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From Mainz to Marburg: A Dialectical Engagement with the Master of Diachronicity

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Yesterday as I was looking through the Johannine collection at the University of Mainz library, I found several books that had the name “Rudolf Bultmann” inscribed on the flyleaf, in very fine handwriting. Given that I believe his commentary on John (1941, English translation 1971) is the most important New Testament monograph in the 20th century (perhaps second only to Albert Schweitzer’s *From Reimarus to Wrede*, or *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*), I would really like to have had an exchange with the Master from Marburg—comparing notes on how the Johannine riddles should be addressed – but of course he died in 1976. As I noted underlining in some texts and a comment or two in the margins, it was humbling to think of the inquiry biblical scholars undertake and how we make our judgments. It would be intriguing to see if his view of Johannine dualism might have been different if the Dead Sea Scrolls had been discovered earlier; it would be fascinating to explore with him whether the Fourth Evangelist might have been a dialectical thinker—especially if modern theologians clam such about themselves. I don’t know how parts of Bultmann’s library came to Mainz, but my guess is that his student, Ernst Käsemann, might have received and passed along some of them; he taught at Mainz from 1946-1951.

Serving as a visiting DAAD professor at the University of Mainz this spring and summer has been a delight, and students and faculty alike have been most welcoming and receptive. The intellectual exchanges on state-of-the-art New Testament subjects in this European context have been exhilarating, and my gracious host, Ruben Zimmermann, is one of the most creative interdisciplinary biblical scholars I know of. Six weeks into my four-month service at Mainz, Professor Zimmermann sent out a note to other universities letting them know of my availability to offer lectures on a variety of subjects, and from that initiative the way opened to speak at the Universities of Nijmegen (on the John, Jesus, and History Project—I spoke on this at the Mainz NT Colloquium, as well), Marburg, and Münster (on A Bi-Optic Hypothesis see below).

Especially memorable for me was the Marburg exchange, where Professor Friedrich Avemarie combined his two classes on the Historical Jesus and the Gospel of John for a joint session. As I have been working on an alternative to Rudolf Bultmann’s theory of Johannine

composition and relation to other traditions, it was a rare treat to express my appreciation for his work in the same halls he used to teach in. I took photos, of course, as any American visitor would have done. The exchange with Bultmann would have to be diachronic, however, given his retirement from Marburg in 1951. Nonetheless, given also his highly diachronic theory of John's composition, that might also be fitting.

In preparation for the session, Professor Avemarie had students read Bultmann's treatment of John 6, where we should have evidence of four of his five sources—that is, if Bultmann's highly diachronic theory proves compelling. Because he cannot believe the Fourth Evangelist was an eyewitness to the ministry of Jesus (John's differences from the Synoptics and highly theological tone make this impossible, in his view), the material must have come from somewhere. Rightly, Bultmann notes John's differences from the Synoptics make its dependence on them implausible. Therefore, synthesizing a full century of critical work on gospel forms and traditions, Bultmann constructs inferred sources accounting for John's miracles (a *Sēmeia* source), I-Am sayings (a Revelation-Sayings source), and Passion narrative (a Passion source). The evangelist wove these into a narrative, his Gospel fell apart and was disarranged, and the redactor rearranged the material (wrongly, giving Bultmann occasion to "restore" the order into units that ostensibly reveal the poetic form of the sayings source—making discourses look more like the strophic form of the Prologue) and adding his own disparate material as a dialectical corrective to the evangelist's work. The students came prepared, and the engagement was lively! I should say that not all of them came into the session convinced by Bultmann's argument, but at least they understood it.

As I had written over 100 pages on Bultmann's paradigm (see *The Christology of the Fourth Gospel*, 1996; now published by Cascade Books with a new introduction and epilogue, 2010), Bultmann's approach to John 6 was an excellent place to begin. In reviewing other leading theories about John's composition and development, most of the major aporias (perplexities) can be solved within a basic two-edition theory, involving at least an earlier and a final edition. One place I *do* agree with Bultmann is his view that the author of the Johannine Epistles appears to have been the final editor (I call him the "compiler") of the Gospel. Regarding alien sources, though, I shared with the Marburg audience that having tested *all* of Bultmann's own evidence (stylistic, contextual, and theological) for disparate sources underlying John 6 (where we should have four of the five sources—excluding the Passion source, of course) the distribution is random. Further, it fails to indicate particular sources except for one: we *do* have a narrator. That, however, does not mean that the

Johannine evangelist was not narrating his own material. Contextual tensions may reflect the evangelist's use of irony (Jesus answers the "real" question of the crowd in John 6:25-26—not interested in when he arrived, but when the next feeding would be) and the adding of John 6 (and other passages to a later edition—the Prologue and chapters 15-17 and 21, etc.) between the two scenes in Jerusalem (chs. 5 and 7). Theological tensions reflect the evangelist's reflective operation as a dialectical thinker—appreciating signs, but existentializing their meaning.

As I worked through a PowerPoint presentation, arguing a two-edition theory of John's composition and a more detailed accounting for John's relations to other traditions, the reception among students and faculty alike was warm. One scholar held on to a view that the Fourth Gospel was composed around 150, and that it was dependent on all the Synoptic traditions, but Bultmann would have disagreed with the Synoptic-dependence view, and here again I concur with Bultmann. I noted 45 similarities between John 6 and Mark 6 and 8, but *none* of them is identical. Some contact may have existed, but literary dependence on the Synoptics falls flat critically. The evidence is against it, which is why Bultmann had to infer a non-Synoptic Passion source to account for the material in John 18-19—John differs from the Synoptics too extensively to be derived from them.

Others picked up on particular features of the theory, however, and the greatest interest in all four of the University presentations is the view that the first edition of John (written around 80-85 CE, making it the *Second* Gospel) was crafted as an augmentation and a modest corrective to Mark. Put succinctly, a Bi-Optic Hypothesis infers that while Matthew and Luke built *upon* Mark, John built *around* Mark.¹

Let me say a bit more, here. Given that chapters 6 and 21 appear to have been added later, the first Johannine Gospel edition featured five signs, not eight. This makes for a good Jewish apologetic piece—five books of Moses / five signs of Jesus—leading hearers and readers to believe in Jesus as the Jewish Messiah/Christ. In that sense, the first edition of John functioned *like* Bultmann's inferred *Sēmeia* source; it simply was an earlier Johannine edition, not an alien tradition. Theological tension was a factor of intratraditional dialectic (earlier and later perceptions in dialogue) as well as intertraditional dialectic (the challenge that the crowd missed the "*sign-ificance*" of the sign because they "ate...and were satisfied"). Therefore, rather than seeing the Johannine evangelist challenging a backwater signs narrative, he appears to have been targeting the signs-valuation in *all five* Synoptic feeding

accounts where that phrase is echoed. Further, these five signs are precisely the ones *not found* in Mark! Therefore, the Johannine evangelist's interest appears to have been *augmentive*—including accounts of Jesus ministry *not found* in Mark. So, the “first sign” and the “second sign” in John 2 and 4 reflect not a numerative feature of a hypothetical source, but a chronological augmentation of Mark—reporting events that transpired *before* the exorcism and healing of Peter's mother-in-Law in Mark 1.

Likewise, the three southern signs in John fill out the Judean ministry of Jesus, which is completely absent from Mark, other than the healing in Jericho of blind Bartimaeus on the way to Jerusalem. So, John's augmentation of Mark is both *chronological* and *geographical*. Matthew even corroborates these moves by placing the Capernaum healing from afar just before the healing of Peter's mother-in-Law (Matt. 8) and noting that Jesus performed healings of the lame and the blind near the temple *in Jerusalem* (Matt. 21:14). Has Matthew's narrator heard echoes of the Johannine rendering, or at least the memories upon which it is based?

The Johannine evangelist, however, also appears to *set the record straight* with regards to Mark, and that's what historical narratives do. Incidental echoes include the following: the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus are held to be simultaneous, reporting developments *before* John was thrown into prison (contra Mk. 1:14; Jn. 3:24). And, despite what Jesus had said about prophets being dishonored in their home town (contra Mk. 6:4; Jn. 4:44), note how the Samaritans received him. Not everyone in Galilee rejected Jesus as Messiah; even the royal official and his entire household believed (Jn. 4:4-54).

More substantively, the Johannine inclusion of at least four visits to Jerusalem instead of the Synoptic singular journey implies a chronological correction of the Markan itinerary. Might the earlier temple incident in John reflect a chronological corrective to Mark instead of a theologically motivated rendering? Despite ingenious developments of the Fourth Evangelist's “theological intentionality” as the basis for an early prophetic demonstration in the temple, the narrator reports that people believed in Jerusalem (2:23), and that they had seen his signs performed there earlier because they too were at the Passover festival in Jerusalem (4:45). The narrator's commentary here implies chronological sequence, not theological meaning. It does seem odd that the Jerusalem leaders want to kill Jesus already in John 5 if this was only his first visit—despite the affront of healing the lame man on the Sabbath. If John's alternate itinerary is intentional, challenging the singular Jerusalem visit of three Markan Gospels might be a difficult pill for conservative readers of the Bible to accept;

however, early Christian witnesses support these findings.

First, Papias cites John the Elder (in my view, the final editor of the Fourth Gospel) as opining that Mark recorded Peter's preaching correctly, but *in the wrong order*. This is an unlikely claim to have been invented, and it recalls a second-century impression of an earlier Johannine opinion. Second, Papias goes on to explain that Mark made no mistake in including the things he did—he just sought to leave nothing out. Does this opinion support the singular Johannine feeding and sea-crossing narratives instead of the Markan (and Matthean) duplicate accounts? Luke, of course, sides with John and includes only one feeding, moving Peter's confession to the *other* feeding account (as it is in John—Eusebius, *Hist. Eccles* 3.39). Scholars have failed to note that it was *the Johannine Elder* who stated, according to Papias, that Mark's account was problematically ordered and duplicative. The facts of the Johannine rendering cohere with these opinions and appear at face value to be setting the record straight—for historical reasons, not for theological ones. A third confirmation by Eusebius is that he mentions the Johannine evangelist's including earlier events in Jesus' ministry transpiring before the Baptist was imprisoned (*Hist. Eccles.* 3.24).

Other corroborations of a Bi-Optic Hypothesis by Eusebius abound, but these support the view that at least the first edition of John was intended as an augmentation and a modest corrective to Mark. This means that John is different from Mark and the Gospels built upon Mark's witness *on purpose*. In defense of its selectivity, the first ending of John protests: "Jesus did many other signs...not written in *this* book..." (as in, "I know Mark's out there, and that this rendering is distinctive...") "...but these are written that you might *believe*" (Jn. 20:30-31).

Additions to the final edition of John include John 6, thus harmonizing the narrative with the Synoptics a bit. Nonetheless, the final editor once more defends the distinctive Johannine rendering against Synoptic measures of historicity in adding a second ending quite similar to the first ending (here also I agree with Bultmann). In paraphrased terms, "Look, if we would have included *everything* in the Synoptic record, as well as in our own tradition, the world's libraries would not have been able to contain the material—this reflects the Beloved Disciple's memory, and we in our community attest that his testimony is true!" (Jn. 21:24-25).

As the discussion at Marburg came to a close, I got the sense that my gracious hosts were willing to look at the Johannine tradition through new lenses. Indeed, I was told that while Bultmann's paradigm is still held in high regard, it is not as compelling as it used to be,

and scholars in Europe are looking for a different way to understand the origin and development of the Johannine tradition. Perhaps it was different from the other traditions as a factor of being an independent memory of Jesus and his ministry instead of being a three-to-one historical loser—on all accounts—as has been the case for the last two centuries of critical scholarship. I wish Professor Bultmann could have been there to engage directly on these issues—especially applying Bultmann’s work on dialectical theology to the dialectical thinking of the Fourth Evangelist. I wonder if he might have allowed a first-century thinker to have also operated in such a way, and if not, why not?

Upon reflection on this diachronic exercise, I am reminded of another lecture given at Marburg in 1953, by Ernst Käsemann, on the inadequacy of ignoring the historical quest for Jesus. That presentation *did* make a difference. Perhaps I could tag onto that critique the inadequacy of using all resources except the one first-century source claiming direct contact with the common subject—Jesus. If I could register a similar complaint, while pleased that the New and the Third Quests for Jesus have gotten underway, I wonder why they have excluded programmatically the one gospel claiming to be written by an eyewitness. Based on hitherto overlooked critical evidence (the subject of my essay next month), that claim may also be true. Perhaps a new critically plausible theory of John’s origin and development will provide a way forward in such a venture; from Mainz to Marburg, and back again. Our inquiry continues.