

Historical Traditions and the Fourth Gospel

History or Theology?

Identifying the many differences between John and the Synoptic Gospels inevitably raises the issue of the historicity of the traditions found only in John's Gospel and of the value of its independent source(s) as historical documents. For example, the Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels speaks consistently of the coming of the kingdom of God, but such statements are absent from John, which is dominated by a series of 'I am' sayings. What does this imply about the historical value of these unparalleled statements pronounced by the Johannine Jesus? This is a pertinent issue because it is commonly acknowledged that John possesses a far higher christology than the other gospels (i.e., Jesus is more explicitly declared to be the Son of God). Since some New Testament scholars (e.g., James D.G. Dunn, Maurice Casey) believe that the shift is from a low christology (Synoptics) to a high christology (John), does not this in itself cast doubt upon the historicity of the Johannine presentation of Jesus? The tendency in early scholarship, as has already been noted, was to regard the Synoptics as the historical sources, and evaluate the material peculiar to John as the product of deep theological reflection betraying little contact with historical facts. Indeed, many scholars today conclude that John has so overlaid his material with theological interpretation that his gospel has become largely worthless for the reconstruction of the historical Jesus.

The Historical Value of Johannine Traditions

C.H. Dodd, in his significant study on this subject, *The Historical Tradition of the Fourth Gospel* (1963), came to the following conclusion: 'Behind the Fourth Gospel lies an ancient tradition independent of the other gospels and meriting serious consideration as a contribution to our knowledge of the historical facts about Jesus Christ'. This conclusion implies that differences between John and the Synoptics do not necessarily signify that John is out of touch with the Synoptic traditions. In fact, it is now often stated that, because information is found only in John's Gospel, this does not justify the tendency to discard it as

possessing no historical value. It is claimed that certain aspects unique to John may possess more historical plausibility than their Synoptic counterparts, or - as phrased by D. Moody Smith - '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' ('Historical Issues', 253). The arguments adduced for this purpose are as follows.

(1) The Length of Jesus' Ministry Jesus' ministry, according to the Fourth Gospel, lasts between two and three years, an inference drawn from the references to three passovers (2:13; 6:4; 11:55), during which time Jesus visits Jerusalem on several occasions. The plausibility of John's chronology and focus on a Judean ministry is implied by the fact that Jesus, even in the Synoptic Passion narratives, betrays some knowledge of the places and people of Jerusalem; this suggests that he was already familiar with the city; compare the Markan account of Jesus' preparation for the entry into Jerusalem (11:3) and for the last supper (14:13-17). Moreover, it seems more likely that a three-year ministry would allow Jesus to gather disciples, teach, conduct a healing ministry and arouse gradual opposition. Of course, none of the gospels claims to give a detailed, day-by-day account of Jesus' ministry (note that Jn 20:30 states that the gospel is not a complete account of Jesus' activities), but a ministry lasting three years is said to be more realistic.

(2) Jesus' Relationship with John the Baptist The Fourth Gospel states that some of the disciples of Jesus were first disciples of John the Baptist (1:35-37) and that Jesus and his disciples conducted a ministry of baptism that overlapped with the ministry of John for a certain time (3:22-4:3). According to Mark, John has already been imprisoned before Jesus begins his ministry (1:14), but no such statement is made in Luke's Gospel and it may be the case that John preserves a historically valid note when he states that their ministries overlapped for a short time. Similarly, according to John, the Baptist sends two of his disciples to Jesus (1:29, 36); it is quite probable that followers of the Baptist later became disciples of Jesus, and this would explain

why disciples who had apparently never seen Jesus beforehand choose to follow him.

(3) Historical, Geographical and Social Details There are other possible indications of the historicity of some of the material peculiar to John. In numerous historical, social and geographical details John seems to preserve authentic features; e.g., detailed and accurate information about the Samaritans and their theology in John 4, the location of the pool of Bethesda in John 5, the pool of Siloam (9:5), the Pavement (19:13), accurate knowledge of Jewish feasts (John 6-8). To cite one such example, in the narrative about the healing of the man at the pool of Bethesda, it is stated that the pool had five porticoes in which the invalids lay (5:2). Archaeological excavations at the pool (between 1914 and 1938) confirmed that there were two pools, each with two porticoes and one between them. The inclusion of such (archaeologically verifiable) details makes one consider more carefully the issue of John's possible attention to historical detail in his presentation of Jesus' ministry.

(4) The Johannine Passion Narrative Certain elements are historically plausible, including the involvement of Roman soldiers in the arrest of Jesus (18:3), and it seems that the Johannine statement that Jesus carried his own cross (19:17) is in accordance with Roman custom.

(5) The Teaching of Jesus It is the discourses of Jesus that are most generally regarded as Johannine creations with no historical basis. But during the last few decades some attempts have been made to demonstrate that these long discourses are not simply Johannine inventions. Scholars such as James Dunn and Barnabas Lindars have sought to show that, at the root of these discourses, are Jesus sayings or traditions which can be traced back to the historical Jesus, and around which the distinctively Johannine discourses have been developed. For example, Barnabas Lindars claims that those sayings preceded by the words 'Truly, truly, I say to you...' are authentic Jesus sayings which were transmitted orally before being recorded in the Fourth

Gospel (e.g., Jn 5:19; 13:16, 20). Similarly, James Dunn (*The Evidence for Jesus*, 38) draws attention to the ‘kingdom’ saying in John 3:3: ‘Truly, truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above’, which has very close parallels in the Synoptics (Mt. 18:3; Mk 10:15; Lk. 18:17): ‘Truly, I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of God’ (Mt. 18:3). Dunn himself therefore argues that the best explanation of the Johannine discourses is of a ‘theological elaboration of history’: ‘The discourses are meditations or indeed sermons on typical episodes in Jesus’ ministry and on particular teachings of Jesus’ (p. 39).

Attention can also be drawn to a study by Peter W. Ensor, entitled *Jesus and his ‘Works’* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), in which he seeks to discover the original speech of Jesus behind the sayings in which he speaks of his ‘work’ and ‘works’. For this purpose he applies the criteria for authenticity usually applied to Synoptic Jesus sayings; these criteria include such considerations as whether a saying can be translated back into Aramaic and reflects Jesus’ Palestinian environment (language, culture and personal idiom); betrays a relationship with those sayings in the Synoptics judged to be authentic; cannot simply be regarded as the product of early Christianity; contains elements which may stand in contrast with the purposes of the evangelist. Ensor’s study leads him to conclude that four sayings, in particular, can be regarded as authentic sayings (Jn 9:3b-4; 4:34; 5:17; 5:19-20a), and that they demonstrate that the virtually exclusive use of ‘work’ terminology by the Johannine Jesus reflects Jesus’ own manner of speaking about his activity and ministry.

Assessment

Such features imply that one can no longer speak of the Fourth Gospel as nothing more than a ‘theological document’. It is true that John, more markedly than the Synoptics, has reworked his traditions and has given them a distinctively Johannine stamp (as evinced for example by John’s distinctive terminology), but not even the Synoptics can now be regarded simply as historical documents. All the gospels are theological as well as historical: “Today

we recognize that each Gospel has a theological view, and that the fourth evangelist is one theologian among the other evangelist theologians' (R.E. Brown, *John*, xlix).

A discussion of the Fourth Gospel must take into account the possibility that it includes (some) historical as well as theological features. And it is also important to note the author's intention, which was not written according to our own ideas of how history ought to be written. It was clearly not his intention to offer his readers a purely historical chronicle of events, but to lead his readers to faith (note the conclusion 20:31: 'Now Jesus did many other signs.... which are not written in this book'). There are certainly primitive traditions in John concerning the works and words of Jesus, and it may also provide some accurate information not found in other gospels. But the various stages of composition cannot be overlooked nor the specifically Johannine interpretation of traditions. In fact, when one seeks to discover information of historical value in the Fourth Gospel, one must always balance this with a consideration of John's interpretative character - and also to acknowledge that attempts to disentangle one from the other is a challenging, and many would say, impossible task.