

# **BIB203 NT1 Life of Christ**

## **Unit 6 Reading 1**

Carson, "Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel"

Presented by the



**LANCASTER BIBLE COLLEGE**  
CAPITAL SEMINARY & GRADUATE SCHOOL

For Use by the

**Blue Letter Bible Institute**

[Web: Study.Bible](http://Study.Bible)

A Ministry of the

**Blue Letter Bible**

[Web: BlueLetterBible.org](http://BlueLetterBible.org)

## ***Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel: After Dodd, What?***

**D.A. Carson**

*Trinity Evangelical Divinity School*

[p.83]

### **I**

Many recent writers have shown us that there is good reason for regarding this or that story in John as authentic. C. H. Dodd in his great work, *Historical Tradition and (sic) the Fourth Gospel*, has carried out a systematic examination as a result of which he concludes that behind this Gospel there lies a very ancient tradition, quite independent of that embodied in the Synoptic Gospels. It is difficult to go through such a sustained examination and still regard John as having little concern for history. The fact is that John is concerned with historical information.

So writes Leon Morris.<sup>1</sup> With this statement, we may profitably compare a recently published judgment by Robert Morgan, who writes: 'Just as gospel criticism finds in the Fourth Gospel a source whose historical value cannot be compared with that of the Synoptics, so too Acts and the authentic epistles are of quite unequal value for a knowledge of Paul.'<sup>2</sup>

One may argue with both of these statements. Morgan's comparison is not very apt: the pauline epistles stand in relation to Acts as primary source to secondary source, whereas neither the fourth gospel nor the synoptics purport to be more than a secondary source for the life, ministry, passion and resurrection of Jesus. For his part, Morris jumps rather quickly from the independence of the tradition in the fourth gospel to the historical trustworthiness of that tradition. Yet the two statements, placed side by side, neatly reveal the simple fact that there is little consensus among johannine scholars as to the historical reliability of John's gospel.

The statement by Morris reflects something else. It is

[p.84]

typical of a fairly broad consensus that attributes to Dodd's *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (hereafter *HTFG*) a turning point in the history of johannine criticism. There is some truth to this assessment, if only because the size of the work and its meticulous scholarship, coupled with Dodd's elegant understated prose, commanded massive respect even where it did not gain universal agreement. In any case, Dodd's work provides an excellent starting-point for anyone who wishes to ask historical questions of John's gospel.

To begin with Dodd is not to ignore the contributions of earlier generations. It is well known that at various times during the last two centuries, John has been thought to be more historically reliable than the synoptics, because he recounts fewer miracles, no exorcisms, and

---

<sup>1</sup> L. Morris, *The Gospel according to John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971).

<sup>2</sup> R. Morgan, 'Biblical Classics II. F. C. Bauer: Paul,' *ExT* 90 (1978-79) 4.

contains more propositional teaching. Conversely, at other times John has been assessed as virtually useless, historically speaking, when compared with the synoptics. Nor has this debate been purely diachronic: a little hunting turns up representatives on both extremes in almost every decade of the last two hundred years. Interest in the subject was not waning when Dodd wrote: three years before *HTFG*, A. J. B. Higgins published his little monograph, *The Historicity of the Fourth Gospel*.<sup>3</sup> About the same time, before Dodd's work put in an appearance, several essays appeared on the subject.<sup>4</sup>

But *HTFG* is more than just one more entry on a list; and for that reason it still merits close attention. In the course of his work, Dodd does not so much assess the historical reliability of this little snippet or that (some exceptions will be considered later), as assess the historical reliability of the underlying traditions. He is not an R. D. Potter,<sup>5</sup> demonstrating the historicity of this or that topographical detail by appeal to archaeology, however useful such work may be; rather, he is to the fourth gospel something of what J. Jeremias is to the synoptic gospels.<sup>6</sup> No matter how meticulous the detail of the picture Dodd 'paints, he paints on a grand scale; and adequate response requires similar detail and similar scope.

This paper lays claim to no such magnificent pretensions. Its contours are far humbler. It does not even attempt a detailed catalogue of positions adopted since Dodd, although it interacts with some of them. Rather, after dealing with several preliminary matters, it offers a few reflexions on some

[p.85]

methodological problems involved in probing the historicity of the fourth gospel. These reflexions arise out of a close reading of Dodd and of much other recent literature on the subject, and thereby stand in Dodd's shadow. But they are largely methodological in nature, exploratory in intent.

It may be helpful first of all to summarize the argument of *HTFG*, if for no other reason than that it has become such a standard work that although everyone knows about it, and many cite it, and some dip into it—few read it.

## II

*HTFG* is, of course, Dodd's second major work on the Gospel of John. To the end of his first work, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*<sup>7</sup> (hereafter *IFG*), Dodd appends a brief chapter entitled, 'Some Considerations Upon the Historical Aspect of the Fourth Gospel.' This chapter sets forth in brief what is expanded at length in *HTFG*. Already in *IFG*, Dodd writes both that he regards 'the Fourth Gospel as being in its essential character a theological work,

---

<sup>3</sup> (London: Lutterworth, 1960).

<sup>4</sup> The most significant examples include: W. F. Albright, 'Recent Discoveries in Palestine and the Gospel of John,' in *The Background of the New Testament and its Eschatology* (edd. W. D. Davies and D. Daube; Cambridge: University Press, 1956) 153-171; R. E. Brown, 'The Problem of Historicity in John,' *CBQ* 24 (1962) 1-14; E. Stauffer, 'Historische Elemente im Vierten Evangelium,' *Homiletica et Biblica* 22 (1963) 1-7.

<sup>5</sup> 'Topography and Archaeology in the Fourth Gospel,' *SE* 1 (edd. K. Aland et al.; 1959) 329-37.

<sup>6</sup> Especially in his work, *New Testament Theology I: The Proclamation of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1971).

<sup>7</sup> C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: University Press, 1953).

rather than a history,' and also that 'it is important for the evangelist that what he narrates happened.'<sup>8</sup> At the same time, Dodd assumes (his word) that although the evangelist intended to record that which happened, he nevertheless felt free 'to modify the factual record in order to bring out the meaning.'<sup>9</sup> I shall have more to say about this remarkable pair of positions a little farther on; but certainly Dodd follows these convictions in writing *HTFG*.

In *HTFG*, Dodd adopts a method which springs from the seminal work of P. Gardner-Smith. In 1938, Gardner-Smith published his little book, *Saint John and the Synoptic Gospels*.<sup>10</sup> There he argues that John is not demonstrably dependent upon the synoptic gospels at any point, and therefore represents an independent stream of tradition. Where reasonably close parallels do occur, they are better accounted for by theorizing about cross-fertilized oral traditions than by appeal to direct literary dependence.

Dodd approaches the question of historical tradition by examining the fourth gospel's relationship to the synoptics. Essentially *HTFG* is a detailed (one might almost say, microscopic) examination of that relationship. The book is divided into two unequal parts: 'The Narrative' and 'The

[p.86]

Sayings.' The former, which comprises three quarters of the work, is divided into three sections, which successively focus on the passion narrative, the ministry, and John the Baptist and the disciples. In other words, the order of the work flows from passages with closest approximation to synoptic gospel material to passages with least approximation to such material.

In each chapter, Dodd concludes that the fourth gospel is not dependent in a literary way on any one of the synoptic gospels. Clearly there is a large distinction to be made between the literary dependence or independence of a passage and its historical worth. But what Dodd argues is that where the fourth gospel is close to the synoptics, it constitutes powerful *independent* evidence for a common dependence upon pre-canonical (and presumably oral)<sup>11</sup> tradition; and where the fourth gospel stands at some distance removed from the synoptics, it very often shows signs of passing on solid tradition, inasmuch as that tradition is rarely tangled up with johannine themes and therefore to be distrusted. Indeed, in not a few instances Dodd argues that the tradition reflected in John is more primitive and more reliable than the synoptic tradition of the same event or utterance. One prominent example of the latter is the johannine dating of the crucifixion.

Such an approach is therefore in the first instance an inquiry into questions of literary dependence, not into questions of historicity *per se*. Because Dodd has so high a regard for

---

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 444.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 447.

<sup>10</sup> (Cambridge: University Press, 1938).

<sup>11</sup> *HTFG* 424: 'All through I have assumed that the tradition we are trying to track down was oral. That any authentic information about Jesus must at first have been transmitted orally does not admit of doubt, and all recent work has tended to emphasize both the importance and the persistence of oral tradition. That some parts of it may have been written down by way of *aide-mémoire* is always possible, and such written sources may have intervened between the strictly oral tradition and our Fourth Gospel. If so, I am not concerned with them....'

pre-canonical tradition, however, he repeatedly turns the literary inquiry into historical considerations. Moreover, his work is rich in asides which affirm the historicity of this or that detail, although it boasts an almost equal number of asides which deny the historicity of some other detail.

It remains to provide some quotations from Dodd's work. Dodd reveals his own estimate of the importance of his method—*viz.* examining literary dependence in order to get at the traditional material (by which Dodd normally means 'historical material') in the fourth gospel—when he writes:

Such examples allow of no positive inference, but they may rightly serve as warning against a hasty assumption that nothing in the Fourth Gospel which cannot be corroborated from the Synoptics has any claim to be regarded as part of

[p.87]

the early tradition of the sayings of Jesus. That tradition was probably more manifold than we are apt to suppose, and the fact that a substantial element in the Johannine report of the teaching can be traced with great probability to traditional sources suggests that he was more dependent on information received than might appear, although he has developed it in new and original ways. *But I do not at present see any way of identifying further traditional material in the Fourth Gospel, where comparison with the other Gospels fails us, without giving undue weight to subjective impressions.*<sup>12</sup>

At the beginning of *HTFG*, when Dodd is setting forth the nature of his research, especially with reference to the passion narrative where parallels between the fourth gospel and the synoptics tend to be closer than they are elsewhere, Dodd says something similar:

This survey in itself justifies the inference that so striking a measure of agreement among the four gospels permits only two alternative ways of explaining the facts: either there is literary interdependence among the four—a theory which almost invariably takes the form of dependence of John on one or more of the Synoptics; or all four evangelists felt themselves to be bound by a pre-canonical tradition in which the broad lines of the story were already fixed.<sup>13</sup>

Clearly, it is the latter alternative for which Dodd consistently opts. But it is his method of attacking the historical questions which I am emphasizing.

Out of this approach, Dodd forges a theory as to how the pre-canonical traditions came together as gospels. He lays this out, for instance, when dealing with the various accounts of the anointing of Jesus,<sup>14</sup> and again in dealing with the feeding of the multitude,<sup>15</sup> and yet again as part of his conclusion. *In nuce*, he argues that whereas the form critics are right to see the pericopae of the gospels being formulated according to the varying needs and conditions

---

<sup>12</sup> *HTFG* 431; italics mine.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 30; italics mine.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 171-173.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 216-222.

of the early church, 'yet there is no sufficient reason for assuming that such formulation was a *creatio ex nihilo*.'<sup>16</sup> Rather:

...the materials out of which they were formed were already in existence, as an unarticulated wealth of recollections and reminiscences of the words and deeds of

[p.88]

Jesus—mixed, it may be, with the reflections and interpretations of his followers. It was out of this unformed or fluid tradition that the units of narrative and teaching crystallized into the forms we know. At the early, unformed, stage we have to think, not of discreet narratives, with their individual features sharply marked, as we have them in the gospels, but of a host of remembered traits and turns of expression, often disjoined and without context, but abounding in characteristic detail.... But the precise occasions with which these features of [*Jesus*'] Ministry were associated were perhaps not always remembered, or were remembered differently by different witnesses; for the association of ideas is a very individual thing, and it often affects our recollection of events.<sup>17</sup>

This sweeping theorizing is supported by a glut of detail, penned in Dodd's inimitable prose. The work is invaluable, not only for its mind-stretching breadth, but also for its attention to and presentation of the minutest consideration.

Because in this paper I am primarily concerned with historical matters, it is worth drawing attention to two of Dodd's asides, both of which touch on historical questions, in order to gain a little more insight into his approach.

In the first, Dodd is dealing with John's account of the arrest of Jesus. He notes, as part of his argument which does not now concern us, that in the account of Peter's attack on the High Priest's slave, the 'one original contribution which John makes to the narrative is the naming of his assailant and his victim.'<sup>18</sup> Although Dodd recognizes that the insertion of names into a traditional story is often taken to be prompted by the forces of legendary accretion, and that 'story-tellers do delight in individualizing their characters by supplying them with names;' yet, he insists, 'it is not true that the line of development is always in that direction, nor are the names supplied always fictitious. In the Gospels, Mark's Jairus has lost his name in Matthew, his Bartimaeus in Matthew and Luke, and his Alexander and Rufus have vanished from both. On the other hand, in introducing Caiaphas for Mark's vague ὁ ἀρχιερεὺς Matthew has certainly not invented a fictitious name.'<sup>19</sup> From these observations Dodd goes on to a very even-handed weighing of the matter, and ultimately decides that 'we have no sufficient evidence for either accepting or rejecting the name

[p.89]

of Peter and Malchus as traditional.'<sup>20</sup> (Note again, in passing, Dodd's use of 'traditional' to mean 'historical' in the sense 'historically correct'.)

---

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 216.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 171-172.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* 79.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 80.

As a second example, we may note that when Dodd treats John 18:13, he concludes that it is 'hardly possible to acquit the evangelist of a misconception of the High Priest's tenure of office.'<sup>21</sup> Dodd then briefly argues his case. Whether or not we find it convincing is beside the point at the moment. The important thing to observe is that although Dodd is primarily engaged in a literary investigation, his focus is repeatedly turned to historical questions. The title of the book is important: *Historical Tradition* (by which Dodd almost always means material passed on to the evangelist, material that is historically correct) *in the Fourth Gospel*. Thus, although the vast majority of the book is given over to the minute defence of John's literary independence from the synoptic gospels, such literary concerns are essentially little more than Dodd's *method* for tackling historical questions. This point cannot be emphasized too strongly; for the reliability of Dodd's conclusions about the historical matters which most concern him turns not only on how well he utilizes his chosen methodological approach, but also on the validity of that approach to answer the historical questions Dodd wants answered.

### III

It may be useful to give some brief account of how *HTFG* has been received, both in the period immediately after its publication and in the decade and a half that have elapsed since then. This account is limited to a few of the initial reviews and a scattered selection of later developments.

Most of the reviews quite properly give primary attention to describing the content and argument of *HTFG*. When it comes time for assessment, *HTFG* and its author receive generous, sometimes even euphoric praise. Marcel Simon, writing of *HTFG*, says, 'Much is original and new. Nothing is unimportant. There can be no doubt about the impact of this book on the further development of gospel criticism. The author has made it perfectly evident that every attempt to resume "the quest 'of the historical Jesus'" must of necessity take into account... the strain of tradition recovered from the fourth gospel...'<sup>21</sup> This laudatory verdict is endorsed to a greater or lesser extent by as wide a variety of scholars as H. K. McArthur,<sup>22</sup> A. N. Wilder,<sup>23</sup> F. W. Beare,<sup>24</sup> A. J. B. Higgins,<sup>25</sup> and G.

[p.90]

Johnston.<sup>26</sup> Even E. Haenchen in the midst of an attack on much of Dodd's thesis admits that Dodd 'Grosses geleistet hat',<sup>27</sup> and I. H. Marshall from the conservative side calls it 'the kind of book which no scholar of the Gospel can possibly afford to neglect', while pointing out that Dodd's approach 'does not remove the element of historical risk in the study of the Gospels'.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Review of *HTFG* in *JTS* 18 (1967) 189-92.

<sup>22</sup> Review of *HTFG* in *The Muslim World* 55 (1965) 161-2

<sup>23</sup> Review of *HTFG* in *JBL* 83 (1964) 303-6.

<sup>24</sup> Review of *HTFG* in *NTS* 10 (1964) 517-22.

<sup>25</sup> Review of *HTFG* in *SJT* 17 (1964) 359-62.

<sup>26</sup> Review of *HTFG* in *CJT* 11 (1965) 142-44.

<sup>27</sup> Review of *HTFG* in *ThLZ* 93 (1968) 346-8.

<sup>28</sup> Review of *HTFG* in *EQ* 37 (1965) 42-46. For other reviews from conservatives see F. C. Kuehner in *WTJ* 27 (1964) 39-41, W. E. Hull in *RevExp* 66 (1969) 81-83, Andrew J. Bandstra in *Christianity Today* 8 (Mar.13, 1964) 28.

Along with such generous praise, reviewers found plenty to criticize. The following is a representative sample of criticisms that impinge on the historical questions which are our focus in this paper:

1. Quite a number of reviewers, while praising Dodd's work in *HTFG*, remain unconvinced that John is independent of all of the synoptic gospels. Mark, and perhaps Luke, are still thought by some to constitute source material which the fourth evangelist mined. Bruce Vawter admits he 'is not entirely satisfied that (Dodd) has completely disposed of the striking verbal correspondences between Jn. and Mk.'<sup>29</sup> Others, such as Ernst Haenchen, appear more convinced. Haenchen comments: 'Dabei verwendet er ausserordentlich viel Raum für den Nachweis, dass Johannes nicht von den synoptischen Evangelien abhängig ist. Man wird es als ein besonderes Verdienst des Buches betrachten dürfen, dass dieser Nachweis wirklich gelungen ist.'<sup>30</sup> A more nuanced position is offered by Harvey K. McArthur:

But is the argument which Dodd develops actually conclusive? In the opinion of this reviewer Dodd has made clear the implausibility of any hypothesis which suggests that the Fourth Gospel was created by someone who took the three Synoptics and then wove them into a mosaic with liberal admixtures of his source materials and theology. Unfortunately the rejection of this hypothesis does not automatically establish the one which Dodd suggests as an alternative, namely, that the Johannine tradition was parallel to but not dependent on the one(s) found in the Synoptics. There is at least one mediating possibility. Is it conceivable that the Fourth Gospel emerged in a community which had known the Synoptics but which had developed its own "oral tradition" from this base with additions from still other sources? This possibility assumes indirect but not direct dependence on the Synoptics.

Dodd does not really consider this alternative in the

[p.91]

course of his detailed investigations although he does endeavor to eliminate it as a possibility in his concluding summary (pp. 423-432). Against such a hypothesis he argues (a) that the time gap between the Synoptics and John was scarcely such as to have allowed so extensive a development, and (b) that it is unlikely that any one Christian community used all three Synoptics at this early date. To the second of these considerations it may be replied that it is at least equally unlikely that the Fourth Gospel emerged in a community which knew none of the Synoptic Gospels.<sup>31</sup>

2. Reviewers of a more sceptical turn of mind criticize Dodd for what they judge to be a too conservative assessment of the historical trustworthiness of the traditions John uses. 'One can agree that the fourth gospel has old independent reports on John the Baptist,' comments Amos Wilder. 'But here as elsewhere one must ask, how old and how primitive?... Moreover, even "primitive" tradition, whether Johannine or synoptic, can be misleading if we fail to recognize that its retrospective interest in the person of Jesus represents a changed perspective. The whole reservoir of primitive tradition, narrative and sayings, upon which the four gospels are

---

<sup>29</sup> Review of *HTFG* in *CBQ* 26 (1964) 267-70.

<sup>30</sup> *Art. cit.* 347.

<sup>31</sup> *Art. cit.* 162. Cf. also A. Wikgren, review of *HTFG* in *Interpretation* 20 (1966) 238.



built had already been radically reshaped by the translation of the earliest witness into various expressions and forms of christological piety and faith.<sup>32</sup> Marcel Simon agrees: 'To (Dodd), the process at work in the shaping of the tradition was one of selection. This might well be true in a number of cases. It is doubtful, however, that it accounts for every single passage: the possibility of fictitious additions is not to be excluded altogether.'<sup>33</sup> Perhaps we should follow 'the sceptical mind' which is 'even prepared to assert that John is an artist of great dramatic power and much of his work reads like that of a superb historical novelist.'<sup>34</sup>

3. Reginal Fuller not only thinks that 'younger scholars in particular will find it difficult' to place in the itineraries the confidence which Dodd is able to place in them; but he is also an able representative of those who reject Dodd's treatment of eschatological statements in John:

More serious, to the reviewer's mind, is the judgment on the tradition-history of the predictions of Jesus' going away and seeing his disciples again. These Dodd holds to

[p.92]

be a more primitive, and indeed substantially authentic, version of Jesus' future predictions, whereas the two synoptic types of prediction—those which speak of death and resurrection and those which speak of the parousia—he holds to be later reinterpretations. It is regrettable that more attention has not been paid to the Johannine 'Son of man' sayings. Siegfried Schultz's study of these has resulted in a very different view of the Tradition-history behind the Fourth Gospel, viz., from an original Palestinian apocalyptic to a 'Jewish-heterodox' *Neuinterpretation*.<sup>35</sup>

4. Fuller praises *HTFG*'s lack of interaction with secondary literature. 'Most of us *Neutestamentler*,' he says, 'spend our time taking in each other's dirty washing and decking it out with extensive bibliographical footnotes. Dr. Dodd's work is refreshingly independent, with an absolute minimum of that type of footnote.'<sup>36</sup> But quite a number of others interpret the same evidence far more negatively. William E. Hull objects in particular to Dodd's failure to interact with the source critics, with A. Guilding's thesis,<sup>37</sup> and with Cullmann.<sup>38</sup> A. J. B. Higgins has similar complaints;<sup>39</sup> and Ernst Haenchen is utterly blistering on Dodd's failure to interact with German scholarship.<sup>40</sup>

5. The last point to be made in this list is not so much an overt criticism of Dodd by the reviewers, as notice of a perceptive observation made by two or three reviewers—an observation which accurately underscores the paucity of the material in John which Dodd judges to be genuinely authentic, *despite the appearance of a far more conservative stance*. The appearance is maintained by the tone of the writing, the turn of phrase; and, certainly, as

---

<sup>32</sup> *Art. cit.* 305-6.

<sup>33</sup> *Art. cit.* 191.

<sup>34</sup> G. Johnson, *art. cit.* 143. More recently, R. Kysar (*The Fourth Evangelist and His Gospel* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1975] 62) has come to much the same conclusion: 'What is disappointing about (Dodd's) study is that this whole effort carried with it a presupposition that "traditional" means historically accurate.'

<sup>35</sup> Review of *HTFG* in *JBR* 32 (1964) 270-71.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> A. Guilding, *The Fourth Gospel and Jewish Worship* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1960).

<sup>38</sup> *Art. cit.* 82.

<sup>39</sup> *Art. cit.* 361.

<sup>40</sup> *Art. cit.*

compared with the work of Bultmann, *HTFG* is a very conservative book indeed. Nevertheless, George Johnston is correct when he says of Dodd: 'At the same time, he reminds us that John is a theologian of profound subtlety, who exploits in the interest of his own spirituality whatever traditional units he has preserved. It will not do, therefore, to jump to hasty conclusions about the factual accuracy of the Gospel narratives as they stand.'<sup>41</sup> F. W. Beare spells this out more pointedly; and, for a final extensive quote, I shall cite him at length:

Professor Dodd has greatly strengthened the case for taking the Fourth Gospel seriously as a quarry for historical facts concerning Jesus of Nazareth. I am left

[p.93]

with the feeling that when its evidence has all been sifted and weighed, it does not add greatly to the meagre store of facts which are supplied by the Synoptics. Where it differs from them, it is not to be automatically ruled out of consideration; the 'pre-canonical' traditions which it has employed have as much title to be looked upon as reliable as those which the Synoptists had at their disposal. But I wonder if the total effect of this investigation may not be misleading, in that it does not take into account the unreality of the general picture of Jesus in this Gospel. These fragments of 'historical' traditions are embedded in a complex theological structure from which they can be recovered in any degree only by an extraordinary exhibition of critical virtuosity on the part of the searcher. To set the matter in perspective let us recall briefly that John the Baptist did not in fact hail Jesus as the Lamb of God (the question here is rightly put by Dodd: 'What measure of historical truth, then, if any, can we assign to the statement of the Fourth Gospel that John the Baptist bore witness to Christ?' - p. 301). Jesus did not talk to a ruler of the Jews about regeneration, did not talk with a woman by a well in Samaria about his own Messiahship and about the spirit-nature of God; did not discourse to the multitudes about his descent from heaven as the Bread of Life... Above all, the Jesus of history did not address his hearers in the structured dialogue and monologue of the Fourth Gospel; and if there are bits of teaching—parables, sayings, brief dialogue here and there—which may be traced to a pre-canonical tradition (as Dodd has succeeded in doing), it must be said that in the Gospel these are submerged in the Evangelist's own constructions and all but dissolved in his theological expositions... And in general, the value and interest of this Gospel surely lie in the developed theology of the Evangelist and not in such occasional fragments of actual *verba Christi* as may be uncovered by patient search.

This is not to suggest that Professor Dodd himself fails to give due weight to these considerations. It is a caution, rather, to his readers against an over-enthusiastic reversion to the historical approach to this Gospel. British scholarship has an unquenchable longing for brute historical and biographical fact, and there is a perpetual danger that the wish may give birth to the persuasion that the facts are more readily ascertainable than is actually the case. After all has been said, and every last

[p.94]

particle of primitive gold-dust extracted, the Fourth Gospel is in its total character a much less reliable source of historical (especially biographical) information than Mark, even though it may in some instances preserve a more accurate recollection of what occurred.

---

<sup>41</sup> *Art. cit.* 144.

The 'new look' on the Fourth Gospel has already, in my opinion, set a number of my colleagues dancing down a false path....<sup>42</sup>

In my view, Beare's analysis of *HTFG* is profoundly accurate, irrespective of whether or not one wishes to follow him in his degree of scepticism.

Since the publication of *HTFG*, research into the fourth gospel has not abated in the slightest. At the risk of coverage that is much too shallow, it may nevertheless be worth summarizing some of the major trends in johannine research during the last fifteen years, as such trends impinge on the concerns of *HTFG* and especially on the problems of historicity.

1. Source criticism came into its own in the fourth gospel with the massive commentary by the late Rudolf Bultmann<sup>43</sup> (which of course antedates *HTFG*), and reached its apex in R. T. Fortna's *The Gospel of Signs*.<sup>44</sup> There have been many other attempts, and not fewer rebuttals; but as I have detailed this debate elsewhere, and indicated my reservations about the validity of the most popular conclusions,<sup>45</sup> I shall refrain from repeating old material.

Of course, source critics are not necessarily interested in the historical trustworthiness of the sources they purport to uncover; but there is almost invariably some interplay between their concern to isolate a source or sources, and questions of historicity.<sup>46</sup> According to Fortna's reconstruction, the signs source is supplemented by material from within the johannine community; and on the face of it this material, which often claims to be authentic, and the utterances actually dominical, is not to be so highly rated. Temple's sources turn on ideological factors, not the least of which is the implausibility of genuine miracles.<sup>47</sup> Schnackenburg is much more cautious about delineating the signs source with precision; but one of his tools for doing so is the identification of seams separating tradition from redaction, and his means for establishing such identification are historical as well as linguistic, stylistic, and theological.<sup>48</sup>

[p.95]

In short, source criticism aims at a much more specific recovery of the traditions behind the fourth gospel than what Dodd attempts, and assumes that those traditions are written, not oral. But precisely because I remain unpersuaded by the validity of the source critical methods currently being used on the fourth gospel, I remain equally sceptical about source critical methods as a viable approach to questions of historicity.

---

<sup>42</sup> *Art. cit.* 521-2.

<sup>43</sup> The English translation is *The Gospel of John* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971).

<sup>44</sup> (Cambridge: University Press, 1970).

<sup>45</sup> D. A. Carson, 'Current Source Criticism of the Fourth Gospel: Some Methodological Questions,' *JBL* 97 (1978) 411-29. Cf. also E. Ruckstuhl, 'Johannine Language and Style. The Question of Their Unity,' M. de Jonge, ed., *L'Évangile de Jean* (Leuven: University Press, 1977) 125-48.

<sup>46</sup> The exception occurs, of course, when a critic seeks to establish his source on purely literary grounds.

<sup>47</sup> S. Temple, *The Core of the Fourth Gospel* (London/Oxford: Mowbrays, 1975); discussed in D. A. Carson, *art. cit.*

<sup>48</sup> E.g. he holds (as do many others) that the excommunication of 9:22 could not possibly have occurred in Jesus' day: cf. R. Schnackenburg, *Das Johannesevangelium*, 2. Teil (Freiburg: Herder, 1971) 316-17.

2. *HTFG* has probably enjoyed its biggest impact in influencing others to hold that John is not dependent on any completed synoptic gospel. The major commentaries of Brown, Sanders/Mastin, Schnackenburg, Morris and Lindars, not to mention the substantial survey by Kysar,<sup>49</sup> all opt for some variation of the view that the synoptics and John enjoy common tradition, written and/or oral, but no literary dependence. As a result, some such conclusion as the following is reached: 'If John did not use the Synoptic Gospels, the way is opened for an independent assessment of the historical value of his material. It cannot be taken for granted that he is more reliable than the Synoptists, or less so. Each item has to be taken on its own merits.'<sup>50</sup>

But it would be quite wrong to give the impression that the thesis has gone unchallenged. Indeed, one might even speculate that it is on the verge of being overthrown. J. A. Bailey argues that in some instances John uses Luke directly, whereas in other passages where there is close agreement the two Evangelists independently follow similar traditions.<sup>51</sup> Similarly G. Richter, at least as far as John 18:1-12 is concerned:<sup>52</sup> John, he contends, depends on Luke. J. Blinzler comes to a more nuanced conclusion when he argues that the Fourth Evangelist had knowledge of Mark, and perhaps of Luke, and reproduced some of it from memory, but without copies in front of him while he worked.<sup>53</sup> Gunter Reim attempts to cut the Gordian knot by appealing to a lost fourth Synoptic Gospel, earlier than the three canonical synoptics, as the prime source of the fourth gospel.<sup>54</sup> Anton Dauer, in his massive study of John 18:1-19:30, thinks the synoptic gospels influenced the fourth gospel while the latter was still at the stage of oral tradition; but even he is unwilling to rule out the possibility of direct literary dependence.<sup>55</sup>

More recently, C. K. Barrett has revised his 1955 commentary<sup>56</sup> and remained quite unrepentant about his belief that John knew Mark, and probably Luke. Barrett argues his

[p.96]

case at greater length in an important article;<sup>57</sup> and he is now joined by detailed contributions from F. Neirynek<sup>58</sup> and M. Sabbe.<sup>59</sup> Boismard proposes a complex theory of three editions of

---

<sup>49</sup> R. Kysar, *The Fourth Evangelist and His Gospel: An Examination of Contemporary Scholarship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1975) esp. 54-66. Cf. also the influential work by B. Noack, *Zur johanneischen Tradition: Beiträge zur Kritik an der literarkritischen Analyse des vierten Evangeliums* (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde, 1954). It must not be thought, however, that this appeal to oral tradition is altogether new. True, the work of P. Gardner-Smith turned prevalent opinion around, and *HTFG* established the new consensus; but there have long been critics who appealed to oral tradition even when such an appeal was out of vogue. See, for example, J. Schniewind, *Die Parallelperikopen bei Lukas and Johannes* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, repr. 1970 from a 1914 edition).

<sup>50</sup> B. Lindars, *The Gospel of John* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1972) 27.

<sup>51</sup> J. A. Bailey, *The Traditions Common to the Gospels of Luke and John* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1963).

<sup>52</sup> G. Richter, 'Die Gefangennahme Jesu nach dem Johannesevangelium (18:1-12),' *Bibel and Leben* 10 (1969) 26-39.

<sup>53</sup> J. Blinzler, *Johannes and die Synoptiker* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1965) 59.

<sup>54</sup> G. Reim, *Studien zum alttestamentlichen Hintergrund des Johannesevangeliums* (Cambridge: University Press, 1974).

<sup>55</sup> A. Dauer, *Die Passionsgeschichte im Johannesevangelium* (München: Kösel, 1972) esp. 335-336.

<sup>56</sup> C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (second edition; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978).

<sup>57</sup> C. K. Barrett, 'John and the Synoptic Gospels,' *ExT* 85 (1973-74) 228-233.

the fourth gospel; but in this view the second and third editions reflect direct dependence on the synoptics.<sup>60</sup>

This is only a smattering of the recent literature on the subject; but perhaps it is fair to say that there is no longer any substantive consensus. C. K. Barrett concedes perhaps a little, but also demands an attractive accountability, when he writes:

It is certain that John did not 'use' Mark, as Matthew did. The parallels cannot even prove that John had read the book we know as Mark. Anyone who prefers to say, 'Not Mark, but the oral traditions on which Mark was based', or 'Not Mark, but a written source on which Mark drew', may claim that his hypothesis fits the evidence equally well. All that can be said is that we do not have before us the oral tradition on which Mark was based; we do not have any of the written sources that Mark may have quoted; but we do have Mark, and in Mark are the stories that John repeats, sometimes at least with similar or even identical words, sometimes at least in substantially the same order—which is not in every case as inevitable as is sometimes suggested. Gardner-Smith's rather lame comment on the sequence of the feeding miracle and the walking on the lake remains as an implied criticism of his own position: 'they go well together, and they were no doubt associated in oral tradition' (p. 33). The fact is that there crops up repeatedly in John evidence that suggests that the evangelist knew a body of traditional material that either was Mark, or was something much like Mark; and anyone who after an interval of nineteen centuries feels himself in a position to distinguish nicely between 'Mark' and 'something much like Mark', is at liberty to do so. The simpler hypothesis, which does not involve the postulation of otherwise unknown entities, is not without attractiveness.<sup>61</sup>

I confess I began a careful re-reading of *HTFG* already prejudiced in favour of its position; but, having been alerted by some of the articles and books cited above, I began to sense special pleading here and there,<sup>62</sup> and I now find myself a

[p.97]

cautious convert to Barrett's position.

In short, there is little clear-cut consensus on the problem of the literary relationship between John and the synoptics. But I have already shown that Dodd's work in this regard was primarily his way of approaching questions of historicity in the fourth gospel. So now we must ask ourselves how the problem of synoptic/fourth gospel literary relationship and the problem of the historical trustworthiness of the fourth gospel should properly be related. How does current revisionism in the one area affect the other? These questions will be probed a little farther on.

---

<sup>58</sup> F. Neirynek, 'John and the Synoptics,' M. de Jonge, ed., *L'Évangile de Jean* (Leuven: University Press, 1977) 73-106.

<sup>59</sup> M. Sabbe, 'The Arrest of Jesus in Jn. 18:1-11 and Its Relation to the Synoptic Gospels,' M. de Jonge, ed., *L'Évangile de Jean* (Leuven: University Press, 1977) 203-234. See also N. Perrin (*The New Testament: An Introduction* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1974) 229) who also affirms that there is literary dependence.

<sup>60</sup> M.-E. Boismard and A. Lamouille, ed., *L'Évangile de Jean* (Paris: Editions de Cerf, 1977) esp. 16-70.

<sup>61</sup> *The Gospel According to St. John* 45.

<sup>62</sup> E.g., pp. 67-68, 103, 163, 165 and many others.

3. Since the publication of *HTFG*, there has arisen a notable succession of commentators who have embraced some kind of 'developmental theory'<sup>63</sup> of composition. R. E. Brown postulates five separate stages leading up to what we call the Gospel of John.<sup>64</sup> B. Lindars traces the fourth gospel's genesis to a series of homilies, put together in at least two major stages.<sup>65</sup> Schnackenburg accepts the existence of a signs source, an early edition of the Gospel which incorporated that source and possibly other material of a kerygmatic or liturgical nature, and 'further drafts' (no specifications as to how many) plus a final redaction.<sup>66</sup> W. Wilkens, though he has not written a commentary, has reconstructed what he believes to be the history of the fourth gospel's formation from a basic Passover framework.<sup>67</sup> The only two exceptions to the adoption of some formulated developmental theory among recent major commentators are C. K. Barrett<sup>68</sup> and L. Morris<sup>69</sup>—and that for entirely different reasons.

This is not to suggest that these developmental theories have sprung up because of the influence of *HTFG*. But there is one obvious connection. Insofar as the commentators have adopted the view that the material in the fourth gospel emerges from an oral tradition relatively independent of the synoptics, to that extent it is easier to postulate the existence of some definitive johannine 'circle' or johannine 'school' which produced the fourth gospel over an extended period of time.<sup>70</sup> Such a perspective may well impinge on the question of historicity.

4. There has been an increasing tendency, partly as a result of Dodd's influence, to recognize the accuracy of many topographical and historical details in the fourth gospel, while, ironically, simultaneously downplaying the historical

[p.98]

worth of most of its content. Barrett thinks John is not really interested in historical accuracy. Those who adopt developmental theories see the theology and teaching of the johannine community almost everywhere, and the theology and teaching of Jesus almost nowhere—except in tiny snippets which may sometimes be retrieved by form criticism. So firmly entrenched is this approach (with the single notable exception of L. Morris) that scholars who might be expected to make somewhat more conservative estimations (because of their practice elsewhere) prefer instead to use ambiguous language. A fine example of such language is provided by Vanderlip, who writes: 'We would probably not be far wrong if we

---

<sup>63</sup> The expression is that of R. Kysar, *The Fourth Evangelist* 38-54.

<sup>64</sup> R. E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1966), 2 vols.

<sup>65</sup> *The Gospel of John*.

<sup>66</sup> The first of the three volumes of his commentary has been translated into English: see *The Gospel according to John* (London: Burns and Oates, 1968) I esp. 72-74.

<sup>67</sup> W. Wilkens, *Die Entstehungsgeschichte des vierten Evangeliums* (Zollikon: Evangelischer Verlag, 1958). Wilkens has defended his proposal several times since its first appearance (which antedates *HTFG*), and, most recently, developed a redaction critical analysis based on his proposal: cf. his *Zeichen und Werke* (Zürich: Zwingli Verlag, 1969).

<sup>68</sup> *The Gospel According to St. John*.

<sup>69</sup> *The Gospel According to John*.

<sup>70</sup> The categories 'circle' and 'school' are, of course, borrowed from O. Cullmann, *The Johannine Circle: Its Place in Judaism, Among the Disciples of Jesus and in Early Christianity* (London: SCM, 1976); and R. A. Culpepper, *The Johannine School: An Evaluation of the Johannine-School Hypothesis Based on an Investigation of the Nature of Ancient Schools* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1975), respectively.

were to hold that the conversations between Jesus and the individuals mentioned in the Gospel of John actually took place, but that the recording of what was said and the manner in which the dialogues are developed should be attributed for the most part to the creative mind of the writer. The conversations are the framework for Johannine instruction.<sup>71</sup> Interpreted sympathetically by all sides, this passage could be accepted by all sides: there are surely few johannine scholars whose position would necessarily contradict the statement. But that is to say nothing more than that the statement is marvellously ambiguous; it certainly does not indicate any marked degree of genuine and detailed consensus among the scholars themselves. To this problem I shall return; but Dodd's influence, directly or indirectly, is not too far away.

5. One other work deserves mention at this point. In its main thesis it leans but little on *HTFG*, even though it follows Dodd in finding no literary dependence of the fourth gospel on the synoptics. I speak of J. L. Martyn's *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*. This little book was first published in 1968. It exerted an influence out of all proportion to its size; and then in 1979 it reappeared in a revised and slightly enlarged form.<sup>72</sup>

This book bears directly on the question of the historical trustworthiness of the fourth gospel, and so I shall attempt to challenge some parts of it.

Martyn contends that much of the fourth gospel is a two level drama, self-consciously presented in such a way as to present bits of christian tradition about the historical Jesus, and also to respond in a slightly disguised fashion to the conflict going on between church and synagogue in the Evangelist's own day. At the first level, the Evangelist

[p.99]

presents the *einmalig* events, by which Martyn means the events which happened 'back there' in Jesus' time. At the second level, the Evangelist addresses his own situation. Martyn believes that much of the *einmalig* material can also be applied to the events of the Evangelist's own day, but that most of the material which he discusses (especially John 3, 5, 6, 7 and 9) is not really at the *einmalig* level at all, and does not seriously pretend to teach us anything about the historical Jesus, but is concerned solely with the *Sitz im Leben* of the Evangelist.

Martyn finds this pattern particularly evident in John 9. At the *einmalig* level, the narrative seems to tell us certain things about Jesus, his disciples, a blind man and his parents, and the Jewish authorities of Jesus' day. But at the second level, we are to discern a Jew of the Evangelist's day who is healed and converted and living in the Jewish quarter of the Evangelist's city. Because the cure (whether of a physical nature or not is immaterial, according to Martyn) is attributed to Jesus, discussion sets in which leads to a confrontation with the local Jewish council. The council interviews the man, and then his parents, who are frightened out of plain speaking because they are aware of a resolution, already passed by the council, to excommunicate from the synagogue anyone who confesses that Jesus is the Messiah. When the healed man leaves the courtroom, he is again confronted by the christian

---

<sup>71</sup> D. G. Vanderlip, *Christianity According to John* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975) 182.

<sup>72</sup> (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979). All references to the work are from the more recent edition.

preacher (under the literary guise of Jesus), and led to faith in Jesus Christ. The preacher declares the significance of his mission and proceeds with a sermon (John 10).

In Martyn's view, none of the material in this narrative from 9:8 on has any reference to the *einmalig* level. Even the word *History* in the title of the book does not refer to the history of Jesus and his times, but to the history of the Evangelist—a point of clarification Martyn himself carefully provides.<sup>73</sup> From this base Martyn moves out to several other passages in the fourth gospel, treating them in similar fashion; and then reaches out yet further to speculate on the theological considerations which prompted the fourth evangelist to write.

#### IV

Virtually everything I've said so far has been by way of background and introduction to what follows. The literature

[p.100]

on the problems of historicity connected with the fourth gospel is so vast, and much of it so intricate, that many volumes would be necessary to interact with it in any detail. In what remains of this paper, I have opted instead to offer a number of personal reflexions, almost all of them strictly methodological and/or programmatic. I shall use these reflexions as a springboard to interact with some of the literature presented so far. I should perhaps add that what follows is more by way of personal progress report by a student seeking to deal fairly with the evidence and arrive at his own conclusions, than of authoritative analysis by a distinguished scholar after a lifetime of careful sifting and study. Not least in this particular, therefore, my work stands over against *HTFG*: At the same time I shall occasionally point to areas which stand in urgent need of additional careful study.

***1. None of us approaches the problem of historicity in the fourth gospel (or any other sensitive question, for that matter) with an entirely 'open' mind, an entirely objective approach; and therefore all of us need to recognize our own 'presuppositions' and not to dismiss others because of their 'presuppositions'.***

The late Rudolf Bultmann is an outstanding example of a man with strong and crucial presuppositions: (a) he held to the existence of a full-blown pre-Christian Gnosticism, a perspective which massively influenced his interpretive judgments; and (b) he held that it is impossible for twentieth century man to believe in the world of angels, devils, literal incarnation, physical resurrection, turning water literally into wine, and so forth.<sup>74</sup> He did not prove, nor attempt to prove, (b): he affirmed it. He did attempt to prove (a), but because there

---

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.* 12: 'The reader will quickly see that these points of correspondence seem to me not only to illuminate important aspects of the conceptual milieu in which the Fourth Evangelist worked, but also—one might even say primarily—to point toward certain historical developments transpiring in the city in which he lived. It is in the sense thus indicated that I have employed the word history in the title.'

<sup>74</sup> Bultmann's approach to Gnosticism appears everywhere in his writings, but was first put into clear perspective in his essay, 'Die Bedeutung der neuerschlossenen mandäischen und manichäischen Quellen für das Verständnis des Johannesevangeliums,' *ZNW* 24 (1925) 100-146. The most convenient place to find Bultmann's famous 1941 essay on demythologization is in *Kerygma and Myth*, ed. H.-W. Bartsch (London: SPCK, 1972) 1-44.



is no conclusive literary evidence for well-developed pre-Christian Gnosticism, he fell far short of convincing everyone.<sup>75</sup>

Bultmann is not alone in having crucial presuppositions; indeed every scholar has presuppositions, recognized or unrecognized. I myself approach the Bible with what most would consider a 'high' view of Scripture: I expect it to tell me the truth (which incidentally leaves me with a wide range of hermeneutical possibilities). My view of Scripture is more like Bultmann's presupposition (a) than his (b), since I have come to it from long study and a serious attempt to weigh the evidence. In my view the total 'fit' for a high view of Scripture is far superior to any of the alternatives.

[p.101]

I freely confess I cannot 'prove' the correctness of this view the way I can 'prove' the truth of the binomial theorem; but then, neither could Bultmann 'prove' his pre-Christian Gnosticism. Yet these two beliefs—one for him, one for me—each function as a more-or-less non-negotiable point as we approach any particular text: they are non-negotiable, that is to say, short of a personal Kuhnian revolution,<sup>76</sup> and such revolutions do occur. We all know scholars who once adopted a high view of Scripture but who came in time to abandon this view, and we know of others, like R. V. G. Tasker and W. Ramsey, who began without such a belief and came in time to embrace it.

In describing Bultmann's non-negotiables, and my own, my intention is both to illustrate the fact that everyone has such patterns of thought, but also—an inevitable consequence of this—to show that having non-negotiables does not exclude anyone from debate. Scholars concerned to disagree with Bultmann have had to do more than point out Bultmann's presuppositions: they have had to wrestle with him on his own terms, and also seek to present another total 'fit' as superior to the wholistic picture adopted by Bultmann.

These more-or-less non-negotiable (short of a Kuhnian revolution) patterns in our belief structures occur at many different levels. For instance in a fascinating and scarcely recognized

---

<sup>75</sup> Of course, the debate antedates Bultmann, and after his entry, embraces many people on both sides. For a convenient treatment of the position opposed to that of Bultmann, and especially competent in the Mandaean sources, see E. M. Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism* (London: Tyndale, 1973).

<sup>76</sup> I have coined the expression from the seminal study by T. S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970). It is not necessary to follow Kuhn in detail in order to benefit from the rubric. Part of the question in the paragraphs above turns on what we mean by 'prove,' a notoriously slippery term: cf. the important discussion by G. I. Mavrodes, *Belief in God: A Study in the Epistemology of Religion* (New York: Random House, 1970) esp. 17-48. To prove anything in the historical realm is rather unlike proving something in the realm of the physical sciences, where experiments are in principle repeatable. History, unfortunately, is not; and therefore historical investigation turns on witnesses of various kinds, and on the cogency of competing reconstructions. Of course, proof in the physical sciences can be overthrown by more data or by a Kuhnian revolution: at that point it shares the nature of proof with historical investigation. But the distinction between the two disciplines needs to be borne in mind when one comes across such expressions as 'the scientific study of the Bible.' The expression is painfully imprecise. Does it mean the study of the Bible based on solely naturalistic presuppositions? Or does it mean that the investigation of the Bible is to be carried on as dispassionately and as objectively as is possible for finite human beings? It cannot logically mean that the study of the Bible is to be exactly like the study of, say, chemistry.

article R. Kysar compares the results of C. H. Dodd and R. Bultmann as each of these giants seeks to delineate the closest literary affinities to the johannine prologue.<sup>77</sup>

Kysar tabulates their use of material from the O.T., classical literature, the Apocrypha, the Pseudepigrapha, Rabbinic literature, the Hermetica, Philo, sub-apostolic writings, the Odes of Solomon + miscellaneous. He finds, first, striking dissimilarity in what they cite: a total of only 20 references in common out of 320 cited. But further he notes that the differences exhibited in the relationship between the sheer amount of evidence, and their respective conclusions, convey vastly different criteria for the use of evidence. Dodd piles up the examples, apparently believing that the number of examples in support of his hypothesis at least partly determines its validity; thus he has an especially large number of references to Philonic and Hermetic material. Bultmann ignores such a consideration. He quotes the Old Testament prodigiously, but discounts virtually all of this evidence. His heavy use of the apocryphal and

[p.102]

pseudepigraphical literature is more understandable, since he believes they betray the existence of pre-Christian Gnosticism; but even so, he thinks that the Odes of Solomon provide the best examples of conceptual roots of the prologue—even though the Odes claim a meagre 11% of his quotations. Moreover, not only are both Dodd and Bultmann sadly deficient in rabbinic parallels, using only secondary literature, they both cite much later literature as exemplars of the thought-forms which, they contend, influenced the prologue: Dodd, the Hermetica, and Bultmann, the Odes and Mandaic sources.

I am not at present quibbling with their results. I am interested solely in their methods, belief patterns, and, to a lesser extent, training (it is not for nothing that the rabbinic parallels offer such slim pickings: contrast A. Schlatter<sup>78</sup>). We might in a similar fashion point out that it is not altogether surprising that Dodd finds the fourth gospel's realized eschatology to be more primitive: the entire pattern of his earlier work tends to downplay the apocalyptic element. I have already pointed out that *HTFG* has been criticized in this area. Clearly, there is a different weighing of the evidence according to people's presuppositions.

When we approach the question of the historicity of the fourth gospel, therefore, we must not only make our definitions of 'history' clear, and what we think can be demonstrated by the 'historian's method;' but we also need to be as self-consciously aware as possible of our non-negotiables (again, I repeat, non-negotiables not in an absolute sense, but in a Kuhnian sense). D. E. Nineham writes, 'It is of the essence of the modern historian's method and criteria that they are applicable only to purely human phenomena, and to human phenomena of a normal, that is a non-miraculous, non-unique character.'<sup>79</sup> Such an approach eliminates *a priori* the possibility that Jesus is literally the incarnation of the Son of God, or that he turned water into

---

<sup>77</sup> R. Kysar, 'The Background of the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel: A Critique of Historical Methods,' *CJT* 16 (1970) 250-255. Kysar bases his study on Dodd's treatment of the prologue in *IFG* and in his essay 'The Background of the Fourth Gospel,' *BJRL* 19 (1935) 329-343; and on Bultmann's treatment of the prologue in his commentary and in his essay, 'Der religionsgeschichtliche Hintergrund des Prologs zum Johannes Evangelium,' *Eucharisterion* (Fs. H. Gunkel; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1923) II 3-26.

<sup>78</sup> A. Schlatter, *Der Evangelist Johannes* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1930).

<sup>79</sup> D. E. Nineham, *Historicity and Chronology in the New Testament* (London: SPCK, 1965) 3.

wine. It cannot possibly envisage a God who acts in history except in an entirely pantheistic sense—in which case, he must be painfully difficult to detect, and in any event not by 'historical' means. If 'historical method' is permitted to include the investigation of anything in the time-space continuum, then much more is open to us as, at least, a possibility.

Similarly, when Dodd says (as I indicated earlier) that he cannot see any way of identifying traditional materials (i.e. historical materials, in the sense that the materials

[p.103]

describe what really happened) in the fourth gospel where comparison with the synoptics fails us, short of giving undue weight to subjective impressions, he has enunciated a terribly limiting methodological non-negotiable. Does he accept as historical in extra-biblical ancient sources only that which is attested independently elsewhere? Where an author proves reliable on incidental details that are to some degree verifiable, is there not a presumption of his reliability in areas where he is not at all verifiable? Are there no broader historical or theological reasons for thinking John to be somewhat more credible than what Dodd's principle allows? I would answer yes; but apparently Dodd's non-negotiable requires that he answer no.

I may go farther. Is it possible that the scholarly consensus regarding a 'school' or 'circle' or 'community,' and regarding a long series of editorial steps and of redactional activity, has unwittingly provided a new generation of scholars with several functional non-negotiables which are rarely tested? If someone like Morris argues that John the son of Zebedee wrote the fourth gospel, he is fairly easily dismissed, precisely because, for most of us, the idea of John as author has already been filtered out by our functional non-negotiables. Indeed, these non-negotiables are often absorbed unwittingly by our reading, even though we ourselves have never examined the primary data first-hand. And even those few who have carefully weighed the evidence and concluded, on balance, that it is improbable that John is the fourth evangelist—among whom Dodd must surely rank near the top in the care and fairness of his approach—even these, once this tentative position is reached, adopt the position as a functioning non-negotiable in the future, short of a Kuhnian revolution.

It is extremely important that this first reflection not be misunderstood by taking it to answer a question not within its purview. I am interested in pointing out that all of us are finite, that none of us begins any inquiry with an entirely blank mind, that we must be self-critical especially in those areas where we adopt functional non-negotiables. However, such a cautious warning does not entail the conclusion of the new historians, over-reacting against the crude objectivism of von Ranke, that history is so non-objective that there is no possible way of evaluating alternative reconstructions and interpretations. The task of the historian is not quite the same as the task of the physicist; but it is remarkably

[p.104]

similar to the task of the geologist. Certain recent critical discussion which carefully defines the term 'objectivity' as applied to history has shown conclusively that 'if we press the criterion of objectivity too hard, it applies to no form of inquiry; slacken it slightly and history

edges its way in with the rest.'<sup>80</sup> I hope to deal with this question in two subsequent articles. For the moment I wish only to make it clear that by this first reflection I do not mean to shut up historical inquiry to unmitigated subjectivism. Nevertheless, even after such a fundamental caveat is registered, it is important, methodologically speaking, that we make clear, especially to ourselves and hopefully to others as well, just what non-negotiables we are harbouring at the moment, and how strong they are (their strength is, of course, entirely relative). In so doing, we will not only be able to learn from each other, but also detect more accurately where and why we disagree. In time, we may even weaken the strength of some of our non-negotiables, and change one of our fundamental positions, and come a little closer to the truth.

## ***2. The barrier commonly erected between history and theology is not only false, but is methodologically indefensible.***

This point has been discussed many times in articles and books. The only justification for raising it again is that the distinction between history and theology is still being used in many quarters as a methodological test for assessing theologically motivated statements as non-historical.

This is not in any way to deny that the Evangelists were theologians with a set of doctrines and theological interests they were earnestly attempting to propagate. The straw man raised by some critics—that either the Evangelists were dispassionate observers giving us cold historical facts, replete with endless specimens of *ipsissima verba Jesu*, or else they were theologians concerned with conveying theological truth and only incidentally (and even accidentally) including solid history—forces upon us a needless choice. The first alternative is so demonstrably untrue that the impression is given we are shut up to the second; and that is methodologically indefensible. Of course the Evangelists were theologians. Sometimes we are able to detect with fair probability some of the theological motivations which prompted a particular Evangelist to treat, say, the Passion Narrative, just as he did. In John's case, the conceptual collapsing of the death,

[p.105]

burial, resurrection and exaltation of Jesus into one soteriological event is unique among the Evangelists, rather dramatic; and certainly this bears detailed study.<sup>81</sup>

Yet this is a far cry from saying that, because John is motivated by theological concerns, therefore he is untrustworthy with respect to his historical witness wherever that witness has been influenced by his theology. Some secular analogies may help to clarify this point. In World War II, when the first trickle of gruesome reports from Auschwitz, Dachau and other death camps first started reaching the Allies, they were almost universally dismissed.

---

<sup>80</sup> J. A. Passmore, 'The Objectivity of History,' *Philosophical Analysis and History* (ed. W. H. Dray; New York/London: Harper and Row, 1966) 75-94, esp. 91. This article is of the utmost importance. See also W. L. Craig, 'The Nature of History: An Exposition and Critique of the Principal Arguments for Historical Relativism, as Propounded by Carl Becker and Charles Beard' (M.A. Thesis, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1976), whose Appendix on the historicity of the gospels is occasionally somewhat unsophisticated but whose major analysis repays close study. I am indebted to John D. Woodbridge for stimulating discussion on these matters.

<sup>81</sup> I have attempted to delineate some of John's theological motivations in this regard in *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Some Aspects of Johannine Theology Against Jewish Background* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1980).

Everyone knew Hitler was leaning on the Jews a little; and it was thought that the Jewish voices being raised, and the handful of escapees who made it to the outside, were grossly exaggerating the facts in order to manipulate the Allies. After all, they were scarcely neutral witnesses. Yet the fact remains that those few committed Jewish witnesses were correct; and the fact that they passionately believed what they were saying to be true did not in the final analysis vitiate that truth. Similarly, a person telling of his true love may not say anything untrue about her, even though his account may be biased.

Another example from World War II is perhaps even more revealing. Two recent books, William Manchester's *American Caesar*<sup>82</sup> and Herman Wouk's *War and Remembrance*<sup>83</sup> both describe the Battle of Leyte Gulf. Both are thorough and careful historical works, and both authors draw largely on the same sources (though I doubt if any of them would be recoverable). Yet their accounts differ enormously, both because of what they include and exclude and because of the differing perspectives from which they are told, Wouk telling the story through Navy eyes, Manchester focussing on General MacArthur, politics and the army side. In one sense these two accounts are distortions, at least from the point of view of omniscience. But it does not follow that either is inaccurate or untrue; I was not able to detect any necessary contradiction. If we require that what they present to be factual be in fact factual, even if not exhaustively true, then we have required as much as is reasonable of a finite intelligence.

Of course, I am not arguing that bias doesn't matter, nor that a deep commitment or a conceptual framework cannot distort the facts, wittingly or unwittingly. I am not surreptitiously jumping from the preceding examples to the illegitimate

[p.106]

conclusion that John must therefore be historically accurate, even though he is a committed witness. Nor am I trying to ignore or surreptitiously skirt the genuine differences between the fourth gospel and the synoptics, concerning which I shall say more a little further on. My argument is purely methodological and much more modest in its conclusion. It is simply that no historical account is ever purely 'objective' in this strong sense; that it is the function of historians<sup>84</sup> to make sense of the whole; that because a man is committed to the truth of what he claims are facts does not per se jeopardize the truthfulness of those alleged facts; and therefore any method which attempts to retrieve the historical by rejecting automatically those historical claims which the witness feels strongly about is both naive and indefensible.<sup>85</sup>

---

<sup>82</sup> W. Manchester, *American Caesar: Douglas MacArthur 1880-1964* (Boston/Toronto: Little, Brown and Co., 1978).

<sup>83</sup> H. Wouk, *War and Remembrance* (Boston/Toronto: Little, Brown and Co., 1978). Wouk's work is a historical novel; yet he has carefully explained where he meticulously follows the events of history and where he departs from them.

<sup>84</sup> In this paragraph (and generally elsewhere) I use the terms 'historian,' 'historical,' 'history' and the like to refer to what takes place in the space-time continuum, or, in the case of 'historian,' to the person who studies what takes place in the space-time continuum, without prejudice from definitions which limit the possibility of what can take place in the space-time continuum to the purely 'natural' (in the technical sense). Such a definition does not require that there be no reality outside the space-time continuum: e.g. no events in God's heaven.

<sup>85</sup> Cf. L. Morris, *Studies in the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969) 70-74, 94-99, 112-118.

At a theoretical level, Dodd is not, of course, unaware of this falsely erected barrier. 'In seeking to interpret the facts he records,' Dodd writes, 'the Fourth Evangelist is not necessarily exceeding the limits proper to history. For it is the function of the historian, as distinct from the chronicler, to expose the course of events as an intelligible process...'<sup>86</sup> He can even say that John 'is concerned to affirm with all emphasis the historical actuality of the facts which (the tradition) transmitted.'<sup>87</sup> Yet a little further on Dodd comments:

It still remains, however, a part of the task of the student of history to seek to discover (in Ranke's oft-quoted phrase) 'wie es eigentlich geschehen ist'—how it actually happened. To what extent and under what conditions may the Fourth Gospel be used as a document for the historian in that sense?

The answer to that question depends upon the sources of information which were at the disposal of the evangelist, if we assume (as I think we may, in view of what has been said) that he intended to record that which happened, however free he may have felt to modify the factual record in order to bring out the meaning.<sup>88</sup>

There is no way to avoid the feeling that Dodd is trying to have his cake and eat it too. But the real problem comes up in Dodd's methodological approach to many individual passages. Of the many examples, we may rote two. In discussing the footwashing episode in John 13:1-17,<sup>89</sup> Dodd detects at the heart of the account a simple episode, an 'exemplary story,' in which

[p.107]

Jesus washes his disciples' feet and tells them he has done this to leave them an example which they are to imitate. This narrative Dodd is prepared to assess as something John drew out of the tradition (which, for Dodd, means it is historical), once the theological commentary has been stripped away. This theological commentary must be attributed to the Evangelist (which, for Dodd, means it is non-historical). This may or may not be a sound conclusion; but it is certainly not a sound method for arriving at a conclusion.

As a second example we may note Dodd's summary statement at the end of his chapter on 'The Reunion.'<sup>90</sup> He writes: 'The extent to which the narrative has been subjected to the influence of the specifically Johannine theology is confined to a few (readily separable) passages....'<sup>91</sup>

I contend, simply, that this is methodologically indefensible. To appeal to johannine theology, or even to johannine drama, is not itself an adequate basis for separating out the historical from the later accretion. I am reminded of the comment of David Halberstam, author of such best-selling non-fiction works as *The Best and the Brightest* and *The Powers that Be*:

---

<sup>86</sup> *IFG* 445.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.* 447.

<sup>89</sup> *HTFG* 60-63; *IFG* 401-12.

<sup>90</sup> *HTFG* 137-51.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.* 151. Dodd is here referring to most of the passion narrative, and draws attention to his treatment in *HTFG* at pp. 75-76, 97-98, 123-124, 135, 145-146; and *IFG* 432-438.

A real writer of non-fiction books is as much a dramatist as a journalist. It does not lessen the responsibility for accuracy, but the writer owes the reader something additional. It is the writer's fault, not the reader's, if the reader puts down the book.<sup>92</sup>

Perhaps John does not want us to put down his book.

**3. If scholarship is to advance in this area of the historical trustworthiness of the fourth gospel, arguments based on vague or imprecise or slippery language must be strenuously avoided.** It is quite legitimate, of course, to attempt to formulate a truly mediating position to which two or more polarized parties are invited to move; and one might even allow ambiguity in area X if there is some need to skate around X in order to get to Y—and Y is the topic of the paper at hand. But what is unacceptable is ambiguity in talking about area X when it is precisely area X that is being studied. Genuine uncertainty—an agnostic position—is, of course, quite another matter; and there is no problem with a statement like 'I am unsure of the historical worth of this *pericope*'. But a statement like 'We shall not be far wrong if we judge that this *pericope* springs

[p.108]

from some primitive tradition which has been creatively handled by the Evangelist' may sound good, but is too imprecise to be useful.

Probably a great deal of unwitting ambiguity has been promoted by talk about the mutual influence of independent oral traditions, and the like. This could mean not much more than that Christians in the first century sometimes talked to each other. Alternatively it could be taken to support theories which postulate communities with their own independent theologies, communities hermetically sealed off from one another but capable of springing the odd leak. We are talking about that for which we have all too little direct evidence, and so we use catch-all terminology.

I have illustrated what seems to be unacceptable ambiguity from George Vanderlip. Another example is found in some parts of Stephen Smalley's recent treatment of history in the fourth gospel, though this is in many ways a useful and competent work.<sup>93</sup> For example, when he comes to discuss his first concrete example, John 2:1-21, he suggests (but does not really argue) that the story has 'an authentically historical base'; but he writes in such a way that it is unclear (1) whether he believes that the historical base included a miracle or only something 'unexpected', (2) whether he believes Jesus' conversation with his mother was originally part of the wedding story, or something added later, (3) whether the master of the banquet had any conversation with the bridegroom (verse 10 being a Johannine link and reflecting Johannine theology). In any case, Smalley tells us that 'John finally worked over this material in his own way with his own style...'<sup>94</sup> If so, it amazes me how well we are able to get back to an alleged source, various accretions, and a final reworking. But my main objection is that at some points the language is too vague to be useful.

---

<sup>92</sup> Quoted by Jean Butler from a personal conversation with David Halberstam: Cf. *Book-of-the-Month-Club News*, June, 1979, 5.

<sup>93</sup> S. S. Smalley, *John: Evangelist and Interpreter* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1978) 162-190.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.* 178.

On this point, Dodd normally fares very well. He is usually extremely clear, with the result that whether one agrees with him or disagrees, one usually enjoys a pretty good idea of what the debate is about.

**4. *Extremely complex and detailed literary and critical theories are usually much less plausible than is often thought; yet somehow, unfortunately, they convey a general impression of convincing coherence even after detail after detail has been demonstrated to be implausible.***

[p.109]

The best argument for this reflection is the history of the source criticism of the fourth gospel in the twentieth century.<sup>95</sup> But because this paper is interested in methodological questions surrounding problems of historicity in John, I shall turn attention to J. L. Martyn's book.<sup>96</sup>

Martyn begins his study of John 9 by noting in vv. 1-7 three elements very often found in the miracle story form: (a) a description of the sickness; (b) the sick person healed; (c) the miracle confirmed. (a) is found in 9:1; (b) in 9:6, 7; and (c) appears to lie in 9:8, 9. This latter identification, however, Martyn rejects; for vv. 8, 9 begin a new scene in which Jesus is no longer present. This proves, to Martyn, that the original ending of the story has been changed in order to incorporate a dramatic expansion of the story, which runs from vv. 8-41. The structure of this entire 'added part' is based 'on the ancient maxim that no more than two active characters shall normally appear on stage at one time, and that scenes are often divided by adherence to this rule.' This generates the following scenes: vv. 8-12, the blind man and his neighbours; vv. 13-17, the blind man and the Pharisees; vv. 18-23, the Pharisees and the blind man's parents; vv. 24-34, the Pharisees and the blind man; vv. 35-38, Jesus and the blind man; vv. 39-41, Jesus and the Pharisees.

Already a host of objections spring to mind. I shall venture a little further reflexion on form criticism below. At the moment, we may profitably note: (1) Granted that the miracle story form is not typical, one must at least ask the question whether the difference is to be accounted for by supposing that John changed it in order to create a 'dramatic expansion,' or by supposing that the story is so primitive that it has not yet even reached the smoothly rounded contours idealized by the form critics. Martyn has opted for the former without even considering the latter. (2) The very first section, vv. 1-7, has three active characters: Jesus, his disciples, and the blind man. This is not uncommon in the fourth gospel (e.g. 1:40-42; 2:1-11 [unless one is going to postulate several scenes!]; 4:39-43; several panels in 18-21). (3) Moreover, Martyn's synthesis provides neither theological nor form-critical explanation for vv. 2-5. (4) It is not obvious that vv. 39-41 should be considered a scene embracing Jesus and the Pharisees over against vv. 35-38 (Jesus and the blind man). On the face of it, Jesus is still addressing the blind man, and anyone else who wants to listen, in v. 39; and some Pharisees are listening in.

[p.110]

---

<sup>95</sup> Cf. D. A. Carson, *art. cit.*, n. 47, *supra*.

<sup>96</sup> *Op. cit.*, n. 74, *supra*.



Martyn, however, on the above bases alone, concludes: 'He who reads the chapter aloud with an eye to the shifting scenes and the skillfully handled crescendos cannot fail to perceive the artistic skill of the dramatist who created this piece out of the little healing story of verses 1-7.' He feels close comparative study 'will surely lead one to conclude that the skilled dramatist is the Evangelist himself.' I am reminded of Halberstam's comments. In any case, it now appears clear, and Martyn makes it evident later on, that vv. 8-41 bear no relation to the historical Jesus: they are a creation.

The purpose of this creation is to produce a two-level story in which, at the *einmalig* level, the reference is to Jesus (even though the story from v. 8 on never happened at that level), and at the second level, the level of John's readers, Jesus stands for an early christian preacher. Vv. 1-7 really refer, not to Jerusalem near the Temple, but to some street in the Jewish quarter of John's city. Some poor Jew, afflicted with blindness (whether of a physical nature or not, Martyn cannot decide), is restored in sight by the faithful witness of the johannine church to the power of Jesus. No matter that the disciples' contribution in vv. 1-7 scarcely sounds like faithful witness. In the next scene (vv. 8-12), the cured man is found conversing with neighbours and acquaintances near his home in the Jewish quarter of John's city. Vv. 13-17 purport to be the Sanhedrin of Jerusalem at the *einmalig* level (which never happened from v. 8 on), but in fact refers to the Gerousia in John's city. A voice from offstage must insert v. 14, as also one or two later snippets which John does not record but which Martyn finds essential to his 'drama.' Vv. 18-23, scene 4, again picture the Gerousia, and presuppose the recent adoption of the *Birkath ha-Minim*, a position Martyn defends in his second chapter. Scene 5, 9:24-34, still in the courtroom, forces choice between Moses and Jesus. In Scene 6, vv. 35-38, the christian preacher (under the guise of Jesus) instrumental in the man's healing leads him to solid faith. This leads to scene 7, vv. 39-41, where the voice of Jesus Christ speaks through the preacher-disciple. Martyn rather has to frame it' this way, since the text still has Jesus speaking in the first person. A sermon follows in chapter 10.

I cannot enter into extended debate with Martyn without writing a book as long as his. But every step of the way, including most of his footnotes, Martyn overcomes difficulties by affirming his theory at the expense of what the text says. His reconstruction turns on many points, most of which I find

[p.111]

implausible. To name but a few. (1) Would first century readers understand that Martyn's reconstruction was what the fourth gospel was really getting at? I could believe that some who were in the *Sitz im Leben* Martyn constructs might apply certain elements of this chapter to their own situation; and I could even believe that John told the story at least in part so that they would be encouraged by it. But that is a far cry from saying that most of it has no historical grounding in the experiences of Jesus of Nazareth, and that John wrote it out of pastoral concern, knowing full well that what he apparently says happened in fact didn't, or alternatively that he wrote in such a way his readers knew he was passing on pastoral advice in the form of a Jesus-story with no basis in historical reality. (2) Martyn bases the doubling between Jesus and the preacher-disciple on such verses as 9:4; 14:12. The resurrected Jesus continues his ministry through his church. I am unpersuaded of his interpretation of these verses, but, that aside, Martyn fails to reckon with the pronounced uniqueness of Jesus in the fourth gospel. Even if his ministry continues in some respects by the Paraclete's working in

his disciples, I doubt that John would feel free to make the easy identification Martyn requires. (3) Martyn requires a strong Christian-Jew antithesis; but this interpretation of the fourth gospel and of its references to 'the Jews' has been strongly—and rightly—challenged.<sup>97</sup> (4) Martyn bases a great deal on equating this instance of expulsion from the synagogue with the *Birkath ha-Minim*; but of this I shall say more later.

Quite literally a score of points of detail from Martyn's first chapter are in fact as implausible as those I've specified, perhaps more so. But the point is that extremely complex theories about questions of historicity tend to promote such implausible details, even though that very wealth of detail engenders a quiet confidence that the general picture must be right, despite the fact that not all the details can be substantiated. As a result, Martyn's work has, by and large, been warmly received. I do not wish to sound too cynical; but I suspect that when scholars have had time to assess his arguments point by point in great detail, Martyn's book will lose its prominence. Of course, if he had written, instead of this detailed book, some shorter essay merely suggesting, in general terms, that John wrote the fourth gospel in such a way as to encourage Christians in their witness to Jesus in their own city, his work would not have had the impact that it has. The irony is that something like the latter conclusion is being drawn from it, even though the detailed arguments which he

[p.112]

adduces to support it are not themselves very plausible.

Something similar occurs with a literary reconstruction of the fourth gospel like that of R. E. Brown. His five successive stages are quite detailed; but they have not really won the day. In the case of his work, it is not so much that any of his arguments is notoriously implausible, as that it is extremely difficult to imagine how one could go about proving his theory—even in the limited sense of attempting to have it assessed as highly probable by a broad spectrum of scholars for a sustained period of time. R. Kysar says something similar:

My point is that the theories advanced by Brown and Lindars are such that no amount of analysis of the gospel materials will ever produce convincing grounds for them. If the gospel evolved in a manner comparable to that offered by Brown and Lindars, it is totally beyond the grasp of the johannine scholar and historian to produce even tentative proof that such was the case.<sup>98</sup>

Yet the fact remains that the scholarly world is, by and large, convinced that John's Gospel did indeed evolve through periods of substantial development. And once again one must suppose that if instead of detailed developmental theories whose details are either implausible or highly speculative, we had been presented only with general ideas about literary

---

<sup>97</sup> Of the many recent works which place this alleged antithesis in proper proportion, perhaps the best is that of R. Leistner, *Antijudaismus im Johannesevangelium? Darstellung des Problems in der neueren Auslegungsgeschichte und Untersuchung der Leidensgeschichte* (Bern: Herbert Lang, 1974). In discussing the Passion Narrative, Dodd came to the same sound conclusion: 'The statement, which is often made, that the Johannine account is influenced by the motive of incriminating the Jews cannot be substantiated, when it is compared with the other gospels' (*HTFG* 107). The same general assessment can be extended to the entire fourth gospel. Cf. also S. G. Wilson, 'Anti-Judaism in the Fourth Gospel? Some Considerations,' *Irish Biblical Studies* 1 (1979) 28-50.

<sup>98</sup> *The Fourth Evangelist, op. cit.*, 53.

development, those ideas would not have had the impact that the detailed theories have enjoyed.

We find ourselves in a Catch-22 situation. In the last reflection I complained about vague and ambiguous language; now it almost appears that I'm complaining about precise language. In fact, that is not quite the case. Rather I'm complaining about detailed theories whose details do not stand up to close investigation, or whose details cannot in the nature of the case be investigated. There must surely be some cases where we are forced to say, 'I don't know'—a point to which I shall return. Moreover, methodologically speaking, I'm not sure these newer, more complex and detailed theories deal any better with the hard evidence than some of the older, simpler theories which have by and large been rejected.

***5. Not a few form-critical arguments used in the service of research into questions of historicity will not stand close scrutiny.***

[p.113]

This reflection can be worked out in two or three ways. In the first place, sober study is showing that form criticism cannot possibly do all that was once expected of it. Recent essays by Schürmann, Hooker, Stanton, Travis, Longenecker, Ellis<sup>99</sup> and others are warning us against the abuse of the tool. These essays are of the greatest importance. It is obviously not possible to repeat all their arguments here; but I cannot forbear to mention a few. Schürmann has provided sociological reasons for thinking the disciples took notes, recording in written form, during the pre-Passion period, various sayings and teaching of Jesus; and Ellis has extended the list of reasons for thinking so. This means that form-critical arguments, which are normally formulated for oral material, must be used with extreme caution. Form critical studies that serve as controls to gospel form criticism have, as Stanton notes, most commonly been done on folklore and Jewish traditions. 'The similarities are often striking,' he says, 'but form critics have often paid insufficient attention to the dissimilarities.'<sup>100</sup> He goes on to point out that the forms were not restricted to one *Sitz im Leben*: almost every form of oral tradition was used in a wide variety of ways. Perhaps it is not surprising that there is wide divergence of scholarly opinion about the most likely *Sitz* in any particular case. Hooker points out, among other things, that just because the form of a pericope is established, and even a plausible *Sitz im Leben* which may well provide the setting in which an earlier story was preserved, shaped and passed on, it does not follow that the *Sitz* in any sense provided the setting for the creation of the story.

---

<sup>99</sup> Respectively: H. Schürmann, 'Die vorösterlichen Anfänge der Logientradition,' in *Der historische Jesus und der kerygmatische Christus*, hrsg. H. Ristow and K. Matthiae (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1962), 342-70; M. D. Hooker, 'On Using the Wrong Tool,' *Theology* 75 (1972), 570-81; G. M. Stanton, 'Form Criticism Revisited,' *What About the New Testament?*, edd. M. D. Hooker and C. Hickling (London: SCM, 1975) 13-27; S. H. Travis, 'Form Criticism,' *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and methods*, ed. I. H. Marshall (Exeter: Paternoster, 1977), 153-164 [[http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/nt-interpretation/09\\_form-criticism\\_travis.pdf](http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/nt-interpretation/09_form-criticism_travis.pdf)]; R. N. Longenecker, 'Literary Criteria in Life of Jesus Research: An Evaluation and Proposal,' *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation*, ed. G. F. Hawthorne (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 217-29; E. E. Ellis, 'New Directions in Form Criticism,' *Jesus Christus in Historie and Theologie*, hrsg. G. Strecker (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1975), 299-315.

<sup>100</sup> *Art. cit.* 20.

The trap into which the form-critic so often falls is that he equates the *Sitz im Leben* with the origin of the material; the *Sitz im Leben* is not simply the 'setting' of the material but, according to Fuller, its 'creative milieu'. Now this is all right so long as by 'creative' is meant 'that which licked the material into its present shape.' But at this stage the form-critic makes the mistake of confusing form with content. Because he has no knowledge of earlier forms, and because he can see the relevance of the material in its present form to the life of the early community, as he understands it, he thinks he has discovered the origin of the material. Of course, he may be right: but he is making an assumption on the basis of insufficient evidence.<sup>101</sup>

Hooker goes on to give a probing critique of the principles of

[p.114]

'dissimilarity' and 'coherence' which are used to answer the sort of objection she has just made. She points out that in reality the principles do not offer objective criteria: what is really operative is the scholar's own understanding of the situation.

Of course, Hooker is not trying to comfort conservatives. She is merely pointing out that the tools we use in New Testament study cannot in the nature of the case answer the sorts of questions being put to them. This surely means that one must opt for agnosticism on these matters, or make decisions at least partly prompted by larger considerations.

Dodd himself, in *HTFG*, occasionally offers a word of warning about form criticism, even though form criticism is not the least important of his tools in this book. For instance, he writes: 'It may fairly be objected to the work of some of the form-critics in the field of the New Testament that they have not always sufficiently allowed for the disparity in the span of time to be taken into consideration.'<sup>102</sup> Most of the comparative studies deal in centuries; in the New Testament we are working with decades. However, Dodd feels that, when all allowance is made, form criticism has become an invaluable tool for recognizing afresh the importance of oral tradition in the New Testament period. Put so generally, few would disagree. However, the cogency of *HTFG* turns on the supposition that the tradition is oral. Suppose Schürmann and Ellis are right, as I think they are: how would Dodd modify his argument?

There is a second way in which form-critical arguments are proving to be tricky things, and need to be handled with more caution. It is this: really close parallels crop up in highly diverse places, but the scholar arbitrarily (from a strictly methodological point of view) fixates on one of them. For example, in an important chapter of *HTFG* called 'Discourse and Dialogue in the Fourth Gospel,'<sup>103</sup> Dodd argues that he has isolated a particular form of dialogue characterized by the following four elements: (1) an oracular utterance by Jesus; (2) blank incomprehension or crude misunderstanding by an interlocutor; (3) a reproachful retort by Jesus; and (4) an explanation or extension of the enigmatic saying. Dodd claims that the closest parallels are found in the *Corpus Hermeticum*, much later Gnostic literature. But now

---

<sup>101</sup> *Art. cit.* 573. Cf. also L. Morris, *Studies, op. cit.* 81-6.

<sup>102</sup> *HTFG* 6.

<sup>103</sup> *HTFG* 315-334. Cf. also his earlier essay, 'The Dialogue Form in the Gospels,' *BJRL* 37 (1954) 54-70.

E. E. Lemcio has isolated precisely the same pattern in the Old Testament, and arguably, in Mark as well.<sup>104</sup> What effect does such

[p.115]

research have on Dodd's work? In this particular instance, of course, Lemcio has provided new evidence (although in one sense the evidence was available from the start). In not a few instances, however, difference in scholarly opinion turns not on the evidence, but on the weighing and interpretation of that evidence. Form criticism is not a 'tool' in the sense that a bunsen burner or a mass spectrometer is a tool; but the terminology has contributed to blinding us, making us unable to see the crucial distinctions.

**6. *The verifiable johannine accuracies ought to be given more weight than is common at present.*** I am referring to details of topography and the like.<sup>105</sup> Of course one may say that John used reliable sources or reliable tradition at these points, and thus remove the credit for accuracy from the Evangelist himself. But that simply pushes the argument one step farther back. If his sources and/or traditions are so good where they are verifiable, why should they be judged largely suspect where they are not verifiable?<sup>106</sup> I suspect that the answer lies in the opinion of many that the theological content ascribed to the historical Jesus by John, and the actions and miracles ascribed to him, could not be genuinely historical, owing to the fact that some modern reconstructions of what must have been the case have *a priori* ruled out of court much of the non-verifiable evidence, and correspondingly minimized the significance of the verifiable evidence. This is methodologically unacceptable. I am not saying that modern reconstructions have no place. On the contrary: they are the very stuff of the historian's task. But if an ancient writer (or his sources!) is historically reliable where he may be tested, and claims that certain statements and events are to be attributed to a certain historical individual; and if the major barrier standing in the way of accepting his claim is some modern reconstruction which denies that such a claim could be true, is it not time to examine the modern reconstruction again?

**7. *There is a great deal of evidence for the view that the New Testament documents are, by and large, 'accidental' or 'circumstantial' documents in some respects; and several corollaries of this observation, all important to the historical investigation of the New Testament, are being overlooked.***

It is still rather in vogue for New Testament scholars to poke gentle fun at systematic theology, especially systematic theology of the older sort which accepted the Bible as a given and attempted to think through a 'system' that fairly embraced

[p.116]

---

<sup>104</sup> E. E. Lemcio, 'External Evidence for the Structure and Function of Mark iv. 1-20, vii. 14-23 and viii. 14-21,' *JTS* 29 (1978) 323-338.

<sup>105</sup> See references at nn. 5, 6.

<sup>106</sup> It must be admitted that some scholars (Bultmann being a notable example) doubt that there is very much that is historically reliable in the fourth gospel. This division of opinion is akin to that in modern *Actaforschung*: the Lightfoot-Ramsay-Bruce-Gasque line over against the Dibelius Haenchen axis. As I read the evidence there are solid, testable, and largely accidental bits of solid historical information in both Acts and the fourth gospel; and it is to this sort of data that I refer.

all its teaching. The New Testament documents, we are reminded, do not present themselves as abstract reflections or as well-organized dogmatics; and the occasions which call forth these documents are too occasional, circumstantial, or accidental to allow fair handling of their material in such a fashion.

Ironically, New Testament scholars tend nevertheless to systematize the individual documents of the New Testament—indeed, to *hypersystematize* them. As a result, there is a rampant proclivity abroad to speak of Paul's Christology in Romans as opposed to his Christology in, say, II Corinthians. From this basis one may go on to speak of the development in Pauline thought, or even the contradictions between his early thought and his later thought on Christology. In our systematizing of the documents, we tend also to analyze the possible backgrounds; and where we cannot draw a reasonably straight line from some document's peculiarity to something in the alleged background, but can trace a straight line from that peculiarity to later literature, we immediately suspect an anachronism. This seems to be an especially attractive alternative if that peculiarity can in some way be fitted into the biblical author's 'system,' as reconstructed by the critic. Moreover, instead of systematizing theology using all the material in the Bible as our chief source, we now systematize history, and use our histmatics (if I may follow German tradition and coin a word) to filter out unacceptable elements in our texts, in much the same way that dogmatics (it is alleged) filtered out unacceptable elements in the same texts.

Thus, it is very common to be told that the historical John the Baptist could not possibly have pointed to the historical Jesus and said, 'Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!' (John 1:29); or that the confession of Jesus' messiahship and kingship (John 1:46,49) could not possibly have taken place as early as John 1. It is unthinkable; and besides, such early confessions seem to fly in the face of the synoptics.

There are several methodological problems with histmatics, and with the general failure to listen to the texts more sympathetically. *First*, in a crucial area like Christology, a great deal of recent writing has resurrected something akin to an older view: that 'high' Christology was not only very fast in developing, but ultimately owes its main points to Jesus himself. Recent works by, *inter alios*, R. N. Longenecker, C. F. D. Moule, I. H. Marshall, and M. Hengel,<sup>107</sup> although

[p.117]

they disagree in many particulars, converge on this point. Such research calls in question many widely held histmatic structures.

*Second*, some modern studies have reminded us of the 'circumstantial' nature of the treatment of various themes in New Testament books;<sup>108</sup> and others, like J. D. G. Dunn's *Unity and*

---

<sup>107</sup> Respectively: R. N. Longenecker, *The Christology of Early Jewish Christianity* (London: SCM, 1970); C. F. D. Moule *The Origin of Christology* (Cambridge: University Press, 1977); I. H. Marshall, *The Origins of New Testament Christology* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1976); M. Hengel, *The Son of God: The Origin of Christology and the History of Jewish-Hellenistic Religion* (London: SCM, 1976).

<sup>108</sup> E.g., R. N. Longenecker, 'The "Faith of Abraham" Theme in Paul, James and Hebrews: A Study in the Circumstantial Nature of New Testament Teaching,' *JETS* 20 (1977) 203-212.

*Diversity in the New Testament*,<sup>109</sup> find that much the same thing prevails with respect to the books themselves, each one taken as a whole. I dissent profoundly from not a few of Dunn's conclusions; but surely few would disagree with him on the point in question: viz. that the New Testament books are largely 'circumstantial' or 'accidental' documents in the technical sense. They respond to circumstances, reflect historical circumstances and perspectives, and are caught up in the 'accidents' or history. Not one of them is meant to be taken as a comprehensive, self-sufficient, and exclusive portrayal of what Christianity ought to be.

It follows, then, that the modern student has to reconstruct to the best of his ability just what happened. There is in early Christianity obvious development of thought: the least sceptical will admit to such, for instance, within the Book of Acts. But when our information regarding the total picture is so limited, and most of the primary sources so 'circumstantial' in nature, it is a major methodological error to construct a large-scale histmatics based in part on a hyper-systematizing (and hyperhistmatizing) of these 'circumstantial' books, and in part on subjective assessments about what could or could not have taken place.

*Third*, it is methodologically absurd to think that a vibrant, thriving, not to say tumultuous fledgling religion like early Christianity, which took root simultaneously in several different cultures and many different lands, and which embraced people from a wide variety of ethnic, educational, social and religious backgrounds, developed in a straight line, in such a way that we can plot very much of the teaching as being early or late. Probably in most conceptual areas, any given teaching was both.

A modern analogy may be of help. Religious developments within Western Christendom during the past one hundred years may at a very general level be histmatized (or caricaturized!) some thing like this: Rationalism was on the ascendancy; an increasing number of people adopted some modern variation of a

[p.118]

liberal Jesus or simply lost faith; popular piety and church attendance decreased sharply; after the Great Depression and World War II there was a short-lived resurgence of Christianity, but it lacked a solid epistemological base and soon dissipated its forces; a quasi-mystical, experience-oriented pop Christianity developed in many places, along with a rising invasion of Eastern cults.

How, then, would some future historian, twenty centuries hence, who develops a histmatics of the twentieth century along the above lines, handle the obvious anomalies? It takes but little imagination to speculate what theories our imaginary fortieth century historians will propound to explain such twentieth century phenomena as the large numbers of overseas missionaries, the Bible sales, the growth and influence of the (by and large) conservative charismatic movement, the re-birth of Reformed theology, or the like. The histmatic structure would not be quick to allow the possibility that the same writer could have written a technical essay on source criticism<sup>110</sup> and then a popular refutation of current attempts to revive Dean Burgon.<sup>111</sup> The latter work must surely have been written eighty or ninety years ago. But such a

---

<sup>109</sup> J. D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1977).

<sup>110</sup> D. A. Carson, *Art. cit.* (cf. n. 47).

<sup>111</sup> D. A. Carson, *The King James Version Debate: A Plea for Realism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979).

conclusion, based as it is on the historic reconstruction, fails to allow for the strange fact that in popular conservative circles Dean Burgon again stalks through the land.

Similarly, it would not be all that surprising to learn that Christian Jews and Christian Gentiles in the first century retained a wide variety of postures *vis-à-vis* one another. It would not be surprising to discover that a decision made at Jerusalem was ignored, in different ways, both by some Jewish Christians in Jerusalem and by some Gentile Christians elsewhere. It should not be thought surprising that an historical Stephen (Acts 7), at an early date, begins to see and expound the implications for the Temple of a salvation made available exclusively through Jesus of Nazareth—an exclusivistic framework already proclaimed by Peter (Acts 4:12), although the cultic implications were not worked out by him (at least, not that we know of!). It is surely not a cause for surprise that these legitimate implications of Christ's cross-work and resurrection, though spelled out in Jewish circles, are actually put into practice among less purely Jewish churches; for tradition dies hard.

*Fourth*, Dodd is surely right when he argues, again and again, that the fourth evangelist presents himself as one

[p.119]

concerned to give true historical data. 'For unquestionably the tradition, in all its forms, *intends* (the emphasis is Dodd's) to refer to an historical episode, closely dated *sub Pontio Pilate*, apart from which (this is the uniform implication) there would have been no church to shape or hand down such a tradition.'<sup>112</sup> Elsewhere, he comments, '...it is important for the evangelist that what he narrates happened.'<sup>113</sup> Again, in discussing John 19:35, Dodd remarks: 'In any case, whether the witness is the evangelist or another, I can see no reasonable way of avoiding the conclusion that the evangelist intends to assure his readers that his account rests, whether directly or indirectly, on the testimony of an eyewitness. Not only so, he formally affirms that the testimony is genuine (ἀληθινή) and that the witness must be believed to be a veracious witness (ὅτι ἀληθῆ λέγει).'<sup>114</sup> Dodd is surely entirely correct in what he believes the Evangelist intends to provide.<sup>115</sup>

If we apply these insights—that (1) even doctrines such as a high Christology appeared remarkably early; that (2) the New Testament books, being of a largely 'circumstantial' nature, ought not be forced into a procrustean historicism against their own evidence; that (3) there was inevitably enormous diversity among the first followers of Jesus, both before and after the cross and resurrection; and that (4) the fourth evangelist intends to be taken seriously as a historian, as well as a theologian—then surely there are no insuperable historical problems with John the Baptist's declaration. Must such a designation of Jesus have arisen

---

<sup>112</sup> *HTFG* 7-8.

<sup>113</sup> *IFG* 444.

<sup>114</sup> *HTFG* 134; cf. L. Morris, *Studies* 119-123.

<sup>115</sup> It must be admitted that some dispute this judgment. C. K. Barrett (*Gospel* viii) says he does 'not believe that John intended to supply us with historically verifiable information regarding the life and teaching of Jesus, and that historical traditions of great worth can be disentangled from his interpretive comments.' Formally, I agree; unless (as I suspect) Barrett means by 'verifiable' something like 'accurate.' Cf. L. Morris, *Studies* 65-70; and also p. 124 n. 110, where he cites J. A. T. Robinson: 'It is astonishing how readily critics have assumed that our Evangelist attached the greatest importance to historicity in general and had but the slightest regard for it in particular.'



solely in the post-Easter church? Is there not evidence, both synoptic (e.g. Mark 10:45) and from the fourth gospel, which indicates that Jesus saw himself as a suffering redeemer—evidence which can be removed only by a methodologically questionable application of historicism? And if, just if, Jesus saw himself in those terms, and really was nothing less than that, would it be altogether surprising if his forerunner pointed him out to be that? And if there is no clear precursor to such a statement in the antecedent Jewish literature, is that fact any more difficult than the broader fact that there is no unambiguous linking, in the Jewish literature, of the messiah and the suffering servant at any level? And if God has actually done the unthinkable in the incarnation, complete with angelic announcement (no less!), should it be thought entirely strange if he instructs his Son's forerunner to introduce a category which, though no doubt somewhat strange at first, and still not entirely perspicuous within the framework of John's gospel, nevertheless ultimately

[p.120]

claimed a significant role in the terminology of redemption? Even using the criteria which we have already adjudged to be rather too subjective, John 1:29 does not fare too badly. The saying, it is true, enjoys little 'coherence' with first century Judaism (but then again, neither does the incarnation); but it is sufficiently 'dissimilar' from johannine themes as to earn a point or two there.<sup>116</sup> And incidentally, might not a gospel writer (or any other writer, for that matter) incorporate material that he finds interesting, or contributing to a minor point in his belief structure, or moving—even though that material does not contribute directly to the writer's most obvious themes?

Moreover, in the apocalyptic fervour of much of first century Judaism, I can well imagine the sort of confessions we find in 1:45, 49. This does not mean that those who uttered them grasped their full christian significance, nor that they never doubted again, still less that some straight line of development would then exclude an authentic Caesarea Philippi confession (which, we recall, was promptly followed up by an insolent rebuke to the one just acknowledged to be the Messiah!). The depth of grief and shock experienced by the disciples after the cross, attested by Luke especially, surely presupposes an assessment of Jesus before the cross that was, at least at times, enormously high. I suspect, moreover, that John deals selectively with this material in such a way as to point out that men often acknowledge Christ in some fashion, and fall away, acknowledge him, and turn away, and so forth: such a repetition becomes a theme for the fourth evangelist. His approach by this means focuses attention on Christ, his significance, his steadfastness, his grace (is he not full of grace and truth, 1:14?), in contrast to the fickle disciples who at best are constantly misunderstanding the significance of what they affirm they believe. By contrast, the synoptists centre attention more broadly on the rising faith and growing understanding of the disciples. These disciples are not without setbacks; but there is a genuine *crescendo* in their belief. For the fourth evangelist, the cross/exaltation is almost exclusively the determining factor. But my point in any case is *that there is no methodological reason for denying that the real historical basis is large enough to support both interpretations.*

---

<sup>116</sup> Cf. *HTFG* 269-271.

There are obvious differences between the presentation of Jesus by the synoptists and the presentation of Jesus by John; and I do not wish to underestimate or minimize such differences. My contention, however, both here and in the ninth reflection,

[p.121]

is that it is methodologically unsound to historicize the fourth gospel and the synoptics separately and then set the two historic structures against each other. It is methodologically superior to suppose that what actually happened is much bigger than any of the presentations, and certainly big enough to support the presentations of both the fourth gospel and of the synoptics (and for that matter any of their sources). I have tried to indicate the direction in which I would pursue such an argument for a number of standard problems; but the work still needs to be done comprehensively and rigorously across a very broad range of data.

**8. *In the light of these and similar methodological reflections, many of the standard evidences of anachronism or of historical error in the fourth gospel do not seem to rest so much on a methodological base as on an ideological base.***

It is often argued, or, worse, presupposed, that John commonly takes some saying of Jesus which he found in the tradition, and expounds it at length in such a way as to give the impression that Jesus himself had given the entire exposition. Sometimes this alleged procedure is justified on the grounds that Christian prophets regularly spoke words of the exalted Christ, through the power of the Spirit; and the church wittingly or unwittingly mingled the statements of the exalted Christ, spoken through some Christian prophet, with the words of Jesus during his pre-Passion ministry. It is further pointed out that in at least one place, namely John 3, it is extremely difficult to ascertain where the purported words of Jesus end and the words of the Evangelist begin.

There has recently been presented solid evidence that the creative role of prophets was much smaller than many have contended.<sup>117</sup> Moreover, if in one passage John does not make it clear where Jesus stops and he begins, in virtually every other case there is no ambiguity at all about where John expects his readers to see Jesus' words finishing.

More important, there is quite substantial evidence not only that Jesus spoke cryptically at times, and that his cryptic utterances were not properly understood until after his resurrection/exaltation and his sending of the Paraclete; *but also that John faithfully preserved the distinction between what Jesus said that was not understood, and the understanding that finally came to the disciples much later* (e.g. John 2:18-22; 7:37-39; 12:16; 16:12f., 25; 21:18-23; compare Luke 24:6-8,

[p.122]

44-49). It is not at all obvious that John is confused on this matter. One might even argue plausibly that anyone who preserves this distinction so faithfully and explicitly is trying to

---

<sup>117</sup> Cf. *inter alia* D. Hill, 'On the Evidence for the Creative Role of Christian Prophets,' *NTS* 20 (1973-74) 262-274; R. Bauckham, 'Synoptic Parousia Parables and the Apocalypse,' *NTS* 23 (1976-77) 162-176; J. D. G. Dunn, 'Prophetic 'I'-Sayings and the Jesus Tradition: The Importance of Testing Prophetic Utterances within Early Christianity,' *NTS* 24 (1977-78) 175-198.

gain credence for what he is saying; and if he errs in this matter it will be because of an unconscious slip, not by design.

I propose, then, to touch lightly on three areas which are often thought to exemplify anachronisms, literary fiction, or the like. I shall not deal in a detailed way with any of them, but merely indicate the line of thought I would be inclined to explore.

(a) *The Farewell Discourse*. Very few believe that John 14-16 represents a summary of material that Jesus actually gave. Most will acknowledge as dominical only the occasional isolated logion. In general, that is Dodd's approach in *HTFG*.

If for the sake of argument the previous reflexions may be judged reasonably sound, I would be inclined to reflect further along the following lines. The old saw about the language being typically johannine I acknowledge: whatever John discusses, it comes out in his own idiom. I shall venture more on that topic in a moment. But it should at least be pointed out that the same language equally blankets sayings assessed as dominical. The criteria often used to separate out the johannine reflection from the dominical aphorism (did Jesus speak only in aphorisms?) I have already rejected as methodologically indefensible. I know no objective test that will suffice. However, although on the basis of John's language, I do not take these words to be the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus; and although the language is that of johannine idiom; and although there is nothing that requires or even suggests that this is all that Jesus said on this occasion; yet I cannot help noting that John presents these chapters to us as the teaching of Jesus, on a certain night, at a certain time in history. On the face of it, he gives the impression that he expects us to believe that these chapters represent what Jesus said. If someone objects that historians in the ancient world were prone to making up speeches and placing them on the lips of their heroes, I protest that only some writers in the ancient world exhibit this propensity. The debate at this point is well chronicled with respect to the speeches in Acts;<sup>118</sup> and I shall refrain from repeating it.

I might also be inclined to find my view reinforced by the

[p.123]

break at the end of John 14. Far from indicating a seam, 14:31-15:1 evidences a momentous recollection of detail. Jesus and his disciples leave the room in response to his quiet Ἐγείρεσθε, ἄγωμεν ἐντεῦθεν. They leave the city, walking in several clumps: twelve men can scarcely walk in one group in the narrow streets of Old Jerusalem and along the narrow path across the Kidron and up the Mount of Olives. This circumstance explains the description surrounding the dialogue in 16:17-19. Moreover, as they pass by vineyards, Jesus finds in them another metaphor to use on this most awesome of nights; and he begins, 'I am

---

<sup>118</sup> Except for the most recent contributions, cf. W. W. Gasque, *A History of the Criticism of the Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975). In particular, cf. F. F. Bruce, 'The Speeches in Acts—Thirty Years After,' *Reconciliation and Hope*, ed. R. Banks (Exeter: Paternoster, 1974) 53-68 [[http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/rh/acts\\_bruce.pdf](http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/rh/acts_bruce.pdf)]; H. N. Ridderbos, *The Speeches of Peter in the Acts of the Apostles* (Madison: Theological Students Fellowship, repr. 1977); W. W. Gasque, 'The Speeches in Acts: Dibelius Reconsidered,' *New Dimensions in New Testament Study*, edd. R. N. Longenecker and M. C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974) 232-250.

the true vine... (15:1). I cannot prove that it was so; but I suggest this is a methodologically superior way of approaching the hard literary evidence we actually possess.<sup>119</sup>

(b) *Excommunication in John 9:22*. Although almost all the commentators see an anachronism here, it is J. L. Martyn,<sup>120</sup> in his second chapter, who devotes most time and energy to proving it. He argues that there are four crucial points in the text: (i) that there is a formal decision, (ii) made by the Jewish authorities, (iii) to bring against christian Jews—i.e. Jews who confess that Jesus is the Messiah; and (iv) that the measure taken is drastic excommunication. Martyn then tests the options against these four findings, and concludes that the punishment in question cannot be the light punishment called the נזיפה, nor the temporary ban referred to either as the נדוי or the שמתה, and still less the permanent, excommunication known as the סרה, if only because there is no unambiguous evidence for the latter until the third century AD. For various reasons, Martyn also disallows the sort of exclusions from the synagogue found in the Book of Acts. This drives him to adopt the conclusion that ἀποσυνάγωγος in John 9:22 presupposes ברכת המניס the *Birkath ha-Minim*, or 'benediction against heretics,' established as the twelfth of the Eighteen Benedictions by the Council of Jamnia *at the end of the first century AD*.

I see no way of proving that Martyn is wrong; but the evidence that he is right is not particularly compelling either. There are three principle points to observe. *First*, his four criteria are rather overwrought. There was indeed some kind of formal decision (9:22); but it may have been an *ad hoc* decision. It was approved by 'the Jews;' but scholars have shown how tricky an expression that is.<sup>121</sup> In this context it may refer to no more than the Jews in question, the Jews who went after the cured blind man, the Jews who reacted against

[p.124]

Jesus, the Jews who were the authorities in the local synagogue. There is certainly no evidence that the voice of Jamnia was involved. If it be objected that any kind of excommunication of Jesus' disciples is inconceivable at so early a date, especially since Jewish Christians and Jewish non-Christians quite clearly lived side by side for many decades, then I would answer that what is in view is *ad hoc* opposition of the sort that put Jesus on the cross, that stoned a Stephen or sent a Saul to Damascus—even though these were merely sporadic outbreaks of violence surrounded by sustained periods of relative calm.

---

<sup>119</sup> Cf. C. K. Barrett, 'The Bible in the New Testament Period,' *The Church's Use of the Bible Past and Present*, ed. D. E. Nineham (London: SPCK, 1963) 21: 'It is worthwhile to note that it is sometimes (the tradition's) sheer historical accuracy, its recounting things that Jesus said and did simply because he said and did them, that leads to a measure of diffuseness, of failure to concentrate upon the focal point.' Moreover, the ἐξῆλθεν in 18:1 does not prove that Jesus left the upstairs room at that point: compare the use of ἐξῆλθεν three verses later, in 18:4. The meaning of ἐξέρχομαι in the fourth gospel and johannine epistles is often theologically rather than spatially determined; and in a few instances it is closer in meaning to 'I go forward' than 'I go out'. Others suggest the exhortation at the end of John 14 marks the end of the meal and a time for cleaning up: there were no servants, after all, even for washing guests' feet. John 18:1 then refers to departure from the upstairs room, and ἐξῆλθεν in 18:4 to 'departure' from an enclosed garden. Such suggestions require historical imagination: let us admit it. But they have a certain verisimilitude, remain within the bounds of the text, and in any case require less imagination than certain complex source theories!

<sup>120</sup> See n. 74.

<sup>121</sup> Cf. n. 100.

Moreover when Martyn contends that 'drastic excommunication' is intended, and not some temporary ban which implicitly suggests a disciplinary step designed to bring about repentance, he bases his argument on the force of ἀπο in the compound ἀποσυνάγωγος. But surely he is leaning very heavily on etymology, as any quick glance at ἀπό-compound entries in a Greek lexicon quickly reveals. No doubt ἀπό indicates exclusion from the synagogue; but it does not necessarily indicate permanent exclusion, nor preclude the possibility that disciplinary exclusion is in view.

*Second*, other options are possible, even if our sources of knowledge are not very good. Some kind of excommunication stretches back to Ezra 10:8. Taan. 3:8 contains a saying of Simeon b. Shetah which threatens excommunication; and he is normally dated c. 80 B.C. The Dead Sea Scrolls betray excommunication at Qumran (cf. 1QS 5:18; 6:24-7:25; 8:16f., 22f.; CD 9:23). So there is certainly evidence that excommunication was an available option to synagogue authorities in Jesus' day. The adverb ἤδη (9:22) almost suggests that it is rather surprising that the authorities took this step so early; it is difficult to imagine what the significance of the word might be if the excommunication involved were post-Jamnian. And incidentally, the *Birkath ha-Minim* does not actually speak of excommunication, although it is probably presupposed. But the point is that some ambiguity attaches to that identification as well.

*Third*, if we grant that 'the Jews' were angry enough at Jesus to plot his death (cf. 11:54), it does not seem unreasonable that they might be angry enough to plot the excommunication of his followers, even during his ministry.<sup>122</sup> These were not, after all, normal times: not every itinerant preacher was capable of arousing the authorities to wrath.

[p.125]

Some years ago D. R. A. Hare explored the connection between the *Birkath ha-Minim* and the excommunication found here, and concluded that the connection was entirely unproven.<sup>123</sup> J. A. T. Robinson comments, 'Unless one begins with a later date for the gospel, there is no more reason for reading the events of 85-90 into 9.22 than for seeing a reference to Bar-Cochba in 5.43, which has long since become a curiosity of criticism.'<sup>124</sup>

(c) *The Eucharistic Discourse in John 6*. The literature on this chapter is immense. I should say I do not find the various partition theories convincing, including the view that 6:51c-57 is

---

<sup>122</sup> For this observation I am indebted to R. A. Stewart, 'Judicial Procedure in New Testament Times,' *EQ* 47 (1975) 97-98.

<sup>123</sup> D. R. A. Hare, *The Theme of Jewish Persecution of Christians in the Gospel of St. Matthew* (Cambridge: University Press, 1967) 48-56. Cf. also C. F. D. Moule, *The Birth of the New Testament* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1966) 107.

<sup>124</sup> J. A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1976) 273.

a late addition.<sup>125</sup> The studies by P. Borgen provide a wealth of illustrative material; but his central thesis fails to convince.<sup>126</sup>

For the sake of economy I shall for the moment avoid close interaction with the secondary literature, and ask a rather simple (some might say naive) question: if we were to suppose that this is a fair statement of Jesus' teaching (however johannine the language, however selectively the Evangelist has presented his material, however many lacunae there may be), what implausible conceptions would we be required to ascribe to the historical Jesus? I ask the question this way because, on the face of it, John expects his readers to believe that Jesus interacted with the crowds, as recorded, and that he gave the content ascribed to him. There is no *formal* ambiguity surrounding where Jesus ends and John begins. If then I take the record seriously, as it stands, does it compel me to adopt some ridiculous position(s) about the historical Jesus? If so, what? If not, what solid reason is there for rejecting the record as it stands?

To answer my own question, then, I would say there is nothing implausible about the record as it stands, provided that five things are true: (i) Jesus sometimes used metaphors of the sort, 'I am the door,' 'I am the vine,' 'I am the good shepherd,' 'I am the light,' and the like. If he did, and if such metaphors sometimes became extended metaphors, or even mixed metaphors, in his hand, then there is no inherent implausibility in this one. If it were not for the fact that we who live after the institution of the eucharist tend to read the eucharist back into these words, would we have any difficulty in accepting the bread of life metaphor as dominical, even when it is pushed to the extreme of being identified with Jesus' flesh (not body, as in the eucharistic institution) and

[p.126]

blood? (ii) Jesus knew he was going to die, and knew too that his death was for a redemptive purpose, a purpose which would be applied to his followers by the Spirit he would himself bestow once he had been exalted beyond the other side of death. (iii) Jesus knew that he had come from his Father in a unique way, and as a result saw himself as the exclusive means of reconciling men to his Father so that they could receive eternal life. (iv) Jesus himself preached an 'already... not yet' brand of eschatology which expected to gather a community of disciples during the interim period, and expected a worldwide mission. (v) Jesus himself stands behind the institution of the eucharist which, granted that John 6 is authentic, had not yet been celebrated at this time. It is not necessary to insist, on the basis of this reconstruction, that Jesus gave these words because he was planning to institute the eucharist. However, when John by means of his gospel passed on this teaching from Christ, the eucharist was already well established in the church; and it would have been unlikely that Christians could read these lines without making some kind of connection. Sensitive to such connections, John

---

<sup>125</sup> For a neat and fairly recent summary of current source analysis of John 6, cf. R. Kysar, 'The Source Analysis of the Fourth Gospel: A Growing Consensus?' *NovT* 15 (1973) 134-152. Apart from broader questions concerning the methodological legitimacy of source analysis in the fourth gospel, some useful counter perspective may be gleaned from J. D. G. Dunn, 'John VI—A Eucharistic Discourse?' *NTS* 17 (1970-71) 328-338.

<sup>126</sup> Viz., P. Borgen, 'Observations on the Midrashic Character of John 6,' *ZNW* 54 (1963) 232-240; *idem*, *Bread from Heaven: An Exegetical Study of the Concept of Manna in the Gospel of John and the Writings of Philo* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1965). I acknowledge that the criteria he adduces in order to show that much of John 6 is midrashic require detailed discussion; but such discussion would take us beyond the limits of this paper.

is saying that this material is what the historical Jesus taught, not less than the institution of the eucharist. If this reconstruction is plausible, John may be warning against a view of the eucharist which guarantees life by the simple ingestion of the physical elements. He restores the balance by pointing out some parallel teaching from the historical Jesus, who insists ultimately it is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words that Jesus speaks are Spirit and life (6:63).

If these five things are true, then there is no implausibility entailed by taking John 6 seriously, as it stands, as a report of what the historical Jesus said. But are these five things true? Each of them is attested repeatedly in the gospels. When any of them is doubted, that doubt does not spring from the application of a neutral literary tool capable in itself of screening out inauthentic statements, but from the application of a historic framework. Dispassionate historical analysis with as few axes to grind as possible would not, I submit, entertain grave difficulty in affirming any of the five points listed. If so, why should the content of John 6 provide any insuperable barrier to an assessment which accepts it as authentic—as, on the face of it, it claims to be?

### ***9. The likely implications of the fact that John has stamped***

[p.127]

***his entire gospel with his own style need to be reckoned with more thoroughly than is usually the case.***

John is, linguistically speaking, remarkably uniform. This datum has implications for source criticism; but I need not repeat them here. From the point of view of questions of historicity, the fact that the fourth gospel sounds more or less the same, linguistically speaking, whether Jesus is talking or John is talking, surely means, at the very least, that either we have few *ipsissima verba* of Jesus preserved for us by this Evangelist, or, if there are a few more than we might suspect, it is impossible to isolate them with any confidence. By and large, we cannot appeal, as Jeremias does in the case of the synoptic gospels, to Aramaisms. Whatever historical material John preserves is not amenable to being isolated by linguistic means.

Yet this simple observation surely calls in question Dodd's essential approach when he tries to determine what is historical. To make this clear, a couple of modern analogies may be helpful. In preparing this paper I read about a score of reviews of *HTFG*. A few of these reviews provide no description of what *HTFG* actually says, but cheerfully launch right into generalities of praise and blame. Most, however, devote a good deal of their space to describing the contents of the book. All reviewers, I presume, read the book, or at least long sections of it; a few of the later reviewers, I imagine, also read the early reviews. Yet each reviewer summarizes the book in his own words, selecting those parts which for any reason attracted him—and the reasons are not all detectable. Here and there the reviewers quote phrases or sentences from *HTFG*; but if there were no quotation marks, the situation that prevails in the biblical manuscripts, I'm quite sure I would not be able to isolate the *ipsissima verba* of Dodd with any degree of confidence. Yet the fact remains that those reviewers accurately describe what Dodd's work is all about. When they say something like, 'Dodd says that...' they tell us in truth what Dodd says. Admittedly, they don't tell us all that Dodd says; and they put it in their own idiom; yet only the most rigid pedant would criticize any of these

reviews on the ground that Dodd really didn't say those things. Now of course it's possible for a reviewer to misunderstand an author, and ascribe to him things he did not say. But, short of reading the book oneself, it is very difficult to detect such passages. Moreover, a careless reviewer may ascribe to the author *an implication* of what the author said, even though the

[p.128]

author would not accept that implication as an entailment of his thought. However, if the reviewer has built a good record of making distinctions between what the author actually says and what the reviewer thinks might be entailed by what he says, one's confidence in the reliability of the reviewer is increased. Or again, consider a learned society meeting where an address is given by a brilliant lecturer. One auditor gives a five minute summary of the two hour address to a close friend.

This friend respects the auditor's reporting. He is aware, of course, that the address was given in German, and the report in English—and reduced at that; but he feels on balance that the report of the lecturer's content is accurate. The friend then gives a one minute precis to his students, beginning his remarks with a preamble such as, 'The great German scholar Schmidt says that....' And by all common usage, his statement is correct—even though Schmidt said more, and perhaps with slightly different thrust, and in a different language. And so we come to John. Does he know the synoptics? At very least we must admit John wrote in such away that it is in the highest degree unlikely that such dependence could be demonstrated. Brown insists, '(If) one posits dependency, one should be able to explain every difference in John as the deliberate change of Synoptic material or of a misunderstanding of that material.'<sup>127</sup> Dodd in *HTFG* operates with the same rule.<sup>128</sup> However, might not the dependency be there, in the sense that John had read, pondered, and even partly memorized the synoptics (or one or two of them)—and then decided to write his own book? This does not threaten the historicity of the fourth gospel unless we insist that its writer was shut up exclusively to the synoptic gospels he had read as the sole source of any accurate knowledge of the historical Jesus. But that, surely, is highly implausible. Luke 1:1-4 reminds us that many accounts of Jesus' ministry were in circulation in the early period. And quite apart from the question of the authorship of the fourth gospel, its writer was at most only decades removed from the events, not centuries.

Brown objects, 'However, any explanation of Johannine 'differences that must appeal as a principle to numerous capricious and inexplicable changes really removes the question from the area of scientific study.'<sup>129</sup> I am not sure what 'scientific' means in such a context. More troubling, I find that the words 'capricious' and 'inexplicable' are loaded. They suggest that the only alternative to an explanation of every change would be an appeal to the 'capricious.' why not

[p.129]

---

<sup>127</sup> R. E. Brown, *Gospel I*, xlv.

<sup>128</sup> This crops up not only in those pages where he outlines his method, but also again and again in the course of the argument: e.g. *HTFG* 167: 'We ask, first, what motive John could have had for altering this at all.'

<sup>129</sup> *Gospel*. xlv.



the far simpler theory—that John wrote his own book, in his own style, with his own themes? It happens every day. Ancient writers were free to copy the works of others as they saw fit, without being branded plagiarists; but they were also free not to copy them. If the fourth evangelist had access to all sorts of excellent information, in addition to the synoptics, what is implausible about the suggestion that he freely composed his own book? Add various editions and redactors if need be, although in my view they add more problems than they solve; but the result is the same.

If this reconstruction is at all plausible, it follows that Dodd's effort in *HTFG* to retrieve historical snippets, as magnificent as that effort is and as important as it may be when placed over against a more radical scepticism, is methodologically far, far too restrictive in what it allows to be judged historical. His method is not big enough even to check for the various kinds of possible dependency on the synoptic gospels; and his use of form criticism to isolate a pre-johannine tradition is methodologically equivocal. Even after this tradition has been isolated, it is extremely difficult to discern anything other than very subjective 'tools' being used to decide what parts of that tradition reach back to the historical Jesus. One simply cannot with confidence use his tools on the sort of book which the fourth gospel appears to be; or, rather, the application of his tools to this kind of book will indeed succeed in straining out some historical gnats; but the historical camels will get clean away.

In short, the uniformity of johannine language makes recovery of alleged snippets from the historical Jesus methodologically difficult, even dubious. However, far from serving as a counsel of despair, we must recognize that John, like many writers, has written up all of his material himself. If this renders retrieval of snippets by source or form criticism a methodologically doubtful task, then *mutatis mutandis* it avoids identifying great passages from the fourth gospel which are not among the snippets, as *not* being historical. This, of course, does not necessarily mean that they are historical; but at least it will enable us to recognize the limitations of literary tools in the historical enterprise, and leave open several options now illegitimately closed.

#### **10. *We must, I fear, return again to the knotty question of authorship.***

[p.130]

One of the many splendid features of *HTFG* is the eminently fair way in which this matter is discussed.<sup>130</sup> Dodd ultimately decides that, on balance, the weight of evidence goes against the tradition that the author of the fourth gospel was John the son of Zebedee. Yet he goes on to argue:

If the balance of probability should appear to be on the side of authorship by John son of Zebedee, much of what is written in the following pages would require some modification, but I do not think it would all fall to the ground. The material ascribed here to tradition would turn out to be the apostle's own reminiscences; but even so, it would be obvious that they had been cast at one stage into the mould of the corporate tradition of the Church—as why should they not be, if the apostle was actively immersed in just

---

<sup>130</sup> *HTFG*, 10-18.

that ministry of preaching, teaching and liturgy which *ex hypothesi* gave form to the substance of the Church's memories of its Founder?<sup>131</sup>

But there is more to it than that. If on balance the author was John the son of Zebedee, more than just a little of Dodd's argument falls away. Most of Dodd's argument is form critical. He himself points out that comparative form critical studies (e.g. of the Maori civilization) demand a much longer time span. Yet there he treats what he admits to be a genuine possibility, an eyewitness author, as if it would scarcely affect his conclusions. Whether or not his conclusions would be affected, his method would certainly be: see, for instance, the form of his argument on pp. 37, 43, 54, 59, 75, 96, 128ff., 166, etc., of *HTFG*. If the fourth evangelist is a *bona fide* eyewitness, and yet form criticism can be used anyway by simply replacing the word 'tradition' with 'apostolic reminiscences,' then on what is the entire discipline of form criticism based? Where are the parallel studies that allow this kind of eyewitness phenomenon to be included? This is still merely a methodological question; but it will not go away.<sup>132</sup>

Before proceeding with further methodological questions, I should perhaps confess my own conclusions. By about the same margin that Dodd weighs the evidence and opts for non-apostolic authorship, I weigh the evidence and opt for apostolic authorship. So far in this paper, however, wherever I have used the words 'John' or 'johannine' as a reference to the author, it has been without prejudice, in accordance with established

[p.131]

scholarly convention. I do not think that any of my arguments so far has demanded, explicitly or implicitly, that the author be John son of Zebedee.

What makes the study of recent discussions of johannine authorship most interesting is the kind of argument which each scholar finds convincing. We must face the embarrassing fact that, apart from the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and some more biblical manuscripts (neither of which contribute much to the debate, except for early papyri which impose a

---

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.* 17 n. 1.

<sup>132</sup> J. A. T. Robinson (*Redating 262-263*) provides a trenchant catalogue of references in which Dodd clearly shows he thinks the Evangelist's relation to the tradition was external and second-hand. The following comments by A. H. N. Green-Armytage (*John Who Saw* [London: Faber, 1951]) are slightly naive, but only slightly; and in any case they constitute a salutary warning: 'There is a world—I do not say a world in which all scholars live but one at any rate into which all of them sometimes stray, and which some of them seem permanently to inhabit—which is not the world in which I live. In my world, if the *Times* and the *Telegraph* both tell one story in somewhat different terms, nobody concludes that one of them must have copied the other nor that the variations in the story have some esoteric significance. But in that world of which I am speaking this would be taken for granted. There, no story is ever derived from facts, but always from somebody else's version of the same story... In my world, almost every book, except some of those produced by Government departments, is written by one author. In that world almost every book is produced by a committee, and some of them by a whole series of committees. In my world, if I read that Mr. Churchill, in 1935, said that Europe was heading for a disastrous war, I applaud his foresight. In that world no prophecy, however vaguely worded, is ever made except after the event. In my world we say, "The first world war took place in 1914-1918". In that world they say, "The world-war narrative took shape in the third decade of the twentieth century". In my world men and women live for a considerable time—seventy, eighty, even a hundred years—and they are equipped with a thing called memory. In that world (it would appear), they come into being, write a book, forthwith perish, all in a flash, and it is noted of them with astonishment that they "preserve traces of a primitive tradition" about things which happened well within their own lifetime.'

*terminus ad quem* in the first third of the second century), we possess no more hard, literary evidence on the subject than the church has enjoyed for centuries. Yet, of recent major writers on the fourth gospel, none save Leon Morris (whose work is certainly worth consulting)<sup>133</sup> defends the apostolic authorship of the fourth gospel, even though that was almost the universally held view until two centuries ago; and, in Britain, the predominant view until a few decades ago. Since the hard evidence has changed but little, the methods for arriving at such different answers must have changed.

Compare, for instance, the commentary by Westcott<sup>134</sup> with the work of some recent writers. Westcott championed apostolic authorship, and did so in a classic statement that has often been repeated. He proceeded in concentric circles from circumference to centre, seeking to show by asking questions of the text that the Evangelist was (a) a Jew; (b) a Jew of Palestine; (c) an eyewitness; (d) an apostle; and (e) John son of Zebedee.

More recent treatments often accept the flow of this argument, if not all the details (e.g. many think the evidence for eyewitness is not all that good), but then say that on the basis of other factors, to which I shall turn in a moment, we must nevertheless conclude that John the son of Zebedee did not write the book. Some of his disciples wrote it following his death, giving him the credit for the bulk of the material. Not infrequently this is related to the famous evidence of Papias about the 'elder John.' Others think that the beloved disciple is either a symbolic person or the idealization of an unknown historical person: such modern reconstructions I shall avoid in this discussion.

I do not propose to review all the evidence at the moment, but to point out the kinds of arguments that those

[p.132]

scholars advance who justify their abandonment of the *prima facie* evidence in favour of agnosticism or speculation, once they have admitted the relative strength of that evidence. Dodd himself, for instance, twice makes a fair amount out of the fact that, although the convincing characterization helps to confirm that the author was an eyewitness, two of the *pericopae* richest in characterization 'are represented by the evangelist himself as occasions when no eyewitness was present—the conversation with the Samaritan woman, and the examination before Pilate.'<sup>135</sup> On this basis, Dodd suggests that all of the characterization in the Gospel is better accounted for by supposing the Evangelist was endowed with consummate skill as a writer than by supposing he was an eyewitness. I am not sure the two possibilities should be placed in antithesis; but, that aside, the Samaritan woman herself seems a likely source of information, judging by the open way she approached her fellow townspeople; and, as for the in camera session with Pilate, if some personal secretary or court scribe, later converted, did not share the information (a possible but probably desperate expedient), I would suggest that the information came from Jesus himself, after his resurrection. Is it possible to imagine extensive contacts with his disciples over a forty day spread without one of them asking what had happened at his trials?

---

<sup>133</sup> L. Morris, *Studies* 139-292.

<sup>134</sup> B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel according to St. John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, repr, 1971); orig. 1889).

<sup>135</sup> *HTFG* 14; cf. *IFG* 450.

What other arguments are used among recent writers to deny that the author was the apostle John? Some note that according to Acts 4:13 John was uneducated, and conclude that an uneducated man could scarcely have composed the fourth gospel. On this basis we are going to run into trouble with the traditions about R. Akiba—or, for that matter, with people with whom I am personally acquainted who became Christians as adults and only then embarked on serious study, including post-graduate training.

The point is that methodologically speaking, the deciding features in this shift of viewpoint are arguments which pit possible but unnecessary inferences from an assortment of texts, against explicit statements and their entailed implications. This is methodologically improper. A great deal of the modern debate about the authorship of the fourth gospel is being carried on at this methodological level.

One final area for methodological reflexion cannot be avoided. The vast majority of contemporary scholars are

[p.133]

convinced that the fourth gospel was not written by one person, but by a 'school' or 'circle' or 'community.' I remain unpersuaded that 'schools' write anything except symposia, or discrete books with a common *Weltanschauung*; yet the proposal seems to have received substantive support by the work of R. A. Culpepper.<sup>136</sup> Culpepper examines such 'schools' as the Pythagorean school, the Academy, the Lyceum, the Stoa, the school at Qumran, and the like, developing a list of nine constants. Then he studies the fourth gospel and the johannine epistles in the light of these constants, and concludes that there is indeed such a thing as a johannine 'school.'

Despite the fact that this work has been well received, several major *methodological* objections must be raised. First, most of Culpepper's constants are not distinguishable from the characteristics of the church—indeed, of any vibrant religion. For instance, according to Culpepper a school in the ancient world was made up of disciples who traced the beginnings of their discipleship to a wise and good man. They treasured the founder, and cherished the traditions surrounding him. Members of the school were in the first instance students of the master, and used the ordinary means of learning and transmitting traditions. These schools adopted certain requirements for admission, and could expel members. Some distance from the host society was maintained in order to ensure perpetuity, a perpetuity also served by the beginnings of institutional structure. And so on. With the best will in the world, I cannot see how a community with constants such as these must be classed as a 'school' in any technical sense, unless Culpepper includes within the range of his definition 'church.' But then, of course, it might be wiser to speak of 'the christian school,' rather than 'the johannine school.'

My second methodological problem is that Culpepper seeks to avoid this obvious conclusion by some highly dubious exegetical steps. He establishes a *johannine* 'school,' as opposed to a *christian* 'school,' by requiring that the beloved disciple be understood to be the idealization of 'John,' the founder of the 'school,' and by insisting that he discharged to the community the role of the Paraclete. This stands at the heart of the book's evidence for the existence of a

---

<sup>136</sup> R. A. Culpepper, *The Johannine School*.

johannine 'school.' True, there are genuine parallels between the beloved disciple and the Paraclete—as between

[p.134]

the Paraclete and Jesus, Jesus and the disciples, Jesus and his Father, and so on. But in each case there are also fundamental distinctions to be drawn. It is methodologically inadequate to note the parallels and to make the jump advocated by Culpepper without weighing with equal rigour the many distinctions between the beloved disciple and the Paraclete. This weakness largely vitiates the book's central thesis.

My *final* methodological objection is that when dealing with John's gospel Culpepper has to assume large elements of what is to be proved. For instance, that disciples of the beloved disciple transmitted traditions is demonstrated, in Culpepper's mind, by the existence of the fourth gospel and the johannine epistles. But that will scarcely be convincing evidence for a 'school' to those who have not already adopted that viewpoint, but who still think, *mirabile dictu*, that John the son of Zebedee wrote the documents in question. On the face of it, the author of the fourth gospel stands with his readers as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

## V

This paper has been primarily methodological in nature; yet even at that level, it has barely scratched the surface. Many historical problems in the fourth gospel have not even been touched (e.g. John 3:13; John's use of Christological titles; the proper place of the cleansing of the temple); and even some methodological questions of fundamental importance have not been raised (e.g. questions surrounding literary genre; proper and improper use of harmonization as an historiographical tool). Such questions cry out for more study.

But certain lessons, I hope, stand out. First, as great a book as *HTFG* is, it is seriously deficient at a methodological level. If we suppose we can establish as historical and authentic only those things which Dodd's use of his tools approves, we do the texts a serious injustice. Second, not a little modern biblical research is in methodological disarray. It is not that any of the literary tools we use is intrinsically evil. On the contrary, all have their place. But we err in treating them as if they guarantee objectivity,

[p.135]

or as if they can produce answers to questions they are simply not able to handle. But M. D. Hooker says it better than I: 'My plea is that we should stop pretending to know the answer when we do not. My argument is that the tools which are used in an attempt to uncover the authentic teaching of Jesus cannot do what is required of them.'<sup>137</sup>

Finally, we must attempt to make reasonable sense of the evidence as it stands; we must attempt to formulate historical reconstructions which reasonably undergird the only evidence that has come down to us. This wholistic approach is methodologically superior to those

---

<sup>137</sup> 'Wrong Tool' 570.

D.A. Carson, "Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel: After Dodd, What?" R.T. France & David Wenham, eds., *Gospel Perspectives*, Vol. 2: *Studies of History and Tradition in the Four Gospels*. Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981. pp.83-145.

---

which on dubious grounds are forced to discount a great deal of the evidence, or treat it with a scepticism which is rooted much more in ideology than in method.<sup>138</sup>

---

© 1981 *Continuum Books*. Reproduced by kind permission of the author and the publisher.

Prepared for the Web in January 2007 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>

---

---

<sup>138</sup> This paper was completed except for very minor revision on October 1st, 1979.