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Codex Bezae on John i. 3–4

One Dot or Two?

The problem of punctuating and dividing vv. 3 and 4 in the first chapter of John is as well known among New Testament scholars as it is ancient.¹ At the present, the weight of opinion favors punctuation before *hò gégonen*:

(3) . . . *kaì chōrìs autoû egéneto oudè hén. (4) hò gégonen en autô zōè ên . . .*,
rather than after:

(3) . . . *kaì chōrìs autoû egéneto oudè hèn hò gégonen. (4) en autô zōè ên . . .*²

The punctuated text of Codex Bezae (D) would normally be a strong witness here except for the fact that it appears, enigmatically, to punctuate both before *and* after *hò gégonen*: two dots.

1.

Apart from a review of the history of the problem, the ambiguity of Codex Bezae on John i. 3–4 is suitably reflected in the following.

(1) The Codex Bezae reading with two dots clearly is not an invention of the modern imagination. It has long been included in the apparatus of various editions of the Greek New Testament, and, anyway, is not unique in the manuscript tradition.³

(2) Westcott examined the manuscript prior to the publication of his commentary on John and declared emphatically that no dot followed *hò gégonen*. His full statement is:

A careful and repeated examination of D satisfies me completely that this MS. has no stop after *gégonen*. There is a slight flaw in the vellum which extends towards *gégonen* from the top of the following E, of which the upper boundary is above the level of the writing, but this is certainly not the vestige of a stop. The stops are below the level of the writing. And again, there is no increased space between *gégonen* and *en* such as found where a stop occurs, as between *oudén* and *hó*. On holding the leaf to the light, the point of a C falls within the flaw and gives the semblance of a stop.⁴

¹ K. Aland, *Eine Untersuchung zu Joh. 1, 3–4*: Zs. nt. Wiss. 59 (1968), p. 174ff.

² The United Bible Societies Greek New Testament, ed. K. Aland et al. (2nd ed. 1968), prints the former, though B. Metzger registers an important minority report in his *Textual Commentary on The Greek New Testament* (1971), p. 195. The twenty-fifth edition of *Novum Testamentum Graece*, ed. E. Nestle & K. Aland (1963), prints the latter, though the twenty-sixth edition will print the former.

³ Outside of Codex Bezae, the two-dot reading occurs in one way or another (two major stops, two minor stops, or one major and one minor) in E, L, O, Psi, 047, 211 (all 8th century); F, G, H, K, M, V, Y, Delta, Theta, Pi, Omega (9th century); S (10th century): Aland (n. 1), p. 188f.

⁴ B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel according to St. John*, 1 (1908), p. 60, n. 1.

(3) Nestle cites Codex Bezae as punctuating only before *hò gégonen* through all twenty-five editions (1898–1963).

(4) The United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament (first ed. 1966) suddenly cites Codex Bezae as giving a dot once again before and after.

(5) Aland, who was the chief editor of the UBS edition and who also examined the manuscripts, calls that a mistake. Whether Aland meant that the apparatus of the UBS edition here contains a clerical error or that on this decision he disagrees with the editorial committee's judgment one cannot tell for certain, but his statement would appear to favor the latter inasmuch as he indicts also Scrivener's edition for the same error⁵: "Scrivener und Greek New Testament sind mit ihren Angaben im Unrecht."

2.

In any case, the UBS citation of Bezae as punctuating both before and after is not to be lightly passed off, for I am persuaded on the basis of my own first-hand examination of D in Cambridge on August 28, 1971, that both Westcott and Aland missed something. It is true that a *prima facie* observation, and even a more careful one, suggests immediately that there is only one punctuation mark involved in the passage, a bold, well-spaced elevated dot preceding *hò gégonen*. There is indeed what at first appears to be an elevated smudge between *hò gégonen* and *en* but one is able quickly to recognize this as the flaw that Westcott spoke of. Viewing the passage at the time under ultra-violet light only revealed that "something is going on" between the two words, but no dot was emphatically resolved. However, a more careful scrutiny through a magnifying glass and a tilting of the leaf toward the sunlight reveals directly below the Westcott flaw, just above the faint line that runs through the middle of the letters used by the scribe as a guide, though *not* above the upper level of the letters, what decidedly appears to be the remnant of a dot. It is small, it is extremely pale, it is wedged in between the two words without appropriate space, but it is there. I am confirmed in this judgment by Mr. A. E. B. Owen, chief paleographer at the Cambridge University Library, who examined the manuscript with me. It is further confirmed by more leisurely examination of ultra-violet and infra-red photographs of the passage.

3.

If, then, there is a dot at the disputed place, the question becomes: How did it get there, how are we to account for this early (perhaps earliest?) and enigmatic punctuation before *and* after *hò gégonen*? One must at this point necessarily indulge in some measure of speculation, and I suggest the following only as the explanation that commends itself as best accounting for all the facts:

⁵ Aland (n. 1), p. 188, n. 18.

(1) The original reading punctuated before *hò gégonen* only.

(2) A later editor or owner of the manuscript, familiar with the alternate reading which punctuated only after *hò gégonen*, cautiously inserted a second dot after *gégonen* either in the interest of thereby building support for the (by then) theologically more desirable reading, or simply for the purpose of conveniently reminding the reader of this interesting and important variation in the text, *or* for the purpose of bringing this manuscript into harmony with several late manuscripts which (beginning in the 8th century?) had begun to adopt the double punctuation (which naturally presupposes that the later double-punctuation was not itself dependent upon Codex Bezae). Of course, if one could believe in the originality of Codex Bezae's double-punctuation, then this might (in view of the difficulty of accounting for late but difficult readings) hold some interesting implications for the general relation of Codex Bezae to these later manuscripts.

(3) The second dot, whenever penned, was so cautiously and lightly penned so as almost to disappear over the years, *or* was deliberately erased or scraped out (if one uses his imagination, he can perceive an ever-so-slight concavity in the vellum where the dot stood) by a still later party who, recognizing what had occurred, and possessing a greater sensitivity to the use and abuse of manuscripts, sought to restore what was obviously the original version. It should be observed that here we have an instance where the "lectio difficilior" principle works exactly in reverse, namely, when there is no possible way of accounting for an *original* reading which makes no sense whatever, or is at least completely ambiguous (an elevated dot both before and after *hò gégonen*), and it is possible to account for such a reading on the hypothesis of a correction or aid.

If there is indeed a dot, or the remnant of a dot, in D following *hò gégonen*, then the critical apparatus of the United Bible Societies' edition is correct in citing D as punctuating before and after. On the other hand, if the second punctuation is to be accounted for somewhat along the lines as I have suggested, then the UBS edition is wrong in not distinguishing between first and second hand readings in this instance as it does in others.

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