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The Authenticity of John 4.35

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Key words: New Testament; John; John 4:35; authenticity; historical Jesus.

'Do you not say, "there are yet four months, then comes the harvest"? I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see how the fields are already white for harvest.'

1. Introduction

John 4.35 purports to relate a saying of Jesus spoken in the context of a conversation between Jesus and his disciples in a city of Samaria called Sychar (Jn. 4.5).¹ The woman at the well has returned to the city to tell the people about Jesus (Jn. 4.28–30), and Jesus has told the disciples that his real sustenance comes not from physical food but from doing God's will and accomplishing his work (Jn. 4.31–34). It is in this context that Jesus begins to speak about a 'harvest' which is ready to be reaped. The harvest sayings continue from v. 35 to v. 38.

As C. K. Barrett has noted, it is difficult to give a consistent allegorical interpretation to these sayings.² Whereas the reaper in v. 35 appears to be Jesus, in v. 38 the reapers appear to be the disciples. There is uncertainty regarding the identity of the sowers and reapers in vv. 36f., and regarding the identity of the 'labourers' in v. 38.³ Moreover in v. 38 Jesus refers to a 'sending' of the disciples which has no background in the story, or indeed in John's Gospel up to this point. Such consider-

¹ For a full introduction to the story see P. W. Ensor (1996) 130–5.

² C. K. Barrett (1955) 202f.

³ For most commentators Jesus is the sower and the disciples are the reapers in vv. 36f., but for R. Schnackenburg (ET 1968) 1.450f. Jesus is the reaper and the sower is the Father. The 'labourers' in v. 38 have been variously understood to refer to the O.T. prophets, John the Baptist and his disciples, Jesus, the Samaritan woman, the apostles, the Hellenists of Acts 8.4ff., or some combination of these.

ations lend weight to the view that vv. 35–38 contain sayings of Jesus which may have had different origins and which have been woven together by the Evangelist at this point to form a short discourse.⁴ In particular, because of the progression of thought between v. 35 and v. 36 (in v. 35 the harvest is ripe, in v. 36 the reaper is already at work), R. E. Brown suggests that v. 36 may have existed originally independently of v. 35.⁵ This idea may further be supported by the observation that whereas v. 36 distinguishes between the sower and the reaper, no such distinction is in view in v. 35. There are therefore good reasons for treating v. 35 as a separate saying and examining its authenticity as such.

Such an enquiry is justified in the light of some rather sweeping negative judgments on the authenticity of the sayings of Jesus in John's Gospel sometimes encountered in the literature on John. Quite apart from the blanket judgments which are sometimes made about the Johannine material as a whole,⁶ there are some specific assertions made about Jn. 4.35–38 which need to be challenged. R. H. Strachan, for example, asserts that vv. 35–38 'are a typical Johannine passage. The immediate historical situation is forgotten, and Jesus is speaking to the Church as it was in the Evangelists' day.'⁷ The implication is that Jesus was *not* speaking to the disciples of his own day. For Strachan, these are words of the exalted Christ rather than those of the historical Jesus. Likewise, R. Bultmann asserts without argument in his note on v. 35 that 'the conversation has no historical significance'.⁸ It is this sort of judgment with regard to this particular verse which it is the purpose of this paper to challenge

2. The Authenticity of Jn. 4.35

The authenticity of this saying cannot be supported on the grounds of multiple attestation. Though the saying bears a resemblance to Mt. 9.37f. par. Lk. 10.2, it can hardly be maintained that Jn. 4.35 is another version of that Synoptic saying. The differences are too substantial.

4 Cf. C. H. Dodd (1963) 391, R. E. Brown (1966) 1.182–4, G. R. Beasley-Murray (1987) 64. Such a procedure is detectable even within the Synoptic Gospels, e.g. at Lk. 16.10–13 where sayings on money seem to have been brought together into a discourse, though probably having a different setting originally (cf. I. H. Marshall (1978) 622f.).

5 R. E. Brown (1966) 1.182.

6 See P. W. Ensor (1996) 49–51 for a selection. An extreme example is the judgment of P. M. Casey (1991) 20, 178, who says that the material in the Fourth Gospel is not only unhistorical but also represents a 'misleading' and 'deceptive' development in the story of the evolving christology of the early church.

7 R. H. Strachan (1941) 160.

8 R. Bultmann (1971) 197.

Nevertheless, the saying's authenticity, at least as a rough approximation to words Jesus presumably originally said in Aramaic, can be supported on the grounds of the other main criteria for authenticity widely accepted in Gospel research today, namely: Language, Culture and Personal Idiom; Coherence; Dissimilarity; and Anti-Redactional Features.⁹ We will now look at the verse under these headings.

2.1. Language, Culture and Personal Idiom

The following features of the verse may be noted as indicating a semitic origin, and, in some cases, affinities with Jesus' personal style:

(a) The opening phrase οὐχ ὑμεῖς λέγετε ... introducing what appears to be a proverbial statement on which Jesus then proceeds to comment resembles the style of Lk. 4.23, 12.54f. and Mt. 16.2 where Jesus also quotes proverbial statements and comments on them.¹⁰ It is true that Mt. 16.2f. is textually uncertain and that its relationship with Lk. 12.54f. is also unclear, but it seems quite likely that both go back to some pre-synoptic saying which may well originate with Jesus himself.¹¹

(b) Most commentators agree that Jn. 4.35a is a proverb rather than a casual statement by the disciples concerning the time of year. If it is to be taken as a statement of the time of year, it is argued, then the time of utterance would be January or early February, when water would be more plentiful than is presupposed in Jn. 4.6ff. Moreover, there was a rabbinic statement to the effect that four months elapse between the end of the sowing season and the beginning of the harvest.¹² Though it has no parallel in other literature, it is quite plausible as a proverbial utterance at the time of Jesus, and uses a semitic paratactic style.¹³

9 See P. W. Ensor (1996) ch. 2 for an analysis of the concept of authenticity and a justification for the criteria applied here. It is a 'type b' authenticity which is being argued for in this paper with regard to Jn. 4.35.

10 The Mt. 16.2 connection is noted by C. H. Dodd (1963) 396 and L. Morris (1971) 278 n. 82. Dodd sees a similar didactic structure in Lk. 14.15ff. (1963) 397.

11 Cf. I. H. Marshall (1978) 546 and W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison (1991) 2.577f.

12 Cf. J. H. Bernard (1928) 1.155f., R. Bultmann (1971) 196 n. 4, L. Morris (1971) 278f., G. R. Beasley-Murray (1987) 63.

13 Cf. B. Lindars (1972) 195, who draws attention to the linguistic parallel with Jon. 3.4, where we find the construction 'ὄδ... we...'; and R. Schnackenburg (ET 1968) 1.449, who draws attention to the yet closer linguistic parallel with Jer. 51.33, where we find 'yet a little while and the time of her harvest will come'. C. H. Dodd (1963) 395 gives parallels from the LXX. The view that it is a Greek proverb on account of its iambic rhythm is thought unlikely by R. E. Brown (1966) 1.173f. and G. R. Beasley-Murray (1987) 63. The iambic rhythm could be fortuitous. As C. H. Dodd notes, the same rhythm is found in non-proverbial contexts at Mk. 4.24, Acts 23.5 and Heb. 12.14 (1963) 395. Even if it is a piece of Greek verse, it is not impossible that a Greek version of a Jewish proverb was circulating in Palestine in the 1st cent. AD, as A. W. Argyle (1971) 247f. and J. A. T. Robinson (1985) 134 note.

(c) The word *θερισμός*, which occurs twice in the verse and is its key word, deserves special attention. It is one of those few words which is found in Jesus' speech in both John and the Synoptics, but which does not occur outside Jesus' speech in any Gospel.¹⁴ Moreover it is used by Jesus independently in three distinct Synoptic sources: in Mk. 4.29; in Q—Mt. 9.37f. par. Lk. 10.2; and in M—Mt. 13.30,39. Still further, it is to be noted that in all these occurrences the word is used metaphorically to refer to the harvest of *people* for the Kingdom of God, whether in the present or in the future. More generally, of course, this usage coheres with Jesus' love of using images from the natural world as vehicles for conveying spiritual truth. Only the harshest critic would dismiss all these synoptic references to a spiritual harvest as inauthentic. The probability is rather that Jesus did use a word for 'harvest' in this metaphorical sense, and therefore that at this point at least Jn. 4.35 reflects his personal idiom.

(d) The word *ἰδοῦ* is semitic, reflecting the Hebrew *hinneh* or the Aramaic *hā*.

(e) The phrase *λέγω ὑμῖν* reflects Jesus' personal idiom.¹⁵ Moreover the adversative context matches the use of this formula in the antitheses of Mt. 5.22,27,32,34,39,44.

(f) The phrase *ἐπάρατε τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς ὑμῶν* is semitic and is used in the speech of Jesus as recorded in the Synoptics.¹⁶

(g) Almost all the other main words used in Jn. 4.35 are found in Jesus' speech as reported in the Synoptic Gospels.¹⁷ Of course, it is possible that some of these occurrences are redactional rather than traditional, especially in view of the fact that they all occur in narrative as well as in Jesus' speech, but there is nothing here which is obviously foreign to the Jesus we know from the Synoptic Gospels.

In conclusion, we may say that, on the basis of a study of the vocabulary and style of Jn. 4.35, a strong cumulative case may be made for the view that the saying is the kind of thing Jesus might very well have said.

It might be argued, of course, that the author was familiar with the Synoptic Jesus and was putting into his mouth something which he himself had made up and which he knew would suit him. That this is

14 In fact it is only found at Rev. 14.15 outside Jesus' speech in the entire New Testament.

15 See further P. W. Ensor (1996) 201f.

16 R. Schnackenburg (ET 1968) 1.449 notes the following parallels: Gen. 13.14, 1 Chron. 21.16, Isa. 60.4, Zech. 2.1, Mt. 17.8, Lk. 6.20, 16.23, Jn. 6.5. To this list we may add Lk. 18.13 and Jn. 17.1. Lk. 16.23 and 18.13 occur within Jesus' speech.

17 *θεάομαι* is found in Jesus' speech at Mt. 6.1, 11.7, 22.11, 23.5, Lk. 7.24. *χώρα* is found in the same sense in Jesus' speech at Lk. 21.21. *λευκός* is found at Mt. 5.36. The only exception is *τετράμηνος*, a New Testament 'hapax legomenon', whose significance will be discussed further later. Suffice it to say for now that it is not at all impossible that Jesus may have used an equivalent Aramaic expression.

unlikely to have been the case will be argued under sections 2.3 and 2.4 below. For now let us note that Jn. 4.35 entirely suits what we know of the historical Jesus on the basis of the first criterion, and go on to support this conclusion on the basis of the second.

2.2 Coherence

The proverbial statement and other features of Jn. 4.35 are unique to Jesus' speech in the Gospels, but the general thrust of the saying can be paralleled at the level of motif, and to this extent it receives support as an authentic saying of Jesus on the basis of the criterion of coherence.

The saying purports to (a) teach the disciples that (b) there is a plentiful spiritual 'harvest' waiting to be reaped, with (c) the implication that harvesters are urgently required to meet the challenge of the situation.

(a) is clearly paralleled *passim* in the Gospel material. The fact that Jesus uses a picture from nature to convey a spiritual truth is also abundantly paralleled elsewhere. If, in addition, we assume that the proverb was already in use in a spiritual sense and that Jesus is correcting a misunderstanding about the timing of the harvest, this need not count against the authenticity of the saying, even though the correcting of misunderstandings is a familiar Johannine motif, since the phenomenon also occurs in the Synoptic sayings of Jesus.¹⁸

(b) is paralleled in Mt. 9.37f. par. Lk. 10.2, a Q saying spoken in the context of Jesus' mission and the commissioning of his disciples (in Mt. the twelve, in Lk. the seventy(-two)) to engage in mission also. The word for 'harvest' is used in exactly the same sense and the greatness of the harvest is also stressed. The authenticity of the Q saying need not be doubted.¹⁹ It therefore provides strong grounds for the authenticity of the general thrust of Jn. 4.35.

(c) is made explicit in Mt. 9.37f. par. Lk. 10.2. Moreover the sense of urgency is thoroughly in tune with what we know of Jesus from the Synoptic Gospels.²⁰

While therefore certain linguistic features and expressions are peculiar to Jn. 4.35, at the level of motif we find the same basic ideas paralleled in Synoptic material which may reasonably be attributed to Jesus. This consideration adds to the impression already gained from 2.1 above that Jn. 4.35 is the kind of saying which Jesus could actually have spoken.

The point was made above that it could be argued that the author of the Fourth Gospel was familiar with the style and personal idiom of

18 See P. W. Ensor (1996) 133 on this point.

19 Cf. I. H. Marshall (1978) 416f.; W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison (1991) 2.148f.

20 See P. W. Ensor (1996) 115f.

Jesus known from the Synoptic Gospels and made up this saying on that basis. The same point may be made again here with specific reference to this Q saying (either from Mt. or Lk. or both, or from independent historical tradition). Was the author merely re-expressing it, with his own adaptations and additions, in his own way? Quite apart from a consideration of the substantial differences which distinguish the two sayings, already alluded to, the application of the final two criteria will help to counteract this position.

2.3. Dissimilarity

This criterion seeks to distinguish sayings attributed to Jesus both from the Jewish background against which he was working and from the early Christian background of the evangelist. Both tasks may be successfully undertaken with respect to the saying before us.

There is a distinction from the Jewish background in respect of the *timing* of the 'harvest' in question. The metaphor of 'harvest' was used in Jewish literature for the eschatological action of God in saving his people and judging the nations.²¹ This usage is reflected in some words attributed to John the Baptist, some of the parabolic teaching of Jesus himself and in the book of Revelation,²² and lies behind the sayings in Mt. 9.37f. par. Lk. 10.2, and Jn. 4.35. However, what is distinctive about these last-mentioned sayings is that they portray the 'harvest' not as some event on the distant horizon but as imminent, even present.²³ This perspective, of course, coheres well with the structure of Jesus' teaching in general, whereby he perceives the Kingdom of God as having broken into history with his own coming and yet as having a future fulfilment. It is a peculiarly New Testament perspective, not paralleled in Jewish literature of the time. This characteristic of Jn. 4.35, therefore, distinguishes it clearly from its Jewish background.

Regarding the relationship between Jn. 4.35 and the early church, it should be noted that the saying pictures the disciples as being still unaware of the existence of harvest to be reaped in the present, let alone as being engaged in reaping the harvest. At this point v. 35 is different from v. 38 which talks of the disciples as having already been sent into the harvest and as having already laboured in it. It is because of this aspect of v. 38 that many commentators imagine a post-resurrection setting for the verse, and its authenticity as a saying of Jesus is

21 Cf. Joel 3.13, Isa. 27.11, 2 Esdr. 4.28-32, Syr. Apoc. Bar. 70.2.

22 Mt. 3.12 par. Lk. 3.17, Mk. 4.26-29, Mt. 13.24-30, 36-43, Rev. 14.14-16.

23 Cf. TDNT 3.133, R. Bultmann (1971) 197, B. Lindars (1972) 195f., G. R. Beasley-Murray (1987) 63. The saying, as many commentators have noted, may even imply a fulfilment of Am. 9.13, where it is prophesied of the last days that 'the plowman shall overtake the reaper', i.e. sowing and harvest will coincide.

correspondingly more difficult, though not impossible, to sustain. But this problem does not arise for v. 35 which suits a pre-Easter setting much more, indeed a setting early on in Jesus' ministry, where in fact it is found in the context of John's Gospel. There is nothing else in v. 35 which may be said to suggest, let alone demand, a later origin for the saying.

It should be remembered that, where it can be successfully applied, the argument from double dissimilarity is a very powerful argument in favour of the authenticity of any saying of Jesus. It would appear that such an argument can in fact be advanced in favour of the authenticity of Jn. 4.35.

2.4. Anti-Redactional Features

The following observations may be made about the saying in Jn. 4.35 which suggest that it stands out to some extent against its Johannine context and therefore that it is not a Johannine creation:

(a) The word *τετράμηνος* is not found elsewhere in the Johannine literature. It cannot be said to be characteristic of Johannine style. In fact it is a rather rare word altogether in Greek literature and a New Testament 'hapax legomenon'.

(b) The word *θερισμός*, as we have seen, is not a typically Johannine word. It is found only in this verse in the Gospel, and otherwise in the Gospels is only found in Jesus' speech.

(c) The proverbial utterance taken as a whole is also unusual. It is not paralleled elsewhere in extant ancient literature, yet, as has been said above, is quite plausible as a proverbial expression at the time of Jesus. There seems to be no reason why John would have wanted to create it out of nothing.

(d) The word *χώρα* is found elsewhere in the Johannine literature only at Jn. 11.54f. but there it means a region or district in v. 54, and probably the countryside in general in v. 55, but not a field, which is what it clearly means in 4.35. This usage in 4.35 is therefore unique in the Johannine literature, but is paralleled, as already mentioned, in Lk. 21.21.

(e) The word *λευκός* is found also at Jn. 20.12 and quite often in the Book of Revelation, and so could be redactional, but all the same its use in this context is unusual and unparalleled in the New Testament. Why would John wish to call fields 'white' for harvest? One plausible explanation is that it refers to the clothing of the Samaritans who were already at this time coming out of the city to meet Jesus at the invitation of the Samaritan woman.²⁴ Another equally plausible explanation is

24 Cf. R. Schnackenburg (ET 1968) 1.449, L. Morris (1971) 279 n. 85, W. Barclay (1975) 168, G. R. Beasley-Murray (1987) 63.

that the word λευκός, especially when viewed against its semitic background, has a broader range of meaning than the English word 'white', and could even include the meaning 'golden'.²⁵ Many commentators are therefore content to see it as a rough description of a ripened cornfield without looking for secondary meanings.²⁶ Either way, the use of the word λευκός here is clearly distinct from the way it is used elsewhere in the Johannine writings.

(f) There is nothing in the content of the verse which is distinctively Johannine. The presence of the harvest is not a theme which John develops elsewhere in the Gospel, and, perhaps even more significantly, there is no christological teaching to be found here. The focus of attention is not on Jesus, as is the case so often elsewhere in John's Gospel, but on the people who need to be reached and brought into God's 'granary'.

3. Conclusion

The arguments presented above have a cumulative effect. While some are not very strong in themselves, taken together they make a powerful case for the authenticity of Jn. 4.35 as a saying of Jesus, spoken in the context in which John places it. As Jesus sees crowds of Samaritans coming out to him from the city at the invitation of the woman, he quotes a familiar proverb about the normal length of time between seedtime and harvest, and then asserts that the same is not the case with the spiritual harvest which is now ready to be reaped from the city for the Kingdom of God. The saying fits Jesus' linguistic and cultural setting and personal idiom. It coheres well with what we know of him from the Synoptic Gospels, yet it does not appear to have been created out of Synoptic material or out of the mind of the author of the Fourth Gospel. The most plausible account of the origin of Jn. 4.35 is that it was spoken in roughly its present form by Jesus himself. At the very least we may say that the case for the authenticity of Jn. 4.35 is as strong as the case for the authenticity of many of the sayings in the Synoptic Gospels whose authenticity is widely accepted by scholars today.

The outcome of this argument is important. It increases the likelihood that there are genuine sayings of Jesus embedded in John's Gospel which are not paralleled in the Synoptic Gospels and which show that the author was carrying an independent stream of tradition. Sayings attributed to Jesus in John's Gospel which are not paralleled in the Synoptic Gospels are therefore not to be dismissed automatically as

²⁵ Cf. TDNT 4.241, 243, 246f.

²⁶ J. H. Bernard (1928) 1.157, C. K. Barrett (1955) 202, R. E. Brown (1966) 1.174, R. Bultmann (1971) 196 n. 5.

unhistorical, as they are by many scholars. It could be that they are genuine sayings of Jesus himself.

Abstract

The author examines a Johannine saying, using the criteria of authenticity for sayings of Jesus developed particularly in connection with material in the Synoptic Gospels and demonstrates by cumulative argument that John 4.35 is most probably a genuine saying of Jesus. If this conclusion is correct, the way is open for further discoveries of the same kind in the Fourth Gospel.

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