

## **The Priority of John, and Some Implications**

Charles St-Onge, December 23, 2000

### **Introduction**

New Testament scholarship has for a long time held as convention that the Gospel of John was the last of the accounts of Jesus' life to be written. The significance of this position has been that the Gospel of John has been evaluated over and against the synoptic accounts (and their supposed sources), and not the other way around. In the last three decades, however, the possibility that John's Gospel represents a valid tradition and could shed light on the synoptic accounts has begun to be explored. This has led to some interesting insights into what the chronology of Christ's life may have been. It has also raised the question of whether other gospel writers, most notably Luke, may have even used the Gospel (or at least the writer) as a source for their work.

Notable among the scholars that have contributed to this new direction of research is John A.T. Robinson, and his book The Priority of John. Robinson makes it clear that he is starting from some key suppositions of his own. He asserts with some wit that *events* produce traditions, and not the other way around. He mocks the scholarly contention that "no story is ever derived from facts but always from somebody else's version of the same story." (Robinson, p.26) He also asserts that the gospel writers cared about the Jesus of history precisely because he *was* the Christ of the Church. The one could not be divorced from the other. The gospels were written to "commend the faith that they proclaimed about Christ by appeal to what Jesus himself said and did and was." (Robinson, p.32) Robinson's suppositions lead him to the conclusion that John's Gospel "does not take us further from history, but leads us more deeply into it." (Robinson, p.33) It is from the point of view of these suppositions that a scholar such as Robinson proceeds to reexamine the place of the Gospel of John among the four stories of Jesus.

### **Why Johannine Priority?**

The traditional argument for seeing John's Gospel as a later interpretation of the synoptics goes something like this. John's Gospel, with its highly developed Christology, was the last to be written, likely by a non-apostolic author from a Johannine school or community. At least two gospels must have been in existence at the time of his writing. The writer of the gospel surely would have known of these gospels, and certainly would have depended on them for some of his material. The Gospel of John, then, should be interpreted as a reaction against, a corrective, or an addition to the synoptic gospel tradition. Three lines of argumentation have traditionally been brought to bear to support these suppositions. These are arguments based on 'space', 'time', and 'person' or authorship.

## **Space**

One of the strongest arguments against the possibility of John's Gospel being a "source" rather than a second-hand commentary on Jesus' life has been its supposed Hellenistic character. The philosophical worldview of the gospel, and its seeming anti-Semitic character, have both been brought forward in support of this argument. Modern discoveries and a closer reading of the gospel remove many of these arguments from play. For example, the discovery of the writings of the Essenes in the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS) has shown that "Palestinian Judaism was more Hellenistic and more syncretistic than had earlier been supposed, and yet it was truly Jewish" (Robinson, p.39). Indeed, the DSS provide the first likely background for the type of thinking present in the gospel. The "philosophy" of the gospel could indeed have been part of a 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestinian worldview.

The topographical details of the gospel have been used to support an early date of composition. The numerous place names mentioned in the gospel were once considered to be fictional inventions. The detailed knowledge of Palestinian geography by the author of the gospel is not now seriously disputed, however. Scholars have suggested other interpretations for the numerous place names other than eye-witness reporting of actual events in those localities. For example, it has been suggested that they are locations of Johannine churches. This, Robinson states, is "a question of whether the communities created the geographical traditions, or the traditions created the communities" (Robinson, p.51). Robinson opts for the latter, as he does throughout the book.

## **Time**

For a long time the argument was raised that John indeed had to have been written last. Dates well into the 2<sup>nd</sup> century were put forward for its final composition. The very late date for the gospel has been disposed of with the discovery of the p75 fragment in Egypt, dating the gospel's writing into the 1<sup>st</sup> century. But there are interior testimonies to the gospel's early date as well. The fact that Jerusalem is spoken of throughout the gospel in the present tense would seem to date its writing even before 70 AD. The gospel itself seems in fact to presuppose a period when the Romans and Jews were still in an uneasy coexistence. The tone John takes in his gospel when speaking of the Jewish authorities and indeed with the Jewish nation matches very well the writing of Paul in 1 Thess. 2:14-16, and of Matthew in his gospel, both writings supposed to have been completed in the middle of the 1<sup>st</sup> century.

The use of the term "the Jews" rather indiscriminately by John in no way suggests that he does not understand the different groups with Judaism. This has sometimes been used as an argument against authorship by an actual apostle of Jesus. John speaks of the "chief priests", and understands full well the power divisions in the Sanhedrin between Pharisees and Sadducees (note his passion narrative). In fact,

the Greek *Ιουδαίος* in the gospel can only be accurately interpreted given the context of what it is being contrasted with: Gentiles, Samaritans, Baptists, or Galileans for example.

### **Person**

A further argument put forward to support a late composition of John, and therefore the author's likely reliance on the synoptics for his writing, comes by positing the impossibility of authorship by the apostle John. If John did not write the gospel, it must then have been written by another later John or perhaps by a later community under John's tutelage. Robinson sees much external and internal evidence to dispute this supposition, and space permits only a short survey of these reasons here.

Internally, there are a few indications of John's personal authorship. First, there are the statements regarding authorship by an eyewitness (John 21:24, 19:35). These statements combined with the feeling of authority in the writing lend credence to the belief that this is a first-hand report. In the words of one scholar, the author is saying "La tradition, c'est moi!" – the author is not merely transmitting, but considered himself to *be*, the tradition of the Church.<sup>1</sup> (Robinson, p.96)

Second, the fact that John, such a key apostle in the other gospels, is missing by name in this gospel must be explained. The tradition of the Church speaks overwhelmingly of Johannine authorship (Robinson, p.100). The "disciple whom Jesus loved" seems to fit so well John, the missing disciple. Only from John's perspective, furthermore, would it be superfluous to speak of John *the Baptist*, who is in fact mentioned only by name and not function in the gospel (Robinson, p.106).

Third, John's authorship would not be as impossible as many scholars have made it seem. John's family seems to be well to do. Zebedee has servants who help him and his two sons in their fishing operations. If John's family was in actuality part of a Galilean merchant class, many things in the gospels would be explained, not the least of which is John's ability to write simple Greek (albeit with a noted Aramaic 'accent')<sup>2</sup>. It would explain how John has contacts with the high priest's household that enables him and Peter to enter during Jesus' trial (John 18:15). It explains why John has a house in the city (John 19:27), and that he may even have been his father's agent in Jerusalem on occasion. While these conjectures are not definitive, Robinson again states that it is "unscientific to invent unknown characters such as the author of this major contribution to New Testament literature and theology" when another real character fits the bill (Robinson, p.117).

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<sup>1</sup> A statement such as this lends support to the belief that the authority of Scripture is derived from its apostolic authority (see Scaer, D. *The Apostolic Scriptures*)

<sup>2</sup> Robinson posits that the *αγραμματοι*, used in reference to John and Peter in Acts 4:13, means simply 'untrained layman' (Robinson, p.116)

## **Implications for Gospel Studies**

If Robinson's assertion that the Gospel of John as written by John himself, an apostolic eye-witness, holds then what new insights can be gained by using *John* as a baseline to understand the synoptics? Robinson makes some astonishing observations. He suggests a familial relationship between 'The Sons of Thunder' and Jesus. He also suggests that other gospel writers, notably Luke, may have used the Gospel or at least a written draft in the writing of his own gospel.

### ***First Cousins***

Robinson compares the passion narratives and notes that Mark's "Salome", Matthew's "the mother of the sons of Zebedee", and John's "Jesus' mother's sister" may indeed all be the same person. If so, John and James may have been Jesus' first cousins, along with John the Baptist (Robinson, p.119). This would provide some fascinating insights into the gospel narratives. First, it would explain why Jesus designated John the one to take in his mother after his death (Robinson, p.120). Second, it would explain why Capernaum, not Nazareth, became the center of Jesus' Galilean ministry. Jesus' brothers and mother may have indeed moved to Capernaum to be closer to family (Matt. 4:13). Third, it sheds light on the tie between James and John, Jesus, and John the Baptist, who would all have been related one to the other. Fourth, it may even explain the contacts within the high priest's court, since Elizabeth was of priestly descent as was her mother, implying that the whole family (Mary and Salome included) would have had family in the Temple priesthood (Robinson, p.121). As Robinson is swift to state, "all these connections are highly tentative and *nothing* hangs on them" (Robinson, p.122). But since it does make sense of a lot of data, it does seem worth exploring.

### ***Lukan Dependence***

Another possibility only touched on but certainly worth exploring is the use of John, in some form, by Luke in the preparation of his gospel. If John's gospel is an eyewitness report by a close follower – perhaps relative! – of Jesus, might his recollections have not been used by the one who "carefully investigated everything from the beginning" (Luke 1:3)? Indeed, "most scholars accept that 'some type of relationship exists between Luke and John'" (Neiryneck, p.35). The question is, who is dependent on who? There are three possibilities: "John may have known some form of Luke, Luke may have known some *early* form of John, both evangelists may have been influenced by some other common source or sources" (Neiryneck, p.36).

It is in the passion narratives that the two gospels stand closest together. However where Luke seems somewhat vague in his narrative, John provides the vivid details (locations, times, names) of an eyewitness. As one scholar puts it, if it weren't for the fact that John *must* have been written after Luke,

we would need to conclude that Luke used John in some way (de Solage, p.157)<sup>3</sup>. If this were *not* the case, then would it not have been possible for Luke to have used John? One significant higher critic, M.-É. Boismard feels there is no choice but to suggest that Luke at least had access to some early Johannine material (Sabbe, p.375). Another writes that it is impossible to imagine that Luke, traveling as he did with Paul, would not have availed himself of John's knowledge while they were in Ephesus at some point in time.<sup>4</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The presupposition that John's gospel must have been written late by someone other than the apostle is no more tenable than the contrary opinion. Arguments that have been raised in the past against his authorship can now be refuted, if one changes one's basic assumptions. The most important assumption made to arrive at Johannine authorship is that real events give rise to traditions, and not the other way around. In fact, if the author is assumed to be the apostle and his account of Jesus' life reliable, much sense can be made of the data in the gospel accounts. Examples include the possible dependence of Luke on John's gospel for some of his material, and the family relationship between the Sons of Zebedee, John the Baptist, and Jesus. Most importantly, new research is revealing how one's assumptions deeply color the interpretations one gives to the Scriptural texts.

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<sup>3</sup> "Il est littérairement impossible de tirer le texte de Jean de celui de Luc." (de Solage, p.157)

<sup>4</sup> "Comment imaginer que Luc, qui accompagna Paul dans ses voyages à partir de l'an 50...n'ait pas rencontré Jean et ne se soit pas soucié d'entendre ce témoin incomparable?" (de Solages, p.267)