

The 'Pericope de adultera' (adultery passage)

How the famous passage about the women caught in adultery is further inferential support for the Gospels having a Hebrew language origin:

Lindsey: "... the Greek gospels which have come down to us represent a third or fourth stage in the **written** transmission of accounts of the life of Jesus"¹

It is almost universally agreed by NT Bible Scholars and translators that the famous story of the adulterous woman brought to Yeshua (John 7:53-8:11) is not an original part of John's gospel. The NIV Bible Commentary (Editor FF Bruce) writes: "It is certain that these verses are a later insertion into the original work. They are omitted by the best authorities for the text, though one group of MSS places them after Lk. 21:38. ..." – page 1264. For a brief and basically accurate overview of this fact see the Wikipedia entry http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jesus_and_the_woman_taken_in_adultery.

And yet, it has remained in John's Gospel in almost all translations. A large part of the reason for this is that most of the same scholars are convinced it is an authentic story from the life of Yeshua.

If it is a true account in the life of Yeshua, does it therefore really matter where it is placed in the NT? Some certainly think so, to the degree that this issue was apparently a significant factor if the biblical scholar Bart Ehrman rejecting Christian evangelical faith (and even going so far from it as to become an agnostic).

There is however some evidence that this story is authentic, but that it was originally part of Luke's gospel.

Some biblical scholars, led by the late Prof David Flusser and Dr Robert L Lindsey have argued that there was an original story of the life of Yeshua written in Hebrew, possibly as early as some 5 to 8 years² after the ascension and also possibly written by the disciple Matthew (also known as Levi the tax collector)³. Note that in Luke 1:1-2, Luke tells us that many who were eyewitnesses had written narratives about Yeshua from the beginning. It is also likely that this was a continuous life story.

At some later time a 'literal' Greek translation of the 'Hebrew Life of Jesus' was written (whether this was Luke's autograph or an earlier work is not fully known). By 'literal' is meant that the same sentence structure and order is generally kept such that if translated back again, a 'literal' translation reads very naturally in its original Hebrew.

An example of a literal Greek translation would be the text of Ephesians 1:18 (obviously also translated from the Greek into English): "the eyes of your heart being enlightened". A non-literal translation would have "the eyes of your understanding being enlightened". This is because in Hebrew idiom the heart is considered the seat of the mind (this was/is not so with Greek and English where the heart is instead thought of as the seat of emotions) and thus of 'understanding'.

As a result of a lifetime of study Flusser and others⁴ believe that the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke derive largely from this original 'Hebrew Life of Jesus' (along with at least one other scroll that had reorganized this narrative into a different structure and order). They also believe that the composition order of the Gospels was Luke⁵, Mark, Matthew and then much later John. (Note that the Gospel of Matthew, especially the Greek version, whether the original language or not, is not the same document as the original Matthew 'Hebrew Life of Jesus', even if it is mostly based on this document. For one thing, the Gospel of Matthew as we have it today is a very anti-semitic document.

¹ Lindsey, *The Gospels*, 4; *A Hebrew Translation of the Gospel of Mark*, xix-xx

² *Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus*, by David Bivin and Roy Blizzard (1983)

³ It may well be that it is this document that Papias refers to as the 'oracles in the Hebrew language' - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Papias_of_Hierapolis

⁴ Jerusalem School of Synoptic Research - <http://www.js.org/>

⁵ "In regard to Luke it remains to be said, that of all the Four Gospels it is the one which gives by far the plainest and most constant evidence of being a translation." - C.C. Torrey; 'Our Translated Gospels' p. lix

The overwhelming evidence is that the original narrative was not at all anti-semitic).

In studying the Hebraic approach behind the gospels Flusser and Lindsey, et al, came to believe that one of these earlier scrolls was written using a three part approach for each story in the narrative of Yeshua. That is the scroll was structured such that there was 1) An opening incident; 2) followed by a teaching discourse of Yeshua; and finally 3) Two related parables (which were also related both to the context of the discourse and often the context of the location).

Turning our attention back to the 'adultery passage', scholars observed that this story did not fit well in the place it was normally found in John (after Jn 7:52 and before Jn 8:12). Note for example that at the end of the story only Yeshua (and possibly his disciples) is left after the adulterous women has departed, and yet we have him giving another discourse about being the 'light of the world' and there are somehow Pharisees present asking him questions.

Added to this, linguists have argued that the style of this portion is not typical of John's writing. At the same time there are at least 2 MSS's which have the adultery passage in Luke. For example, the Family 13 (Ferra Group) have the adultery passage in Luke (in a number of places including before Luke 21:37; after Luke 21:38 or after Luke 24:53 – eg Miniscule 1333 from the Karakalou monastery).

Using the 3 part structure of opening incident; discourse and 2 parables, Lindsey argues that the adultery passage should be placed in Luke 19 after verse 46⁶.

Lindsey even puts forward a plausible argument as to how this passage could have been missed by a copyist who then, realizing his mistake with the scroll of the Gospels he was making looked for the next sensible place to re-insert this story and came up with its accepted position at the end of John 7.

In proposing that the adultery passage be placed just after Yeshua has entered Jerusalem and 'cleansed' the Temple; Lindsey argues that the Temple authorities ('chief priests and the scribes' - mostly Sadducees) were questioning Yeshua's authority to take such action, so that this incident was just another approach where they tried to bring his authority into question.

In placing it here, Lindsey produces a composition that contains an incident(s) (the Temple cleansing and the adultery passage challenging Yeshua's authority and trying to 'trip him up'); a teaching discourse from Yeshua (really a summary of his whole mission in calling for repentance as the Messiah of God); and then the two parables (the 'vineyard', and the 'stone' parables – Luke 20:17,18).

So in conclusion, what does this (greatly simplified) explanation regarding the adultery passage, say in support of the argument for Hebrew sources for the Gospels and for the Gospels themselves first having been composed in Hebrew (and therefore presumably not using the LXX for quotes from the Tanakh)? To answer this question even partially, we also perhaps need to ask which is the inspired autograph (the first version that we believe to be inerrant); the sources (that Luke very clearly speaks of in Luke 1:1-4) or the first Greek translations?

Some tough questions. My money⁷ is on the autographs having been written in Hebrew and having used Hebrew source documents.

In hindsight though, I suspect that the 'pericope adultera' really does not tell us a lot. As a message about the Almighty; about the 'Spirit of Torah'; about forgiveness and repentance though, it speaks volumes.

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⁶ 'Jesus, Rabbi & Lord' by Dr Robert L Lindsey p 155

⁷ See my article on the Greek NT and the LXX