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THE HEALING OF THE LEPER: THE ACCOUNTS IN THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS AND PAPYRUS EGERTON 2, PAPYRUS KÖLN 255

Carol Kellas

The account of the healing of the leper in the three synoptic gospels, Matt 8:1-4, Mark 1:40-45, Luke 5:12-16, shows a common core of words which are identical or near identical, together with a complicated set of inter-relationships between the remaining words. In analysing these accounts scholars mainly argue either for the priority of Mark (those following the two-document hypothesis) or see Mark as a conflation of Matthew and Luke (those following the two-gospel hypothesis). There are other hypotheses, but it is unusual to find one which proposes that there is no simple direct relationship between the accounts in their final forms in Matthew, Mark and Luke. However, in a recent article O'Neill has argued that this is indeed the case because it is unlikely that the lost written records were in Greek or that scribes altered, selected or changed the sacred traditions of Jesus deliberately.[1]

An analysis of the texts of this particular pericope lends support to this last hypothesis, and the case is reinforced when the account of the healing of the leper in Papyrus Egerton 2 and papyrus Köln 255 is placed alongside the three canonical Gospels as a fourth column. The same complicated set of relationships appears, with a slightly reduced core of identical or near identical words which make up the skeleton of the story.

I wish to argue that this core has passed through separate traditions and that the inter-relationships of the synoptic accounts are explained neither by the priority of Mark nor by the direct dependence of one gospel on one or two of the others. Further, that the account in Papyrus Egerton 2 and Papyrus Köln 255 is neither an

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[1]   J.C. O'Neill, 'The Lost Written Records of Jesus' Words and Deeds behind our Records', *JTS* n.s. 42 (1991) 483-504.

archaic form of the synoptic account nor dependent on one or more of the canonical gospels but is representative of the way the tradition has been handed down in a different environment.

The account of the healing of the leper in Papyrus Egerton 2, fragment 2 recto, is one of five pericopes contained in the four extant fragments. Bell and Skeat[2] render the visible letters of this pericope, with contractions in round brackets and conjectures for the missing letters in square brackets, thus:

32   και [ι]δου λεπρος προσελθ[ων αυτω]
λεγει διδασκαλε Iη(σου) λε[προις συν-]
οδευων και συνεσθιω[ν αυτοις]

35   εν τω πανδοχειω ελ[επρησα]
και αυτος εγω εαν [ο]υν [συ θελης]
καθαριζομαι ο δη κ(υριο)ς [εφη αυτω]

38   θελ[ω] καθαρισθητι [και ευθεως]
[α]πεστη απ αυτου η λεπρα ο δε κ(υριο)ς]
[ειπεν αυτω] πορε[υθεις επιδει-]

41   [ζον σεαυτο]ν τοι[ς ιερευσι]

As this account contains no command to make an offering, as laid down by Moses, it could be seen as an earlier shorter version of the healing of the leper. However Papyrus Köln 255 has been identified as the missing part of Papyrus Egerton, fragment 2, which finishes the story in the same way as the synoptic gospels. Gronewald's setting down of the visible letters with his reconstruction and new numbering[3] incorporates lines 39 to 41 of Bell and Skeat. It reads thus:

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[2]   H.I. Bell and T.C. Skeat, *Fragments of an Unknown Gospel* (London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1935).

[3]   M. Gronewald, 'Unbekanntes Evangelium oder Evangelienharmonie (Fragment aus dem "Evangelium Egerton")', Kö lner Papyri (P. Ko ln) Band 6, Papyrologia Coloniensia (Abh. RWA Sonderreihe, VII; Opladen: Cologne, 1987) 136-145 at 140.

42 (39) [α]πεστη απ αυτου η λεπ[ρα λεγει]
δε αυτω ο Ιησ(ους) [ ] πορε[υθεις σεαυ-]

44 (41) τον επιδειξον τοι[ς ιερευσιν]
και ανενεγκον [περι του κα-]

46 (-) [θ]αρισμου ως προ[σ]ε[ταξεν Μω(υσης) και]
[μ]ηκετι α[μα]ρτανε

Papyrus Egerton 2 may well date from the middle of the second century AD or even earlier according to Bell and Skeat.[4] It has been assessed as nearer the end rather than the middle of the second century[5] but even if this second dating is correct it is still estimated to be one of the five earliest extant Christian writings.[6]

The assessment of its relationship to the synoptic gospels is, not surprisingly, varied. . Mayeda, who wrote a dissertation on the Papyrus in 1946, argued that the Papyrus represented a private gospel written independently of the canonical gospels.[7] Koester says that it represents a stage in the tradition that preceded the canonical gospels.[8] Cameron writes that Egerton 2 shows no dependence on the gospels of the New Testament.[9] In his thesis, *The Egerton Gospel: Its Place in Early Christianity*, Daniels supports this view

4   Bell & Skeat, *Fragments of an Unknown Gospel*, 1.
5   Gronewald, 'Unbekanntes Evangelium', 137.
6   E.G. Turner, *The Typology of the Early Codex* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1977) 90.
7   G. Mayeda, *Das Leben-Jesu-Fragment Papyrus Egerton 2 und seine Stellung in der urchristlichen Literaturgeschichte* (Bern: Paul Haupt, 1946) esp. 65-77. See Helmut Koester, 'Apocryphal and Canonical Gospels', *HTR* 73 (1980) 119.
8   Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament, Vol 2, History and Literature of Early Christianity* (Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1980; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 182; *Ancient Christian Gospel: Their History and Development* (London: SCM, 1990) 205-216; 'The Healing of a Leper', 211-213.
9   R. Cameron, *The Other Gospels* (Guildford: Lutterworth, 1983) 73.

and suggests that the account of the healing of the leper plausibly represents a separate tradition.[10]

However Jeremias takes a different view and concludes that the 'juxtaposition of Johannine and Synoptic material and the fact that the Johannine material is shot through with Synoptic phrases and the Synoptic with Johannine usage, permits the conjecture that the author knew all and every one of the canonical Gospels'.[11] Neirynck declares that the weight of scholarship sees a connection between Egerton 2 and the canonical gospels and says himself that the writer had an acquaintance with all the gospels but certainly with Luke.[12] Neirynck and Boismard have discussed this question in *The Interrelations of the Gospels*[13] where Neirynck is attempting to refute the theory of Boismard who sees the account of the healing of the leper in Papyrus Egerton 2 as preserved in a more primitive form than the synoptic accounts. Boismard's findings accord with his 'Niveaux multiples' hypothesis and Neirynck's with the priority of Mark.

To begin with I wish to examine the four accounts of the healing of the leper in terms of context, order, exact word similarity, near similarity and differences.

Firstly, the context of each. In Matthew the story is placed after the teaching on the mountain when Jesus has descended. The crowds are astonished at his teaching and its authority and if a

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[10] J.B. Daniels, *The Egerton Gospel: Its Place in Early Christianity* (Dissertation, Claremont Graduate School, Claremont, California, 1989). See a report in H. Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels*, 206-207.

[11] Joachim Jeremias, 'An Unknown Gospel with Johannine Elements', *New Testament Apycropha*, Vol 1, ed. W. Schneemelcher (London: Lutterworth, 1963) 95.

[12] F. Neirynck, 'Papyrus Egerton 2 and the Healing of the Leper', *EThL* 61 (1985) 153-160.

[13] F. Neirynck, 'The Healing of the Leper', *The Interrelations of the Gospels* ed. D. Dungan, (BETL XCV, Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1990) 94-107; Boismard, M.-E., 'La guérison de lépreux, *The Interrelations of the Gospels*, 254-258.

sequence is assumed they are still with him when the leper approaches him.

In Mark the context is different. Jesus has been in a lonely place, apparently pursued by the crowds and saying that he must move on to preach, so he went 'throughout all Galilee preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons' (1:39).

In Luke the pericope follows the call of the four fishermen disciples and the location is 'one of the cities'.

In Papyrus Egerton 2 the story of the leper follows straight on from a passage in which the rulers sought to lay hands on Jesus but could not because his hour of betrayal had not yet come and o κ(υριο)ς εξελθων [δια μεσου αυ]των απενευσεν απ [αυτων] (Lines 30-31). This episode closes and the story of the leper begins without any comment.

In Mark and Luke and Papyrus Egerton 2 it is quite clear that there is no necessary connection with the preceding verses. All move into the story of the leper without any words which seek to make a link with the preceding pericope. It is quite straightforward to see here the account of the healing of the leper as an independent story. In Matthew superficially there is a connection in that the incident is placed after the descent from the mountain and joined with a καί. However, the mountain provided the context for Jesus teaching the people; a mountain was peculiarly suitable with its overtones of theophany and Moses at Sinai. Going up and coming down a mountain would appear to be a clear literary device and in no way connected with following events. Further, the crowds are said to have descended with Jesus and thus logically would have been present at the healing of the leper but Jesus says, 'See that you say nothing to anyone', a rather strange order in view of the accompanying crowds..

The conclusion is that here, as in Luke and Mark and in Egerton 2, the pericope is isolated and it seems most likely that it was originally a story without a specific location.

In Matthew the healing of the leper is the first of a series of healings including the Centurion's boy, Peter's mother-in-law and many who were possessed by demons. In Mark and Luke it is followed by the healing of the paralysed man. The larger unit in all

three canonical gospels is concerned with healings. In Papyrus Egerton 2 the story is not part of a healing collection. It could well be an example of an early stage when the sayings and deeds of Jesus were being gathered together and simply laid side by side. The Egerton 2 fragments have been called an 'unknown gospel' by Bell and Skeat and others who have commented on the fragments but with so few fragments it is hardly possible to surmise that they necessarily formed part of a whole gospel in our understanding of the term. They may have formed one of many smaller collections of the words and deeds of Jesus.

On the question of order, in the wider context, there is no clear pattern which emerges. In all three canonical gospels these healing collections occur early in the gospels. Luke has a block which begins with the healing of the leper, 5:12 to 6:17, which is similar to Mark 1:40 to 3:13, but Matthew has different material. As the healing of the leper has come in at least two different healing collections, so these themselves are part of different larger collections. In Papyrus Egerton 2 there is not enough text to evaluate its position in a wider context.

The superficial similarities of the text of the three canonical gospels and Egerton 2 can be deceptive, for within this pericope of the healing of the leper there is not only a common core but there are also significant and numerous differences.

To begin with there is a considerable difference on a simple word count. The text used for the comparisons is Aland's *Synopsis of the Four Gospels*, German Bible Society, Stuttgart, Eighth corrected Edition. Matthew, the shortest of the synoptic accounts, has 63 words, Luke has 98, Mark has 99 and Papyrus Egerton 2 (for the following purposes this also includes Papyrus Köln 255) has 62.

Matthew, Mark, Luke and Egerton 2 have 19 words in common. In the case of five there are variants in Egerton 2: λέγει instead of λέγων, καθαρίζομαι instead of καθαρίσαι, ἐπίδειξον as opposed to δεῖξον, ἄνενεγκον instead of προσένεγκε, and priests in the plural instead of the singular. It should be noted however that a sizeable number of versions witness to priests in the plural in Luke's account (b ff² sy⁵ sy^p Persian Diatessaron Clem Alex Aug Harm Gosp 2.40 Ephrem Comm 12:23,24 Ev 95). One further difference

is that Mark has εὐθύς and Matthew, Luke and Egerton 2 have εὐθέως.

Matthew, Mark and Luke have a further fourteen words in common which are identical in order, apart from ἥψατο αὐτοῦ which is reversed in Mark.

Mark, Luke and Egerton 2 have two phrases in common. In the first, ἀπῆλθεν ἀπ' αὐτοῦ, Egerton has different verb ἀπέστη (line 39). The second phrase, περὶ τοῦ καθαρισμοῦ, is identical.

Matthew and Mark also have six words in common: ἐκαθαρίσθη, καὶ λέγει αὐτῷ ὅρα, and ὕπαγε.

Matthew, Luke and Egerton 2 all introduce the leper with ἰδού and Matthew, Mark and Egerton all describe the man as λεπρός. However, λεπρός is also used in Luke in Codex Bezae, the Old Latin version d, the Arabic Diatessaron and Marcion.

There are three instances where two accounts share one identical word: Matthew and Egerton 2 have προσελθών describing the action of the leper in approaching Jesus; Matthew and Luke have the leper addressing Jesus as κύριε; and Mark and Luke have σου following περὶ τοῦ καθαρισμοῦ. In addition Luke has καθὼς and Egerton 2 has ὡς introducing προσέταξεν Μωϋσῆς.

The remainder of the central part of the story which is different in each account amounts to 7 words in Matthew (plus verse 1); 23 in Mark (plus verses 1a and 45); 17 in Luke (plus verses 15 and 16); and 29 words in Egerton 2.

All the arguments that are used to show Mark as the gospel Luke and Matthew used could in this case be used to show Matthean priority. Matthew not only has the shortest text but also has more in common with Mark and Luke than they have with each other.

The words which are exactly the same, almost identical or in different tenses, form the main core of the story. There is a clear outline of an incident:

> A leper said,
> 'If you wish, I can be cleansed'.
> He said,
> 'I do wish. Be cleansed.'
> Immediately the leprosy left him.

He said,
Go and show yourself to the priest
and give the offering laid down by
Moses'.

This outline can account for variations of expression in each of the versions. For example the presence of 'If you wish, you are able to cleanse me' in the canonical gospels and 'If you wish, I am cleansed' in Egerton 2 could well easily be two ways of expressing, in Greek, the same original in Hebrew or Aramaic. Likewise the different ways of describing the healing: ἐκαθαρίσθη αὐτοῦ ἡ λέπρα in Matthew; ἀπῆλθεν ἀπ' αὐτοῦ ἡ λέπρα in Mark; ἡ λέπρα ἀπῆλθεν ἀπ' αὐτοῦ in Luke and ἀπέστη ἀπ' αὐτοῦ ἡ λέπρα in Egerton 2 are close enough to be four translations; likewise the variations in Jesus' instructions to the leper to go to the priest(s) could derive from an original account.

In the next stage this core material has moved in at least two directions. One is that which has developed into Egerton 2. Firstly, there is a description of how the leper approached Jesus. Secondly, there is an expansion which explains how the man became a leper. Thirdly, there are three connecting phrases introducing the words of the leper and the two sets of the words of Jesus. Fourthly, there is the extension of the order to go to the priests when Jesus says, 'and sin no more'. It is easy to see how these may have joined the core to bring Egerton 2 into its present form, whether in one or several stages. The Johannine overtones of the last phrase do not suggest that the scribe had any or all of John's gospel before him and had picked out a phrase to round off this story (John 5.14; [8.11]); rather this looks like part of the tradition which has come from a source (cf. Matt 12.45; Heb 6.4-8; 10.26; 2 Pet 2.20-22).

The core material, which is common to all four accounts, has been extended in the tradition which has fed into the canonical gospels. The words of the leper have been expanded to become:
'If you wish, you are able to cleanse me'.
The words of Jesus have been extended to include the comment:
Stretching out his hand he touched him.
Preceding Jesus' instruction to go to the priest is the warning:

See that you say nothing to anyone.

The offering to Moses is said to be:

as a witness to them.

All this further material common to the canonical gospels is thus the next stage of the transmission. It is not essential, for the account stands without them. The phrases are expansions and extensions which would have followed quite naturally. This new core has, like Egerton 2 at an earlier stage, separated and moved in different directions. As the story has become part of the Jesus tradition of different communities, so it has developed in a way that produced similar but distinct forms.

For example, in each of the canonical gospels there are descriptions of how the man approached Jesus, which have nothing in common. Mark's account has the additional information that Jesus was moved with pity, and has a description of the manner of Jesus, sending the healed leper away, as well as an emphatic 'to anyone', added to the order to say nothing. As we have seen, some of the material outside of the core is common to Matthew and Luke and some is common to Matthew and Mark. Both Mark and Luke have additional lines which complete the story whereas Matthew finishes with the common material.

To sum up: in these pericopes there is material common to the canonical gospels and Egerton 2; there is further material common to the canonical gospels alone; each account then has other material which is unique, but also words and phrases which are identical in two or three of the four accounts.

All these complications exist simply within the one text of Aland's *Synopsis of the Four Gospels*, which has been used for this purpose. There is a vast number of other possibilities within the different manuscripts of the canonical gospels. There are over 30 variant readings for this pericope in Matthew and Mark and over 60 for Luke. This suggests a much more complicated process of transmission than is apparent when working on a single text. Elliott[14] has pointed out the importance of taking variant readings

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[14]   J. K. Elliott, 'Printed Editions of Greek Synopses and their influence on the Synoptic Problem', *The Four Gospels:*

into account and says that 'decisions about the Synoptic Problem ought not to be made on the basis of the text in any one Synopsis but ... one should make use of the alternative readings to be found in the critical apparatus and ... one should not imbue the editor of any one printed text with an omniscience that enabled him to produce a definitive version of the text'.

There are variant readings of the words and phrases which are common to Matthew, Mark and Luke in Aland's text. Underneath the harmony there is discord lurking. It is not always of great significance but it is always a reminder of earlier stages where the texts of the gospels may have differed from one another far more widely than is shown by modern attempts to construct a 'standard' text. Take, for example, the phrase σεαυτὸν δεῖξον τῷ ἱερεῖ which is identical in Matthew, Mark and Luke in Aland's text, except that Luke has δεῖξον before σεαυτόν. The different order of these two words is also found in Matthew's text in 1396 and in Mark's text in the Washington Codex. Furthermore, Luke has σεαυτῷ in Γ and 69. The words τῷ ἱερεῖ are varied in readings to be found in all three gospels. The reading ἀρχιερεῖ for ἱερεῖ is found in Mark (fam 13 [excl. 124] 33) and Luke (047). In Luke, as has been noted, τοῖς ἱεροῦσιν is another variant. This plural form exists also in one Syriac version of Matthew (syᶜ). In Luke τῷ is omitted in 1604 and the whole phrase δεῖξον σεαυτὸν τῷ ἱερεὶ καί is omitted in Codex Sinaiticus*.

The traditional solutions to the Synoptic Problem that there is one original account used by the other two, or that one or more of the accounts is dependent on one or more of the others do not square easily with this evidence.

There is undoubtedly a large amount of identical material. There is also some similar material which can be fairly easily explained, such as εὐθύς in Mark and εὐθέως in Matthew, Luke and Egerton 2. However, if this is a straight copy, why are there so many internal variations, identical words between Mark, Luke and

Egerton 2; Mark and Matthew; Luke, Matthew and Egerton 2; Mark, Matthew and Egerton 2; Matthew and Egerton 2; Luke and Egerton 2; Mark and Luke; and Matthew and Luke? This represents almost every conceivable variation, and when all the evidence of other manuscripts is added in, the picture is even more complicated. Why should there be such picking and choosing? The problem of the variety between the accounts seems to outweigh the problem of the identical material. It would be a tortuous business to show that Luke and Mark had used Matthew or that Matthew and Luke had used Mark. Egerton 2 has material in common with all the synoptic gospels as well as its own distinctive additions and variations, suggesting that it is likely to be an independent account rather than an account dependent on any or all of the three gospels.

There has to be an explanation which accounts for the identical, similar and different words and phrases. In the oral tradition the core words must have been sufficiently significant to be remembered and handed on in a similar form. It is unlikely that such a large section of common material could have come into four different collections in the same words by chance. It is much more likely that this points to an important and well known tradition which was carefully passed on.

As the tradition came to be written down these were the main words and, as the tradition developed, they became embedded in different settings. In the development from the oral tradition to written records these words have retained their importance but their total identity has been lost as they developed in different communities. Small changes such as Matthew and Luke having κύριε would make sense as the basic plot is developed into story form. The major differences in the additional material at the beginning in Egerton 2 and the end in Mark and Luke do not disturb the integrity of the main part of the account.

A possible explanation for this core's remaining intact is that these words were used in ritual by the early Christians for healing, and that this story was a paradigm. Words used in such a context are most likely to stay in an identical form with only minor changes. This story is perhaps not just a simple healing. Lepers, like the blind and the dumb, seem to have some symbolic significance. The other

two main references to lepers in Matthew are used in this way. In Jesus' instructions to his disciples he says, 'Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons' (10:8). When John asks whether Jesus is the one who is to come the answer of Jesus is, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see, the blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them' (11:4-5). Clearly leprosy, even if it included many skin complaints, was only one of what must have been many diseases, yet it is singled out in this way. The verb καθαρίζω suggests ritual purity as signified in the rules in Lev 13 and 14. The fact that the best part of these two chapters of Leviticus is employed to explain the rules for purification of those with skin diseases underlines the significance of this kind of ritual impurity. Behind these four accounts of the healing of the leper there may be a liturgical use of the words which form the core of the story.

The only other reference to the healing of lepers in the synoptic gospels is in Luke in the cleansing of the ten lepers (Lk 17:11-14). The points of contact are not many. There is no conversation about Jesus being able to cleanse the lepers nor any mention of hand contact. There is a reference to going to the priests, without a reason being given. Here it is priests, as in Papyrus Köln 255, rather than priest of the earlier account and of Matthew and Mark. However, it has already been noted that there are readings in Luke's first account which also have 'priests'. The significance of the difference between singular and plural should not be over-emphasised. There may be a very simple explanation which relates to the background. The singular reference may be because there was one priest at a sanctuary as opposed to several priests at another which accounts for the plural. Or it may be that there were several priests but only one was needed to certify the cure, in which case either the singular or the plural would be appropriate and might explain why the action is to be a witness to αὐτοῖς in the synoptic accounts. Luke's account of the ten lepers suggests that there were other stories of lepers being healed but this does not affect the conclusions concerning the four accounts of the healing of the one leper.

Papyrus Egerton 2 and Papyrus Köln 255 offer a rare opportunity to examine a pericope from the canonical gospels in a wider context. The normal method of procedure in assessing the evidence of the synoptic gospels is given a new dimension when this fourth source is placed alongside Matthew, Mark and Luke. What emerges is four accounts of a healing where the words of the leper and of Jesus have been handed down in an almost identical form. In the process of transmission these treasured words have followed diverse paths and so in the form that we have them today they are found in similar words yet different settings.

Mrs Carol Kellas, a research student at the University of Edinburgh, died of cancer on 20 May 1994.