Response to Four Reviews of The Riddles of the Fourth Gospel

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Paul Anderson on ‘The Riddles of the Fourth Gospel’

Paul responds to my latest review-entry.

Again, I appreciate Jim West’s engagement of chapters 8 and 9, and will point the reader to the contents to get a fuller sense of topics addressed. With Jim, there’s a lot in these chapters worth thinking about; more than can be discussed in even an extensive review. Nonetheless, Jim has selected some central elements in the larger discussions (over the last two centuries of critical scholarship) worth considering for interpretation.

May I first comment on the importance of considering chapters 8 and 9 together—focusing on John’s christological/theological features and also on implications for the historical quest for Jesus. All too often scholars have divided these two features of John, and the fact is that neither interest can adequately account for all of (or even the bulk of) John’s content. This is what struck me after writing The Christology of the Fourth Gospel. While John is pervasively christological, not all of its features and material can be accounted for on the basis of the imagined “theological interests of the evangelist.” Such can lead to “theologizing speculation gone awry,” and nowhere has critical scholarship so sloppily given an uncritical pass as with the unquestioned claims of those who assert that a detail, a unit, or a feature in John is attributed to the evangelist’s “theologizing interests.” True, the Fourth Evangelist does attribute meaning to a good deal of the content he includes, but this does not mean that such was the originative source of that material. State how such is known—fine. Making such a claim, however, without evidence, or without having falsified a historical claim, is positivistically insufficient.

Here’s where Jim has really put his finger on the crux of the matter with reference to modern positivism as a feature of historical-critical methodology in biblical research. It extends beyond gospel studies, but these are especially susceptible to distorted claims precisely because of Johannine distinctiveness. Here I want to be a bit “hard-nosed critical” regarding positivism. Interestingly, historical positivism has largely been wielded only in one direction—against biblical claims, challenging all verification interests. To be balanced, though, positivism must also be plied toward claims of falsification. How does one know—with positive certainty—that a historical claim is compellingly false? Simply noting differences in the Synoptics cannot necessarily falsify a Johannine claim, and even less compelling are arguments from silence—either Synoptic or Johannine.

So, I concur with Jim’s focusing on the crux of the matter; we need to rethink the modernistic dehistoricization of John and the resultant de-Johannification of Jesus. In my book, The Fourth Gospel and the Quest for Jesus, I actually argue what I call a nuanced approach—citing eight ways John and the Synoptics concur, eight ways the Synoptics seem historically superior to John, and eight ways John seems historically superior to the Synoptics. These lists could be expanded or modified, but they offer, I believe, a more reasonable approach to understanding New Testament historiography, and the prophet from Nazareth, in bi-optic perspective.

If I may pick up on Jim’s further observations, if the Johannine Gospel indeed reflects an independent Jesus tradition—albeit theologically engaged in its development, it functions to corroborate independently a number of Synoptic accounts, and vice versa. The first edition of John especially seems to be augmentive in its relation to Mark, so it is different on purpose. Therefore, if the intention is non-duplicative (as stated somewhat clearly in John 20:30–31 and 21:25) it is precisely its differences with Mark that might be suggestive of its historical interests. Now, this does not confirm its historicity, but it might be suggestive of historical knowledge and intention, which forces us to rethink our criteria for determining historicity. Further, if the Johannine narrator has a bone to pick with the Markan rendering here or there (as Papias suggests explicitly—the Johannine Elder opined that Mark was in the wrong order and that it contained too many duplicate accounts) it is precisely where the Johannine narrative “sets the record straight” that may imply a historical Johannine opinion, not a theological interest.

Of course, such is impossible to ascertain with certainty, but what is apparent to me is that traditional and critical scholarship alike have been myopic in their inference of historical connections between John and the
Synoptics, missing out on a good number of likelihoods. A) The prevalent assumption is that only similarities show traditional contact, the main form of which is obviously (a word too often used when guessing) Johannine dependence on Mark; why not Mark’s dependence on John, or some sort of interfluence? B) Differences of inclusion may reflect Johannine augmentation of Mark, and this is arguable both in terms of John’s adding earlier material and southern material—thus, John augments Mark chronologically and geographically. C) Differences of presentation and slant may also be included for historical reasons (Jesus never said that; he only said to Peter…; this was before John was thrown into prison; despite Jesus’ being rejected in his hometown look how the Samaritans received him…). Perhaps John counterbalances Mark and other traditions so that John’s differences may reflect historical interests—wrongly or rightly.

New historicism also here applies. Not only do we need to think critically about John’s distinctive rendering of Jesus serving as a new window (especially if we’re going to use Thomas and second-fourth century traditions!) into the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth for today’s researchers, but maybe it also functioned that way also in the late first century situation. Put plainly, perhaps John’s most diametric differences with the Markan gospels reflect a dialectical engagement with them precisely because of historical interests—providing an alternative perspective by one or ones who claimed to know.

Such a view is substantiated by the theory of composition in chapter 6, as John is seen most plausibly to be an autonomous tradition alongside Mark; Luke and Q appear to have used John as one of their sources. Such are aspects of a larger theory, which I call "a Bi-Optic Hypothesis." Matthew and Luke built upon Mark; John built around Mark.

Of course, as the first three modern quests for Jesus have programmatically excluded John from the canon of historical resources, this may call for a fourth quest for Jesus—one that includes John in the mix! How to do that well, of course, is the question.

Thanks, Jim!

Paul