

HISTORICAL ISSUES AND THE PROBLEM OF JOHN AND THE SYNOPTICS

D. Moody Smith

I

Martinus de Jonge has repeatedly addressed himself to questions of the history and interpretation of the Johannine literature and has quite recently published an important contribution to Jesus research.¹ Although in the latter volume he does not deal with the Gospel of John, but focuses mainly on Mark and Q, he nevertheless writes that not only material distinctive of Matthew and Luke, but 'even individual pieces of tradition recorded only in the Fourth Gospel, may also go back to an earlier date'.² In a much earlier essay, however, de Jonge had dealt sensitively with the important question 'Who are "we"?', taking his direction from the 'we have seen his glory' of Jn 1.14.³ De Jonge observes that here as elsewhere in the Fourth Gospel and 1 John the apostolic eye-witness is in view, although John's use of the first person plural cannot be limited to that original group.

In paying tribute to our colleague we should not appear to invoke his words to validate our own opinions, but it does seem worthwhile to point out that my interests find a resonance in his work. In this essay it is my intention to set the question of historicity in John over against the problem of John and the Synoptic Gospels, not so much with a

view to proving John historical, as to suggest that in a number of cases in which John differs from the other Gospels there is not convincing reason for preferring them for historical purposes or on historical grounds. Insofar as John's differences do not seem to be variants from the Synoptics made for theological reasons, they speak on the side of the independence of the Gospel of John, whether or not the evangelist knew, or knew about, the other Gospels.

Over a half-century ago, Percival Gardner-Smith wrote that critics are not likely 'to accept the Johannine account as historical in the narrower sense of the term; the influence of interpretation is too obvious for that; but where the Fourth Gospel differs from the Synoptics it may henceforth be wise to treat its testimony with rather more respect than it has lately received, and perhaps in not a few cases it may prove to be right'.¹ Gardner-Smith's 'henceforth' modestly alluded to his own arguments for the independence of the Fourth Gospel of the Synoptics, which heralded a major change in scholarly opinion. With the publication of C. H. Dodd's *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel*, the view that John wrote independently of the other Gospels, basing his narrative on a separate, if related, tradition, seemed well on the way to becoming canonical.² The significance of John's independence of the Synoptics for the historical question was, however, variously expressed, as the differences between Dodd and Rudolf

1. *Saint John and the Synoptic Gospels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1938), p. 97.

2. C. H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), p. 8 n. 2, refers to Gardner-Smith's work as 'a book which crystallized the doubts of many [regarding John's dependence on the Synoptics], and he exerted an influence out of proportion to its size'. One may cite, in America, R. E. Brown's important commentary as typical of this newly emerging position: *The Gospel according to John* (AB, 29A; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966, 1970); note especially vol. 1, pp. xlv-xlvii: 'To summarize, then, in most of the material narrated in both John and the Synoptics, we believe that the evidence does not favor Johannine dependence on the Synoptics or their sources' (p. xlvii). But already in 1941 R. Bultmann had completed his *Das Evangelium des Johannes* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht) for the *Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar* series, which thirty years later was to be translated by G. R. Beasley-Murray and others as *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971); in this critically important commentary he finds John's use of the Synoptics an unnecessary hypothesis and at best a late, redactional phenomenon, peripheral rather than central to John's composition.

1. See, for example, the collection of his Johannine essays in *Jesus: Stranger from Heaven and Son of God, Jesus Christ and the Christians in the Johannine Perspective* (SBL SBS, 11; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977); on Jesus himself, *Jesus, The Servant-Messiah* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

2. De Jonge, *Jesus, The Servant-Messiah*, p. 2.

3. The essay, entitled 'Who Are "We"?', is found in de Jonge's *Jesus: Inspiring and Disturbing Presence* (trans. J. E. Steely; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974), pp. 148-66. The earlier part of the essay, which concerns us here, was written in 1968 as a public lecture and published in Dutch that same year.

Bultmann show. For Dodd the possible historical value of the Fourth Gospel was an important implication of its independence with distinct theological overtones, but for Bultmann, the historicity of the Fourth Gospel was, apart from its bare fact claim, negligible and of little theological import. In any event, John's independence could be taken for granted as a beginning point for discussion, and in his efforts to renew the defence of the historicity of the Fourth Gospel, John A. T. Robinson did just that.¹

For those who follow Johannine scholarship, however, it is scarcely fresh news that John's independence of the Synoptics is no longer taken for granted. Indeed, the latest wave of investigation moves in the opposite direction.² In light of this recent movement, I want to examine some of the historical aspects or implications of the problem of their relationship. Obviously, if the Gospel of John was wholly dependent upon the Synoptics for its portrayal of Jesus and his ministry, any deviation from them would imply a diminution of its historical accuracy. Accordingly, the Gospel would be deemed of no value as an independent source. If, on the other hand, John was independent of the Synoptics, the question of its historical value would be worth pursuing. In the latter case, of course, nothing would be necessarily implied about its historical truth, for an independent gospel could be historically valueless or specious. But if, or insofar as, the distinctly Johannine materials present or reflect data or situations that are plausibly or arguably historical, they bespeak the

1. See most recently, and finally, the late Bishop Robinson's *The Priority of John* (ed. J.F. Coakley; London: SCM Press, 1985), where Robinson more or less begins from the premise of John's independence (cf. pp. 10-23). Robinson's 'The New Look on the Fourth Gospel', in his *Twelve New Testament Studies* (SBT, 34; London: SCM Press, 1962), pp. 94-106, was first given as a paper at the Oxford conference on 'The Four Gospels' in 1957. It expresses the same point of view more tentatively. At about the same time, A.J.B. Higgins was writing his brief book, *The Historicity of the Fourth Gospel* (London: Lutterworth, 1960), in which John's independence is presumed.

2. It is represented most impressively by the work of Professor F. Neirynck and his colleagues at the Catholic University of Louvain. On this most recent turn in the discussion of the problem, see my *John among the Gospels: The Relationship in Twentieth-Century Research* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992). The trend is well represented in the papers presented to the Louvain Biblical Colloquium 1990 on John and the Synoptics. See A. Denaux (ed.), *John and the Synoptics* (BETL, 101; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1992).

independence of John from the Synoptics. While independence does not imply historical value, the attribution of historical plausibility to the distinctive Johannine material does imply independence, although it, of course, does not prove it.

II

In all probability, at least two characteristics of the Gospel of John have led historians of Christian origins to regard it as a document of only secondary historical worth—behind the Synoptic Gospels—if it has any such value at all. In the first place, several of the signs of the Fourth Gospel surpass in their sheer miraculousness the mighty works narrated in the Synoptics. They are more spectacular or incredible. The man at the pool of Bethzatha has been ill for thirty-eight years; the blind man in ch. 9 has been blind from birth; the dead Lazarus has been in the tomb all of four days. Such astounding aspects of Johannine stories seem to be exaggerations based upon the already amazing deeds of Jesus narrated in the Synoptics. If in the Synoptics Jesus supplies ample food for the five thousand from a few loaves and fish (as he does also in John) the fourth evangelist portrays Jesus changing water into wine. But, secondly, even more distinctive than the Johannine Jesus' deeds are his words. In the Synoptics, especially in Mark, Jesus can scarcely be coaxed into talking about himself, whereas in the Fourth Gospel he proclaims his messianic status and argues with opponents about his dignity and role. The familiar 'I am' words of Jesus are altogether typical, and distinctive, of the Gospel of John.

Both these characteristics of the Fourth Gospel are understandably, and rightly, regarded as historically suspect, while at the same time they cast doubt upon the historicity of the Johannine portrayal of Jesus and his ministry generally.¹ While the unhistorical nature of such aspects of the Gospel of John has been granted by most critical scholarship in the course of this century, a similar negative historical evaluation has gradually characterized Synoptic exegesis also. Some Johannine exegetes have sought to turn the situation in Synoptic studies to the advantage of the Fourth Gospel, and its historical worth, by pointing out that John's theological character scarcely differentiates it from the other canonical

1. I. Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), pp. 36-38, cites Strauss and Baur in documenting the demise of the Fourth Gospel as a historical source in the eyes of nineteenth-century critics.

gospels.¹ This is certainly true, but from the standpoint of one who values historical trustworthiness it may be small consolation!

Obviously, it does not enhance the historical value of John just to devalue the other three. Yet there are a number of points at which it may be argued that John represents, or reflects more accurately, the historical situation or events of Jesus' ministry, even if his purpose is not to narrate something we call 'history' or 'biography'. If one seeks criteria to identify such points, or justify their consideration as historical, three simple ones may be suggested. Elements or items deserve consideration as possibly historical that (1) without reproducing the Synoptics accord with the portrayal of Jesus found in them, (2) do not advance the distinctively Johannine Christology, and (3) are historically plausible in the time, place, and setting of Jesus' ministry. I want to point to such elements or items with brief justification, by way of inventory, without drawing any firm conclusions. For our purposes it is neither necessary nor appropriate to presuppose John's independence in the sense of his ignorance or deliberate ignoring of the Synoptics. It is obvious enough that the evangelist goes his own way. I intend simply to point to certain data and leave the conclusions up to the reader. Nothing of what I say will be entirely new. Gathering and quickly surveying the data in view of the question of John's relation to the Synoptics may, however, be worthwhile.

1. Already R.E. Brown effectively made this point in one of his early articles, 'The Problem of Historicity in John', *CBQ* 24 (1962), pp. 1-14 (3). His purpose was broader than ours, namely, to show that John's Gospel should be considered representative of a Palestinian, eyewitness historical tradition in some ways as valuable as the Synoptic. (Although his article appeared the year after Dodd's book, it was obviously written before Dodd was published.) Our purpose is simply to argue that at a number of points where John differs from the Synoptics his account is at least as likely—sometimes more likely—to be historically valid. Perhaps closer to our purpose is Brown's 'Incidents that are Units in the Synoptic Gospels but Dispersed in John', *CBQ* 23 (1961), pp. 143-60. Brown's interest in maintaining an important element of historicity at the level of Jesus himself is strongly evident in the first volume of his Anchor Commentary especially, and I think he has never abandoned it, despite the fact that he has later shown greater interest in *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979). Likewise, his longtime Union Seminary colleague J.L. Martyn, who in *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, rev. edn, 1979), portrays the Gospel as a narrative on two levels, the *ekmanig* (putatively Jesus's) and that of the primitive Johannine church, nevertheless focuses his attention on the latter level.

First, there is the *chronology* of Jesus' ministry. The traditional three-year ministry is, of course, an inference from the Fourth Gospel, for the Synoptics seem to presuppose a ministry of one Passover and of a year or less. John, on the other hand, speaks of three distinct Passovers (2.13; 6.4; 11.55). We commonly say that the three-year scheme of the Fourth Gospel accommodates the evangelist's interest in Jesus' replacement of Jewish festivals.¹ This may be the case, but that fact alone would not necessarily mean that there is not something historically correct about John's time-frame. Moreover, the Synoptic (Markan) framework is generally acknowledged to be literary and theological rather than historical. Did Jesus gather disciples, teach, gain fame as a miracle-worker, and arouse opposition that led to his death in less than a year? Possibly, but the traditional, longer (Johannine) time-frame makes considerable sense, particularly if we take into account a period in which Jesus worked under the influence of John the Baptist, as the Fourth Gospel may imply. The ancient and traditional way of harmonizing the Gospel accounts by accommodating the other three to the Fourth Gospel was an obvious and practical apologetic procedure, but not for that reason necessarily wrong.

Another chronological consideration is, of course, the matter of when, according to the Jewish calendar, Jesus celebrated the Last Supper with his disciples and when he was put to death. As is known, according to the Synoptics the Last Supper was a Passover meal, and Jesus was tried and put to death during the feast. According to John, on the other hand, Jesus' last meal was at most a proleptic Passover feast, for it occurred the evening before Nisan 15. He was then tried and crucified before the Feast (Cf. Mk 14.2), so that the Jewish authorities wanted his body taken down quickly (Jn 19.31). In favor of the Synoptic chronology it is argued that John makes an alteration to have Jesus die while the Passover lambs are slain. Odd that he should make this juxtaposition and not mention it or otherwise indicate why he has done so. Moreover, one would then expect Jesus' expiatory, salvific death to play a larger role, as it does in Paul and even 1 John. Of course, there have been elaborate efforts to explain John's deviation from the Synoptics by recourse to theories about John's midrashic character or diverging Jewish calendars. But is not the

1. Cf. already E. Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel*, pp. 63-64, cited by Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, p. 122 n. 3. This is, of course, a recurring theme with many variations in the exegesis of the Fourth Gospel.

simplest explanation that the Synoptics succumb to an understandable pressure to make of the Last Supper a Passover meal, while John represents a more primitive phase in which that had not yet occurred!¹

Closely related to the three-year Johannine chronology or itinerary of Jesus' ministry is the *geographical locale*, in which Jesus appears frequently and for long periods of time in Judea and Jerusalem. Again, Johannine theological interests are apparently at work. Jerusalem is the headquarters of the Jews'. Yet if, in fact, Jesus' ministry went on for two or three years, is it not intrinsically probable that he made more than the one Passover pilgrimage to Jerusalem that the Synoptics report? The three Passover visits reported by John become a probability, even though they advance Johannine Christology. One might also note that Mark (14.49) has Jesus say to the arresting party that he was daily (*kath'hēmeran*) in the temple teaching, a statement that fits the Johannine chronology and setting better than the Markan, where Jesus could have only been there a few days. Jesus' seeming familiarity with persons or places in Jerusalem, reflected precisely in the Markan account of the preparation for this Triumphant Entry (11.3) or the Last Supper (14.13-17), bespeaks a longer acquaintance with the capital city than Mark's narrative seems to allow.

The whole question of Jesus' *relationship to the Baptist* (always called simply 'John') is handled more elaborately in the Fourth Gospel than

1. I here follow Dodd (*Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel*, pp. 109-111), who assembles the evidence in favor of John's dating. C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press 1978), pp. 48-51, makes the case for the historicity of the synoptic dating, following Jeremias and taking issue with Bernard (JCC), who had favored the Johannine. Bullmann's indifference to the historical question is typical. Nor is the historical question, which of the two datings is correct (perhaps the Johannine), of any importance for the interpretation of John' (*Gospel of John*, p. 465 n. 1).

There is another significant Johannine variant, in that Jesus is said to be crucified at, or after, the sixth hour (19.14), whereas in Mark he is crucified at the third hour (15.25). Assuming the Jewish reckoning of time in both cases, John would put the crucifixion at noon, when the Passover lambs were slain, arguably a theologically motivated timing, which, however, seems more likely to lie in John's tradition than in the evangelist's redaction. On the other hand, twelve noon would seem a more plausible time for the crucifixion to begin than nine in the morning, particularly since in Mark the trial before Pilate immediately preceded. (This gets us into questions of how early in the morning a Roman prefect would have gone to work and whether that is irrelevant because of the unusual circumstances, etc. These questions cannot be adjudicated here.)

in the Synoptics. For example, in the Fourth Gospel the Baptist goes out of his way to make sure that his own temporal priority to Jesus is not misconstrued (1.15, 30). The one who comes after—Jesus—was before, in the sense of prior to, or greater than. Bullmann, following Matthew Black, suggests the possibility the 'coming after' (*ercheshai opisō*) means following in the sense of discipleship.¹ Thus Jesus would at one time have been a disciple of John, and this was then all the more reason for the evangelist to make their actual, theological relationship clear.² If, indeed, Jesus himself baptized, as John more than once states (3.22, 26; 4.1), he clearly identified himself with the movement of which the Baptist was the head. The statement that only Jesus' disciples, not Jesus himself, baptized (4.2) seems a lame afterthought and correction. Moreover, this entire scene (3.22-4.3) portrays Jesus and the Baptist as working, if not side-by-side, at the very same time.³

Thus it became necessary to note, probably in light of the contradiction with the Synoptics, that John had not yet been cast into prison (3.24)—again a sort of afterthought.⁴ In the Synoptics, of course, John is already out of the way, in prison, before Jesus begins his ministry (Mk 1.14). Here there is a rather strange agreement between John and Luke only, for while Luke notes that Herod imprisoned John (Lk. 3.19-20), he does not make the sharp dichotomy between John's ministry and Jesus', which we might have expected of him (that is, he omits Mk 1.14). One suspects that John (with Luke) knows something, namely, that John the Baptist's ministry did not end before Jesus' began, that they were for a while contemporaries, and that John would have appeared the originator and leader of a movement Jesus joined. Thus the Fourth Evangelist needs to set matters straight theologically because he knows the somewhat embarrassing history! Certainly John's historical assumptions about the relation of Jesus and John do

1. Bullmann, *The Gospel of John*, p. 75 n. 4.

2. Bullmann, *The Gospel of John*, p. 108.

3. Dodd (*Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel*, pp. 285-86), takes the representation of Jesus as baptizing to derive from old tradition, if it is not historical. Bullmann (*The Gospel of John*, p. 168) conjures with the possibility that 3.22 is derived from old tradition, but nevertheless views the entire section 3.22-26 as a literary composition of the evangelist designed to show Jesus' superiority over the Baptist.

4. Bullmann (*The Gospel of John*, p. 171) proposes that 3.24 is the insertion of the ecclesiastical redactor, for the evangelist shows no interest in harmonizing his account with the Synoptics. Dodd (*Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel*, pp. 279-80) also takes 3.24 to be 'an editorial note' but from the evangelist.

not serve his Christology nearly so well as the Markan premise of the clean sequence of Jesus and John, with no overlap, would have. Yet given the conditions of first-century Palestinian Judaism, the more complex relationship predicated by the Fourth Evangelist seems entirely reasonable. What is missing from John's Gospel, of course, is the apocalyptic character of John's preaching, as well as that of Jesus, which we know so well from the Synoptics. But this is exactly what we would expect in John. Furthermore, just that apocalyptic outlook would explain the close relationship of John and Jesus, which the Fourth Gospel describes more fully than do the others. John strongly implies that Jesus was a baptist, and I am inclined to agree!

Moreover, it is arguable that John the Baptist's statement, 'I did not know him' (1.33), reflects the historical fact that John had not known Jesus prior to this encounter. In Matthew (3.14), however, it is clearly presumed that John had prior knowledge of Jesus and of who he was. Although Mark does not state that John had such prior knowledge, Matthew may have inferred it from Mk 1.7-8. While Luke does not go beyond Mark in this narrative, he had earlier described Mary as a relative of John's mother Elizabeth (1.36), leaving the reader to presume John's knowledge of Jesus, to whom he would have been related. In the Fourth Gospel John comes to know who Jesus is, but only by virtue of the descent of the Spirit (1.33-4).

The portrayal of Jesus' relationship to John the Baptist raises the question of Jesus' own disciples, inasmuch as the Fourth Evangelist has two of them sent to Jesus by John the Baptist. That this happened in the way, and with the words of introduction (1.29, 36), John reports is unlikely. Yet that some of Jesus' disciples had been attracted to, or were followers of, the Baptist is altogether probable, given the similarities between them. Moreover, the Johannine account is, as interpreters have noted for centuries, better motivated. In Mark (followed by Matthew) Jesus calls disciples who apparently have never before seen him, and they follow. Traditional harmonization has explained this implausible sequence by proposing that Mark's (and Matthew's) narrative assumes John's. As unlikely as this may be, it is a way of taking account of the problem and acknowledging that John supplies an answer to an important question that Mark leaves unanswered—and unasked.

Moreover, while assuming the existence of the twelve, John clearly acknowledges that Jesus had other disciples, indeed, some who deserted him (6.66). Is it likely that John would have fabricated such a scene

had he not known it, or at least the fact of their desertion, as a given.¹ Of course, we now tend to look first at John's own situation to explain and identify such deserters, but if the evangelist had such contemporaries in mind, he could easily have had Jesus predict them in the farewell discourses rather than insert them into his Galilean ministry.

John not only knows there were disciples who deserted Jesus. He also knows that the loyal disciples did not understand Jesus during his earthly ministry, but only after his crucifixion and resurrection.² Mark, of course, knows this as well. But John differs from Mark in his presentation of this state of affairs. In Mark, Jesus clearly predicts his coming death (and resurrection) and seemingly holds the disciples accountable for their failure to understand. John, however, regards the disciples as unable to understand, because the crucial events have, after all, not occurred, and the Holy Spirit or Paraclete has not yet come. Although John's presentation of Jesus is in some ways highly anachronistic—and much more so than the Synoptics—John does not have Jesus predict his own death so openly; rather he alludes to it more obliquely (3.14-15; 12.32), and the disciples are not clearly and culpably obtuse for not understanding. In this respect John seems closer to what must have been the actual situation of Jesus' disciples during his ministry. They did not understand because as yet they could not. Incidentally, in this connection Peter's confession in John does not betray that disciple's failure to understand and his culpability as it does in Mark, and John otherwise shows no particular desire to elevate or exonerate Peter. (Ch. 21 might be regarded as an exception, but even there Peter is subordinated to the beloved disciple, who as one who all along does understand in that sense at least represents the postresurrection church.)

Perhaps less important than Jesus' relationship to his disciples, but nevertheless interesting, is his relationship to his family—mother, brothers and father. Suffice it to say that, as in the Synoptics

1. Dodd (*Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel*, pp. 220-21) thinks that 6.66 has some traditional and historical basis, thanking W.L. Knox for the original suggestion.

2. On the disciples' inability to understand earlier, see F.F. Segovia, "'Peace I Leave with You: My Peace I Give to You': Discipleship in the Fourth Gospel", in F.F. Segovia (ed.), *Discipleship in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), pp. 76-102 (92-94); also M. de Jonge, *Jesus: Stranger from Heaven and Son of God*, pp. 7-9.

(Mk 3.21, 31-35) Jesus puts distance between himself and his mother and brothers in incidents that are, however, distinctive of the Fourth Gospel (2.1-11; 7.1-10).

Another of Jesus' relationships that stands out as significant involves the women who appear in the Fourth Gospel.¹ Jesus' mother (never called 'Mary' in the Fourth Gospel) plays a larger and more positive role in the Johannine narrative than in the Synoptic, but one that is not contradictory to the Synoptic accounts. Jesus' encounter and conversation with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's Well (ch. 4) is, of course, unique to the Fourth Gospel. (Luke shares an interest in Samaria, as well as Jesus' female followers, with the Fourth Gospel, but without their sharing the same narratives.) But here the Johannine Jesus manifests typically human characteristics. He is tired from the journey in the heat of the day, as well as thirsty, and strikes up a conversation with the approaching woman, asking her for a drink. That Jesus should initiate a conversation with a woman, much less a Samaritan, is out of keeping with Jewish custom, as the story eventually indicates (4.9, 27), but this state of affairs does not necessarily speak against the historicity of the incident. Indeed, Jesus' approach to the Samaritan woman, his apparent openness to her, is congruent with and complements the Synoptic, especially the Lukan, picture of Jesus. That Jesus might have behaved in this way. The reader may be pleasantly surprised, but he is not confused. The conversation that develops is, of course, replete with Johannine theological themes and reflects the style and vocabulary of the Fourth Evangelist. One would be hard pressed to argue that John presents an account of an actual conversation between Jesus and this woman.

The sisters of Lazarus, Mary and Martha of Bethany, appear only in John and Luke (10.38-42). But only in John are they said to be sisters of Lazarus and to reside in Bethany. In John as in Luke they play host to Jesus and thus appear as his friends. In fact, Jesus is said to love them, even as he loves Lazarus (Jn 11.5). In John only, of course, this Mary anoints the feet of Jesus and wipes them with her hair (12.1-8, cf. Lk. 7.36-50, where the woman is not named). In John the apparent personal relationship between Jesus and this family in Bethany is the

basis of a theologically important narrative: Jesus raises the brother Lazarus from the dead. But whatever one makes of this episode, it scarcely calls into question the verisimilitude of the relationship. Obviously, verisimilitude is not the same as historical factuality, but it is its *sine qua non*. That Mary and Martha appear also in Luke, in a somewhat different narrative, enhances the credibility of the Johannine notices. It is, of course, possible that John has here taken up the sisters from Luke, made the Lazarus of the Lukan parable (16.19-31) their brother, and constructed the narratives we now read in his Gospel. (But such a proposal involves us in the larger question of the relationship of Luke to John, which presents difficulties for it, that is, the distinctively Lukan material or *L₁*, is scarcely paralleled in John.)

Then there is Mary Magdalene, who in John, as in the other Gospels, appears at the cross and at the empty tomb. (In Luke she is not yet named at the cross, but only Luke indicates that she had an earlier relationship with Jesus; cf. Lk. 8.2.) In John she becomes the first witness of an appearance of the risen Christ (20.11-18). This is also the case in Mt. 28.9-10, although there her role is not stressed. Again, it is possible that John has taken a small item from Matthew and enlarged it greatly, but again we encounter the problem of explaining John's larger relationship—or lack of it—to the other Gospel.¹ Certainly John has ascribed a larger role to Mary Magdalene. She now stands out along with the mother of Jesus, the Samaritan woman, and the sisters Mary and Martha as one of the prominent people of the Gospel story. Is it more reasonable to believe that John in his social and theological setting enhanced their roles because of his nascent feminist interests or that he reflects here, albeit in ways different from the Synoptics, Jesus' actual relationships with women who followed him?

The *Johannine passion narrative* contains a number of interesting divergences from the Synoptics. We have already noticed the flagrant difference in the dating of the Last Supper and Jesus' crucifixion. The other most striking Johannine departure is the omission of any trial before the Sanhedrin following Jesus' arrest. Ironically, John's dating of the arrest before the feast lightens one of the major objections to the historicity of such a trial. Obviously, there is also an element of

1. See the remarkable essay by R.E. Brown, 'Roles of Women in the Fourth Gospel,' in *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*, pp. 183-98. Brown underscores the evidence that women are fully, and perhaps uniquely, recognized as disciples of Jesus in the Gospel of John.

1. Brown (*The Gospel according to John*, pp. 1002-3), regards Mt. 28.9-10 as a later insertion into the Matthean narrative, among other reasons, because v. 8 leads so nicely into v. 11 if it is omitted. Thus Jn 20.14-18 would be an independent version of the same tradition and not a Johannine development of a Matthean episode.

confusion in John, for Jesus is sent to Annas the father-in-law of the high priest Caiaphas (18.12-13), but subsequently in the same episode Annas is referred to as high priest. At the end Jesus is sent off bound by Annas to Caiaphas the high priest, but nothing is said about what happened there. Is the Markan (and Matthean) account of the trial to be assumed in reading John? Apparently Luke did not assume it; at least he moves the whole Sanhedrin scene to the morning after and at the same time removes its juridical elements (22.66-71). How is John's omission to be explained? On the one hand, we are told that the Jewish trial scene is superfluous in John, because all along Jesus has been on trial before the Jews.¹ Moreover, a Jewish verdict against Jesus seems to be presumed in the trial before Pilate (18.30-31), but whether it is based on the verdict of a missing trial scene or the conclusion of the case against Jesus made throughout the Gospel is hard to say. On the other hand, John's omission of the trial is a problem for the exegete because its inclusion would seemingly have fulfilled his purpose and design so well. Jesus is condemned because he finally claims to be the Messiah, the claim that has got him in trouble with the authorities since the beginning of his ministry in the Fourth Gospel. Of course, the Markan episode presents severe historical problems as to its time, execution and verdict—much more so than the Johannine. Whether John knew Mark or not, his version is to be preferred on historical grounds.²

Other distinctive elements of John's account are historically plausible. A (Roman) cohort is involved in Jesus' arrest (18.3). Overkill perhaps, but Roman involvement, especially at Passover, might be expected. After his condemnation, Jesus leaves for the place of execution, bearing his own cross (19.17), the usual procedure in a crucifixion. Of course, in the Synoptics (Mk 15.21 par.) Simon of Cyrene is impressed to carry Jesus' cross. Traditional exegesis has long combined the two: Jesus starts out as in John, but subsequently

1. Cf. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John*, pp. 523-24. Moreover, according to Barrett (p. 524), 'there is little in his story that cannot be explained as a Johannine modification of a narrative not unlike Mark's'. On the Gospel of John as a juridical proceeding, see A.E. Harvey, *Jesus on Trial: A Study in the Fourth Gospel* (London: SPCK, 1976). In a paper read before the 1990 Louvain Colloquium on John and the Synoptics, A. Dauter argued that John 10 presupposes, or is based upon, a narrative of the Jewish trial similar to, but not identical with, Mark's. See his 'Spuren der (synoptischen) Synedriumsverhandlung im 4. Evangelium. Das Verhältniss zu den Synoptikern', in *John and the Synoptics*, pp. 307-39.

2. As Dodd contends, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel*, pp. 88-96, 120.

needs help, as Mark describes.¹ This is, in fact, quite possible, although we can scarcely get beyond conjecture in the matter. Only John tells of the intention to break the legs of the three crucified men in order to speed their death, again a common practice. The soldiers in the detail dispatched to do this found Jesus already dead, and this finding agrees with what we read in Mark, namely, that Pilate was surprised to learn that Jesus had already died (Mk 15.44). Again, we have to be content with the observation that John's report of the crucifixion could be historically true. That it was invented to provide fulfillment of Scripture (Ps. 34.21; cf. Exod. 12.46 and Num. 9.12; Zech. 12.10) is possible, but I think less likely than that those passages were used to interpret an historical event, or at least one conveyed as such by tradition. (Such Old Testament testimonia in the Fourth Gospel seem to be traditional rather than the composition of the evangelist, because they frequently have Synoptic or other New Testament parallels.)

Missing from the broader Johannine passion is, of course, the cleansing of the temple, which had already taken place on Jesus' first Passover pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Traditional Christian exegesis has resolved the seeming contradiction between John and the Synoptics by having Jesus cleanse the temple twice—an unlikely solution. John A.T. Robinson's proposal that the Fourth Gospel is correct on this point and the Synoptics wrong has found few takers because of Robinson's other views, but it is by no means outlandish.² Most of us have preferred to think that Jesus' action in the temple led directly to his arrest and execution at the same Passover. But it remains possible that Jesus' action at an earlier Passover caught the attention of the temple authorities and caused them to lie in wait for him on his return. (Such a scenario is all the more credible on E.P. Sanders' view that the displacement of the old temple with a new one was a central item of Jesus' eschatological agenda.³) However that may be, it remains arguable and perhaps even likely, that John's departures from the Synoptics in the passion narrative reflect a more accurate view of what actually took place.

1. Brown (*The Gospel according to John*, p. 899) observes that 'serious scholars of the caliber of Dodd and Taylor judge... [this] solution a perfectly reasonable interpretation of the evidence'.

2. Robinson, *The Priority of John*, pp. 127-31, 185-86.

3. E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), pp. 61-76.

Turning briefly to the *resurrection narratives*, we find a new and different situation, for here as nowhere else in the Gospel all John's episodes have Synoptic parallels, whether close or more remote. The arrival of the beloved disciple and Peter at the empty tomb, probably a Johannine composition, seems to be the outstanding exception, but even that is already suggested by Luke (24.12, 24). At this point in the narrative, if anywhere, John's account appears to be clearly secondary to the Synoptics. I have already observed that in the Fourth Gospel Jesus' initial resurrection appearance is to Mary Magdalene, but even here John's dramatic account can be viewed as a development of Matthew's rather brief and colorless notice of Jesus' appearance to Mary Magdalene and the other Mary at the tomb.

The most striking and original Johannine resurrection account is, however, in the appendix (21.1-14). This story, paralleled only in the call narrative of Lk. 5.1-11, is presented as the third resurrection appearance of Jesus (21.14), although it is actually the fourth counting the one to Mary Magdalene. In part because of the Lukan parallel, it has been understood by some exegetes, pre-eminently Robert Fortna, as a sign story that has been transferred to the resurrection period.¹ But the Gospel of Mark and the Gospel of Peter anticipate a Galilean resurrection appearance of Jesus. Indeed, Peter's account seems to anticipate just such a scene by the sea as we find in the Fourth Gospel. John's narrative is on the face of it more likely to be a traditional resurrection narrative than the rather obviously Matthean composition that concludes the First Gospel. In fact, this appearance narrative is exactly the one that Mark's Gospel leads us to expect, even to the extent that Peter plays a leading role. (The women are told in Mk 16.7 to tell Jesus' disciples and Peter.) One might facetiously suggest that the lost ending of Mark's Gospel somehow became the appendix to John's! I am not going to suggest that, but more, soberly, that the narrative of Jn 21.1-14 may well be the earliest account of Jesus' appearance to his disciples that we possess.²

1. R.T. Fortna, *The Gospel of Signs: A Reconstruction of the Narrative Source Underlying the Fourth Gospel* (SNTSMS, 11; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 87-88. In his more recent *The Fourth Gospel and its Predecessor: From Narrative Source to Present Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), pp. 65-79, Fortna maintains his position, but acknowledges its more hypothetical character in relation to his other proposals (p. 66).

2. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, p. 705: 'The early Easter story, related in

III

If this rather brief survey of the Gospel of John seems to confirm the impression of John's independence with which I started, that should come as no surprise. I have, in effect, been spelling out the basis for that impression. In conclusion, I return to the question of John and the Synoptics, which has hovered in the background all along. What conclusion may be drawn by way of summary? Simply, that where John possesses, reflects or advances data or a point of view different from, or at odds with, the Synoptic Gospels or tradition, its statements or narratives deserve serious consideration as quite possibly historically superior to the Synoptics. The distinctive Johannine Christology, on the other hand, is usually found in the discourses and dialogues of Jesus, which on other grounds seem to be compositions of the evangelist. They scarcely represent the utterances of the historical Jesus.

Are we then to infer that John is independent of the Synoptics? Not necessarily, particularly if independence means ignorance. But if independence means not being determined or even overtly influenced by the Synoptics, John certainly seems to live up to that standard, especially in his use of an array of historical data concerning which there is little reason to prefer the Synoptics. Indeed, as we have seen there is often good reason to prefer John.¹

v. 1-14, manifestly originally told of the first (and only?) appearance of the risen Jesus to the disciples'. Moreover, 'that this story, or a variant of it, formed the original conclusion of Mark (and of the Gospel of Peter) has a certain probability' (p. 705 n. 5). Bultmann is not being facetious.

1. That the Johannine account of Jesus' words and works is a theologically freighted narrative is clear enough, and no longer needs any defense. Yet this fact does not determine, or should not determine, its value as a historical source on specific points. In this regard the statement of R. Pesch, 'The Gospel in Jerusalem: Mk 14.12-26 as the Oldest Tradition of the Early Church', in P. Stuhlmacher (ed.), *The Gospel and the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 116, is very much to the point:

The linkage of theology to history—in subordination to the biblical witness of the canon—is the linkage to the faith-interpreted history of God with his people... The stubbornly factual character of that history and of the concrete speech of the word of God resists the arbitrariness of our wilful arrangements—even in the language of legend, which by no means lacks a relationship to history simply because it is not interested in the historical accuracy of the course of events portrayed in the world of the narrative but is very interested in the meaning of the history as faith understands.