

## CHAPTER I

*The semeiotics of history: C. H. Dodd on the  
origins and character of the Fourth Gospel*

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In 1963, Cambridge University Press released C. H. Dodd's *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (*HTFG* – cited in this chapter as '1963: page number'), still today the definitive study of the origins and character of the Johannine Jesus tradition. Appearing at a time when Jesus scholars viewed John's account as a Christological treatise whose imaginative claims lay outside the scope of their discipline, Dodd's conclusions were largely left to the interests of Johannine specialists. Fifty years later, however, the core concerns of Dodd's book have migrated from the margins toward the mainstream, as evident from the surging wave of interest in the potential value of the Fourth Gospel as a source for the historical Jesus. The present collection of essays will engage Dodd as a dialogue partner to reflect on the current state of research into the origins and character of the Gospel of John and its distinctive witness to the Jesus of history, with particular attention to methodological and conceptual shifts over the past half century and to avenues of inquiry that will likely characterize the next several decades of research. This introductory chapter will contextualize the discussion to follow by reviewing key themes in Dodd's argument, particularly those points where his research anticipated and/or illuminates current debate.

Still today, *HTFG* is stunning for the breadth and depth of its analysis, and both this volume and its 1953 precursor, Dodd's *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (*IFG* – cited in this chapter as '1953: page number'), would arguably rank among the dozen most significant studies of the Johannine literature produced in the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> Viewed from the hindsight of a half century of subsequent research, however, two obvious

<sup>1</sup> Much of the content of *HTFG* was first elaborated in Dodd's 'Sarum Lectures' at Oxford in 1954–5, two years after the release of *IFG*, and Dodd specifically describes *HTFG* as 'an expansion of the Appendix to that book' (1963: vii). These two volumes, then, should be read side by side, with *IFG* outlining the broader research programme within which *HTFG*'s narrower interests may be located.

lacunae in Dodd's treatment are particularly striking. First, in contrast to the tastes of more recent biblical scholarship, both *IFG* and *HTFG* lack a methodological introduction – one might call Dodd an 'applied theorist' in the sense that he rations out his research paradigm while explaining certain specific conclusions, waving his finger toward a global theory but never fixing the reader's gaze directly upon it. The present chapter will fill this void by offering detailed outlines of Dodd's model for understanding the character and development of the Johannine tradition and of his method for reconstructing that tradition from the Fourth Gospel.

Secondly, and more significantly, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* is a book that does not quite live up to its title – or, perhaps better, that achieves its ultimate objective only in a very qualified sense. At first glance, one has the impression that Dodd's study will be primarily concerned with the relationship between the Gospel of John and the Jesus of history, and that he will seek to trace elements of the Johannine tradition to their points of origin in the actual past – either the actual past of Jesus' life, or the actual past of the Johannine Christians who told stories about him. In point of fact, however, Dodd very rarely arrives at any definite conclusion regarding the authenticity of specific elements of John's presentation, and nowhere offers a summary overview of the Fourth Gospel's distinctive contribution to the Jesus database. This striking ambivalence has substantially reduced the impact of Dodd's work on subsequent Jesus research and, ironically, has tended to confirm the general consensus that the Fourth Gospel is not useful as a source for Jesus.

As will be seen, the two gaps noted above are closely related, in as much as Dodd's inability to draw firm historical conclusions is a function of his model of, and method for analysing, the Johannine tradition. While Dodd's personal assessment of the Fourth Gospel's historicity is clearly positive, and while he categorically rejects any notion that the Synoptics should be privileged over the Fourth Gospel as sources for Jesus, his research paradigm inherently magnifies the distance between Jesus, the tradents of the Jesus tradition, and the Fourth Evangelist to such an extent that it is ultimately impossible to say what the Gospel of John might tell us about the Jesus of history. In this respect, while *HTFG* anticipated the recent surge of interest in the Fourth Gospel's potential historical value, Dodd's work remains an effective case study in the limits of historical criticism and a convenient illustration of the obstacles that future research on John and Jesus must overcome.

The discussion in this chapter will proceed in three steps, reflecting both the interests of the present volume and the innate logic of Dodd's

argument in *IFG* and *HTFG*. First, I will offer a detailed reconstruction of *the origins and evolution of the Johannine Jesus tradition*, as Dodd conceives it. As will be seen, Dodd suggests that the Fourth Gospel emerged from a nebulous mass of memories that gradually evolved into fixed forms and sequences before being adapted by the Fourth Evangelist for integration into a running narrative of Jesus' career. Dodd's conceptions of the social locations of the Fourth Evangelist and his audience and of the narrative dynamics of the Fourth Gospel are important elements of this paradigm, in as much as the current text of the Fourth Gospel reflects John's systematic attempt to translate Christian collective memory into terms and themes that would be comprehensible to his implied reader. Secondly, I will outline Dodd's *research method*, the means by which he moves backward from the text of the Fourth Gospel to and through the Johannine tradition. While neither *IFG* nor *HTFG* includes a sustained methodological discussion, a close reading of both books exposes a persistent set of questions and criteria that guide Dodd's analysis of specific units and sequences in the Fourth Gospel. Thirdly and finally, I will briefly review Dodd's assessment of *the historical value of the Fourth Gospel's presentation*. As will be seen, Dodd's ambivalence on this point is a natural, and perhaps inevitable, accident of inherent tensions in his research model. This chapter will close with a brief overview of the structure and scope of the remainder of the present volume.

### Jesus to John: Dodd's model of oral tradition

*HTFG* (1963) is grounded in the premise that the canonical Gospels are built on 'a living tradition' which was both vital to, and shaped by, 'the conditions, interests and needs of various groups within the [Christian] community at different times' (1963: 7). While Dodd never explicitly outlines the history of this tradition or its precise characteristics, his overall discussion suggests that the oral Jesus material underwent two major stages of development before its incorporation into the written Gospels that are available today. In Stage 1, the Johannine tradition existed as a body of framed, fluid memories of Jesus – 'memories' in the sense that the traditional material originated in the personal recollections of Jesus' associates; 'fluid' in the sense that these memories were unfixed and thus subject to normal forces of mnemonic decay, with porous boundaries between discrete recollections and regular exchange of details and settings; 'framed' in the sense that even the earliest Christian preaching was heavily coloured by terms and themes drawn from the Jewish Scriptures. In Stage 2 of the tradition, this amorphous mass of memory was gradually

Table 1.1

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**The evolution of the Johannine Jesus tradition**

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**Stage 1:** A mass of plastic and porous memories of Jesus emerging from the recollections of a group of Judean disciples. These Jewish Christians framed Jesus' words and deeds in terms drawn from the Old Testament. Stage 1 traditional materials did not bear fixed forms, and details from discrete episodes often migrated from one story to another in memory and performance.

**Stage 2:** In service of preaching, teaching, and evangelism, Stage 1 traditional materials were gradually hammered into fixed forms and rudimentary sequences. Stage 2 units were characterized by distinct structural outlines that included clear opening and closing conventions. Allegorizing tendencies were minimal.

**Stage 3:** The Fourth Evangelist, seeking to appeal to a late-first century Hellenistic audience, organized traditional units into a narrative Gospel with distinctly evangelistic purposes. In the process, John imposed Hellenistic religious ideals on the more primitive material and adjusted individual oral units to reflect his own literary style and theological concerns, thus producing the Fourth Gospel's distinctive 'signs' and discourses.

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hammered into fixed forms and sequences in service of the Church's need for a relatively stable body of gospel material to inform its preaching and teaching. Finally, John's adaptation of available oral tradition in service of his own literary and theological interests may be viewed as a third and final stage in the traditioning process.<sup>2</sup> A brief review of each of these three stages will be helpful here (see also Table 1.1), in as much as each has left a significant imprint on the shape and substance of the Fourth Gospel.

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. [1963: 7]

*Stage 1: framed, fluid memory*

In Dodd's view, the Johannine tradition originated in the personal memories of associates of the historical Jesus. Of course, the same could be said of the traditions that underlie Matthew, Mark, and Luke, a fact which

<sup>2</sup> Dodd acknowledges the possibility that some of this traditional material may have come to John in the form of written notes but essentially treats these as *aides-mémoire* for oral recall. In Dodd's model, the production of such documents does not represent a distinctive stage in the evolution of the Johannine tradition (1963: 424).

raises the obvious question of why the Johannine and Synoptic presentations are so dramatically different, not only in tone but also in raw content. Dodd resolves this dilemma by positing that the Johannine tradition emerged from Judean disciples who may have been associated with ‘priestly circles’ in Jerusalem (1963: 244–5, 426). Necessarily, then, John’s base tradition would reflect ‘a geographically southern standpoint’ and ‘a psychologically metropolitan outlook’ quite in contrast to that of Mark’s tradition, which was apparently grounded in the witness of the Twelve, who were, of course, rural Galileans (quotations from 1963: 263; cf. 245–6). Particularly significant among this group of Judean witnesses was the mysterious figure whom John calls ‘the disciple Jesus loved’, an unknown individual whose unique relationship with Christ made him ‘the principal guarantor’ of the Johannine tradition (1963: 128; cf. 128 n. 2, 133–4, 134–5 n. 1, 302, 338, 395, 401 n. 2, 428 n. 2, 431, 452). Of course, this Beloved Disciple and his Judean associates communicated their memories of Jesus in Aramaic (1963: 64, 306–9, 341 n. 1, 343, 346, 348, 350 n. 1, 383, 424–5) and were acutely aware of the topography and the religious and political climates of pre-70 CE Roman Palestine (1963: 150–1, 180, 244–5, 263, 309–10). The preaching of these individuals was, predictably, directed toward their Jewish co-religionists in the Palestinian synagogue, so that their memories of Jesus were shaped in dialogue with rabbinic reasoning and were not substantially engaged with the concerns of the Pauline Gentile mission (1963: 412–13, 425–6).

The basic tradition, therefore, on which the evangelist is working was shaped (it appears) in a Jewish–Christian environment still in touch with the synagogue, in Palestine, at a relatively early date, at any rate before the rebellion of A.D. 66. [1963: 426]

As these Judean disciples, and their own disciples and converts, began to publish their recollections orally, a ‘tradition’ concerning Jesus’ activities and teachings gradually emerged. Consistent with the conclusions of form criticism, Dodd characterized this emergent tradition as plastic and porous. Stage 1 memories of Jesus were essentially episodic, a mass of recollections of striking events that were not conceived or communicated as elements of an overarching story of Christ’s career and thus were not tied to specific contexts (1963: 172–3). Because the boundaries of these individual units were not fixed, details could easily wander from one event to another, and memorable sayings might attach themselves to a variety of situations (1963: 55–6, 104 n. 1, 345 n. 1). In more extreme instances, memory might attribute a saying of John the Baptist to Jesus or vice versa

(1963: 331), and the content of a pericope might be spontaneously recast into different genres during live performances of the material (see e.g. 1963: 363–4). Yet even at Stage 1, certain organizing principles had begun to influence the shape of oral units. Dodd frequently insists that citations of, or allusions to, *testimonia* from the Jewish Scriptures were an essential characteristic of the primitive tradition, serving as ‘the firm scaffolding’ on which many oral pericopae were built (1963: 31, cf. 49). The appropriation of language and motifs from these sacred texts tied Jesus’ activities to the great tradition of Judaism, thus providing the essential theological rationale for Christian claims about the significance of Christ’s life and death.

The interest which certain facts acquired from their association with specific prophecies fixed these facts in the corporate memory of the Church, and determined their place in the tradition. [1963: 49]

#### *Stage 2: fixed forms and sequences*

Over time, as the early Christians repeated stories about, and sayings of, Jesus in typical life settings – preaching, the instruction of catechumens, evangelism, and so forth – the fluid memories of Stage 1 began to take a more definite shape. Dodd does not define this traditioning process precisely, but the metaphors he uses to describe it – ‘crystallization’ and ‘digestion’ – suggest an organic process through which individual oral units became more fixed and more reflective of the growing institutional needs of the Church (1963: 249–50, 292). The resultant Stage 2 tradition included both distinct episodes and stock transitional scenes, the latter of which could be utilized in live performance to string specific sayings and stories together into rudimentary sequences, some of which became relatively fixed. It will be helpful here briefly to survey *HTFG*’s characterization of the fixed forms and sequences at Stage 2 of the Jesus tradition, in as much as Dodd views these as the primary database for the composition of the Gospels.

In Dodd’s conception, the gradual digestion of Stage 1 oral materials led to certain structural changes in traditional memories of Jesus. Most notably, Stage 2 saw the emergence of fixed pericopae characterized by narrative wholeness and evidencing distinctive generic features appropriate to the contexts in which the material was typically recited. Stage 2 units evidenced ‘wholeness’ in the sense that they did not assume the audience’s knowledge of any preceding or subsequent events, and thus included clear opening and closing statements that provided settings and resolutions for

the action (see e.g. 1963: 152–4, 160–73, 311). Stage 2 traditional units also demonstrated a dramatic ‘unity of time and place’ in the sense that they did not shift the temporal or geographical focalization of the story toward the location of the reader, a move that Dodd associates with the allegorizing tendencies typical of the evangelists’ literary interests (1963: 160; see e.g. 160–1). Finally, Stage 2 saw the evolution of the oral genres that have been widely documented by form critics. While John clearly played more loosely with these traditional outlines than, say, Mark or Luke, Dodd nevertheless regularly finds traces of standard form-critical patterns beneath the Fourth Gospel’s stylized presentation and cites these as proof that John is adapting traditional material (see e.g. 1963: 162–4, 174–6, 181–3, 188–95, 315–16, 366–87).

As noted above, in Stage 2 of the tradition some self-contained, structured pericopae were combined into rudimentary narrative and dialogue sequences that became relatively fixed. The former (narrative sequences) connected several distinct episodes in a running string, while the latter (dialogues) gathered up multiple traditional sayings in the context of a specific exchange (1963: 322–7, 389–90).<sup>3</sup> The most significant and sustained traditional narrative sequences, as evident from parallels in all four canonical Gospels, were the miraculous feeding in Galilee (see 1963: 221–2) and the passion, the latter of which was clearly ‘framed in tradition as an independent whole’ (1963: 28; cf. 21–2). While this process did not produce a running story of Jesus’ life, Stage 2 did see preliminary attempts to fix the meaning of individual incidents and teachings through integration into larger narrative contexts.

### **Tradition to Gospel: John’s compositional strategies**

In Dodd’s model, Stage 3 in the evolution of the Johannine tradition is represented by the work of the Fourth Evangelist himself. Some seven decades after Jesus’ death, John gathered up independent oral units and rudimentary traditional sequences and shaped them into a narrative that reflected his own literary style and that served his own theological interests and rhetorical purposes. To understand the significance of this shift from living memory to physical document, it will be helpful to review Dodd’s conception of John’s social location, purposes for writing a gospel, and implied audience. These three issues are particularly relevant to the concerns of the present volume, in as much as Dodd’s methodology,

<sup>3</sup> Following this principle, Dodd would locate Q, whether a written document or a stable body of oral materials, at Stage 2 of the tradition (see 1963: 360–1).

historical conclusions, and exegetical observations are grounded in his understanding of the Fourth Gospel's provenance.

### *John's social location*

While Dodd clearly admires the erudition and theological genius of the Fourth Evangelist, his comments on this individual's specific identity are notoriously vague. At the same time, *IFG* and *HTFG* are clearly guided by a coherent set of working assumptions about several key aspects of the Fourth Evangelist's identity. Three such aspects will be briefly noted here, all of which are significant for Dodd's larger programme.

First, and most basically, the Fourth Evangelist lived in Ephesus and wrote his Gospel sometime 'towards A.D. 100', shortly after the publication of the Synoptics and Acts and about the same time as the composition of Revelation (1963: 263; cf. 115, 128, 258–9, 305, 424; 1953: 9). The Fourth Gospel, then, was produced in a major cosmopolitan centre with a diverse population, an ideological melting pot where the cross-pollination of religious and philosophical ideas was a cultural norm. Secondly, while the Fourth Evangelist is clearly interested in, and frequently draws upon, currents in rabbinic and speculative Jewish thought, his overall posture toward the Law of Moses and the Jewish customs that proceed from it 'is external and detached', reflecting the mindset of a person who 'feels himself to be outside the Jewish system' (1953: 82; cf. e.g. 88–93). Thirdly, and perhaps most significantly here, the Fourth Evangelist, as Dodd conceives him, is not in substantial dialogue with those trajectories of early Christianity that produced the Synoptic Gospels and the Pauline letters. Of course, John subscribes to the basic premises of the universal Christian *kerygma*, and obviously has chosen to articulate his views about Jesus through the vehicle of a narrative Gospel, a distinctly Christian literary form (1953: 6). At the same time, Dodd goes out of his way to stress that John's thinking did not develop in dialogue with other New Testament authors or the theological trajectories that they represent (see e.g. 1953: 4–6, 193–6, 196 n. 1). Overall, the Fourth Evangelist is engaged with Hellenistic culture, disenfranchised from Judaism, and essentially indifferent to the beliefs and practices of other Christians.

### *John's purpose and audience*

In Dodd's reading, the distinctive language, themes, and structure of the Fourth Gospel are a function of the Fourth Evangelist's rhetorical purposes and implied audience. Concisely, Dodd views the Gospel of John as an

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evangelistic document addressed to ‘a wide public’ that consists ‘primarily of devout and thoughtful persons’ of a Hellenistic mindset (quotations from 1953: 9; cf. 309, 371). John thus goes out of his way to make his Jesus story comprehensible to intelligent pagans and Diaspora Jews, avoiding anything that would be offensive or unintelligible to his ideal readers (see e.g. 1953: 313–14, 316–17). While John’s account would be meaningful to Christians, who would necessarily perceive theological truths in the story that the uninitiated could not grasp, the Fourth Gospel is an evangelistic tract, not a textbook for catechumens.

[T]he [fourth] gospel could be read intelligently by a person who started with no knowledge of Christianity beyond the minimum that a reasonably well-informed member of the public interested in religion might be supposed to have by the close of the first century . . . If he was then led to associate himself with the Church and to participate in its fellowship, its tradition and its sacraments, he would be able to re-read the book and find in it vastly more than had been obvious at first reading. [1953: 8–9]

Seeking to win a lost world, the Fourth Evangelist strings oral gospel materials into a connected narrative driven by themes that resonate with Hellenistic religious thought.<sup>4</sup> Prominent among these themes are:

- a material dualism that sharply differentiates the material world from the metaphysical realm of ideas/truth/spirit (1953: 61–5, 213–27)
- the notion that all things in the material world, including human beings, are expressions or imitations of this divine realm (1953: 170–8)

<sup>4</sup> Dodd reconstructs the ideal reader of the Fourth Gospel through exhaustive analysis of a wide range of ancient religious and philosophical texts, including primarily rabbinic documents, Philo’s writings, and the *Corpus Hermeticum*. Dodd also considers Gnostic and Mandaean texts as possible parallels to Johannine thought, but ultimately discounts these due to the late date of the available documents (see 1953: 98–128). Somewhat puzzling here is Dodd’s failure to engage with the work of Josephus, whose writings must have been, by Dodd’s own criteria, the closest available parallel to the Fourth Gospel in terms of date, authorial agenda, and implied audience. While Dodd occasionally refers to *Antiquities*, *Jewish War*, or *Life* to clarify or corroborate some specific element of the Fourth Gospel’s presentation (see 1963: 257, 280, 294 n. 1, 310 n. 1, 348), Josephus is never cited as a significant parallel to the Fourth Evangelist’s attempt to translate Jewish theological themes into Hellenistic idiom.

Obviously, the Dead Sea Scrolls were not available at the time *IFG* was written (see 1953: 242, 242 n. 3), but *HTFG* does occasionally interact with the then-available Qumran documents, most particularly in discussing the Fourth Gospel’s presentation of John the Baptist’s ministry and message (1963: 252–5, 263 n. 1, 281, 289, 298, 300 n. 1). Overall, Dodd views the occasional connections between the scrolls and Johannine thought as accidental parallels reflecting a common religious milieu, not as evidence of any specific contact between the Qumran sectarians and the Johannine tradition (1963: 15–16 n. 3; cf. 321, 359–60 n. 5).

- the belief that the residue of the divine image in humanity makes it possible for human beings to aspire to knowledge of the truth (1953: 28–9, 58–61)
- a corresponding belief that knowledge of this higher realm must somehow be mediated to material human beings, a process that is typically articulated in a mythical narrative framework of descent/ascent from the world above to the world below, or vice versa (1953: 43–4, 66–9; 72–3)
- a tendency to personify or anthropomorphize this process of mediation in terms of a specific agent, often using a ‘Logos’ framework that portrays the revealer figure as a ‘divine man’ who is, in some respects, an archetype of humanity (1953: 33–6, 43–44, 70–3, 163–8, 207–11)
- the notion that access to this revelation, ‘knowing God’, is the highest good, granting life and light to those who receive it (1953: 55–8, 144–50, 151–63, 176–8, 179–86, 201–7)
- portrayal of the receipt of this life and light as an existential crisis that amounts to total transformation or ‘rebirth’ (1953: 52, 223–7)
- the corresponding notion that rebirth results in a mystical union between individual human beings and divine truth (1953: 187–97)
- finally, a belief that human beings may be categorized on the basis of their receipt/knowledge or rejection/ignorance of this divine reality (1953: 201–7).

In Dodd’s reading, Johannine theology, as evident from the text of the Fourth Gospel, is essentially the product of a sustained attempt to translate Stage 2 traditional materials into the idiom of this global Hellenistic myth.

### *‘Signs’ and discourses*

Viewed within the historical setting that Dodd envisions, John’s primary challenges in writing a Gospel are obvious. The Judean disciples of Jesus whose memories formed the substance of Stage 1 of the Johannine tradition were not engaged in the same intellectual currents that shaped the thinking of John’s implied audience. The same could be said of the anonymous Stage 2 Christians whose preaching and teaching gradually imposed distinct forms and rudimentary sequences upon earlier traditional material. John, then, was faced with the obstacle of translating a mass of disconnected stories and sayings that had been hammered on the anvil of the Hebrew Bible into a coherent narrative of Jesus’ life that would persuade Hellenistic readers to accept him as the archetypal ‘Word of