others.

However, the fact remains that the first rule we established in the process was that "[t]he older reading is to be preferred." (Archer, 1974, pp. 57-60) Metzger and others are focusing on this generally accepted rule of textual criticism to support their position that our oldest codices, which are of the Alexandrian text-type, should be preferred. As a result of this line of reasoning, they conclude the story was not original to the Gospel of John. However, my assessment is that Hodges is not abandoning this principle. Hodges is using a genealogical external evidential hypothesis to explain that the non-Alexandrian text-types which included the story are more faithful to the original text and to suggest that it is the Alexandrian text-type that has been corrupted regarding this story by its removal at some point, likely pre-A D 200. This hypothesis is highly convincing, in light of the historical validity, the linguistic

compatibility, and the contextual compatibility of the story. However, it is only a hypothesis. I suggest that more evidence in the form of manuscripts older than the 4th century codices would be preferable. Nevertheless, the hypothesis should not be entirely rejected on the basis of this lack of evidence.

This is where, as noted before, textual criticism becomes a challenging blend of science and art. It is entirely acceptable for Metzger to reject Hodges's hypothesis because it lacks proof, but it is also entirely acceptable for one to favor Hodge's hypothesis in light of the unique historicalness of the account that is agreed upon by both sides. I feel the Hodges hypothesis is very plausible, in part because this hypothesis explains the historical validity of the story by identifying the source of the story as the Apostle John. Metzger's position admits the historical validity of the story without adequately explaining its origin. Nevertheless, I cannot be totally certain in light of the lack of earlier manuscripts that would prove or disprove the Hodges hypothesis.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, what are we to do with this story? I agree with Laney (1992) when he writes that "[C]are should be taken to avoid building any distinctive doctrines on a questionable text." (p. 154) Yes, there is a good case supporting the authenticity of this story as being included by the Apostle John. However, in light of the lack of verifying evidence of the hypothesis of Hodges, we would do well to avoid building a major doctrine on this passage or giving it too central of a place in our exposition of the gospel of God. We can use the story to support topics explained in other parts of the gospel, but we cannot offer substantively new material in light of the textual problems. The topic helps us in our explanation of the purpose of the Gospel of John by helping us to know what John originally wrote. While the text itself is not a primary text in the broad sweep of systematic theology or in the Biblical Theology of John, the underlying process of textual criticism is a very important process to be sensitive to. This process helps us substantiate that we do sufficiently have the original words written by the authors of Scripture. Only the original authors were speaking by divine inspiration by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter. 1). While variants do exist, these questionable materials involve less than one half percent of the New Testament text, and that ratio is exceptional even compared to other writings of antiquity. (Metzger, 1963, p. 144, cited in Geisler & Nix, 1986, p. 475) A major personal implication of this is that there is sound, objective support for my faith in the Bible as the Word of God. The fact that variants exist should not lead Christians to question the Bible's Inspiration. We can trust the Bible we have, and build our faith and lives upon it.

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