
CONCLUSION

Huckster or Historical Witness?

The Johannine Dilemma

When Jesus claimed to be God, he reached forward in time and presented mankind, ancient and modern, with a dilemma: Either he is who he claimed to be, or he is a bad man. This insight is the foundation of C. S. Lewis's famous trilemma. Was Jesus God, was he bad in the sense of being insane, or was he bad in the sense of being a wicked deceiver?¹ Lewis, with characteristic panache, dismisses the attempt to find some fourth option by declaring Jesus merely a good man and a great teacher:

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.²

What is true of Jesus is true also of his Beloved Disciple. Either he is an honest, meticulous, historical witness or he is a hoaxer of almost diabolical realism, emerging from nowhere without literary predecessors or successors.³ Modern

¹ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: Collins, 1952), pp. 54–56.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 55–56.

³ C. S. Lewis, "Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism" in *Christian Reflections*, edited by Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1967), p. 154.

critical scholarship, always pained by such uncompromising choices, tries to do with John what it tries to do with his Master—to tame him. Just as scholars attempt to repackage Jesus as merely a great man and teacher, they rebrand John as a semi-fictional theological mystic whom we must judge by some vaguely poetical but not rigorously historical standard. And unfortunately, too many evangelical scholars are willing to follow their mainstream colleagues in the second of these projects.

The attempt to evade the Johannine dilemma is assisted by that curious terminological fog that descends over so much scholarly writing. Rather than coming out and saying openly that John invents, scholars say that he “tweaks,” “paraphrases,” or “adapts.” It is possible to read page after page on a scene in John’s Gospel without getting any clear idea of whether the scholar thinks it really happened that way or not. One does, however, gather that the historicity of the scene is in question to some extent or other. This is unacceptable. Anyone who cares about the truth has a right to consider a clear thesis, clearly stated, and the arguments for and against it. That is what I have done in this book. Making careful distinctions from the beginning, I have spelled out various claims that John changed facts, asked what the alleged arguments are for them, and responded. Stripped of obfuscation and equivocation, the thesis that John sometimes deliberately altered facts has proven indefensible. At the same time, I have presented a wealth of evidence that John reports honestly and accurately, pressing the question, “Why should we think that John ever deliberately changed facts, even a day or a time, or put his own elaborations into Jesus’ mouth?”

For many mainstream scholars, the claim that John invents fairly widely is a dogma. It is unlikely that it will be abandoned in the liberal scholarly world any time soon, though not because rational argument supports it. The more interesting action therefore takes place in those self-consciously moderate sociological spaces where one gets the impression that scholars regard John as a curiosity—more historical than used to be thought yet still somewhat prone to invent. On the evangelical side, there is an unfortunate tendency to give some fodder to this idea through references to John as...different. The pastor, seminary student, or layman reading or hearing scholars deemed to be conservative may simply assume that such comments *never* refer to factual alteration or invention. Sometimes they don’t. Sometimes, indeed, they have no clear referent at all. But as I have made clear throughout, surprisingly often they do mean that John changed specific, identifiable facts and created specific, identifiable sayings, dialogues, and

discourses by embellishment. We must then consider whether the evidence supports even occasional fictionalizing by John that leaves some vaguely defined “big picture” intact. Since, as I have argued, the evidence instead supports John’s robust factuality, we should be prepared to be considered “ultra-conservative” both for bringing out the unvarnished meaning of statements like, “John engages in loose paraphrase to adapt Jesus’ teachings for his own generation” or “John adapts the Synoptic traditions” and for rejecting them on objective, historical grounds. Considering how much important unique material John has to offer about Jesus, his historical veracity should be good news to Christians, and affirming it should be worth suffering a little name calling. It is thus, as I pointed out in Chapter I, that we reclaim a great treasure that we would otherwise lose.

Those prepared to defend this forward position can strengthen their hearts by reflecting on just *how far afield* the critical consensus has wandered from an understanding of this author. John may be a mystic. He is undoubtedly a profound theological thinker. But those who tell us that these qualities are at odds with his being a fully literal historical reporter do not understand him in the least. For in John, these qualities are indissolubly bound up with joyous, painful empiricism of a sort that modern scholarship derides as naïve. If you do not like literal historical reportage, you do not like John. If you are unable to recognize literal reportage when you see it, concluding instead that it is symbolic, factually adapted, or metaphorical, then you do not understand John. You may like very much some creature of your own scholarly imagination, but not John, the beholder.

It is not as though he does not tell us what he is trying to do. He tells us over and over again: “That which we have seen and heard, declare we unto you” (I John 1.3, KJV). “That which...we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled of the word of life” (I John 1.1, KJV). “He who has seen has borne witness, and his witness is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth...” (John 19.35). Leon Morris puts well the connection between history and theology as John sees it:

This is of the essence of the matter as the New Testament writers understood the faith. It was a bold, and for most of the ancient world a novel doctrine that God had willed to reveal Himself in history. In fact so bold a conception is this that sometimes men still shrink from its implications. It is difficult to resist the conclusion that some scholars have feared to trust God to history. The world of history is such an uncertain world...It is safer to rescue God from the whole world of history... .

[H]owever, God has...preferred to reveal Himself in the historical, and it is there that we must find Him. Unless we affirm that Jesus has come “in the flesh” we are not on God’s side. We align ourselves with the antichrist (I John 4:2f). . . . We cannot flee history into a safe world of ideas and still remain authentically Christian.⁴

It is in John that Jesus declares, “He who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14.9, cf. John 1.14). Does John believe this? Does he passionately accept that Jesus of Nazareth, a man born of woman who left literal footprints upon the literal soil of first-century Palestine, was God Incarnate? Assuredly he does. John believes that God dips his pen in history and writes the story of our redemption using literal events, not literary inventions.

But in that case, how can we think that John puts his own theological extrapolations into Jesus’ mouth, presenting them as though Jesus historically said them on real, recognizable occasions, while knowing that he didn’t? Would this not be a form of blasphemy, at odds with John’s entire incarnational theology? Why would we think for a moment that John changes the deeds of Jesus, placing them on different days and times, adding things Jesus never actually did, creating dialogues and discourses, “tweaking” the historical facts, to make a better story or a theological point, as though the real truth were not good enough? Why would we think that John, for theological reasons, changes the very day on which the Son of Man is lifted up and draws all men unto himself?

We should see the fact that scholars seriously postulate such things, to the point that they regard this view of the evangelist as a truism, as a prodigy of scholarly malpractice. Nor need it be deliberate malpractice. The discipline of Gospels scholarship, sadly enough, encourages such views and rewards them with praise as nuanced, brilliant, and profound. So much the worse for the discipline. So much the more does it need a reform. The special doubts cast upon John’s full historicity provide us with a cautionary tale about the effects of scholarly groupthink. Once it becomes common to treat John’s historical confirmations in an *ad hoc* fashion as mere “nuggets” and to strain to find a theological motive for John to invent or alter manifestly empirical details, such practices take on a life of their own. Unnecessary tentativeness even becomes a badge of a real (“critical”) historical Jesus scholar, so that those who say, “This really happened” rather than, “This Johannine tradition may go back to the historical Jesus” or “There may be an historical core to this narrative” are dismissed as outsiders with insufficient knowledge.

⁴Morris, *Studies in the Fourth Gospel*, pp. 89–90.

But the shoe is on the other foot. The knowledge that scholars lack is the knowledge that they have lost—the multitude of tiny confirmations, mounting up grain by grain into a mountainous weight of evidence that in reading this Gospel we are seeing through the eye of the beholder.