JESUS TRADITION IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

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1. Introduction

For the purposes of this article, Jesus tradition refers to material or data that may stem from Jesus of Nazareth or from the period and places of his activity and death. Without claiming comprehensiveness, we intend to give an indication of its maximal extent in John. At the outset, two matters related to the existence and character of such tradition should be noted: first, the Gospel’s apparent claim to be written by or based upon the testimony of an eyewitness (21:24; cf. 19:35); second, its relation to, and differences from, the synoptic gospels.

Both the eyewitness claim and the authorship claim demand further scrutiny. What is said at the conclusion of the Gospel (21:24) is only that the one who is testifying and his testimony are true. But this statement in the narrative context (21:20) clearly implies an eyewitness claim (cf. 19:35). At best, the claim of 21:24 does not necessarily mean that the Gospel was itself written by the disciple whom Jesus loved (21:20). He is designated as the one who “testifies to these things and has written them,” or “caused them to be written” (cf. 19:1 NRSV for an analogous translation: emastigōsen is properly translated “had [him] flogged”). With either translation the truth claim should be taken seriously, although not at face value.¹

¹ See Andrew T. Lincoln, “The Beloved Disciple as Eyewitness and the Fourth Gospel as Witness,” JSNT 35 (2002): 3–26. Lincoln has been a colleague in the SBL Consultation, “John, Jesus, and History,” presided over by Tom Thatcher, who with Robert T. Fortna has edited a volume of seminal essays, Jesus in Johannine Tradition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001). To these and other participants I am indebted for their stimulation and criticism. My thanks also to Professors Ed P. Sanders and J. Louis Martyn, who read and commented helpfully on an earlier version of this essay, as well as to Dr. Kavin Rowe, who read it meticulously at several stages. They have saved me from embarrassing errors. Needless to say, I am responsible for its final form, as well as for the translation of most of the New Testament quotations.
John’s differences from the synoptic gospels are far-reaching, but like them John purports to narrate the career of Jesus in early first-century Palestine. In fact, the name *Iesous* occurs much more frequently in John (237 times) than in any of the others (Matthew 150; Mark 81; Luke 89). The issue and its implications for the historical value of John can be put simply. If John is totally dependent on the synoptics for its knowledge of Jesus, then the question of Jesus tradition in John is already answered. Presumably there would be none, for wherever John departs from the synoptics, it would depart from history. This resolution of the matter is not basically different from the position that dominated criticism until Percival Gardner-Smith proposed that John was written independently of the synoptics.\(^2\) In that case, every difference from the synoptics becomes a case to be decided on its own merits. Independence opens a range of possibilities, but no individual case proves historicity in general. Our procedure will be to give precedence to the question of Jesus tradition in John, without deciding in advance the question of John and other gospels. Yet the question of Jesus tradition in John will often hinge upon cases in which the Fourth Gospel differs from the synoptics.

Where John differs widely from the synoptics gospels, such differences have tended to speak against John’s historical reliability and value:

1. John’s narrative of Jesus’ ministry differs widely in sheer content. Simply put, most of what is found in John does not appear in the synoptic gospels, and vice versa. Only John’s Passion Narrative offers an extended parallel to the synoptics.

2. John differs in chronology and topography. Whereas in the synoptics Jesus’ ministry appears to span a year or less, and he is in Jerusalem only once, to attend the final Passover feast, in John it lasts between two and three years, as three different Passovers are mentioned. In John he is frequently in Jerusalem (or Judea), attending Tabernacles (7:2) and Hanukkah (10:22), as well as more than one Passover. Thus Jesus’ ministry is of significantly longer duration and seems centered in Jerusalem and Judea rather than in Galilee as in the synoptics.

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