

Uncomfortable Textual issues arising from John 21.

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*This is an appendix to John 21 Commissioning of Peter as Shepherd*¹

John 21 occupies a curious place within John's gospel. The early church always counted John's gospel as a canonical book, and the New Testament was finally established beyond further question at the Council of Carthage in AD397. This chapter also appears in all the ancient copies of John's gospel. So it is therefore fully and unquestionably canonical.

Having said that, the chapter does not sit easily with the rest of John's gospel. John 20:30-31 is clearly intended as the final conclusion of the message that has gone before. Up to this point John's gospel is tightly structured around seven signs, with a strong coherent message, and clear objective (John 20:30-31).

For these reasons, John 21 is normally regarded by scholars as an "appendix", probably not written at the same time as the rest. The difference in its character, which is stylistically like Luke's gospel, and specific internal evidences suggest a different author, or authors.

John 21:23, for example, seems likely to have been added by an editor after John's death, much as Deuteronomy 34:5-12 cannot have been written by Moses. The final two verses of John 21 are different again. John 21:24, written in the third person, claims to be telling the truth, which sits oddly with the lofty and self-authenticating character of the first 20 chapters. The reversion to writing in the first person in the last verse is unprecedented in a gospel in which the writer seems at particular pains to hide himself. This last verse comes across as a self-conscious but ineffective recapitulation of the strong statement of John 20.30-31.

The honest seeker for truth cannot avoid facing such textual issues.

The ancient world had a different conception of authorship from what most people expect today. Nowadays we generally think of the author as being the person who physically writes the words of the text. That was not true then. In a culture where relatively few were literate, a scribe would normally do the actual writing, and do it in his own style. Even the highly educated apostle Paul used a scribe to write his letters. The scribe would write the meaning of the author down, and turn the spoken words into a tighter written form, much as a modern

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personal assistant corrects her boss's sloppy expression and grammar when she types up his dictation.

Consequently authorship in the minds of people in the ancient world rested with the person who generated the **substance** of the ideas, the concepts, rather than the person who chose the words in which the ideas were clothed and wrote them down.

I believe this gives a clearer understanding to what is meant by 2 Timothy 3:16, which says that all scripture is God-breathed. The ideas are His, because he breathed (spoke) them, but they are clothed and written in human language (with its attendant limitations) by human scribes.

This concept of authorship survives today. Celebrities and politicians often have their autobiographies written by "ghost writers", yet they are represented as the book's author when the book is published.

In the ancient world people did not consider it dishonest to reedit existing books written by others to suit a different audience. Again, such a process is not unknown today: it happens routinely in the "review process" of work published by large organisations such as the Civil Service, and the changes can be quite extensive, even though the altered work may still appear under the original author's name. Even for scripture, it still continues, since a translation into another language needs a re-editing process to suit the needs and thought forms of the target readers in a different culture.

Of course there are limits to the acceptability of doing this. The additions that we find in this last chapter of John or the last chapter of Deuteronomy lie within the acceptable limits. That is why these chapters are canonical.

What was not acceptable to the early churches was representing a completely new work with a different message as by a well-known person. This was a common problem in the ancient world. Normally, probably, at least in Christian circles, the writer was well-intentioned, believing he was representing apostolic views, but often the work bore little relationship to apostolic opinion expressed in other works. The process of developing the "canon of scripture" was about "choosing the good and refusing the evil". This was not generally difficult, as the falsely ascribed texts were usually obviously spurious. But the selection process was restricted to accepting or rejecting books taken as a whole. Doubtful text or editorial emendations were not removed from within books, as it was too difficult, and, as we know from modern attempts to do this, would have caused too much controversy.

These are not comfortable ideas, as they affect our view of the process of production of scripture, and what we mean by scripture being inspired:

- Is it the thrust of the message, or is it every detailed word?
- Do we allow that the editorial process was part of the process of improving and refining the text, much as my superiors improved my papers for publication when I was at work?
- That is, do we accept editing by the church as part of the "testing of the prophecy", or do we regard it as a corruption of the text "as originally given"?
- What importance do we give to the role of the selection process, where the churches tested the books over a long period and finally accepted the books we have as being beyond question?
- Was that testing process able to produce a "perfected" text, or must we continue to test the text, and choose what is good from it?

Such questions affect the way we exegete scripture, how rigidly we interpret it, and, perhaps, what we conclude from it.

My broad conclusion is that we must seek the core message, and that our dogmatic beliefs should rest on a broad basis of Biblical evidence, rather than on isolated texts. Indeed scripture itself enjoins this approach. It insists that we should avoid disputing about words, which does no good, (2 Timothy 2:14), suggesting that the general core of the message is what is important. When our ideas rest on subtle points we are on unsafe ground. And the Biblical principle is that truth is only **established** by the testimony of two or three witnesses: such witnesses need to be independent, of course. A single witness may be telling the **truth**, but it remains **unproven**. This is why the Bible includes many books from a variety of witnesses with different viewpoints.

All men, however holy, however inspired, only see through a dim mirror with partial knowledge (1 Corinthians 13:12). We must never forget that, but rely on the Holy Spirit to teach us and lead us to the Truth, which is Christ Himself, "The Word of God", not words written in a book, even though those words of testimony do have great value.

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(The elders of Victoria Hall Christian Fellowship do not necessarily endorse the opinions expressed in this paper, which are entirely the responsibility of the author).

These notes not comprehensive but should stimulate personal bible study. Every effort has

been made to be accurate, but the reader should test everything in accord with the example of Acts 17:11 and the command of 1 Thessalonians 5:21.

Errors, or queries which are unresolved after consulting the LORD, should be referred to the author: R H Johnston (email rhjbibpap@rhj.org.uk).

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