

# THE JOHANNINE DISCOURSES AND THE TEACHING OF JESUS IN THE SYNOPTICS

A COMPARATIVE APPROACH TO THE AUTHENTICITY  
OF JESUS' WORDS IN THE FOURTH GOSPEL<sup>1</sup>

Philipp Fabian Bartholomä

The main subject of this dissertation is the correlation between the alleged relationship of the Johannine discourses with the teaching of Jesus in the Synoptics on the one hand and the assessment of the authenticity of Jesus' words in the Fourth Gospel on the other. Generally speaking, the Johannine discourses have received comparatively little attention as reliable and thus valuable sources for the teaching of the historical Jesus, not least owing to the fact that even a cursory glance at John and the Synoptic Gospels reveals obvious differences between how Jesus' words are presented. These differences have frequently been perceived as too great to accept the Johannine discourses as authentic representations of Jesus' teaching, especially when placed alongside Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Chapter one provides a critical review of the literature regarding the question of the authenticity of Jesus' words in the Fourth Gospel. A detailed representation of the history of modern research brings clearly into focus the causality between Johannine-Synoptic relations and the scholarly judgement about the authenticity of the Johannine discourses. Especially those scholars holding a more or less sceptical view of Johannine authenticity frequently based their conviction on an assumed incoherence between how John and the Synoptics present the teaching of Jesus. Yet, even though the relationship between John and the Synoptics seems to be one of the key issues in assessing the authenticity of the Johannine discourses, no sustainable attempt to either support or falsify such an argument based on a thorough investigation of the data has been put forward in the literature. Thus,

---

<sup>1</sup> Philipp Fabian Bartholomä (Ph.D. dissertation, Evangelische Theologische Faculteit of Leuven, Belgium, 2010). Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Armin D. Baum.

the primary purpose of this dissertation is to examine through a detailed comparison whether a negative judgement concerning the authenticity of Jesus' words in the Fourth Gospel can be significantly substantiated by the differences between the two major strands of canonical gospel tradition.

Chapter two is devoted to several methodological considerations. Since the Fourth Gospel itself claims a historical intent, it is argued that the authenticity of the Johannine discourses should be evaluated in light of the standards that existed in ancient historiography. According to contemporary standards, the Johannine discourses should be considered as historically authentic as long as they reliably reproduce the basic substance of the words of Jesus. The insight that differences in wording are not sufficient to argue reasonably for the inauthenticity of the Johannine discourses means that the comparative approach to be employed in the main part of this dissertation has to function not only on a semantic level but also include a rigorous comparison of the conceptual content of Jesus' teaching between John and the Synoptics.

The third chapter studies the two extensive Johannine dialogues with individuals, namely, Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus in John 3:1-21 and his dialogue with the Samaritan woman in John 4:1-30. Regarding the former, the results reveal only a limited degree of verbal conformity with Jesus' synoptic teaching but a significant coherence in meaning and conceptual substance between what Jesus said to Nicodemus and his teaching in the Synoptics. Especially noteworthy are the similarities with reference to key concepts such as the imperative of new birth (3:3, 5 par. Matt. 18:3 and Mark 10:15), the importance of personal faith in Jesus (3:14-15 par. Matt. 19:28 pars.), and the emphasis on Jesus as the Saviour who gives eternal life to those who believe (John 3:16-18 par. Matt. 19:28 pars.; Luke 19:10). Similarly, Jesus' dialogue with the Samaritan woman, though stated in uniquely Johannine language, has a good amount of Jesus' teaching at its conceptual core that resembles his reported words in the Synoptic Gospels. Central motifs inherent in John 4 as well as in the Synoptics include the emphasis on Jesus' identity as the true source of salvation (4:10, 13-14, 26 par. Matt. 9:6 pars., 19:28-29 pars.; Mark 14:62 pars.), the foundational role of Judaism in salvation history (4:22 par. Matt. 5:14, 8:11-12), and the inauguration of a new salvific age in the person and ministry of Jesus (4:23 par. Matt. 11:4-5; 12:6; Mark 13:2 pars.).

The fourth chapter examines two Johannine discourses addressed to the Jewish public. The results of the comparative study of the Bread of Life discourse in John 6:22-59 does not support the scholarly claim of staggering dissimilarities between this Johannine discourse and Jesus' teaching in the Synoptics. Not showing close semantic proximity to Jesus' words in the other three canonical Gospels, the main teachings of the discourse are not idiosyncratic to the Fourth Gospel. Among the elements that fit well with synoptic material is the unique role of the Son in the work of salvation (6:27b, 27c, 40 par. Matt. 16:27 etc.), the envoy-Christology (6:29b, 33, 35b, 37b, 40, 47, 50-51, 53-56, 58 par. Mark 10:45 par. Matt. 20:28 etc.), and the Father as the ultimate source of redemption (6:32b, 37a, 44a, 45c par. Matt. 10:26-27; Matt. 11:27 par. Luke 10:22; Luke 12:32 etc.). The findings of the comparison between the Light of the World discourse in John 8:12-59 and Jesus' teaching in the Synoptics are also not in agreement with the perceived gap between the Johannine and the Synoptic Jesus. Major themes of this discourse are conceptually paralleled in the Synoptic Gospels, such as Jesus' invitation to follow the truth and to thereby receive eternal life (8:12, 24, 31, 32, 51 par. Matt. 19:28-29 pars.; Matt. 11:29; Luke 8:8, 15 etc.) and the identity of Jesus as the sent one who truly knows and obeys the Father (8:14a-c, 16a-b, 18b, 23b, 28a-c, 29a-b, 38a, 40b, 42b, 55b par. Matt. 11:27 par. Luke 10:22; Matt. 26:39, 42 pars. etc.). In addition, even certain motifs that have been frequently designated as secondary developments of the Johannine community, like Jesus' preexistence or the portrayal of his severe clash with the Jewish public, are echoed in John's synoptic counterparts.

The fifth chapter investigates the first unit of Jesus' Farewell Discourse addressed to his disciples in John 14:1-31. The comparison with Jesus' synoptic teaching yields results scarcely different from what was encountered in the two preceding chapters. Though many consider the content of the Farewell Discourse as being ultimately rooted not in the teaching of Jesus but rather in the theology of the Johannine community owing to supposed inconsistencies between John and the Synoptics, the findings do not seem to support such a claim. Once again, we found that, while the verbal agreement between John 14:1-31 and Jesus' synoptic teaching is certainly not very remarkable, the observable overlap in content make the supposed differences between Jesus' words of farewell and synoptic speech material difficult to substantiate. None of the Johannine utterances

appear to contradict the synoptic teaching of Jesus, rather the most important theological themes permeating this first unit of the Farewell Discourse find parallels in Matthew, Mark, or Luke, e.g. Jesus' announcement to go away in order to provide access to the Father (14:2-3, 4, 6, 25, 29 par. Matt. 20:23 par. Mark 10:40; 13:23; 14:21 pars.; Luke 24:44 et al.), the possibility of encountering the Father in the person and ministry of Jesus (14:7 [also 9a-b, 10a-b] par. Matt. 11:27 par. Luke 10:22), the challenge to pray expectantly (14:13a, 14 par. Matt. 7:7 par. Luke 11:9; Mark 11:24 par. Matt. 21:22), and not least the promise of the Spirit-paraclete (14:16, 26 par. Luke 24:49; Mark 13:9-11 pars.).

Chapter six summarises the main results of the study and comes to the general conclusion that a negative judgement concerning the authenticity of Jesus' words in the Fourth Gospel cannot be sustained by assumed differences between the two major strands of canonical gospel tradition. While much of Jesus' teaching in the Fourth Gospel is expressed in uniquely Johannine idiom, most of it has a more or less close conceptual parallel in the Synoptics. Thus, at least for the discourses covered in this study (i.e. John 3:1-21; 4:1-30; 6:22-59; 8:12-59; 14:1-31), the significant correlations with the words of the Synoptic Jesus show that the theological content of Jesus' teaching is consistently reproduced between John and Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In and of itself this does not demonstrate the general authenticity of the Johannine discourses, but the comparative results of this dissertation seem to suggest a more positive evaluation of the historical credibility of the words of Jesus in the Gospel of John.

The seventh chapter offers a more specific characterisation of the nature of the differences and similarities encountered between how John and the Synoptics render the words of Jesus. When juxtaposed against the teaching of Jesus in the Synoptics, the Johannine discourses seem to be especially characterised by three peculiar literary traits: significant repetition as a means to communicate the message, a semantically reduced presentation of dominical doctrine through a stronger concentration on particular keywords, and a noticeable tendency for abstraction, which includes frequent generalisations, the reduction of particulars to key concepts and the omission of vivid detail. Further, with regard to theological content, the development undergone by the Johannine discourses in comparison with the teaching of Jesus in the Synoptics can be (most importantly but not

exclusively) described along four lines: the Johannine discourses are more explicit regarding Jesus' christological identity, they focus more clearly on Jesus as the essential object of faith, they put greater emphasis on life as a present soteriological reality, and they contain a dualistic emphasis that shows certain differences with the synoptic outlook.

The final chapter reflects on several historical issues of importance for giving a general evaluation of the authenticity of the Johannine discourses. Noting that the approach employed in this study does not have the potential to demonstrate positively the historical reliability of the Fourth Gospel's discourses, it was argued that an overall assessment of the value of Johannine-synoptic relations is strongly dependent on the degree of authenticity ascribed to the synoptic sayings used as parallels for the Johannine discourses we examined. Further, it was noted that our confidence in the authenticity of the Johannine discourses increases, (a) if we estimate positively the historical reliability of the non-discourse material in the Fourth Gospel, (b) if we consider the author of the Fourth Gospel as an eye- and earwitness of Jesus' teaching who had indeed the ability to report accurately, and (c) if we reckon with a general willingness among the earliest Christians to preserve reliably dominical teaching tradition rather than creatively produce sayings of Jesus. In contrast, if we are sceptical regarding the ability and willingness of the Fourth Evangelist (and his community) to report historical truth, we will have little reason to anticipate finding a significant amount of authentic Jesus tradition in the Johannine discourses.