

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29123-1 - Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel

C. H. Dodd

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

'Historical tradition in the Fourth Gospel.' But is there such a thing as an historical tradition in the gospels at all? The revolt against 'historicism' which declared itself in Germany during the second decade of this century was comparatively slow in making its full impact upon theological thought in this country; but in recent years its influence has been wide and deep. The climate of our studies is transformed. The 'quest of the historical Jesus', which stimulated the critical study of the New Testament in the nineteenth century, is by some of the most influential theologians of our time no longer believed to be a profitable, or indeed a feasible, enterprise. A study of the theological symbolism and typology embodied in the gospels will (it is urged) bring us further in understanding them than any attempt to establish a residuum of factual record. In any case they were written (in the current cliché) 'from faith to faith'. To seek in them sources of historical information is to misunderstand their character and the intention of their authors.

It is of course possible, without proceeding to the extreme position here adumbrated, to believe (as I do myself) that the revolt against 'historicism' was a salutary reaction, justified by the increasing sterility of 'liberal' criticism in its latest phase, and to welcome the awakened interest in the witness of the gospels to Christian faith and worship as expressed in the liturgy and theology of the early Church. But the general effect of the movement certainly has been to discourage any serious attempt to learn from the gospels an answer to questions of historical fact.

Yet even if the theologian disinterest himself in the quest for 'mere' facts, the historian, who must take account of the Christian movement in the Roman Empire, will still wish to discover whether the meagre information about its origins offered by Tacitus and the Talmud can be supplemented from Christian sources. If we tell him that the gospels, because they are religious, not historical, documents, are not available for his purpose, he may feel obliged to take our word for it. But if we go into detail, and explain that these documents contain an element of myth or legend, typology or symbolism, that most of their contents were transmitted through the dubious channels of popular tradition, and that the whole has been moulded by the masterful influence of a body of strongly

INTRODUCTION

held beliefs (which we may regard as divinely inspired truth, but he can only treat as a particular 'ideology'), he might be surprised that we should consider such characteristics as these—even stating them in the most extreme terms—sufficient grounds for excluding the gospels from serious consideration as sources for history. For he is familiar with documents of equally unpromising character, which nevertheless can be made, by suitable critical treatment, to yield results of solid historical value. The Homeric poems were once regarded (much as some moderns would have us regard the biblical narratives) as a corpus of sacred allegory, to be interpreted by experts in such matters. In my schooldays their main contents were confidently classed as myth. Nowadays they are accepted as valuable sources, when critically treated, for the history of the dark age lying between the fall of Knossos and the Dorian invasions. That is already an old story. More recently, and indeed at this very time, historians are having a surprising measure of success in distilling trustworthy historical information from the popular traditions of various societies, full as they are of legend and myth. It is largely a matter of employing suitable methods of criticism for the study of material of this kind. In view of contemporary achievements in this field, the historian might be pardoned for thinking that we throw up the sponge too readily, and for overhearing, when we sing the praises of the new approach to the gospels, a half-smothered sigh of relief at escaping from a peculiarly difficult and embarrassing problem.

That the historical problem in the gospels is one of peculiar difficulty is certainly true. A survey of the long series of failures, or dubious successes, in the effort to solve it, as they lie embalmed in the mortuary chambers of Schweitzer's *Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung*, is not encouraging. Yet there are weighty theological reasons to be urged against a one-sidedly non-historical approach to the gospels. It was not for nothing that the early Church repudiated gnosticism, with all its speculative breadth and subtlety and its imaginative mythology. It may be true (though it is by no means so self-evident to me as it is to some of my fellow-workers in this field) that the evangelists had no biographical interest, but it is possible that even in writing 'from faith to faith' they may, perhaps unintentionally, have let out facts that may prove to have biographical interest for us. At any rate, whatever theologians may say, it is the plain duty of the historian to make use of every possible source of information in the effort to learn the facts about an historical episode which on any showing was a significant and influential one.

INTRODUCTION

Such is my apologia for returning to so well worn a theme as the existence and extent of historical elements in the Fourth Gospel. In spite of all that has already been said and written in the course of a prolonged debate, it may be that an approach from a somewhat different angle will usefully carry the discussion a step forward.

The changed theological climate to which reference has been made has proved of positive advantage to Johannine studies, and that in several ways.

(i) In the first place, these studies have benefited from the mere fact that the problem of 'historicity' receded for a time into the background. The debate over 'the historicity of the Fourth Gospel' had pretty well reached a position of deadlock by the opening decade of the twentieth century. All the important arguments had been canvassed; only minor points could be added. The debate became repetitive. Each side remained convinced of its own position without being able to carry conviction to its opponents. Not only so; a disproportionate preoccupation with a perpetually inconclusive discussion upon this single aspect of the Johannine problem prejudiced the consideration of other aspects of it. It gave a bias to criticism. The discussion of the (perhaps unanswerable) question of authorship acquired an exaggerated importance from the belief, shared in the main by both sides, that upon its settlement depended the assessment, positive or negative, of the value of the gospel as an historical source. Again, the spate of partition-hypotheses and schemes of source-analysis which appeared in the early years of this century can be seen in retrospect to have been largely inspired by the wish to recover some kind of *Grundschrift* to which the critic might feel justified in assigning the historical credibility which he could no longer attribute to the work as a whole. Most serious of all, the dominant historicism hindered an adequate appreciation of the Fourth Gospel as it lies before us. It led some to undervalue it, and others to esteem it on precarious grounds.¹ In the new

¹ It would not, I think, be unfair to say (as a generalization requiring various qualifications) that the conservative or traditionalist school tended to value the Fourth Gospel as the most authoritative record of the teaching of Jesus, being the work of his most intimate disciple, while the liberal school, having decided against the 'historicity' of the work, could make little of the teaching in it beyond a hotch-potch of borrowings from popular Hellenism with a 'deutero-Pauline' setting. As for the narrative, the factual accuracy of the miracle stories was vital to the one school, while the other, for which miracles as such were a scandal, rejoiced to be free to get rid of them. In the current semi-popular presentations, at least, of the liberal position the Fourth Gospel appeared as a second-rate work, while the high conservative estimate of it stood or fell by the criterion of 'historicity'.

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[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

climate of our time, in which the religious and theological character of the gospels commands attention, it is easier to see this gospel for what it really is in its full scope and intention.

Some such reassessment of the character of the work, of the author's turn of mind, the direction of his thinking, and his attitude to his subject matter, was in fact called for as a preliminary to any further advance in the discussion of the historical question. Thanks to work that has been done on these lines we are in a position to open up that question afresh. For the more clearly the theological position of the Fourth Gospel is examined, the more clearly is it seen to involve a reference to history. This has been implicit in much of the recent movement of thought, at least in this country. A landmark in that movement is the great, though incomplete, commentary by Hoskyns and Davey. It is avowedly, and consistently, a 'theological' commentary. Its author and its editor deprecate the preoccupation of critics with the problem of 'historicity'; they regard with suspicion any attempt to distinguish between the facts themselves and their interpretation; and they discourage any expectation of finding an answer to the question whether the Fourth Evangelist had command of trustworthy information upon the facts beyond that which is accessible to us in the Synoptic Gospels. Yet they recognize, and state with all possible emphasis, that the Johannine theology has its centre in the historical person and the historical action of Jesus Christ. 'The historical tension of the Fourth Gospel' (they say) is not to be lightly resolved by any theory which would lay the evangelist under 'the charge of inventing history, or of using it merely as symbolism'.¹ But if this is so, it appears to bring us back by a different approach to the problem of historicity.

(ii) Secondly, the comparison between the Fourth Gospel and the Synoptics has been placed in a fresh light. That there is a real difference between them is a fact which has been manifest to clear-sighted readers of the gospels ever since the time when Clement wrote that 'John, observing that the bodily facts had been made clear in the [earlier] gospels . . . composed a spiritual gospel'.² But the difference was exaggerated by nineteenth-century criticism, as if the Synoptic Gospels were entirely

¹ *Op. cit.* Introduction, p. xxxiv. With much of what they say, and with the general trend of the argument, I find myself in cordial agreement, but I cannot see that it makes the historian's question, *wie es eigentlich geschehen ist*, either illegitimate or unimportant, or, in principle, unanswerable.

² Euseb. *H.E.* vi. 14. 7.

Cambridge University Press

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[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

'somatic' and John nothing but 'pneumatic'; as if, in other words, the Synoptics gave us nothing but plain, brute facts of history and John nothing but abstract theology in symbolic guise. The newer school of criticism recognizes the presence of 'History and Interpretation in the Gospels' (to quote the title of R. H. Lightfoot's influential book)—in the Synoptics as well as in John—and it believes that the factor of interpretation is not one which can conveniently be taken out and set aside as *Gemeindeftheologie*, leaving the residue pure matter of fact, but is organic to the whole structure of the gospels. Where the Fourth Gospel differs from the others is that its interpretation is not only in different thought-forms, but is also deliberate, coherent, and in the full sense theological, as theirs is not. And if there is more of the 'spiritual' element of interpretation in the Synoptics, it may be that there is more of the 'bodily' element of fact in John, than earlier criticism allowed. In any case, each version demands consideration on its merits, allowance being always made for the different intentions of the evangelists and the different 'setting in life' to which their renderings of the story belong.

(iii) Thirdly, the new attitude to our documents has been accompanied by the development of the method of *Formgeschichte*, or form-criticism,¹ and this has altered the conditions of our investigation in various ways, but most particularly in that it has directed our attention to the pre-literary, or at least non-literary, tradition, which lies behind our written gospels and their hypothetical documentary sources. The old 'oral hypothesis' which used to be offered as the solution of the Synoptic problem was already antiquated by the beginning of this century. The improved methods of documentary criticism developed during the late nineteenth century commended themselves by their greater precision, and the possibility they offered of presenting a case through actual statistics of agreements and differences. They seemed to open up a more 'objective'

¹ Most of those who have written on biblical *Formgeschichte* in this country refer to German and Scandinavian authorities. But it should not be forgotten that we have in English *Formgeschichte* on the grand scale in the three massive volumes of H. M. and N. K. Chadwick on *The Growth of Literature* (Cambridge). Mrs Chadwick's short book, *The Beginnings of Russian History*, is a brilliant example of the application of the method to the elucidation of a singularly dark period. The volume *Studies in Early British History*, by the Chadwicks and others, applies the same method to the study of early Welsh and Irish traditions, with, it appears, a considerable measure of success. Even the Arthurian legends find a place. Other writers seem to be doing much the same thing for the history of the Maori of New Zealand, which rests entirely upon oral tradition, and there is evidently a large body of similar work being done on other dark ages.

INTRODUCTION

way of accounting for the phenomena. And in fact I still believe that the 'two-document hypothesis' did, within its limits, offer a solution which is basically capable of standing against attack, although various adjustments may be called for. This solution, however, covered only those parts of the Synoptic Gospels which were sufficiently closely parallel to allow of the agreements and differences being precisely measured. When the method of search for documentary sources extended itself to those parts of Matthew and Luke which had no parallels, or only remote ones, it lost its claim to precision and objectivity. Still less fruitful (in my judgement) has it proved in attacking the Johannine problem, because here the area over which parallelism can be traced on anything like the Synoptic scale is extremely narrow; consequently any analysis into documentary sources must allow greater play to conjecture, or even speculation, and become less convincing as it becomes more detailed.

But while documentary criticism was working itself to a standstill, the application of form-criticism opened up new lines of approach. It began by studying the various *literary* forms to which the several writings of the New Testament belong,¹ but soon developed a special interest in the long neglected oral tradition lying behind the gospels. It did so under the influence of writers who had applied this method to various kinds of folk-tradition, such as the Germanic sagas and the stories of the Pentateuch. It was observed that much of the material of the Synoptic Gospels could be analysed into units showing features which these writers had discovered to be characteristic of popular oral tradition. 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. A tradition with several centuries of oral transmission behind its first appearance in written form cannot be expected to exhibit canons or 'laws' directly applicable to one with a pre-literary history of less than a normal human lifetime. It is necessary to bear this in mind, and, while making use of the valuable experience of form-critics in other fields, to refrain from insisting that the New Testament material must rigorously conform to the same canons. But when all allowance is made for an enthusiasm which has sometimes claimed too much for the method, it is certainly true that the form-critics have done great service in leading us to recognize afresh the importance of oral tradition in the New Testament period.

¹ E.g. P. Wendland, *Die neutestamentlichen Literaturformen* (1912).

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

Attention was given to this tradition in the first place in the hope of penetrating into the obscure period between the death of Jesus Christ and the writing of the earliest extant gospel. But it is important to realize that we are not dealing with a primitive period of oral tradition superseded at a given date by a second period of literary authorship, but that oral tradition continued to be an important factor right through the New Testament period and beyond. Papias, in the first half of the second century, still preferred oral tradition, where it was available, and Irenaeus, towards the close of that century, could cite with great respect that which he had 'heard from a certain presbyter who had heard it from those who had seen the apostles'.¹ We have to think of the life of the Church as being nourished, and its faith and fellowship maintained, by a living tradition. This tradition served (among other purposes) to guard and hand on what was remembered or believed concerning that which Jesus had done, said and suffered—in other words, the raw material of gospel composition; and it was still very much alive at the time when the Fourth Gospel was written and in the region where (in all probability) it was written. This we know from contemporary evidence.²

The recognition of the continuity of oral tradition has been accompanied by the recognition that, just because it was so vitally related to the whole life of an active community, it has been shaped and coloured by the conditions, interests and needs of various groups within the community, at different times. Among its other contents, statements about the life and teaching of Jesus Christ bear the stamp of the varying *Sitz im Leben*, or 'setting in life', within which the tradition was formed and had currency. The primary task of the historical criticism of the gospels is the recovery of this tradition in its unity and variety, as a function of the continuing life of the Church, unbroken from its earliest days. From the nature and content of the tradition thus recovered and described we may in turn hope to work back to the events themselves which started it on its course. For unquestionably the tradition, in all its forms, *intends* to refer to an historical episode, closely dated *sub Pontio Pilato*, apart from which (this is the uniform implication) there would have been no church to shape or hand

¹ *Sancti Irenaei adversus Haereses*, ed. W. W. Harvey, iv. xlii. 2. Cf. iv. xlvi et *passim*.

² And note that this Asian tradition is associated with the names, not only of two persons of the name of John, both of whom have been put forward as candidates for the post of author of the Fourth Gospel, but also of Andrew, Philip and Thomas, who figure importantly in it, though they play little or no part in the Synoptic Gospels (see below, pp. 304–5, 308–10).

INTRODUCTION

down such a tradition.¹ It is in this sense an historical tradition, whatever degree of absolute historical or factual value may attach to various parts of it.

In the ensuing investigation we are not asking, in the first place, whether this or that statement in the Fourth Gospel is likely to be historically correct, or more or less correct than such another statement in Mark or Luke; nor, in the first place, whether the Johannine picture as a whole is more or less probable than that of the Synoptics. No doubt we must, in the long run, take responsibility for our judgements of historical probability, a responsibility which no serious historian can avoid, with all its risks of 'subjectivity'; but there is much useful investigation of a more 'objective' kind that can be done before we come to that. The first question we are asking is this: Can we in any measure recover and describe a strain of tradition lying behind the Fourth Gospel, distinctive of it, and independent of other strains of tradition known to us? This will inevitably raise afresh the much debated question of the relation of the Fourth Gospel to the Synoptics.

For some time it has been almost a dogma of criticism that John depends on the Synoptics, much as Matthew is held to depend on Mark, Matthew and Luke on the hypothetical 'Q'; that the author employed these works as sources, or, if not all three, then two of them, or at least Mark. Recently there has been a certain trend away from this position.² Yet the most outstanding recent English commentary, that of C. K. Barrett, still maintains the older view. The matter is perhaps ripe for a more thorough reconsideration. The presuppositions of the discussion have been modified by recent developments in the method and outlook of criticism more, perhaps, than is commonly allowed for. The early Church was not such a bookish community as it has been represented. It did its business in the world primarily through the medium of the living voice, in worship, teaching and missionary preaching, and out of these three forms of activity—liturgy, *didache*, *kerygma*—a tradition was built up, and this tradition lies behind all literary production of the early period, including our written gospels. The presumption, therefore, which lay behind much of the earlier criticism—that similarity of form and content between two documents

¹ For some reasons for regarding the tradition behind the gospels (with all the theological or liturgical elements that they contain) as essentially an historical tradition, see my book, *History and the Gospel* (Nisbet, 1938).

² The turn of the tide might be marked, for this country, by the publication of P. Gardner-Smith's *St John and the Synoptic Gospels* (1938), a book which crystallized the doubts of many, and has exerted an influence out of proportion to its size.

INTRODUCTION

points to the dependence of the later of these documents on the earlier—no longer holds good, since there is an alternative explanation of many such similarities, and one which corresponds to the conditions under which gospel writing began, so far as we can learn them: namely, the influence of a common tradition. To establish literary dependence something more is needed—some striking similarity in the use of words (especially if the words are somewhat unusual) extending over more than a phrase or two, or an unexpected and unexplained identity of sequence, or the like. It is evidence of this kind that has convinced most critics that the Synoptic evangelists made use of written sources in certain parts of their works, and it is the lack of such evidence in other parts, in spite of a general parallelism, that has led many rightly to limit the use of such sources more narrowly than was at one time customary. In comparing, therefore, a given passage in the Fourth Gospel with a parallel passage in the other gospels, we have to inquire whether there are coincidences of language or content going beyond what might be reasonably expected in works having behind them the general tradition of the early Church, and next whether any marked differences might be accounted for (supposing he were copying the Synoptics) by known mannerisms of the evangelist, or his known doctrinal tendencies. If not, then there is a *prima facie* case for treating the passage as independent of the Synoptics, and we have to ask whether it has characteristics, in form or substance, or possible indications of a *Sitz im Leben*, which would associate it with traditional material so far as this is known to us.

This approach to the critical problem throws into the background two questions which have bulked largely in discussions of it in the past: the questions of Johannine and Synoptic chronology, and of the authorship of the Fourth Gospel. Neither is irrelevant, yet neither now appears to have the overwhelming importance attached to it by many critics, on both sides of the controversy. It will be well to indicate briefly at the outset the light in which I should view these questions.

(i) First, the question of the chronology of the ministry of Jesus Christ. In appearance, at least, John offers a narrative neatly arranged according to a calendar of Jewish festivals, and covering, it is thought, about three years. Mark, on the other hand, has been supposed to bring the whole ministry within a period of less than a year. The problem thus posed has caused the shedding of much ink and the display of endless ingenuity. In the main, the 'conservative' critics tended to take the Johannine

Cambridge University Press

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C. H. Dodd

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

framework as normative, and to fit the Synoptic material into it, while 'liberal' critics tended to use Mark to discredit John. But the arrangement of the narrative in the Fourth Gospel is now widely regarded as dictated by the order of thought much more than by the order of events.¹ Johannine chronology, in fact, in the sense in which it has been the critic's bugbear, melts in our hands. This does not, however, mean that the Marcan chronology is left in possession of the field. Recent criticism has shown that it would be possible to account for Mark's order on grounds other than chronological, for example by a system of typology, or by a liturgical sequence. None of these theories can be said to have yet won general assent, but at least they have shown that it is precarious to regard the Marcan order as a strictly chronological sequence of events, offering a fixed standard by which other arrangements of the narrative may be tested. But apart from any particular theory of the determining motive of Mark's arrangement of his material, the form-critics have shown that relatively complete units of narrative, without any necessary connection before or after, are the part of the material which can, on grounds of form, with greatest confidence be traced to an earlier oral tradition, while it is in the arrangement and connection of these units that we are to recognize the individual work of the evangelist as editor.² If this is true of Mark, then we may reasonably expect (though the expectation must of course be tested by examination of the material) that any pre-canonical tradition to be found in John must also be sought primarily in the units of narrative and discourse rather than in the chronological arrangement. Form-criticism has in fact reduced to manageable proportions, if it has not removed, one of the most intractable elements in the problem as it was formerly handled.

(ii) Secondly, the question of authorship. The long debate has so far been inconclusive, and is perhaps likely to remain so, unless some happy accident should bring us altogether fresh evidence. A brief summary of the position may be useful.

The external evidence for the apostle John son of Zebedee as author of

¹ This subject is treated at length in my book *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (1953), to which I shall have frequent occasion to refer. That the 'festival' framework may reflect in one way or another liturgical usage is a theory, advocated in various quarters, for which there is much to be said.

² I believe that this editorial work of Mark was less arbitrary and uncontrolled than some critics suppose, and that he was guided in part by some sort of outline which was also traditional (see my book *New Testament Studies*, Manchester: University Press, 1953; also below, pp. 233-4).