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HISTORICAL TRADITION IN THE FOURTH GOSPEL: A RESPONSE TO J.S. KING

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I am very grateful to J.S. King and his article, 'Has D.A. Carson been Fair to C.H. Dodd?', for taking the time in the pages of this journal[1] to interact thoughtfully with my essay, 'Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel: After Dodd, What?'[2] In so doing he has helped me to clarify some of my own thinking. King has not been ungenerous in his treatment of my essay; but he contends that 'notwithstanding the valuable criticism Carson has made of Dodd's position, he has not been fair to C.H. Dodd' (pp. 101f.).

The first and most serious charge King levels (p. 97) arises from my statement, 'Dodd does not so much assess the historical reliability of this little snippet or that, as assess the historical reliability of the underlying traditions' (p. 84). 'This statement', King writes (p. 97), 'is correct in its first clause but its second clause asserts precisely what Dodd claims he is not doing'. King cites Dodd (*HTFG*, p. 432) to the effect that the Johannine tradition he mapped out would one day have to be worked up into a *historical* reconstruction; for the historical Jesus is 'the great end of our studies'; but *HTFG* itself, King argues, is not concerned with questions of historicity, but only with establishing the *independence* of the Johannine tradition from the Synoptic tradition. Thus, I am charged with treating *HTFG* as if it were the 'great end', instead of one step along the way.

In my view King has misunderstood both Dodd in *HTFG* and my essay. It is true that Dodd's *first* concern is whether or not the Johannine tradition is independent of the Synoptic tradition; but it is not his only concern. This is made clear from four factors: (1) Again

and again Dodd suggests that the Johannine tradition on some point or other is more historical than its Synoptic counterpart. King recognizes this, of course; but he therefore criticizes Dodd for going 'beyond the strict limits that he set himself' (p. 97). Not so: Dodd had more than one general purpose in view. The 'strict limits' are King's, not Dodd's. (2) Dodd did not title his book *The Independence of Johannine Traditions* or the like, but *Historical Traditions in the Fourth Gospel*. King's attempt to fence off historical considerations not only charges Dodd with inconsistency but with a misleading choice of titles. (3) Dodd constantly distinguishes between redaction and tradition. But since for Dodd that which is traditional is historical (however faulty that presupposition may be, since theoretically tradition might be fabrication and redaction may preserve bits of history independent of the tradition), the very structure of Dodd's argument deals with the historical. (4) King has demonstrably misunderstood Dodd in the 'great end' quotation referred to above (p. 432 of *HTFG*). King interprets this to mean that *HTFG* was, at least in theory, uninterested in historical questions, which therefore lay *beyond HTFG* as the 'great end' of further study into the 'quest of the historical Jesus'. In fact, careful reading of the two or three pages leading up to this concluding paragraph of *HTFG* reveals something quite different. The 'traditional material' (*HTFG*, p. 431) that Dodd believes he has retrieved from the Fourth Gospel is by Dodd's usage historical material. What lies beyond *HTFG*, according to Dodd, are two steps: first, a comparison of this 'strain of tradition recovered from the Fourth Gospel' with other strains, 'corroborating or supplementing them, correcting them or being corrected by them, and of being in the end, perhaps, integrated into a consistent picture of the facts as they were handed down by the first witnesses'; and second, once we recognize that even this step (not *HTFG*!) is 'not the end of the task', we may then set this broader tradition 'in its total historical environment, by the use of all available evidence'. It is 'these larger tasks' which Dodd avows he has 'not essayed in this book' (p. 432). In other words, Dodd sees two tasks beyond *HTFG*, if the 'quest of the historical Jesus' is to be prosecuted properly: the careful comparison of the *historical* tradition he has retrieved from the Fourth Gospel with other historical traditions; and an integration of the result with its 'total historical environment'. But nowhere does he suggest that the only thing *HTFG* has accomplished is the isolation of Johannine tradition from the Synoptics, without reference to the historicity of

that tradition, requiring therefore that another stage be embarked upon, viz. the assessment of the Johannine tradition he has isolated to weigh how much of it is historical.

Because King has misinterpreted Dodd on this point, he has likewise misinterpreted the sentence in my essay, quoted above: 'Dodd does not so much assess the historical reliability of this little snippet or that, as assess the historical reliability of the underlying traditions'. By this I mean that Dodd does not proceed as do many redaction critics of the Synoptics, arguing that such and such a word or phrase is redactional, the next is historical, and so forth. Rather he is more of a form critic than a (in this sense) redaction critic. Despite the remarkable detail of his book, Dodd's tendency is to retrieve broad swathes of historical tradition, rather than snippets. My essay noted exceptions; but the generalization is sound. King's charge that my treatment of Dodd at this point is 'one serious defect' (p. 97) in my discussion reduces to his own misreading of Dodd. To coin a title, 'Has J.S. King Been Fair to C.H. Dodd?'

At this point, King raises questions about several of the 'theses' I put forward in my essay. In the first, I tried to wrestle with the problem of hidden 'non-negotiables' that can distort any scholar's work; and I applied my argument to a number of problems, including various efforts to describe or define 'history'. King's complaint in this case is that I failed to make clear, from *other* works composed by Dodd, exactly what Dodd's view of history was.

Perhaps I should have included such allusions; but they would not have altered anything that I actually wrote. I applied this first thesis to several scholars from across the theological spectrum; and in one case the test issue I used was the definition of 'history'. But in no way did I apply *this particular* problem of 'preunderstanding' or 'non-negotiable' to Dodd; and therefore I am not certain why I should have introduced *his* understanding of history at this point. The two points on which I do suggest that Dodd betrays hidden non-negotiables are rather adjacent to the problem of the definition of history. In the first, I referred to Kysar's valuable essay[3] comparing Bultmann's and Dodd's use of parallels when these two great scholars treat the prologue. The overlap is only about 7%; both scarcely touch rabbinic parallels; and the criteria for the use of evidence are substantially different. My point was that an unrecognized methodological problem lies behind the two results. The second place I interacted with Dodd was in his statement that he

could not see any way of identifying traditional (i.e. historical) materials in the Fourth Gospel 'where comparison with the other gospels fails us, without giving undue weight to subjective impressions' (*HTFG*, p. 431; Carson, pp. 102f.). My point of contention is not with Dodd's *definition* of history, but with what I called 'a terribly limiting methodological non-negotiable. Does he accept as historical in extra-biblical ancient sources only that which is attested independently elsewhere?' (Carson, p. 103). So again, I am uncertain why King thinks I *should* have included a definition irrelevant to my discussion.

The second thesis in my essay, as King points out, reads as follows: 'The barrier commonly erected between history and theology is not only false, but is methodologically indefensible' (p. 104). In the course of my argument (pp. 103-107) I pointed out that Dodd finds himself defending a pair of mutually contradictory positions: *viz.* (1) that whereas the Gospel of John is essentially concerned with theology, the Evangelist nevertheless finds it important to narrate what actually happened; and (2) that the Evangelist felt free to modify facts in order to bring out meaning. It would be easy to provide many more examples than my essay actually listed; but no matter, for King graciously accepts that this is a fair criticism of Dodd. He feels, however, that my discussion would have been 'more satisfactory' if I had shown, from Dodd's other writings, 'that Dodd's usual principle was that there can be no specifically Christian revelation without historical events . . . [Carson] has in fact drawn our attention to an aberration from Dodd's classical position; Dodd would normally have accepted Carson's second thesis' (p. 99).

My response is twofold. First, at one level King is right: I did not attempt to examine all of Dodd's thought in the area, but focused on its manifestation in *HTFG* and, to a lesser extent, in *Interpretation*.[4] But King acknowledges the validity of my criticism of Dodd in so far as I discussed him; and as I have already pointed out, my purpose was to deal with certain methodological problems in approaching the Fourth Gospel, as exemplified in various works by Dodd and others—*not* to give an exhaustive treatment of all of Dodd's thoughts. King's charge, in other words, is that I failed to write an article on a slightly different topic from the one I chose. Second, and more important, I think King is confusing two issues. My second thesis dealt with the methodological problems arising out of an invalid theoretical opposition between what is historical and what is

theological; and King replies that Dodd himself regularly acknowledges that Christian revelation (and presumably therefore Christian *theology* as well) rests on a basis in *history*. Well and good; but King's observation misses my point. After all, most New Testament scholars other than the most extreme existentialists cheerfully acknowledge that Christian theology rests on *some* sort of historical base; and Dodd was a long way from history-reducing existentialism (and even Bultmann had his *dass*!). My second thesis, however, is not concerned merely to affirm that Christian theology must in some sense be rooted in history (though I believe that to be true, and concur that Dodd would agree with such a proposition), but rather to point out that the attempt to discover what is historical in (in this instance) the Johannine tradition by stripping off the theological elements is methodologically indefensible. I gave a number of examples, secular and otherwise, to demonstrate that if an author passionately holds to the correctness of a particular interpretation of some event, or if he tenaciously believes in the historicity of some event because of a predisposition motivated by other convictions, it does not necessarily follow that the event is fictitious or that his interpretation of it is false. King fails to address this question, and unwittingly substitutes another in its place—which my paper did not address. That Dodd was sometimes guilty of the methodological problem I was discussing cannot seriously be called into question: *HTFG*, to a lesser extent *Interpretation*, and many of his published form-critical papers seek to establish what *really* happened by beginning with this history/theology disjunction. To quote one example of many scores: 'The extent to which the [passion] narrative has been subjected to the influence of the specifically Johannine theology is confined to a few (readily separable) passages . . . ' True, when Dodd detects Johannine theology in some pericope, he usually argues that *behind* that pericope there is historical tradition on which the evangelist worked (e.g. see *HTFG*, p. 76); but even to phrase himself that way shows Dodd has succumbed to an unfortunate methodological disjunction.

Part of the problem, I think, is that Dodd, both in *HTFG* and in many of his smaller and more generalizing books, uses 'conservative' language to defend the historicity of some event behind the narrative in the text; and this language is wrongly interpreted to mean that Dodd is far more conservative with respect to questions of history than he actually is. The historical kernel he detects is not infrequently far removed from the impression given by a straightforward reading

of the text. The point is well recognized by Beare's thoughtful review of *HTFG*,[5] cited at length in my essay (pp. 92-94); but my point here is that insofar as Dodd utilizes the history/theology disjunction to isolate his historical kernel, he utilizes a tool inadequate for the task (whether his conclusions be right or wrong on other grounds). That this is the burden of my second thesis, in its application to Dodd, seems to escape King.

King next mentions my fifth thesis, which deals with various inadequacies of form-critical arguments which seek to serve questions of historicity. King seems to be saying (p. 99) that my observations are correct in themselves, but wrongly applied to Dodd. True, as King points out, Dodd himself mentions some of the weaknesses of form criticism, and in various places phrases himself in a kind of ambiguous language that makes him appear more conservative than he is (who would disagree with Dodd's statement that the tradition has been 'shaped and coloured by the conditions, interests and needs of various groups within the community at various times' [*HTFG*, p. 7; cited by King, p. 99]?); but does the 'shaping' and 'colouring' extend to the creation of material which has every appearance of being as historical as the historical kernel he isolates? The evangelists do not create *ex nihilo*, he rightly affirms; but in his handling of form criticism, their 'shaping' and 'colouring' include creation, if not *ex nihilo*, then out of a theologically motivated desire to use the (historical) tradition to meet their need. The Jesus Dodd retrieves from the Fourth Gospel did not talk to a ruler of the Jews about regeneration; nor did he converse with a Samaritan woman about God's spirit-nature; nor did he deliver a discourse to the crowds about his descent from heaven as the bread of life; and so forth. In each case, of course, Dodd insists that there is some historical kernel in the background—a much more believable approach than that of, say, Bultmann. But it appears to me that King reads Dodd's generalizing statements with conservative blinkers, and fails to appreciate the way Dodd himself actually *uses* the form-critical tools he describes with due caution. As my essay points out, it is Dodd's *use* of the tools that raises methodological questions.

Again, I referred to recent work by Schürmann and Ellis on the sociologically believable view that written notes of Jesus' teaching were taken during his lifetime; and I asked, 'Suppose Schürmann and Ellis are right, as I think they are: how would Dodd modify his argument?' (p. 114). King rightly points out (p. 100) that Dodd

himself reflected on the possibility of written *aides-mémoire* (*HTFG*, p. 424), and that he went on to say: '. . . such written sources may have intervened between the strictly oral tradition and our Fourth Gospel. If so, I am not concerned with them; I am trying to discover where, if at all, the finished work still betrays the existence and character of the oral tradition upon which, whether directly or through the medium of written memoranda, it depends' (p. 424). Probably I should have unpacked my rhetorical question, 'How would Dodd modify his argument?', a little more; indeed, I shall do so in a moment. But King's mention of Dodd's last-minute allowance for *aides-mémoire* entirely misses my point. Dodd allows for the possibility of such written notes *intervening between* the oral tradition and the Fourth Gospel; i.e. the oral stage still occupies the determinative role in shaping the tradition. This is the necessary presupposition of form criticism as it developed from Gunkel onwards. But Schürmann and Ellis are advocating something different: they are suggesting that there were *aides-mémoire* from the earliest stages, from the time of the teaching of the historical Jesus. In other words, although oral tradition doubtless played a role *alongside* written records, under their reconstruction there was *never* a period when oral tradition exercised, as it were, a free hand. But if this be so, then what happens to the discipline of form criticism? Classic form criticism always suffered from disabilities too seldom recognized (e.g. the shortness of the period between the historical Jesus and the canonical gospels, as compared with parallels drawn from elsewhere, such as the Maori civilization); but what sort of blow does it receive if there never was an exclusively oral period? I am not certain of the answers; phoenix-like, it might return in another guise with more stress on *literary* forms. Be that as it may, the kind of form criticism on which Dodd depends would have to be judged not only faulty for intrinsic reasons, but in this area of research principally obsolete. I repeat my question: If Schürmann, Ellis and others are substantially right, how would Dodd modify his argument? King's failure to distinguish between the kind of *aides-mémoire* to which Dodd makes reference and the position I was advancing vitiates his ensuing discussion about 'fluid' and 'fossilised' tradition.

King's treatment of my seventh thesis acknowledges the validity of my argument that Dodd frequently decides on what is historical on the basis of a theoretical reconstruction of the history of early Christianity, a reconstruction that rules out the *possibility* that a

certain event is historical or a certain logion authentic. The criterion is fundamentally subjective and ideologically based if we have no access to the actual history other than through the source documents whose credibility we are calling into question. I am assuming, of course, that there is no fundamental contradiction within the sources, or some other clearly defined problem, but simply a clash between a theoretical reconstruction of history and the documents themselves. King acknowledges that some of Dodd's judgments are ideologically based, but seeks to defuse the force of the argument by saying that all methodologies are ideologically based—including that of Carson, he says, who argues that 'it is methodically superior to suppose that what happened is much bigger than any presentation, and certainly big enough to support the presentation of both the fourth gospel and that of the synoptics [in the test cases I was using]' (King, p. 101; Carson, p. 121). I take King's point: we all approach any text with the total perspective we have adopted as a result of all previous experiences. But phrased as baldly as King puts it, this would mean that no presupposition can ever be changed by further interaction with evidence, or that all presuppositions are equally valid or invalid, or even, in the extreme, that scholars cannot possibly learn enough from one another to change their views. I refer him again to my treatment of 'non-negotiables' earlier in the article (pp. 100-104). But if King does not mean to say so much, what is the force of his criticism at this point? I agree that 'all methodologies are ideologically based'; but I was arguing in my essay that Dodd's 'ideology' at this point is *faulty*, because he fails to reckon with several demonstrable characteristics of the documents. I shall not repeat those arguments here; but King, it must be said, has not addressed them.

My genuine thanks go to King for prompting me to think through these matters again, and for affording me the incentive and opportunity to clarify the positions I hold at this point in my pilgrimage. Nevertheless, I cannot forbear to raise one more rhetorical question, in adaptation of his own: 'Has J.S. King been fair to D.A. Carson?'

NOTES

1. 'Has D.A. Carson Been Fair to C.H. Dodd?', *JSNT* 17 (1983), pp. 97-102.

2. D.A. Carson, 'Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel: After Dodd, What?', *Gospel Perspectives II* (ed. R.T. France and David Wenham; Sheffield: JSOT, 1981), pp. 83-145.

3. R. Kysar, 'The Background of the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel: A Critique of Historical Methods', *Canadian Journal of Theology* 16 (1970), pp. 250-55.

4. C.H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: University Press, 1953).

5. F.W. Beare, review of *HTFG* in *NTS* 10 (1964), pp. 517-22.