

The So-Called “Church Fathers” on GH

The fourth Century “Church Father” Eusebius writes about the Nazarenes:

“And among them [doubted books] some have placed the Gospel according to the Hebrews which is the especial delight of those of the Hebrews who have accepted Messiah.”

(Eusebius; Eccl. Hist. 3:25:5)

And as Jerome frequently mentions:

In the Gospel according to the Hebrews, which is written in the Chaldee and Syrian language, but in Hebrew letters, and is used by the Nazarenes to this day...

(Jerome; Against Pelagius 3:2)

And in the Gospel according to the Hebrews, which the Nazarenes are accustomed to read, ...

(Jerome; Commentary on Ezek. 18:7)

Hugh Schonfield on GH

The Gospel according to the Hebrews is a literary outlaw with a price on its head; but in spite of the scholarly hue and cry it still evades capture. Neither monastic libraries nor Egyptian rubbish heaps have so far yielded up a single leaf of this important document....

For behind Hebrews lies the unknown potentialities of the Nazarene tradition, which may confirm or contradict some of the most cherished beliefs of Orthodox Christianity. It is useless for certain theologians to designate Hebrews as “secondary” on the evidence of the present fragmentary remains preserved in quotation. ...

Judged by ancient testimony alone it is indisputable that Hebrews has the best right of any Gospel to be considered a genuine apostolic production; ...

Here is obviously a most valuable witness, perhaps the most valuable witness to the truth about [Yeshua] whom even a jury composed entirely of orthodox Christians could not despise, and who ought to be brought into court. But the witness is missing, and all that we have is a few reported statements of his taken long ago...

(Hugh Schonfield; According to the Hebrews; 1937; pp. 13-18)

Two Versions of GH

The Gospel according to the Hebrews was used by both Nazarenes and Ebionites (who split off from the Nazarenes in 70 C.E.). Jerome refers to it as

“...the Gospel which the Nazarenes and Ebionites use...” (Jerome; On Matt. 12:13)

However it seems that the two groups had slightly different versions of the same book:

- The Nazarene Version (GH-n) which Epiphanius says was “quite complete... as it was first written.” (Pan. 29:9:4)

(This quote actually speaks of Hebrew Matthew however I have included it because: 1) Throughout the Church Fathers there is a confusion between the original “complete” Hebrew Matthew and GH (as we will discuss later they may be the same) this is compounded by the context of this quote in contrast to the Ebionite text of GH (elsewhere the “Church Fathers” say that Ebionites used only Matthew and do not mention GH lending to the implication that they are the same.)

- The Ebionite Version (GH-e) which Epiphanius says was “not wholly complete but falsified and mutilated.” (Pan. 30:13:2)

By the middle ages the Nazarene version became known as “the Gospel of the Nazarenes” and in modern times the Ebionite version has come to be known as “The Gospel of the Ebionites.”

Original Language

There has been much debate about the original language of the Gospel according to the Hebrews. Eusebius refers to GH as “*the Gospel that is spread abroad among the Jews in the Hebrew tongue*” (Theophania 4:12 on Mt. 10:34-36) and “*the Gospel [written] in Hebrew letters*” (ibid on Mt. 25:14f). Jerome refers to GH as “*written in the Chaldee and Syrian language but in Hebrew letters*” (Against Pelagius III.2) but seems to refer to the same document in another passage as “*in the Hebrew language and letters*” (Of Illustrious Men 3). In context however Jerome seems to say that GH was originally written in “*the Hebrew language and letters*” but that the copy in the library at Caesarea is “*written in the Chaldee and Syrian language but in Hebrew letters*” (i.e. Aramaic). Thus Schonfield is correct in writing:

The original language of the Gospel was Hebrew. It has generally been assumed on insufficient grounds that this Hebrew was in fact Aramaic (commonly called Hebrew).

(According to the Hebrews p. 241)

Misconceptions

Many misconceptions have circulated concerning the Gospel according to the Hebrews. For example many scholars have attempted to make GH into several documents. These refer to the Gospel according to the Hebrews, the Gospel of the Nazarenes and the Gospel of the Ebionites as three different documents. However nowhere do the “Church Fathers” refer to a “Gospel of the Ebionites”. Epiphanius says that the Ebionites used the “Gospel according to the Hebrews” and never refers to a document titled “Gospel of the Ebionites”. The term “Gospel of the Nazarenes” is never used by the “Church Fathers” either and only appears in the middle ages where it is clearly a euphemism for the Gospel according to the Hebrews. The presumption that there were three documents called GH has taken root in scholarship.

Part of the basis for this assumption is that Clement of Alexander (who did not know Hebrew or Aramaic) quotes GH in Greek before Jerome translated GH into Greek. However it is quite possible that Clement obtained his quotation from a secondary source who did know Hebrew and that had quoted GH in ad hoc Greek, a secondary source which is now unknown. The fact that Clement of Alexander quotes the book in Greek prior to Jerome’s translation is far to little evidence from which to conclude multiple documents.

Another misconception is the presumption that thirteen readings in marginal notes found in certain manuscripts of Greek Matthew and which refer to alternate readings taken from “the Judaikon” (i.e. the “Jewish version”) refer to the Gospel according to the Hebrews. While one of these readings (a note to 18:22) agrees with the reading of GH as given by Jerome (Against Pelag. III 2) that in itself is not enough evidence to jump to the far reaching conclusion that the “Judaikon” is the same as GH. The “Judaikon” readings may also be readings from a Jewish (Hebrew or Aramaic?) version of canonical Matthew and not to GH at all.

While there is no reason to presume that there were three different Gospels called the Gospel according to the Hebrews, it is certainly clear that Nazarenes and Ebionites used different versions of GH. Epiphanius describes the version of GH used by the Ebionites as “called ‘according to Matthew’, which however is not wholly complete but falsified and mutilated” (Pan. 30:13:2) however in speaking

of the Nazarenes he refer to the “Gospel of Matthew quite complete in Hebrew... preserved... as it was first written, in Hebrew letters” (Pan. 29:9:4). So it would appear that the Ebionite version of GH was “not wholly complete but falsified and mutilated” while the Nazarene version was “quite complete... preserved... as it was first written.”.

This explains why the Ebionite version omitted the birth narrative and opened with the ministry of Yochanan (Pan. 30:13:6) while the Nazarene version is known to have included material parallel to the first two chapters of Matthew.

The Synoptic Source

Many scholars through the years have seen within the Gospel according to the Hebrews, possible answers to questions about synoptic origins.

In 1778 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781) known as a founder of the Scientific Method, proposed the idea that the Gospel according to the Hebrews was the primary source for our Synoptic Gospels.

(The Hilbert Journal 3 (1904); The Gospel according to the Hebrews; Walter F. Adeney, M.A., D.D.,; p. 139)

In 1866 Hilgenfeld concluded:

At length the Gospel according to the Hebrews offers those of us who are investigating the origin of the gospels the punctum Archimedis [point of origin] which so many learned men have vainly sought in the Gospel according to Mark. (Ibid; Novum Testamentum extra Canonem Receptum, fasciculus iv. P. 13. Apud. Nicholson, The Gospel according to the Hebrews, p. ix.)

In 1905 A. S. Barnes proposed an identification between the Gospel according to the Hebrews and the Logia document which many scholars closely associate with the hypothetical “Q” document Barnes writes:

Is it possible seriously to maintain that there were two separate documents, each of them written at Jerusalem during the Apostolic age and in the Hebrew tongue, each of them assigned to the Apostle Matthew, and each of them dealing in some way with the Gospel story? Or are we not rather forced to the conclusion that these two documents, whose descriptions are so strangely similar, must really be identical, ... (A. S. Barnes; The Gospel according to the Hebrews; Journal of Theological Studies 6 (1905) p. 361)

In 1940 Pierson Parker concluded that a close connection existed between the Gospel according to the Hebrews and the hypothetical “Proto-Luke” and the hypothetical “L-Source” document:

...the presence in this gospel of Lukan qualities and parallels, the absence from it of definitive... Markan elements... all point to one conclusion, viz., that the source

of the Gospel according to the Hebrews... was most closely related to sources underlying the non-Markan parts of Luke, that is, Proto-Luke. (Pierson Parker; A Proto-Lukan Basis for the Gospel according to the Hebrews; Journal of Biblical Literature 59 (1940) p. 478)

And Hugh Schonfield concluded of the Gospel according to the Hebrews:

...it may be argued that there has been dependence not of 'Hebrews' on the Synoptics but vice versa— that 'Hebrews' was one of the sources on which one or more of them drew. (Hugh Schonfield; According to the Hebrews; 1937;pp. 13-18)

GH and Matthew

The so-called “Church Fathers” do not hesitate in hinting to us that Matthew’s source document was the Gospel according to the Hebrews. In fact, they readily identify our Gospel of Matthew with the Gospel according to the Hebrews. Jerome writes:

In the Gospel which the Nazarenes and Ebionites use which I have lately translated into Greek from the Hebrew and which is called by many people the original of Matthew... (Jerome; On Matt. 12:13)

Jerome is not the only “Church Father” to identify the Gospel according to the Hebrews with the Gospel of Matthew. For example Irenaeus says that the Ebionites used only the Gospel of Matthew (Heresies 1:26:2) while Eusebius says the Ebionites “used only the Gospel called according to the Hebrews” (Eccl. Hist. 3:27:4) and Epiphanius writes that the Ebionite “Gospel” “...is called “Gospel according to Matthew, or Gospel according to the Hebrews” (Panarion 30:16:4-5). Moreover Jerome seems to refer to the original Hebrew of Matthew and the Gospel according to the Hebrews interchangeably.

This led Hugh Schonfield to conclude, in his 1927 translation of the DuTillet Hebrew version of Matthew:

My own opinion is that the canonical Gospel [of Matthew] is an abridged edition of a larger work, of which fragments still survive, ... I believe that this Protevangel was written in Hebrew, not in Aramaic, ... Whatever may have been its original title, we have early allusions to it under the name of “the Gospel” “the Gospel of the Lord,” “the Gospel of the Twelve, or of the Apostles,” “the Gospel of the Hebrews” and “the Hebrew Matthew.” (An Old Hebrew Text of St. Matthew’s Gospel; 1927 p. viii)

However ten years later Schonfield writes:

The only difficulty in fact that stands in the way of accepting the Greek [of Matthew] as really translated from the Hebrew [of Matthew], instead of vice

versa, is undoubtedly the irrefutable evidence that Greek Matthew has largely used Mark.

(According to the Hebrews; 1937; p.248)

Schonfield finally comes to the conclusion of...

...the strong probability that Hebrews was one of the sources of canonical Matthew.

(ibid p. 254)

However, Schonfield was mistaken in his 1937 statement referring to “the irrefutable evidence that Greek Matthew has largely used Mark.” This misconception was the only thing which held Schonfield back from concluding that Greek Matthew is a translation of Hebrew Matthew and that Hebrew Matthew was an abridgement of the Gospel according to the Hebrews. If we remove this barrier of presumed Markan priority we may adopt the logical conclusion that Schonfield hesitated from, that our Book of Matthew is an abridgment of the Gospel according to the Hebrews.

Mark is Secondary

The original documentary theory claimed that Matthew and Luke were dependent on a collection of sayings known as the Logia or as “Q”. “Q” is from the German word “Quelle” meaning “source” and a narrative document usually identified as Mark.

Streeter developed this theory further. He realized that Luke and Mattitياهو contained narratives in common which could not be found in Mark. He attributed these to a third document, which he called “Proto-Luke“. Proto-Luke was said to have had incorporated into it “Q”, the non-Markan portions of Luke and the narrative material which Luke and Matthew held in common.

However the late Dr. Robert Lindsey made further observations. Lindsey points out that the phrase “and immediately” occurs in Mark over 40 times. Luke contains this phrase only once and then in a portion with no parallel in Mark. Lindsey pointed out that it is unimaginable that Luke systematically purged the phrase “and immediately” from every portion of Mark which he used, especially since he uses the phrase himself elsewhere. This means that Luke could not have copied from Mark and that Mark therefore copied from Luke.

If we eliminate all of the Lukan passages from Mark then almost everything else can be found in Matthew. In fact only 31 verses of Mark cannot be found in either Luke or Matthew. It is clear as a result that Mark was compiled using Luke and Matthew. The following three facts also support this conclusion:

1. When Mark and Matthew differ in chronology Luke agrees with Mark.
2. When Mark and Luke differ in Chronology, Matthew agrees with Mark.
3. Matthew and Luke never agree in chronology against Mark.

Mark therefore is secondary, compiled from Matthew and Luke with only 31 lines of original material. It plays no part in synoptic origins. (Lindsey’s “Proto-Mark” was probably actually the Gospel according to the Hebrews itself.

Luke used GH as a Source

Many scholars look to a hypothetical Proto-Luke as the source behind the material unique to Luke but not found in Matthew and Mark.

In 1940 Pierson Parker concluded that a close connection existed between the Gospel according to the Hebrews and this hypothetical “Proto-Luke” document:

...the presence in this gospel of Lukan qualities and parallels, the absence from it of definitive... Markan elements... all point to one conclusion, viz., that the source of the Gospel according to the Hebrews... was most closely related to sources underlying the non-Markan parts of Luke, that is, Proto-Luke. (Pierson Parker; A Proto-Lukan Basis for the Gospel according to the Hebrews; Journal of Biblical Literature 59 (1940) p. 478)

However, I believe we may easily conclude that the material unique to Luke comes not from a Proto-Luke or L-Source at all, but actually from the Gospel according to the Hebrews.

To begin with Luke admits to having had source documents when writing his gospel (Luke 1:1-4) and the fact is that several of the surviving readings from the Gospel according to the Hebrews parallel Luke only and not Matthew. For example only Luke gives Yeshua’s age as being thirty (Lk. 3:23); only Luke includes the account of Yeshua being comforted by an angel (Lk. 22:43); only Luke includes the discussion about eating the Passover as described in Luke 22:45 and only Luke includes Yeshua’s words at the crucifixion “father forgive them...” (Lk. 23:34). All of these are found in the surviving Gospel according to the Hebrews fragments. There are also Lukan elements even in Gospel according to the Hebrews material that also parallels Matthew. The immersion account as cited by Epiphanius also included the words “in the form of [a dove]” (as in Luke’s account) and the phrase “I have this day begotten you” (as in Luke’s account in the Greek Western type text of Codex D).

The correlation with the Greek Western text type of Codex D is also extremely important, but I will have to visit that topic in a future blog.

If Mark is secondary and not primary, as we have found that it is, we should expect that the Synoptic source would have readings which parallel Matthew only, readings which parallel only Luke and readings which are common to Matthew and Luke (and sometimes Mark) but should not expect readings which parallel only Mark and this is exactly the case with the Gospel according to the Hebrews.