

Is Jesus John’s Mouthpiece? Reconsidering Johannine Idiom

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Abstract

Scholars commonly move from the premise that Jesus in the Fourth Gospel speaks in Johannine idiom to the conclusion that the evangelist elaborated Jesus’s teachings. We can evaluate this claim better if we distinguish paraphrase from elaboration, restricting the former concept to reports that would be recognizable both in content and in historical context. We should further distinguish different things that could be meant by the phrase “Johannine idiom.” When we do both of these, we can see the weakness of the argument from idiom to elaboration. There is also positive evidence supporting the counterclaim that John was scrupulous in recording the teachings of the historical Jesus. Two lines of such evidence come from the narrator’s explanatory “asides” and from unexplained allusions in Jesus’s teaching in the Gospel of John.

1. Scholarly Consensus: John Elaborates Jesus’s Teaching

Many Johannine scholars are convinced that John elaborates Jesus’s teachings at least somewhat, putting these elaborations into Jesus’s mouth.¹ Scholars also

¹ I will refer to the author of the Fourth Gospel throughout this paper as “John” without pursuing questions of authorship in detail. The secondary literature on the topics discussed here is vast, and I want to show awareness of that fact. The mainstream view that John is historically free with the words of Jesus is exemplified by Jörge Frey (2018, 99–101). Alan Culpepper (1993, 57–101) is slightly more optimistic, believing that we can find some historically authentic sayings, or bits of historically authentic sayings, amidst much other material that has been invented by the Johannine community. Peter W. Ensor (1996, 41–57) suggests a more positive approach to John’s authentic recording of Jesus’s speech, but the outcome is only somewhat more optimistic than that in Culpepper. Richard Bauckham (2007, 30–36) emphasizes the realistic appearance of John’s way of reporting Jesus’s speech and notes that it is not clear that it is less historical than that of the Synoptics. D. A. Carson (1981, 122–129) argues that the presence of Johannine idiom does not provide an argument that John has historically invented or even significantly elaborated the words of Jesus as reported.

Keywords

Johannine idiom, historical Jesus, paraphrase, Fourth Gospel, Johannine discourses, Gospel historicity

About the Author

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tend to take it for granted that he does so more than the Synoptic evangelists. Even those who are not invested in a developmental thesis concerning Johannine Christology are inclined to assume Johannine elaboration, though sometimes not specifying where or how extensively it occurs. Here, for example, is George Eldon Ladd:

It would be fair to say that John and the Synoptics are today seen as being closer together than earlier in the twentieth century. John is regarded as deserving at least some respect as a historical source; the Synoptics are seen as theological documents that also involve deliberate interpretation of the tradition. Nevertheless, it remains true that the Fourth Evangelist is quite unique in the degree of freedom he has taken in retelling the story of Jesus. He thus repeatedly makes explicit what the Synoptics are content to leave implicit. He retells the story with all the advantage afforded by the post-resurrection perspective, bringing out the full meaning of Jesus for his readers. He does not give us a verbatim report of the words of Jesus or a strictly literal account of his deeds.... The story is not less true because of this, but in a way actually truer. If the Synoptics provide us with theological *history*, the Fourth Gospel gives us *theological* history. Both words are necessary in both instances. John's elaboration of core elements of the tradition tells us unerringly the significance of the historical Jesus for the church of the present. (Ladd 1993, 684 n. 82)

Craig Keener comments in a similar vein,

Granting a significant a priori degree of probability [of historicity] in general does not obviate the importance of other considerations

in various individual cases. The Fourth Gospel makes no effort to disguise the Johannine style of its discourses; most Johannine scholars see these discourses as including homiletic elaboration on Jesus's teaching, interpretation that the author would undoubtedly claim was guided by the promised Spirit of truth. (Keener 2019, 15)

Here Keener focuses on the discourses in John and makes explicit the role of Johannine idiom as a basis for the claim that John elaborates. Keener treats this style as requiring us at least to qualify our conclusions about the historicity of those portions of the Gospel. Similarly, Paul N. Anderson, who has urged that Johannine historicity be taken with much greater seriousness by the scholarly community, nonetheless suggests that the connected discourses in the Fourth Gospel represent John's own preaching more than the recognizable teaching of the historical Jesus in the contexts reported (Anderson 2011, 164, 215–216). The appeal of the idea that John treats Jesus as his mouthpiece (at least to some degree) is therefore not confined to the “liberal” end of the scholarly spectrum.

I will argue that scholars have overestimated the argument from Johannine idiom to Johannine elaboration and that there is positive evidence to the contrary—namely, that the author of the Fourth Gospel does not make Jesus his own mouthpiece.

2. Distinguishing Paraphrase from Elaboration

My methodological approach in this paper is both analytical and realistic. I assume that truth about history, including religiously relevant history, can be known, even if our justification is probabilistic rather than certain. I also assume that we will approach the task of this investigation best if we are as

clear as possible about what we are saying and about why we think it is true. For this purpose, linguistic disambiguation is often valuable.

To discuss clearly the question of whether or not John deliberately elaborates Jesus's teachings, we need a sharpened idea of what constitutes paraphrase. In the quotation from Ladd, above, it appears that Ladd takes the alternative to "John elaborates" to be the claim, *inter alia*, that John gives a verbatim account of Jesus's teachings. On the face of it, this is a false dichotomy. Is there no middle ground between (on the one hand) putting one's own elaborations into another person's mouth, and (on the other hand) giving a verbatim account?

In his influential paper on this topic, Darrell Bock (1995) identifies three different categories, which he dubs "live," "jive," and "Memorex." The last of these is a verbatim record, like a transcript of an audio recording. The second ("jive") he defines thus: "[T]he Gospel writers had *and took* the opportunity *to create* sayings. They felt perfectly free to put words in Jesus's mouth that did not reflect at all what he had taught" (emphasis in original). Bock characterizes the "live" view, which he advocates, like this:

[T]he text reports Jesus's sayings, even those that can be tied to the same setting, with variations of wording.... Each Evangelist retells the living and powerful words of Jesus in a fresh way for his readers, while faithfully and accurately presenting the "gist" of what Jesus said. (Bock 1995, 76–77)

This three-part distinction is an important step in the direction of avoiding a false dichotomy between elaboration and verbatim recording, but there remains some ambiguity. Bock states that the "jive" view involves putting words into Jesus's mouth that did not at all reflect what Jesus taught. But some who advocate the idea that John elaborates Jesus's teachings (e.g.,

creating long discourses that Jesus did not recognizably utter) would say that these elaborations do reflect what Jesus taught in the sense that they accurately explain the deeper meaning of his brief sayings or expound his message as shown in other stories recorded in the Synoptics. For example, Michael Licona (2017) seems to suggest that Jesus's more explicit claims to deity in John's Gospel might be John's way of making clearer what Jesus indicates only implicitly in entirely different Synoptic scenes. But this would in itself make the unique Johannine sayings unhistorical in their reported contexts and would plausibly make the scenes surrounding them (such as the dialogue leading up to and flowing from John 10:30) unhistorical as well.

Moreover, Bock says that it is compatible with the "live" view that the evangelists made changes to Jesus's words in order to "apply Jesus's teaching to their audiences." He also says that the reports of Jesus's teachings show that these teachings have been "reflected on in light of the significance his teaching came to possess" (Bock 1995, 76–77). Even if this is not Bock's intention, these comments might be taken to mean that creating longer discourses that elaborate upon Jesus's teaching is merely a kind of "live" paraphrase.

For the sake of greater clarity both among scholars and between scholars and lay audiences, I suggest the following as minimal criteria for referring to something as a paraphrase of spoken words. Even if a record of Jesus's teaching is not, or may not be, a precise record or an exact translation (e.g., from Aramaic into Greek), we should call it a paraphrase only if it has the following two properties:

- 1) The verbally expressed content would be recognizable, from the record given in the Gospel, to someone who was present and understood the relevant language(s).

2) The occasion on which the Gospel indicates that Jesus said these things would be recognizable by such a person (Carson 1981, 122, 125–126).

Naturally, there will still be debatable areas. Just how recognizable does the content need to be? But if we are to discuss these matters clearly, we need to have some anchor so that terms like “paraphrase,” “gist,” and *ipsissima vox* do not become indefinitely malleable. Just a few years after Bock’s essay, Daniel B. Wallace (1999, 5–6) argued that evangelicals hold too narrow a view of *ipsissima vox*. He criticized Bock’s essay in this respect, especially concerning John’s Gospel. He went further the following year (Wallace 2000), suggesting that it is a form of *ipsissima vox* for John to change Jesus’s words “My God, why have you forsaken me?” to “I thirst.” This example illustrates the need for clearer definitions of such terms.

Ensor (1996, 36–38) has suggested that a paraphrase be distinguished from both a much shorter summary and an interpretive elaboration; all three are included in his “type c” category of “looser representations” of what Jesus said (as contrasted with verbatim quotations in Aramaic or very close verbatim translations into Greek). But interestingly, Ensor’s “type c” category, even at the level of a recognizable paraphrase of content, contains no stipulation concerning context, and he seems to count a report as a paraphrase in his sense even if Jesus did not say something recognizably like that in the context given in the text (Ensor 1996, 118, concerning John 9:4). It seems that we should have a category in hand that stipulates both recognizable content *and* recognizable context, especially when we are considering the reliability of an evangelist. If an evangelist firmly situates a statement of Jesus in a context where it did not occur at all, this detracts at least somewhat from the evangelist’s reliability as a historical reporter, and even more so if the change was made deliberately.

At times the scene that forms the context is so intertwined with the saying that, if the evangelist “moved” and “adapted” Jesus’s words from a different scene, this would amount to inventing a scene in his own gospel. For example, suppose that Jesus did not agonize aloud before the crowds about his forthcoming death as recorded in John 12:27, resolving his musings by saying, “Father, glorify Thy name” (John 12:28a).² Suppose that, as Frey (2018, 73–74) suggests, this was John’s adaptive use of the Markan Gethsemane tradition. In the scene in John, the voice from heaven, the people’s speculation about the voice, and Jesus’s comments about it (vv. 28b–30) all flow naturally from Jesus’s musings. The voice from heaven responds to Jesus’s conclusion, “Father, glorify Thy name,” which (on the adaptation theory) did not historically occur at this time. If these words are invented in the sense that Jesus said no such thing on this occasion, then it is plausible that the voice from heaven and the dialogue about it are invented as well. While Frey would probably have no qualms about that conclusion, the point is that it is a stronger blow against John’s historical reliability than one might realize from a bland statement like, “This is a paraphrase of an authentic saying of Jesus in another context.” It is worthwhile to mark that point by restricting “paraphrase” to instances where both the content and the context would be recognizable to someone who was present at the time.

3. Three Possible Meanings of “Johannine Idiom”

With a sharpened concept of paraphrase in hand, we are in a better position to discuss the question, “What does ‘Johannine idiom’ mean?” and thereby

² Scripture quotations are from the NASB (1977).

to see whether its presence in the words of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel is a good argument for Johannine elaboration.

One possible meaning of “Johannine idiom” is the presence of terms that express themes prominent in the Johannine literature, sometimes in the mouth of Jesus, sometimes in the voice of the narrator of the gospel, and sometimes in I John. Examples of such terms include μαρτυρέω (“to bear witness, testify,” John 8:18, 15:26–27, 18:37, 1 John 4:14, 5:9, etc.), ἀλήθεια (“truth,” John 8:32, 14:6, 18:37, 1 John 4:6, and so on), and ζῶν αἰώνιον (“eternal life,” John 3:15–16, 6:47, 17:3, 1 John 5:11–13). There are also common Johannine themes that cannot be reduced to a single term, such as knowing the Father through the Son (John 3:13, 6:46, 14:6, 1 John 5:11, 20, etc.).

We should immediately ask exactly how the argument is supposed to go from the prevalence of these conceptual themes to Johannine elaboration. One possible route for such an argument goes through the fact that these themes, and the words that express them, are statistically more common in Johannine literature, including in the words of Jesus, than they are in the teachings of Jesus recorded in the Synoptics. Why is this an argument that John elaborated Jesus’s words so as to bring up these themes? It seems that there must be an unstated premise concerning the statistical representativeness of both the Synoptic and the Johannine records. One would need to assume that the teachings of Jesus recorded in the Synoptics are meant to be taken as a representative sample of how often Jesus addressed certain themes and used the terminology appropriate to those themes, and the same for John. If we make that strong assumption, then we have what might be called a statistical contradiction, since Jesus does talk more often in the Fourth Gospel about bearing witness or testifying than he does in (say) Mark.

But why should we accept any such premise? No Gospel claims to present such a sample, and there is every reason to believe that the evangelists engaged in selection of material, though that selection could easily have come from entirely historical material. Moreover, the Synoptic Gospels are famously interdependent (though theories of the causes and nature of that dependence vary), and apparent Synoptic dependence often affects precisely the selection of Jesus’s teachings. Therefore, the Synoptics do not constitute three separate statistical “testimonies” to how Jesus *usually* taught or what themes he *most often* discussed. (A similar point is made by Anderson 2011, 46.)

The appearance of supposedly “Johannine” themes and language in the Synoptics also supports the suggestion that the different statistics represent different selection from historical material. Besides the famous “Johannine thunderbolt” in Matthew 11:25–27, on the topic of the Father’s endorsement of the Son and the need to know the Father through the Son, there is the use of “eternal life” in the Synoptics (e.g., Luke 10:25), including in a place where Jesus himself treats that phrase as synonymous with “kingdom of God” (Mark 10:17, 24–25, 30, noted by Bauckham 2007, 35–36), the prevalence of the theme of witness and testimony in Luke and Acts (Luke 24:45–49; Acts 1:8, 21–22), and Jesus’s use of “children” for his disciples (Mark 10:24). There are also too many similar sayings to list in this paper—compare, to take just one example, “Ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you” (Matt 7:7) with, “Until now you have asked for nothing in My name; ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be made full” (John 16:24).³ All of these considerations should lead to considerable skepticism about the strength of the argument from Johannine idiom, conceived as the presence of Johannine themes, to elaboration.

Space does not permit a detailed discussion of the claim that John systematically replaces “kingdom of God” with “eternal life” (Kim 2010, 55; Keener 2003, 328; Bauckham 2007, 35–36; Bauckham 2015, 192). Depending on the context, such a replacement could in many cases be a minor, fully recognizable paraphrase. But the evidence for that replacement is only statistical, since the occasions in question are non-overlapping scenes between John and the Synoptics. That is, the argument is that Jesus seems to use the one phrase more often in the Synoptics and the other more often in John. As already noted, an argument for deliberate authorial alteration based purely on such statistical considerations is on shaky ground, and this is true even when the replacement is relatively minor (McGrew 2021, 190–192). This consideration is all the more relevant given that the Synoptics do use “eternal life” and even show people other than Jesus doing so.

A second potential meaning of the term “Johannine idiom” relates it to specific aspects of Greek grammar and style that are typical of Johannine literature (Abbott 1906, 97–171; Burge 2013, 87–89; Poythress 1984, 312–340). The idea is supposed to be that there is something suspicious about the fact that Jesus appears to follow these aspects of style in the Fourth Gospel and also that the narrator and the author of the other Johannine literature (such as 1 John) does so. Jörg Frey draws strong conclusions from a combination of such stylistic matters and other kinds of Johannine idiom:

If we observe, then, that in the Fourth Gospel Jesus speaks to individuals as well as to groups in the same style as the Baptizer...

³ For more examples of similar sayings in John and the Synoptics, see McGrew (2021, 380–389) and Leathes (1870, 300–320).

the Johannine narrator, or the author of the Johannine Epistles, the conclusion is unavoidable that this is the language of the Johannine community, and that the traditional words of Jesus have been transformed into the diction and style of the Johannine community or author(s). The direction of the transformation is suggested by linguistic and theological considerations: The synoptic tradition in its earliest strata is closer to the teaching of the Jesus of history. Compared with the Synoptics, the Johannine words and speeches of Jesus have undergone a more thorough transformation with regard to their language and quite likely also with regard to content and theology. (Frey 2018, 100)

Notice the swift movement in the last sentence from “language” to “content and theology.” This is where the above distinction between paraphrase and elaboration is especially helpful, as becomes evident when we consider some of the specific idioms in question. There is, for example, the well-known adversative *καὶ* (“and”). The author of the Fourth Gospel has a tendency to use *καὶ* to indicate a contrastive meaning, where one might expect him to use a different Greek word (for example the strong contrastive *ἀλλά* [“but”] or, even more likely, the weaker, common contrastive *δέ* [“but”]). In John, we find *καὶ* used as an all-purpose conjunction, including in places where it seems to have the meaning “but” or “and yet,” and this occurs both in the voice of the narrator (1:10–11) and the voice of Jesus (3:6, 11).

Another example of Johannine idiom in this sense would be the use of *καθὼς* followed by *καὶ* to mean “just as ... so” (6:57, 13:15, 33; 15:9; 17:18; 20:21). If these same sayings were found in Luke, for example (they are not), we would expect them to be rendered using *καθὼς ... οὕτως* (“just as ... so also”), as in Luke 11:30. So in these places, John defaults to his favorite *καὶ* to complete a comparison.

One more example is asyndeton—the absence of conjunctions where we might expect them. So, in the preface, we find, “For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17) and in the mouth of Jesus, “Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives, do I give to you” (John 14:27). There are many such examples (1:49, 14:1, 15:5, 17:17, are just some) where John, and Jesus as recorded, do not bother to use conjunctions, either to subordinate one thought to another or to express their relations. The relations of the ideas are left implicit; the effect is surprisingly forceful.

But we must ask why Frey is justified in considering such minor matters of style to be evidence for the elaboration of content not expressed recognizably by Jesus on the occasions in question. Once we understand that recognizable paraphrase is a different matter from elaboration, it is a *non sequitur* to take the similarity of Jesus’s idiom in this sense to that of the narrator as evidence that the narrator has put his own words into Jesus’s mouth in any significant sense.

To push the point even farther, since these are not sayings and discourses recorded in the Synoptic Gospels, it is difficult to say why we should think that the use of $\delta\acute{\epsilon}$ as a connective is either more or less historical in reports of Jesus’s words than the use of $\kappa\alpha\iota$. We do not have “competing” records of those specific sayings, since they appear only in John. If Jesus was speaking in Aramaic on the occasions recorded, he did not use either Greek connective. And if he was speaking in Greek, we have no reason to think that he used $\delta\acute{\epsilon}$ in the places where John records $\kappa\alpha\iota$.

In any event, these are hardly matters of great importance to the clear, recognizable meaning of what Jesus said on those occasions. There is not even any reason to put John and the Synoptics in competition, as Frey (2018, 98–99) attempts to do when he suggests that, if we took John’s reportage of Jesus’s teaching to be literally historical, we would have to

think that the Synoptic authors “altogether depart[ed] from the language and style of the ‘real’ Jesus.” “Altogether departed” is far too strong. These stylistic variations in both John and the Synoptics are compatible with recognizable, historically accurate recording of Jesus’s authentic teaching on particular occasions. The very fact that themes, metaphors, and other distinctive content (and even style) can be translated into multiple languages shows that these variations in Greek usage do not amount to “altogether departing” in either direction—whether Jesus’s verbatim speech was (in some sense) more like that recorded in John in these minor ways or more like that recorded in the Synoptics.

Finally, “Johannine idiom” can refer to the fact that, in John, Jesus teaches in a more connected, repetitive way than he does in the Synoptics. A good illustration of this type of Johannine idiom occurs in John 15:1–17. In this passage, Jesus repeats himself in what one might call a spiral fashion, ringing the changes on particular terms. He begins (vv. 1–3) with the metaphor of the vine. Next comes the repetition of the word (and concept) of abiding (vv. 4–7). First, he links this concept of abiding with the metaphor of the vine, but then he links it with a new concept in this passage—keeping his commandments (v. 10). The concept of “commandment” leads to the concept of love, since that is a major commandment he has given them (vv. 10–14). “Love” and “commandments” lead to the concept of friendship, since keeping Jesus’s commandments for love is the way to be his friend rather than just a servant (vv. 13–15). At the end, Jesus circles back to the notion of bearing fruit (v. 16), only here it is the fruit that remains. Then we come back to “command” and “love” once again (v. 17). In this passage, too, the lack of connectives (asyndeton) fits together well with repetition. The absence of connectives goes almost unnoticed as the repetition and linking of concepts replaces subordinating connectives as a structuring element. Jesus, like a good preacher, hammers home the words and ideas

not only by repetition but by weaving them together, so that one concept leads naturally to another and then back again to a word that he dropped several verses ago.

In contrast, a passage of similar length from the Sermon on the Level Place does not show this same looping repetition. In Luke 6:20–35, which includes a series of beatitudes, Jesus uses parallelism and aphorism, but the passage moves much more abruptly from one thought unit to another.

Here it is useful to contrast the conclusions that different scholars draw about the realism of these ways of speaking. Frey thinks that not only could Jesus have spoken in the more choppy, less repetitive manner of the Synoptic discourses, he probably did so. Hence, to Frey, the more repetitive, connected style in John is almost certainly a Johannine invention:

[T]he character of Jesus’s language in John is overwhelmingly different from his language and style in the Synoptics. The genres of the teaching of the synoptic Jesus—prophetic and sapiential sayings, brief apophthegms and especially parables—are absent in John and seem to be replaced by longer, repetitive, spiraling discourses or lengthy dialogues that create larger webs of metaphors throughout the whole Gospel.... Thus, the decision is clear: Jesus spoke either in the style and the forms of the synoptic tradition, in brief sayings or parables, or in the style of the Fourth Gospel, in lengthy discourses and extensive exemplary dialogues. [T]he conclusion is unavoidable that this is the language of the Johannine community, and that the traditional words of Jesus have been transformed into the diction and style of the Johannine community or author(s). (Frey 2018, 99–100)

That there are no “story parables” in John of the same sort that we find in the Synoptics is a weak argument from silence that can be set aside and treated separately from the argument from Johannine idiom. It is not an idiom *not* to speak in parables. And John would have been able (if he had so desired) to record or invent story parables in a repetitious style. There is nothing about a parable *per se* that requires that it be told in Jesus’s style in the Synoptics. (Rather surprisingly, at the other end of the scholarly spectrum, Anderson (2011, 57, 195) appears to concede that we must choose between John and the Synoptics concerning whether or not the historical Jesus spoke in pithy aphorisms and parables. I do not see that we are forced to make such a choice at all.)

In contrast to Frey, Richard Bauckham argues that the more connected style of Jesus’s discourses in John appears more realistic than the terse, choppy style found in the Synoptics:

The way [the Synoptic Gospels] represent what Jesus said on such occasions is mostly by means of a collection of Jesus’ aphorisms and parables, sometimes with explicit thematic structuring of the material, sometimes more loosely grouped according to topic or catchword. A point that historical Jesus scholars rarely make is that this cannot have been how Jesus actually taught. If Jesus did, as Mark represents (4.1), address the crowds from a boat on the lake of Galilee, he cannot have spoken merely the three parables Mark attributes to him on this occasion or even the larger collection of parables that Matthew provides. The issue here is not what Jesus said on a specific occasion, but the way in which Jesus generally taught. He must have taught in a much more discursive and expatiating way than the Synoptic Gospels attribute to him.... Formally, [the] teaching or discourse material [in John] is quite

varied, but it has in common the negative characteristic that it does not consist of collections of the kind of aphorisms and parables the Synoptics provide. Aphorisms and short parables, even sayings we also find in the Synoptics and sayings that would not have been out of place on the lips of Mark's, Matthew's, or Luke's Jesus, are found, but they are scattered through the discourse material and in many cases embedded in it. The main point to be made here is that, formally speaking, Johannine discourses and dialogues could well be regarded as more realistic than the typical Synoptic presentation of his teaching. (Bauckham 2007, 31–32)

Bauckham does not draw the conclusion that John's own presentation is strongly historical, for he adds,

Both the Synoptic and the Johannine ways of representing the way Jesus taught combine realism and artificiality. In one sense, John's presentation is more realistic than theirs, but at the same time it required much more than theirs did the putting of words into Jesus' mouth. (Bauckham 2007, 33)

Before we agree too readily with this further comment, we should pause to contemplate the stark difference between Bauckham's judgement and Frey's. Frey insists that the less connected, more aphoristic speech recorded in the Synoptics, even considered as discourse material, is wholly realistic. This, in turn, he takes to undermine the robust historicity of John's records of Jesus's discourses. Bauckham, in contrast, insists that a more connected style is more realistic, and that it is unlikely that Jesus moved so abruptly from subject to subject when he spoke at any length, as he certainly did on many occasions as a teacher.

Bauckham does not say why he is so confident that John's more realistic records must require putting words into Jesus's mouth "much more than" the Synoptic records. If a real teacher would be likely to speak in this more connected way, why could the evangelist not have known that Jesus did so? Why could he not have represented Jesus's connected discourses on real occasions in an historically recognizable way? Perhaps Bauckham's unstated premise is that no one could remember accurately such relatively long, connected discourses (Keener 2003, 53–54; Ensor 1996, 58). In contrast (so might go the reasoning) it would be easier to remember authentic short sayings and parables, which could be stitched together at will in longer compilations.

There is something historically dubious about using an aprioristic premise about the amount of content a disciple could have remembered to conclude that apparent reportage is *less* historical precisely because it appears *more* historical. Again, the notion of recognizable paraphrase is useful here. A witness (even without supernatural help from the Holy Spirit) with an excellent (but not necessarily eidetic) memory could have remembered at least *approximately* the way that Jesus connects the ideas of bearing fruit, keeping commandments, and abiding in John 15:1–17 and the way that he repeats himself there. If a clever student produced an imitation of a professor's historical discourse on the topic of looking in the syllabus before asking a question, the student might portray the teacher as repeating, "Look in the syllabus!" or "Read the syllabus!" five times when the teacher did so only three times (or *vice versa*), not because he is elaborating but merely because of the limits of verbatim memory. Nonetheless, his representation of the teacher's discourse could be strikingly faithful to what the teacher said on that day in class. He could even include some phrases and sayings verbatim as part of a recognizable paraphrase of the professor's remarks as a whole. It seems that the evangelist could do so as well. Perhaps

surprisingly, the entirety of John 14–17, including the dialogue, can be read in a leisurely fashion in only twenty-five minutes.

It is also worth remembering that preaching can have more than one effect. The phrase “homiletic elaboration” conveys the image of the evangelist preaching his own interpretations and “making” the historical Jesus say them. But by telling others what Jesus historically taught, beginning shortly after Jesus departed, John could fix in his own mind his memories of what Jesus said, not elaborating but consolidating.

Once again, I am not suggesting that the Synoptics are unfaithful reporters. Cutting out repetition and giving only part of what Jesus taught on particular occasions are also legitimate forms of recognizable paraphrase and (for that matter) easier than elaborating. And if the evangelists had any scruples about trying to represent the words of the historical Jesus accurately, the former is a more likely modification than the latter.

The words of Papias about his interest in talking to those who had personally heard Jesus are pertinent:

Nor did I take pleasure in those who reported their memory of someone else’s commandments, but only in those who reported their memory of the commandments given by the Lord to the faith and proceeding from the Truth itself. (Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 3.39.3–4, trans. Bauckham 2017, 154)

Far from supporting a notion of ancient unconcern with accurate speech reportage, Papias shows a strong interest in getting as close as memory will allow to the historical teaching of Jesus on real occasions as opposed to the teaching of others. Nor does he make an exception for the apostles. He does not say that he would be just as interested in hearing “someone else’s

commandments” if the others were apostles putting their own words in Jesus’s mouth, since their interpretations were guided by the Holy Spirit.

The careful separation of the concepts of paraphrase and elaboration, combined with a separation among different things that might be meant by “Johannine idiom,” allows us to see that the argument that Jesus is (even in part) John’s mouthpiece has been overstated.

4. Evidence that John is Scrupulous: Asides

Space does not permit a discussion of the many types of evidence for John’s literal reliability; there is much pertinent data not directly related to speech. The attempt to seal off the evidence of, for example, geographical and cultural confirmations of John’s accuracy and to declare dogmatically that it is quite irrelevant to the question of whether John invents incidents and discourses (Frey 2018, 95–97) is arbitrary. Indeed, it is fundamentally anti-inductive. If one finds that an author is accurate again and again in other matters, this cannot be historically irrelevant to whether or not the author invents material, including the spoken word. It is obvious that if matters were otherwise—if John were found to have repeatedly erred on historical, geographical, and cultural matters—that would be considered negatively relevant to his reliability, and rightly so. As Carson says,

The verifiable [J]ohannine accuracies ought to be given more weight than is common at present. I am referring to details of topography and the like.... If his sources and/or traditions are so good where they are verifiable, why should they be judged largely suspect where they are not verifiable? (Carson 1981, 115; see Blomberg 2001, 63)

Here I will focus on two kinds of evidence that can be brought to bear specifically on John's reporting of Jesus's speech, supporting the conclusion that he is a faithful reporter rather than an elaborator. First, consider the matter of John's "asides" to the reader. There are multiple contexts where John reports what Jesus says, and the narrator pauses to explain what Jesus meant. Put starkly, if the picture of the evangelist putting his own interpretations into Jesus's mouth were correct, we would not expect this at all. These asides are especially improbable given the claim that the evangelist believed that, since he was guided by the Holy Spirit, it was permissible for him to take the interpretations he thought were correct and report them as if spoken by the historical Jesus. If that were the case, why would he bother to pause in reporting Jesus's words precisely at the point where he provides his own interpretations?

One example of this phenomenon occurs in John 2:18–22:

The Jews therefore answered and said to Him, "What sign do You show to us, seeing that You do these things?" Jesus answered and said to them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews therefore said, "It took forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?" But He was speaking of the temple of His body. When therefore He was raised from the dead, His disciples remembered that He said this; and they believed the Scripture, and the word which Jesus had spoken.

The evangelist clearly thinks that he is correct to interpret Jesus as speaking of his own resurrection. If he thought consciously of himself as guided by the Holy Spirit, he presumably believed that this interpretation was Spirit-led. Yet he does not, for example, construct a scene in which Jesus explains privately to his disciples that he was speaking of his body.

Another such aside occurs in a passage that is perhaps even more significant, since the narrator believes that Jesus is referring to the Holy Spirit:

Now on the last day, the great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, "If any man is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, 'From his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water.'" But this He spoke of the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were to receive; for the Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified. (John 7:37–39)

The Fourth Gospel is by no means lacking in places where Jesus is quoted as speaking about the Spirit. Yet here, the narrator does not portray him as doing so explicitly but instead pauses to tell the reader in his own voice that this is what Jesus meant.

A third example occurs when Jesus, after washing the disciples' feet, states, "He who has bathed needs only to wash his feet; but is completely clean. And you are clean, but not all of you" (John 13:10). This saying concludes a dialogue with Peter in which Peter has at first urged Jesus not to wash his feet and then switches to asking Jesus to wash his head and hands. One might even have guessed that Jesus is alluding to Peter's forthcoming denial here, since he has just been speaking with Peter and refers to Peter's denial in verse 38. But the narrator glosses, "For He knew the one who was betraying Him; for this reason He said, 'Not all of you are clean'" (v. 11). This is not an implausible interpretation since Jesus mentions the betrayal by Judas a few verses later (vv. 21–27). But it is not completely obvious, either. What is interesting is that the narrator inserts his own gloss immediately after verse 10 and does not portray Jesus as explaining his own comment

with reference to Judas. It would have been quite easy for the narrator to place the remarks about one who will betray Jesus at the earlier point and to link them via words placed into Jesus's mouth. ("You are clean, but not all. For I tell you that one of you will betray me.") But he does not do so. There is something almost clumsy about the aside informing us that Jesus was speaking of Judas. This is as far removed as possible from the picture of an evangelist who considers himself licensed to elaborate Jesus's words. Carson has rightly noted these asides as a mark of accuracy in the Fourth Gospel:

It is not at all obvious that John is confused on this matter. One might even argue plausibly that anyone who preserves this distinction so faithfully and explicitly is trying to gain credence for what he is saying, and if he errs in this matter, it will be because of an unconscious slip, not by design. (Carson 1981, 122)⁴

5. Evidence that John is Scrupulous: Unexplained Allusions

An unexplained allusion occurs in a document when a speaker or the narrator refers to something that, within that document, remains a "loose end." It appears that the speaker or narrator has something in mind, but he does not gloss it. In some cases (as when Paul speaks of baptism for the dead in 1 Cor 15:29) we may have reason to believe that the original audience understood the allusion. In that case it serves as evidence of a

⁴ I am aware of the scholarly trope that it is often difficult to tell when Jesus finishes speaking and the narrator picks up. As Carson points out in the same passage, this is incorrect. There is only one such place in the Fourth Gospel. On the growth of this claim, see McGrew (2021, 167–169).

genuine understanding between the author and the original audience; the author was writing for a historical audience (e.g., in an epistle) with whom he shared background information. Compare Paul's reference to an earlier conversation in 2 Thessalonians 2:5 (Paley 1850, 135–136). Sometimes there is more than one audience in view. Jesus's original hearers probably knew about the eighteen on whom the Tower of Siloam fell, whom Jesus mentions in Luke 13:4, but there is no reason to think that Theophilus knew (Luke 1:3). Thus, the allusion to this incident is a mark of genuineness in Luke's reportage of Jesus's teaching.

The Fourth Gospel contains a surprising number of such "loose ends" in its narrative. Just one example is the reference to a dispute between the disciples of John the Baptist and an unnamed Jew about purification in John 3:25. The Baptist's disciples ask him about Jesus's popularity (v. 26); the narrator does not bother to explain how this question relates to the dispute.

Such allusions are a largely unexplored type of evidence for the historical accuracy of the Gospels, though some of them have been individually noticed by commentators. One of the most interesting things about unexplained allusions is that they make for poor fiction, even by the anachronistic standard of modern fiction, and all the more so in an ancient document that did not have a genre precedent of highly realistic fiction. What they do resemble when they occur in narrative or in reported speech is unstudied memoir or oral history, in which the narrator tells what he thinks to mention, drawing from what he believes to be true, without attempting to make it fit into a literary pattern (See McGrew 2021, 350–360). In the Fourth Gospel, this evidence crosses the divide between narrative and the reportage of speech, including Jesus's speech, showing once again that it is an artificial distinction. If John is faithful in recording events, we should also take him to be faithful in recording speech.

John 6:36 provides an example of an unexplained allusion in the words of Jesus. Jesus says, “But I said to you that you have seen Me, and yet do not believe.” As Leon Morris (1969, 159) has noted, we cannot find anywhere earlier in John that Jesus has said this. If the evangelist were given to putting words into Jesus’s mouth, why would he put these words into Jesus’s mouth without also crafting the earlier occurrence of the saying? Or, if these words happen to be historical, but he had no qualms about putting words into Jesus’s mouth, why not craft an earlier occasion on which Jesus says this? It would be (on one understanding) an “authentic” saying to attribute to him on an additional occasion. After all, Jesus himself tells us that he said it earlier. What’s the harm in “making” a scene where he says it earlier if none is otherwise known? But John does not do so. Interestingly enough, this unusual saying occurs in the Bread of Life Discourse, which is strongly Johannine and hence suspect from the perspective of critical scholarship.

Similarly, John 7:37–39, already noted for the fact that it contains a narrator’s aside, contains an unexplained allusion. Jesus says, “He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, ‘From his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water.’” But it is a matter of some conjecture as to what OT text Jesus is referring to. Certainly, there is no single OT text that says what Jesus says here.⁵

If the evangelist feels free to put words into the mouth of Jesus, why record an unclear allusion to Scripture? It would be easy to craft a saying that alludes clearly to a Scripture about the Holy Spirit. For example, Joel 2:28–29 was understood by the early church as being in some sense fulfilled at Pentecost (Acts 2:16ff), and John could have “made” Jesus refer clearly to those verses.

⁵ Keener (2003, 725–728) surveys various scholarly suggestions, focusing on texts that might have been read for the Feast of Tabernacles, such as Zechariah 14:16–21.

Morris puts the matter well:

It is intelligible that Jesus cited Scripture in an unusual fashion. It is not intelligible that someone who was manufacturing the incident would affirm that Jesus ascribed certain words to Scripture, but do it so badly that no one has been able to find the passage. (Morris 1969, 159–160)

Another example occurs in yet another location where critical scholars have cast doubt upon John’s record of Jesus’s speech—namely, John 12:23ff. For Frey (2018, 73–76), the use in this passage of language similar to that in Mark, such as the “hour,” and the resemblance to Jesus’s agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, is evidence that John has ahistorically adapted Mark’s Passion narrative. Frey is struck by the fact that Jesus in John does not go quite so far as to ask the Father that the cup might pass from him, as in Mark; this is allegedly a function of John’s higher Christology. A more positive, but similar, perspective is Keener’s: While (he suggests) John is moving and adapting sayings from a Synoptic-like tradition, putting them into different contexts, at least he is not inventing without *any* historical source (Keener 2003, 873–876).

In both of these approaches, the scene *qua* scene is to some degree invented: Allegedly, Jesus did not recognizably speak in all these ways in the historical context described in John 12. What is left out is the very real possibility that Jesus did think and speak of his Passion using a term like “the hour,” and that he was in mental anguish and mused about his expected crucifixion on more than one occasion, including this one. This would be quite natural as a human matter (Blomberg 2001, 181–182). Since John and the Synoptics are both writing about the same Jesus, they both show

historical knowledge of how he spoke of his death. In other words, Jesus is not “so different” in John and the Synoptics after all.

Evidence for the historical approach to this passage comes from the odd connection between the context and Jesus’s mention of the “hour” in John 12:23—an unexplained allusion. Some Greeks come to Philip asking to see Jesus. When Philip and Andrew ask Jesus if he will see them, John records,

And Jesus answered them, saying, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains by itself alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” (John 12:23–24)

Why does Jesus give this answer to this request? What is it about the approach of Andrew and Philip on behalf of the Greeks that leads him to say that his hour has come? We are not told, nor do we ever learn whether Jesus spoke to the Greeks or what was said at such a meeting. Carson (1991, 436) has suggested, plausibly enough, that Jesus sees the approach of the Greeks as a sign of his “hour” because the Gentiles are seeking him when the Jewish leaders have decisively rejected him. But if this is correct, the narrator leaves out the connection. He does not even explain it by way of a theological aside. He just records what Jesus said. We should consider the very real possibility that he does so because it happened and because he found it striking (if cryptic) and worth telling.

While many unexplained allusions in John are found in the narrative of events, several fascinating ones occur in the words of Jesus. The evidence of unexplained allusions should lead us to suspect that the evangelist’s project is primarily testimonial. Whatever his literary abilities and interests, they are not permitted to get in the way of his testimonial mission.

6. Conclusion

That John elaborates Jesus’s speech, using Jesus as his mouthpiece, and that the presence of Johannine idiom in Jesus’s words is strong evidence for this conclusion has become a scholarly axiom. Often scholars do not pause to spell out the argument from premise to conclusion. Precisely how does Johannine idiom support Johannine elaboration? Separating paraphrase firmly from elaboration and explicitly constructing a category of paraphrase that is historically recognizable both in content and in context is an important step in making our approach to this question rigorous. Next, distinguishing different senses of “Johannine idiom” enables us to tease out the unstated necessary premises for an argument from Johannine idiom to elaboration.

These analytical activities work well together when we encounter the premise, stated or unstated, that the evangelist could not have remembered a connected discourse of the length and type found in several places in the Fourth Gospel. For it is far more plausible that someone remembered a fully recognizable historical paraphrase of such a discourse, uttered on a literal occasion, than that he remembered such a discourse verbatim. Of course, short sayings and passages within a longer discourse could have been remembered verbatim or nearly so, as is generally assumed for the Synoptics.

Finally, positive evidence from the narrative asides and unexplained allusions in Jesus’s speech in the Fourth Gospel point to a far different picture of the evangelist from the one often assumed in critical scholarship. The author of the Fourth Gospel is so scrupulous that we find him explicitly refraining from putting his own words into Jesus’s mouth; that is the evidence of the asides. He also records Jesus’s words even when they raise unanswered questions, leaving them “as-is” for his readers to take or leave;

that is the evidence of unexplained allusions. Why, then, should we think that he ever deliberately elaborated Jesus’s teachings? This argument from unexplained allusions suggests the possibility of further, fruitful research into the relevance of apparent casualness in both the Synoptics and John for our conclusions about historicity. If the evangelists’ project was more testimonial than literary, we may expect to find other “loose ends” left unexplained; this somewhat casual approach to composition would suggest that reporting what really happened, just because they believed it, was of primary importance. While the claim that the Fourth Evangelist never elaborated may be a surprising one in the current scholarly milieu, if we are to be open to the evidence of the text it is a conclusion that deserves serious consideration.

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