THE ANOINTING OF JESUS IN THE SYNOPTIC TRADITION: AN ARGUMENT FOR AUTHENTICITY

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The story of the unnamed woman who anoints Jesus at a meal is one of the few Gospel stories in which Jesus appears in the company of a woman at a meal. A version of the story occurs in all four Gospels (Mk 14.3-9; Mt. 26.6-13; Lk. 7.36-50; Jn 12.1-8) and is corroborated by one extra-biblical source (Ignatius, Eph. 17.2). Several elements of the story remain constant in all four Gospel accounts: Jesus is anointed with expensive perfume by a woman in the context of a meal. Others present object to her action, and Jesus rises to defend her. On the grounds of multiple attestation alone this story deserves careful consideration as having a basis in an actual event in the life of Jesus. However, given the expectations for women’s proper behavior at meals current in the Hellenistic world, this story should also be carefully considered as having a basic historical core on the grounds of dissimilarity. Furthermore, this story also coheres with a tradition usually considered authentic, the tradition accusing Jesus of eating and drinking with ‘tax collectors and sinners’ (Mk 2.14-17 and par.; Lk. (Q) 7.34). I have argued elsewhere that this image brings to mind one who dines in the company of disreputable people, including women accused of promiscuity. Jesus was generally accepting of those considered outcasts, even the lower classes and slaves.

Tradition History of the Anointing Story

Overviews of scholarly theories of the transmission of the anointing story have been done previously.4 Up until the 1950's the scholarly consensus seemed to be that behind the Gospel accounts was one incident, and that variations arose in the course of oral transmission and the evangelists' redaction.5 For a period of time, however, the possibility of there being two separate incidents or stories behind the Gospel accounts was re-considered, one event in Bethany and a second in Galilee.6 Further discussions, however, reaffirm that there lies one single incident or story behind the four accounts.7 Scholars have been equally divided on the development of the Gospel tradition, as well as which account of the anointing should be given priority. Most assume the priority of the Markan account,8 but many consider the Lukan version to be the more primitive.9 Even the priority of


6. So Benoit, Taylor, McNeile, Beare, R. Brown, Vawter, Schackenburg, Lindars. Affirmed by Legault, 'Application of the Form-Critique Method'. Holst notes that this was also the view of Origin, Tatian and Chrysostom ('One Anointing of Jesus', p. 435 n. 2). In the 1980's Thomas L. Brodie, 'Luke 7, 36-50 as an Internalization of 2 Kings 4, 1-37: A Study of Luke's Use of Rhetorical Imitation', Bib 64 (1983), pp. 457-85, suggested that Lk. 7 was indeed independent of the other anointing accounts, but was a fictional account constructed from two stories about women in the LXX.


9. So Goodenough, Drexler, Holst (see Holst, 'One Anointing of Jesus', pp. 436-37), as well as Derrett, 'Anointing at Bethany'.

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