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Peter W. Ensor

The Authenticity of John 12.24

Dr Ensor, who is now teaching at the Presbyterian Seminary in Kumba, Cameroon, here takes further the approach to the authenticity of Johannine texts that he developed in his doctoral monograph (see fn. 5 below).

Key words: New Testament; John; John 12.24; authenticity; historical Jesus.

‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.’

1. Introduction

John 12.24 purports to relate a saying of Jesus spoken during the final week of his life on earth. It is found in a section of John’s narrative (12.20-36) which immediately follows his record of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem (12.1-19) and which opens with the request of some ‘Greeks’ (i.e. Gentiles) to see Jesus (12.20f.).¹ Philip and Andrew take this request to Jesus (12.22) and Jesus responds with a discourse which runs from v. 23 to v. 28a, and which is followed by some exchanges between Jesus and the crowd.

Most scholars view vv. 24-26 as an insertion into a basically Johannine framework provided by characteristically Johannine references to Jesus’ death as the hour of his glory (12.23, 27f.). This view is supported by the fact that vv. 24-26, in contrast to vv. 23, 27f., bear a strong Synoptic stamp, with vv. 25f. in particular having various close Synoptic parallels (cf. Mk. 8.35/Mt. 16.25/Lk. 9.24, Mt. 10.39, Lk. 17.33 for v. 25, and Mk. 8.34/Mt. 16.24 for v. 26). Moreover, v. 24 potentially, and vv. 25f. actually, have a broader reference than one which refers to the coming death of Jesus; and the theme of glory being revealed *in* death, or the loss of one’s self, as opposed to *after* it, is conspicuously absent. We would be justified, therefore, in taking

1 E.g. R.E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 1.471; R. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971), 420; B. Lindars, *The Gospel of John* (London: Oliphants, 1972), 426f.; G.R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (Waco: Word, 1987), 207. Whether vv. 24-26 were inserted at the time of the initial writing of the Gospel, as Lindars thinks, or later, is immaterial for our purposes.

vv. 24-26 as made up of originally independent sayings which the author has added into his narrative at this point.

If we now look at vv. 24-26 as a separate unit, we see that whereas vv. 25f. have close parallels in the Synoptic tradition (even if put in reverse order to that found in Mk. 8.34f./Mt. 16.24f./Lk. 9.23f.), v. 24 has no such parallel. We are therefore led to consider the origin of this saying, and to ask whether it could possibly be a genuine saying of Jesus which found its way into John's Gospel but which, for some reason, never made it into the Synoptic Gospels.

Opinions have differed on this question over the years. On the one hand, J. Jeremias was confident that no objection could be raised to the genuineness of this saying.² This view was more cautiously supported by B. Lindars who said that the parable was 'probably' a genuine saying of Jesus.³ On the other hand, however, R. Schnackenburg said that John 'most likely composed it himself'.⁴ Other scholars seem reluctant to commit themselves to one position or the other. In the light of this variety of opinion, it is the purpose of this article to examine the evidence for the authenticity of John 12.24 in accordance with the commonly recognised criteria for authenticity,⁵ with a view to ascertaining which opinion stands closest to the truth.

2. The Authenticity of John 12.24

As already stated, this saying is not multiply attested. Though it has a certain resemblance with certain Synoptic sayings attributed to Jesus, as we shall see, none of these can count as a direct parallel. We are left then with the criteria of Language, Culture, and Personal Idiom; Coherence; Dissimilarity; and Anti-Redactional Features.

2.1 Language, Culture, and Personal Idiom

Under this heading the following points should be noted:

(a). The opening formula *amēn amēn legō humin* is commonly recognised on the basis of the Synoptic evidence to be one that the historical Jesus used (at least with a single *amēn*).⁶

However, the frequency of its use in the fourth gospel, together with its use with sayings which bear a strong Johannine stamp, sug-

2 J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* ((London: SCM Press, 1972), 220 n. 59.

3 Lindars, *op. cit.*, 428.

4 R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 2.384.

5 Particularly as explained and defended in P.W. Ensor, *Jesus and his 'Works' - the Johannine Sayings in Historical Perspective* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1996), 40-47.

6 For argumentation see Ensor, *op. cit.*, 201f. and the literature cited there.

gests that the author used it fairly indiscriminately to introduce important sayings, whether or not the formula was originally attached to them.

Whereas, therefore, the formula should be regarded as authentic in itself, its original connection with the parable which follows is less certain, and is not something for which this article will contend.

(a). Regarding the wording of the parable in the main part of the verse, the following points should be noted

(i). The word *kokkos* is found in Jesus' speech in the Synoptic gospels at Mk. 4.31/Mt. 13.31/ Lk. 13.19 (the parable of the mustard seed) and at Mt. 17.20/Lk. 17.6 (the saying about faith as a grain of mustard seed), i.e. in both Mark and Q.⁷

(ii). The word *sitos* is found in Jesus' speech in the Synoptic Gospels at Mk. 4.28 (the parable of the seed growing secretly), Mt. 13.25, 29f. (the parable of the wheat and the tares), Lk. 12.18 (the parable of the rich fool), 16.7 (the parable of the unjust steward), and 22.31 (Jesus' words to Peter), i.e. in Mark, M and L.

(iii). The words *piptō* and *gē* are both in common use throughout the New Testament, but it is worth noting that in combination they are found in Jesus' speech at Mk. 4.8/Mt. 13.8/Lk. 8.8 (the parable of the sower), and Mt. 10.29 (of sparrows falling to the ground – though this may be redactional since the Lukan parallel does not have these words).

(iv). The words *karpos* and *pherō* are both in common use throughout the New Testament, but it is worth noting that out of the 66 occurrences of the word *karpos* in the New Testament 41 occur in speech attributed to Jesus (in Mt. 17 out of 19 times, in Mk. in all 5 occurrences, in Lk. 9 out of 12 times, in Jn. in all 10 occurrences), and that in combination they are found in Jesus' speech at Mk. 4.8, and possibly at Mt. 7.18.⁸ Moreover, the verb *karpophoreō* occurs in Jesus' speech at Mk. 4.20/Mt. 13.23/Lk. 8.15 and Mk. 4.28.

(v). All other major words used in the parable are quite common throughout the New Testament as a whole, including Jesus' speech as recorded in the Synoptic Gospels. This is true even of the favourite Johannine word *menō*, to which we will return in section 2.4 below.

From the parable's wording, therefore, we may note that there is

7 Even though the authenticity of some of the Synoptic sayings cited in this article may be questioned by some, I believe the cumulative effect of the evidence used to be sufficient to support the basic points being made.

8 This is the reading of several MSS. The preferred reading of the 27th edition of the Nestle-Aland text is now *karpous poiein*, but this makes little difference to the point being made here. For the virtual synonymy of the two expressions, note how the LXX of Hos. 9.16 translates 'yield fruit' with *karpon enenghēi*.

nothing to exclude it from the realm of authenticity, and, in the light of the Synoptic evidence, several strong indications that it belongs naturally to the corpus of genuinely dominical sayings.

(b). The very fact that this saying is in the form of a parable immediately places it naturally within the ministry of the historical Jesus, who indisputably used the parabolic method as one of his major tools of instruction. Moreover, the fact that this is a parable with an agricultural setting binds it naturally with the many other similar parables attributed to Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels (especially those connected with seeds or sowing as in Mk. 4.1-20 parr., 26-29, 30-32 parr., Mt. 13.24-30).

(c). If we look more closely into the structure of the parable, we note that a similar conditional structure is used in Mt. 5.13 and Mk. 3.24, and that the use of contrasting conditions is paralleled in the parabolic material found at Mt. 6.22f.⁹ More generally, it is to be noted that the use of antithetical parallelism is commonly acknowledged to be one of the characteristics of the teaching of the historical Jesus.¹⁰

We have seen, then, that, as far as its vocabulary, form, and personal idiom is concerned John 12.24 fits naturally into Jesus' ministry, as far as we can reasonably reconstruct it from the evidence provided by the Synoptic Gospels. This being so, there is no need to argue further that it also fits naturally into 1st century Jewish culture generally. What now may be said about the saying's content? This brings us to the second criterion:

2.2 Coherence

It has already been remarked that v. 24 potentially has a broader reference than one which refers to the coming death of Jesus, and this is true especially if it was originally an independent saying.¹¹ We need to ask, therefore, whether the content of the saying fits naturally into Jesus' teaching when applied firstly to himself, and secondly to those who would follow him. In both cases the answer is in the affirmative:

(a). As applied to Jesus, the saying essentially tells us that his coming death on the cross is necessary if he is to 'bear fruit'. The necessity of Jesus' death in the plan of God is a constantly repeated motif in the Synoptic record of Jesus' teaching (cf. Mk. 8.31/Mt. 16.21/Lk. 9.22, Mk. 9.12, 9.31/Mt. 17.22f./Lk. 9.44, Mk. 10.33f./Mt. 20.18f./Lk. 18.31-33, Mk. 14.21/Mt. 26.24/Lk. 22.22, Mt. 26.54, Lk.

9 Points made by C.H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: CUP, 1963), 366f.; Brown, *op. cit.*, 1.471.

10 As demonstrated by C. F. Burney, *The Poetry of our Lord* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1925), 83f.; J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1971), 14-20.

13.33, 17.25, 22.37, i.e. occurring in Mk., M and L). Moreover, there is much to suggest that Jesus believed that his death would be a source of blessing to others (cf. Mk. 10.45/Mt. 20.28, Mk. 12.1-12/Mt. 21.33-46/Lk. 20.9-19, Mk. 14.22-24/Mt. 26.26-28/Lk. 22.19f., Mk. 14.61f./Mt. 26.63f./Lk. 22.67-69).¹² Within the context of Jesus' ministry, therefore, the thought that his coming death would lead to 'fruitfulness' would have made a great deal of sense.

(b). As applied to Jesus' followers the saying could mean that their martyrdom would have positive effects,¹³ or it could mean they would have to 'die' to themselves in a metaphorical sense in order to 'bear fruit' (conceived either in terms of christian character or of effective service). As far as 'fruit-bearing' is concerned, there are many passages in the Synoptic Gospels which indicate that Jesus saw this as a desirable goal for those who would follow him (cf. Mk. 4.8/Mt. 13.8/Lk. 8.8, Mk. 4.29, Mk. 4.32/Mt. 13.32/Lk. 13.19 – taken with Dan. 4.12, Mk. 12.2/Mt. 21.34/Lk. 20.10, Mt. 7.16-20/Lk. 6.43f., Mt. 13.26, Lk. 13.6-9, i.e. occurring in Mk., Q, M, and L). As for martyrdom and dying to oneself in a metaphorical sense, we have the saying recorded in Mk. 8.34/Mt. 16.24/Lk. 9.23, where Jesus calls upon anyone who would come after him to 'deny himself' and 'take up his cross'.¹⁴ At face value, this is a call to self-renunciation and readiness for martyrdom (since those carrying their crosses in those days were on their way to the place of their execution), but at the same time it clearly does not necessarily imply that every disciple would in a literal sense be crucified: it is the *attitude* of regarding one's life as in one sense 'already finished' that is the key point,¹⁵

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- 11 Some commentators interpret the saying generally even within the Johannine context, e.g. F.V. Filson, *Saint John* (London: SCM Press, 1964), 102; W. Barclay, *The Gospel of John* (Edinburgh: St Andrew Press, 1975), 2.123; but most believe that here the reference to the coming death of Christ is primary.
- 12 For detailed argumentation see now N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996), 477-653.
- 13 As in Tertullian's famous dictum 'the blood of the martyrs is (the) seed (of the church)', which Barclay, *op. cit.*, 123 quotes at this point. This is how the verse was taken by Petilian as quoted in Augustine's Answer to Letters of Petilian the Donatist 2.90, where Petilian says: 'Christianity makes progress by the death of its followers'. Augustine himself, following John, usually takes the verse to apply to Christ, but nevertheless sees a parallel between the death of Christ and Christian martyrdom as in his Exposition of Ps. 70 sec.1.
- 14 This saying is paralleled also in Q at Mt. 10.38/Lk. 14.27. As I.H. Marshall says 'there need be no doubt about the authenticity of the sentiments in this verse'; *The Gospel of Luke* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1978), 374.
- 15 Marshall, *op. cit.*, 373; an interpretation followed also by W.D. Davies and D.C. Allison, *The Gospel according to St Matthew* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), 2.671. The thought is not far from the Pauline ideas of being crucified with Christ or dying to sin.

whether or not it leads to actual crucifixion or some other form of martyrdom. This thought is thoroughly coherent with the idea of 'dying' implicit in Jn. 12.24 when applied to the disciples. The distinctive element in Jn. 12.24 is the connection between such a 'dying' and 'fruit-bearing', but if Jesus saw both as aspects of discipleship there is no reason why he should not have brought them together in a single saying.

We have seen, then, that, however the saying of Jn. 12.24 is taken, there are sufficient parallels at the level of motif in Synoptic material which may reasonably be regarded as authentic to justify the conclusion that the content of Jn. 12.24 coheres well with the known teaching of the historical Jesus.

2.3 Dissimilarity

There are no exact parallels to this saying in Jewish literature, though the rabbis did repeatedly used the image of a grain of wheat as a symbol of the eschatological resurrection of the dead.¹⁶

As far as pagan Greek parallels are concerned, it is now virtually agreed that, despite some superficial resemblances, there is nothing to compare with Jn. 12.24 in the literature of the mystery religions or of gnosticism.¹⁷ At most the author may have chosen to include this saying because it might have been readily intelligible to some of his Hellenistic readers, but there is general unanimity that it does not have its roots in Hellenism.

What of the early church? The closest parallels¹⁸ are to be found in the writings of Paul. In 1 Cor. 15.35-38 Paul, like the rabbis, uses the image of a seed dying and coming to life for the final resurrection of the dead. Otherwise he speaks of Christian believers as having been united with Christ in his death and resurrection in Rom. 6.3-11, and in Rom. 7.7 of their having 'died to the law' so as to belong to the risen Christ in order to 'bear fruit for God'. Though he comes close to our saying, Paul never explicitly connects the images of the seed, dying, and fruit-bearing together. In any case it is thought highly unlikely that there was any dependence between John and Paul.¹⁹

16 H. L. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament* (München: Beck, 1924), *ad loc.*; Schnackenburg, *op. cit.*, 383.

17 It is noteworthy that even Bultmann, *op. cit.*, 424 n. 2, distances our saying from gnostic ideas; but see also R.H. Strachan, *The Fourth Gospel. Its Significance and Environment* (London: SCM Press, 1941), 254; E.C. Hoskyns and F.N. Davey, *The Fourth Gospel* (London: Faber, 1947²), 424; W. Temple, *Readings in St John's Gospel* (London: Macmillan, 1947), 196; C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St John* (London: SPCK, 1955), 352f.; Brown, *op. cit.*, 1.472; Lindars, *op. cit.*, 428; Schnackenburg, *op. cit.*, 2.383 and 526 n. 68.

18 Apart from Ign. *Rom.* 4.1 which appears to be dependent on Jn. 12.24.

19 Cf. Barrett, *op. cit.*, 46-48; Bultmann, *op. cit.*, 10; Lindars, *op. cit.*, 36.

Granted that the thought expressed in Jn. 12.24 remains unparalleled in Jewish, pagan, and 1st cent. Christian literature, it might still be argued that the ingredients lay at hand for a creative early christian mind, such as we may suppose the author of the fourth gospel to have had, to fuse them together in such a way as to create the saying which we have before us. Such a possibility cannot finally be excluded, but that it remains unlikely in the case of the fourth evangelist at least will become evident as we turn to the final criterion:

2.4 Anti-Redactional Features

Several considerations are relevant here:

(a). Firstly, we need to remind ourselves that Jn. 12.24 does not fit naturally into its clearly Johannine framework. As with Jn. 12.25f., it has all the appearance of a saying which the author had received and wanted to fit into his narrative at some suitable point. If it had been his own creation, it is likely that it would have been fitted less awkwardly into its immediately preceding context.

(b). Secondly, and as an extension of this point, we need to remind ourselves that whereas v. 23 speaks of Jesus' glory being revealed in his death, a commonly acknowledged Johannine redactional tendency, this perspective is lost in v. 24 which speaks of Jesus 'fruit bearing' as taking place only *after* his death.²⁰ The latter betrays a characteristically Synoptic as opposed to a Johannine perspective.

(c). Thirdly, we need to notice that some of the vocabulary of this saying is not only typical of the Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels, as shown in section 2.1 above, but also *untypical* of John. The evidence may be set out as follows:

(i). The word *kokkos* is found *only here* in the Johannine literature. Apart from its occurrences in Jesus' Synoptic speech, which have already been noted, its only other occurrence in the New Testament is at 1 Cor. 15.37.

(ii). The word *sitos* is found *only here* in the gospel and letters of John. Apart from its occurrences in Jesus' Synoptic speech, which have already been noted, it is found once in words attributed to John the Baptist (Mt. 3.12/Lk. 3.17), twice in the Book of Revelation (6.6, 18.13), and twice elsewhere (Acts 27.38, 1 Cor. 15.37).

(iii). The phrase *piptō eis tēn gēn* is found *only here* in the gospel and letters of John. Apart from its occurrences in Jesus' Synoptic speech, which have already been noted, it is found elsewhere at Mk. 9.20, 14.35, Acts 9.4, Rev. 6.13, 9.1.

(iv). The word *apothnēiskō*, though common in John, is here used in

20 As Bultmann acknowledges (*op. cit.*, 424).

a sense which is untypical for John: whereas normally in John's Gospel the verb *apothnēiskō* and the noun *thanatos* are used to signify either physical death or a state of spiritual death from which we need to be delivered, *only here* does either of them carry the possible meaning of a metaphorical kind of death which is voluntarily embraced for the sake of a greater good.

(v). The word *menō*, it has to be admitted, is characteristically Johannine (being used 40 times in the Gospel), but this may not be significant here. As Bultmann has pointed out,²¹ John sometimes uses this verb as a rough equivalent for some part of the verb 'to be', so its presence in this verse may indicate no more than that the imperfect of the Aramaic verb *hawāh* stood in the original saying.

(vi). The phrase *karpon pherō* likewise is no stranger to the Gospel, being found seven times in the allegory of the vine in 15.2-16 as well as in this verse. However, as we have already seen, the same figure of speech is also found in Jesus' Synoptic sayings and is likely to be authentic, so its use in what appears to be a piece of Johannine elaboration in Jn. 15.2-16 cannot of itself decide the issue of the authenticity of its use in Jn. 12.24.

As far as the wording of Jn. 12.24 is concerned, therefore, we may conclude that while the evidence is to a certain extent ambiguous, on balance it does not favour the view that this is a saying which John has created *de novo*.

(d). Finally, as far as the content of the saying is concerned, we note the absence of the typically Johannine tendency to focus attention on the divine status of Christ, or indeed, if the saying was originally independent of its present context, of any necessary reference to Christ at all.

Taking these points together we may say that Jn. 12.24 in many respects stands out against its Johannine context in its position in the text, its vocabulary, and its content. It resembles far more closely the clearly Synoptic sayings which follow it in vv. 25f. than the surrounding Johannine framework. It is much more likely to have been a traditional saying incorporated into the Gospel than one made up by the author himself, and if we look for that creative mind which brought these motifs of seeds, dying and rising, and fruit-bearing together we could look nowhere better than at the mind of Jesus himself.

3. Conclusion

Our review of the evidence for the authenticity of Jn. 12.24 has

21 Bultmann, *op. cit.*, 321 n. 1, 617 n. 1.

revealed that, while it is nowhere paralleled in the Synoptic Gospels, by its vocabulary, form, style and content it fits naturally into the ministry of the historical Jesus and at the same time is unlikely to have been composed by the author of the Fourth Gospel himself. Moreover, the fact that the combination of motifs present in the saying is unparalleled in any extant contemporary Jewish, pagan or Christian literature lends credence to the view that he did not draw it from any other source than the body of traditional sayings of Jesus with which he was familiar. I conclude, therefore, that Schnackenburg's scepticism is unjustified at this point. While we may regard Jeremias' judgment that no objection could be raised to the saying's authenticity to be a little overconfident, the weight of evidence clearly favours B. Lindars' view that Jn. 12.24 probably represents a genuine saying of Jesus. If so, then this verse gives further support to the view that Jesus' discourses in the Fourth Gospel are not pure Johannine creations, as some have thought, but contain sayings which go back to the historical Jesus himself.

Abstract

A review of the evidence for the authenticity of Jn. 12.24 reveals that by its vocabulary, form, style and content it fits naturally into the ministry of the historical Jesus and at the same time is unlikely to have been composed by the author of the Fourth Gospel himself. The fact that the combination of motifs present in the saying is unparalleled in any extant contemporary Jewish, pagan or Christian literature lends credence to the view that he did not draw it from any other source than the body of traditional sayings of Jesus with which he was familiar. If so, then this verse gives further support to the view that Jesus' discourses in the Fourth Gospel are not pure Johannine creations, as some have thought, but contain sayings which go back to the historical Jesus himself.