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Jesus and His 'Works': The Johannine Sayings in Historical Perspective

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In this slightly modified reproduction of a doctoral dissertation prepared under the direction of Ruth B. Edwards and submitted to the University of Aberdeen in 1993, Ensor examines afresh the extent to which the Fourth Gospel preserves reliable representations of Jesus' teaching by focusing attention on one small block of sayings, namely, those in which Jesus speaks of his "works."

The first chapter is a brief but competent survey of some of the usual introductory matters. The author of the Fourth Gospel was either an eyewitness of Jesus and his ministry or a close associate of an eyewitness. This author wrote independently of the Synoptic Gospels and passed on tradition not represented there. That Johannine tradition *may* in part have been tied up in a "signs source," but this cannot be proved and in any case this source has been so incorporated into the Fourth Gospel as a whole that its precise boundaries can no longer be established. The author probably worked on the Gospel for a long period of time, and it was subject to further alterations after it left his hands. But Ensor's chief argument from this survey is that none of these points means that the Fourth Gospel contains nothing "authentic" from the ministry of the historical Jesus.

Up to this point Ensor has put "authentic" and "authenticity" in quotation marks. In his second chapter he discusses the notion of authenticity without reference to John. Here he spells out three levels of authenticity: actual words of Jesus in Jesus' own tongue (which he assumes to be Aramaic--*ipsissima verba* in the strictest sense) ; a close translation of those words; and a loose representation of those words, whether in summary, paraphrase, or "interpretative clarification." These are not entirely discrete levels; rather, they are points along a spectrum. Ensor argues that all three levels of authenticity are found in the Gospels, and an initial presumption that the Gospels contain a roughly reliable guide to Jesus' teaching is justifiable. The looser kinds of representation may be justified "by

comparing their content with sayings which may reliably be assigned a stricter type of authenticity” (p. 47).

In chapter 3, Ensor begins with a brief survey of source-critical and style analysis of the Fourth Gospel, covering familiar ground. Then he focuses his attention on OT quotations. The author’s handling of these quotations “offers us a unique paradigm of the way he handled a source which he believed expressed the word of God” (p. 83). The divergent ways the OT is handled, from exact quotation to considerable freedom, corresponds with the different levels of “authenticity” discussed in the second chapter. Some OT quotations that are verbally quite distant from the original nevertheless may tell us something about those originals, or how they were perceived--and in the same way we should expect the same range of treatments to be applied to the author’s handling of the sayings of Jesus.

Ensor devotes chapter 4 to articulating and plausibly defending the proposition that *)/ergon* and *)erg/azomai* in the Fourth Gospel “reflect Jesus’ original style of speech” (p. 96). Chapters 5 through 9 then work through the relevant passages: John 9:3b- 4 (chapter 5); 4:34; 17:4 (chapter 6); 5:17 (chapter 7); 5:19-20 (chapter 8); 5:36; 10:25, 32, 37-38; 14:10- 11; 15:24 (chapter 9). The shape of the argument varies a little from chapter to chapter, but critical to the presentation are the links Ensor draws between these Johannine sayings and certain motifs in synoptic sayings that are commonly given a high authenticity rating among scholars today: Jesus’ consciousness of God being his Father in some special sense, and therefore of his awareness of being God’s son in some special sense; his habit of speaking with absolute authority, often in utterances presaged by “Amen”; his belief that he had been “sent” by God, with a powerful sense of destiny, urgency, and obedience; his belief that he had the right to override scribal regulations regarding the sabbath; his fundamental conviction that he was bearing witness to who he was, such that those around were expected to recognize his messianic role. In addition, each chapter includes a brief statement of the exegesis of the relevant passage(s) in the patristic period. The Johannine passages treated in chapter 9 are also compared with Matt 11:2-6; Luke 7:18-23, which constitutes “evidence that the historical Jesus did in fact think in these terms” (p. 246). As an example of Ensor’s conclusions, in chapter 9 he argues that although none of the sayings of Jesus treated there “can be shown to stand in a close relationship with Jesus’ original words, they yet contain many basic motifs which can be traced back to him. To a very large extent, therefore, they can be shown to share in what we have called a type ‘c’ authenticity [loose representation or summary]” (p. 261).

The final chapter summarizes Ensor’s findings. Some Johannine works-sayings stand in close relationship with the words of Jesus (9:4; 4:34; 5:17; 5:19-20a); others are more remote but still “authentic.” The patristic contribution was to take statements about the works of Jesus being the works of God (which in the Johannine context refer to the works of the ostensibly historical Jesus, however many the hints of something more) and

explicitly stretch the connection to include the works of the Son and of the Father *in eternity*. Ensor ends with two appendices. The first refutes the source theory of Urban C. von Wahlde, since it is tied to a particular interpretation of *)/ergon* and *)/erga* which, if correct, would vitiate Ensor's work. The second looks at 10:37-38 more closely, against a background of Jewish sources.

The work is competently carried out within the methodological constraints Ensor has imposed upon himself. John's treatment of Scripture as a model for his treatment of Jesus-sayings has been suggested before; what is new is the detailed application of this test to a small group of sayings, with thematic parallels drawn to synoptic sayings. Scholars less happy with finding so much "authentic" material in the Fourth Gospel may think that Ensor tends to read current critical positions rather more optimistically than the reality warrants. Ensor's methods reflect a fairly traditional approach to matters of authenticity but are removed both from questions of *Sitz im Leben* and of more recent literary criticism.