A STYLISTIC TRAIT OF THE FOURTH GOSPEL
IN THE PERICOPE ADULTERAE?

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As an evangelical and thus an adherent of the inerrant inspiration of biblical manuscripts, I am vitally interested in establishing the precise text and readings of the original New Testament documents even when no great doctrinal issue may be at stake. Our subject concerns the question of the genuineness of the celebrated passage about Jesus and the adulterous woman in John 7:53-8:11, known technically as the pericope adulterae. Admittedly, this textual problem has been settled in days past in the minds of most New Testament scholars who, while retaining the authenticity of the incident, exclude the account as an integral part of the Gospel of John. Since the story is found to be (1) absent in the oldest and best manuscripts, versions and patristic citations,
(2) foreign to the context and (3) linguistically incompatible with the vocabulary and style of the Fourth Gospel, the cumulative decision reached by most is “conclusive against the Johannine authorship of the section.” However, though the majority to the contrary, a few competent scholars have examined the evidence carefully and have been reluctant to consider the passage as an interpolation. There seems to be warrant for giving further attention to this passage in the contemporary status of New Testament textual criticism. Present trends are toward a shift of authority from external manuscript evidence to internal criteria for


establishing the best text.6 Years ago Colwell stated that the New Testament had to be determined verse by verse. 7 This is known as the eclectic method and is carefully described by Vaggary8 and first illustrated in the monumental work of Zuntz9 on P46. The Greek text of The New English Bible, New Testament is the product of modern eclecticism. While external evidence must still be considered to some extent, the lack of certainty as to the genesis of our contemporary manuscripts leads scholars to examine the evidence for each variant impartially with no special predilections for or against any one type of text.10 Thus, the internal evidence of linguistics and context play a most vital role in recent methodology and should demand a more careful consideration of the internal character of the pericope adulterae. Since the matter of context is such a highly subjective area of discussion, our examination centers around the linguistic phenomena observed in the passage.

THE VALIDITY OF THE STATISTICAL METHOD CHALLENGED

The internal evidence of linguistics (i.e., vocabulary, grammar and style) has traditionally been used against the inclusion of John 7:53-8:11 as an integral part of the Fourth Gospel. Two main questions on this evidence may be raised. First, can statistical linguistic information derived from the passage prove that a different hand wrote 7:53-8:11 than the rest of the Gospel? Secondly, does the linguistic phenomena of the pericope yield any positive stylistic feature that is similar to that found in the remainder of John’s Gospel?

The linguistic argument against the Johannine genuineness of the pericope has been worked out in considerable detail in more recent years by Robert Morgenthaler in his Statistics of New Testament Vocabulary (Statistik Des Neutestamentlichen Wortschatzes, 1958).11 Morgenthaler, following the traditional approach, shows that out of eighty-two vocabulary words employed in 7:53-8:11, fourteen do not occur elsewhere in John’s Gospel. Furthermore, twenty-one of the thirty-five Johannine preferred words occur in John 4:6-18, where John likewise treats the meeting of a woman with Jesus, whereas only fourteen occur in 7:53-8:11. Common Johannine words and particles are totally absent from this passage. Morgenthaler continues to multiply examples of the above words mathematically shown to be unlike John’s frequency of usage and concludes that the passage must be an interpolation and not part of the Fourth Gospel.

The statistical method of determining the authorship of a New Testament writing was first popularized by the detailed work of P. N. Harrison on the criticism of the Pauline authorship of the Pastoral Epistles.12 By the use of word-counts and mathematical patterns established for the other Pauline epistles, Harrison concluded that the vocabulary and style of the Pastoral epistles were so different that they could not have been written by Paul. However, recent studies by competent conservative scholars have exposed two serious limitations of the statistical method. First, when this method is applied to other literary works than the New Testament, the analogy breaks down. Furse applied the method to Cicero and found it unreliable.13 The statistical method does not take into account the mood, purpose, and subject matter of the author. Furthermore, C. Udney Yule, a professional statistician and reader of statistics at the University of Cambridge, has shown that it takes at least 10,000 words to form any solid statistical basis for authorship.14 In 7:53-8:11 there are only 174 words. The insufficiency is evident.

Secondly, the statistical method proves too much. It can be applied to sections of writings of known authorship and prove them to be from a different hand.15 This point can be demonstrated by subjecting the statistical information on John 2:13-17 to the same methodology used by Morgenthaler and others on 7:53-8:11. The following tabulations may be considered.

It may be noted that in each case of hapax legomena words that 7:53-8:11. faces considerably better in percentage of total vocabulary than the undisputed passage 2:13-17. Attention should also be called to the fact that nearly twice the percentage of Johannine preferred words occur in 7:53-8:11 than in 2:13-17. Furthermore, Morgenthaler tabulates a number of words and particles that he feels are necessary for Johannine writing and are absent in the pericope adulterae.16 How-

ever, over two-thirds of these same words are totally absent as well from 2:13-17. Four possible reasons, then, based on statistics, could be advanced against the Johannine authorship of 2:13-17: (1) the large number of hapax words (14) not found elsewhere in John, (2) the use of frequent synoptic words rare in John, (3) the use of words more Lukan and Markan than Johannine, and (4) the absence proportionately of a sufficient number of Johannine preferred words and particles compared to other sections in the Fourth Gospel. To these could be added the abruptness of the incident in the context and the apparent historical anachronism of an early temple cleansing. It is hoped that by seeing how statistics can discredit a genuine passage in John, the obvious weakness of such a method will be acknowledged and abandoned by serious students who are searching for a true evaluation of the linguistic phenomena of 7:53-8:11. The shortcomings of the statistical method are evident and the trend in recent opinion is that such an approach is invalid for disputing authenticity. A much too narrow stricture upon an author's vocabulary, grammar, style, mood and subject matter is imposed by this method. In conclusion to our first question concerning the validity of the statistical method, we answer that mathematical word counts are insufficient to discredit the Johannine authorship of 7:53-8:11. The question of genuineness is still left open.

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In setting aside the validity of certain popular word-count statistics as having no value in deciding the genuineness of the pericope adulterae, the question is still open as to whether the passage may contain any stylistic trait or literary pattern that would clearly show its affinity with the Gospel of John. One of the unmistakable literary patterns of the Fourth Gospel is the practice by the author of interjecting short explanatory phrases which interpret the significance of the words that have just been spoken in the narrative. For example, in John 6:5 Jesus speaks to Philip and says, "Whence should we purchase bread that these should eat?" John then adds the interpretive phrase, "Now this he spake tempting him, for he knew what he was about to do" (v. 6). The explanatory phrase is introduced by three elements. It has the conjunction "now" (δέ), the demonstrative "this" (τοῦτο) and a form of the verb "to speak" (λέγειν). How completely this trait is in keeping with the style of the Gospel of John is seen in that it is employed at least ten times by the author throughout the book. It may be helpful to set these occurrences before us.

6:6 τοῦτο δὲ λέγειν περὶ αὐτοῦ . . .
6:11 εἶπεν δὲ τὸν Ἰουδαῖον . . .
7:59 τοῦτο δὲ λέγειν περὶ αὐτοῦ . . .
11:13 καὶ δέησα δὲ τὸ ἱερατέ . . .
11:51 τοῦτο δὲ αὐτῷ εἰπὼν οὐ εἶη . . .
12:26 εἶπεν δὲ τοῦτο διὰ τοῦτο οὐ . . .
12:38 τοῦτο δὲ λέγειν σημαίνει . . .
13:11 διὰ τοῦτο εἶπεν οὐκ . . .
13:26 τοῦτο δὲ . . . εἰπεῖν τοῦτο . . .
21:18 τοῦτο δὲ εἰπεῖν σημαίνει . . .

In seven out of the ten above examples all three introductory elements (δὲ, τοῦτο, λέγειν) occur in the phrases and in the remaining three cases two of the elements appear in each instance. This type of literary style is completely absent in the Synoptic Gospels. In a personal letter to us, Ernest Cadman Colwell, President of The Claremont School of Theology, Claremont, California, has acknowledged this phenomenon to be a literary pattern of the Fourth Gospel. An exact duplicate of this pattern occurs in the middle of the pericope adulterae. After the Pharisees have accused Jesus what he should do with the adulterous woman, the author has inserted the interpretive phrase, "Now this they were saying tempting him, that they might have to accuse him" (τοῦτο δὲ λέγειν καταγαγόντες . . .). The phrase has

all three introductory elements that have been observed earlier (δι', τοιούτου, λέγειν). That this fact has generally been ignored in discussions on the passage is evident from the complete silence of critical commentators in mentioning anything about it. The explanatory phrase in 8:6 might be explained as a scribal interpolation in an attempt to make the pericope appear to be Johannine. However, since this literary pattern is so little observed, it is unlikely that an approach so subtle would deliberately be attempted. It seems more reasonable to assume that this interjectory statement is an integral part of the whole narrative and thus that the passage also is an integral part of the whole Gospel.

We conclude that the traditional and popular internal linguistic criticism of this disputed passage is not as strong as it has usually been represented. No one should feel compelled from statistical tabulations to exclude the pericope from the Gospel of John. Furthermore, the distinctive literary trait of the Fourth Gospel that can be seen in John 8:6 must be adequately explained by those who would reject the genuineness of the passage. If internal evidence is highly determinative in our methodology of New Testament textual criticism, perhaps a re-interpretation of the external evidence of John 7:53-8:11 is in order.

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25. Some twenty-five to thirty critical commentaries (including French and German) on John were checked for this point and found to be silent (cf. bibliography cited by C. K. Barrett).