From the “Kingdom of God” to “Eternal Life”:
The Transformation of Theological Language in the Fourth Gospel

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It is the aim of the “John, Jesus and History” project to reinvestigate the historical value of the Fourth Gospel and to question the allegedly critical consensus by which Johannine interpretation has been “de-historicized” while the quest for the historical Jesus has been “de-Johannized” (Anderson 2006b, 43-100; 2007a, 3). A new search for elements of historical value in John appears warranted in view of the history of research, at least since the beginning of the twentieth century. Back then, the so-called “critical consensus” in Johannine studies was established, with the effect that John was excluded from the quest for the historical Jesus (Frey 1997, 38-9). Neither the “mystical” reading of John in the history of religions school (e.g., Heitmüller 1918), nor the influential “existential” interpretation of Rudolf Bultmann, nor the more recent trends of a literary and narrative reading of John showed any deeper interest in the question of its value in terms of historical reference. The redaction-critical approaches that were interested in the *History and Theology of the Fourth Gospel* (Martyn 1968) also focused their historical inquiry mostly on the situation and history of the Johannine community; from there they explained the decisive features of the Fourth Gospel, especially its anti-Jewish polemics. In this perspective, only few textual elements were read as referring to the earthly Jesus, much less as historically valuable for the reconstruction of the Jesus of history.

Apart from strictly conservative approaches (e.g., Blomberg 2001b; Carson 1981; cf. also Bauckham 2007a), few scholars have explicitly searched for *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Dodd 1963). Of course, learned conservatives such as the German Lutheran Theodor Zahn (1921), or the Anglican Bishop of Durham Brooke Foss Westcott (1908), had steadfastly resisted the critics and eloquently tried to “safeguard” the apostolic authorship and, along with it, the historical reliability of John’s Gospel. But for that purpose, they often

introduced extra-textual and psychologizing conjectures. For instance, they held that Jesus spoke John 15–17 on the way to the Mt. of Olives or in the room of the Last Supper (Zahn 1921, 576; Westcott 1908, 2.187, 197). Modern evangelical apologists often follow their paths (Morris 1995, 586-7; Blomberg 2001, 205) and even utilize harmonizing arguments, such as the assumption that Jesus might have cleansed the temple twice, at the beginning and at the end of his ministry (Carson 1991, 177; Morris 1995, 167; Blomberg 2001b, 89-90). It is quite conceivable that this kind of argument could never convince critics while also casting suspicion on all further attempts to "rescue" John's historical accuracy, especially if the arguments are far-fetched or methodologically unclear and apparently guided by traditionalist or dogmatic biases or a pious reluctance against criticizing the Bible historically.

For reasonable scholarship, the differences between the Gospels call for decisions in terms of historical reference and accuracy, at least in cases such as the cleansing of the temple. If the harmonizing solutions introduced by (some of) the church fathers[1] are excluded, only an either-or judgment remains. Either Jesus cleansed the temple at the end of his ministry, as a provocative act that necessarily caused the authorities to react and to arrest him, or he did so at the beginning of his ministry, where a similar reaction of the temple authorities to Jesus' violent behavior would be expected—though John merely notes the "question" of "the Jews" (John 2:18) about a sign of his authority. While the temple incident lies outside the scope of the present paper, it serves to illustrate that if one is not willing to evacuate the idea of "historical truth" or "historical accuracy," an "either-or" is often unavoidable. Whereas other differences between John and the Synoptics cannot be decided with a similarly high degree of probability, and while in some instances John might provide a more historically

[1]Cf. already Augustine, *De consensu evangelistarum* 2.67; see also Merkel 1971; Frey 2003, 64-67 on this harmonizing tendency. It must be noted that other church fathers rejected the harmonizing view and, by the majority, preferred the Johannine chronology and plot due to the tradition that an eyewitness authored the Gospel.

accurate account, the cleansing of the temple is the most obvious instance where John deliberately changed the plot of the traditional account for dramatic reasons. Thus he exhibits an astonishingly free approach to earlier traditions, fictionally creating an alternative (hi)story, for his dramatic purposes.

An even more rigorous decision is in place regarding the *language of Jesus*. Apart from a few "synoptic" sayings also attested in John, and the single instance of the so-called "Johannine" saying in the logia tradition (Matt 11:25-27/Luke 10:21-22), the overall character of Jesus' language in John is overwhelmingly different from his language in the Synoptics. The genres of prophetic and sapiental sayings, brief apophthegms, and especially parables are absent in John and seem to be replaced by longer, repetitive, or spiraling discourses with dense webs of metaphors. From those discourses, some sayings can be isolated and considered to be traditional (cf. Theobald 2002), but even the style of these "kernel" sayings usually differs from that of the Synoptic sayings of Jesus. Linguistic observations widen the gap even further: while some of Jesus' words from the synoptic tradition suggest the possibility of retroversion into his original Aramaic idiom (cf. Jeremias 1979), this is almost impossible for the Johannine discourses of Jesus, despite some Aramaic terms being present in the text.[2]

There is also a remarkable difference regarding *central theological terms*. The issue of the "kingdom of God" (or in Matthew "of the heavens") is one of the most striking examples: *basileia* was certainly one of the most central terms of the preaching of the earthly Jesus. With

[2]One of the last scholars who suggested an Aramaic original of the Fourth Gospel was the Oxford Semitist, C. F. Burney (1922). But a closer examination of his argument could demonstrate that the Aramaic (or simply Semitic) elements were more frequent in some of the narrative passages than in the discourses of Jesus. T. W. Manson, Burney's British contemporary, argued instead that a composition of the Johannine narratives in Syria could account for the Semitisms (cf. Manson 1946/47). Be that as it may, the observations do not support the idea of an "original" source for Jesus' discourses in John or of the originality of the style of the Johannine Jesus.

reference to the kingdom of God, the term is used thirteen times in Mark, nine times in the Q material, twenty-seven times in other passages in Matthew, and eleven times in other passages in Luke (see Jeremias 1973, 41). In John, however, the term is almost totally avoided, with the exception of two very similar sayings in John 3:3 and 3:5;instead, other terms, such as "eternal life," become dominant. Thus, the theological language of the Johannine Jesus also differs markedly from the language of Jesus in the Synoptics, and the most striking observation is that Jesus' language in John is almost the same language as that of the Evangelist in his narrative passages and comments, or even of the Johannine Epistles. The conclusion is unavoidable: it is the language of the Johannine author and/or of his community that shapes Jesus' language in the Fourth Gospel, and it is quite often also the preaching or theology of the author and his community that are put into the mouths of Jesus and other characters.

The above conclusion is evident from a number of peculiarities in the language of the Fourth Gospel regarding the effects of Jesus' ministry. Some sayings in the plural in the Johannine discourses of Jesus demonstrate this, such as John 3:11 ("*we* speak of what we know, and bear witness to what *we* have seen"), which can be best explained as putting elements of the Johannine preaching into the mouth of Jesus (cf. Frey 1998, 252-57). Another hint to such a utilization of community language are those tenses (aorist, perfect) within Jesus' discourses that presuppose that the whole work of Jesus has already been completed and is in effect for the community; they represent a post-Easter perspective even within the words of the pre-Easter Jesus (Frey 1998, 130-34, 247-48). That God "has given" his only son (John 3:16; complexive aorist ἔδωκεν) is stated long before Jesus' death is narrated. Similarly, the perfect tenses in John 16:33 ("I have overcome the world;" νενίκηκα τὸν κόσμον) or even in 19:30 ("It is accomplished;" τετέλεσται) pronounce the accomplishment and remaining effects of Jesus' work before it is actually accomplished in his death and resurrection. And when Jesus, although still speaking in the midst of his disciples, says, "I am no more in the

world" (John 17:11), or "while I was with them" (John 17:12), these prolepses are best explained by the assumption that the post-Easter perspective of the community has entered into the words of Jesus. They represent a retrospective viewpoint that already presupposes his death and resurrection, his departure from the world, and his return to the Father.

The same is true of many of the theological themes and insights that appear in Jesus' discourses in John: they are closely related with conflicts and problems that apparently do not belong to the time of the Jesus of history, but rather to the later experiences of the community, most prominently the conflict with the Pharisees' expelling confessors from the synagogue (John 9:22), the hatred of the world (15:18), and the mourning of the disciples who feel like orphans because of the departure and absence of Jesus (13:33; 14:18). These problems of the community of the disciples, and also the "solutions" promised in the farewell discourses, especially the work of the Spirit-Paraclete, are all linked to the situation of the community of addressees and are rather remote from the predominant concerns of the preaching of the Synoptic Jesus in Galilee or on his way to Jerusalem.

If the language of the Evangelist and his community is put into the mouth of Jesus (and also his dialogue partners), it is very hard to link sayings of the Johannine Jesus to the time and situation of the earthly Jesus. With perhaps s few isolated exceptions, the "either-or" is posed most radically here: Did the Jesus of history speak in the manner of the synoptic Jesus, or did he speak in the manner of the Johannine Jesus? The only possible answer is: If we will ever be able to determine the language of the historical Jesus, it will be much closer to the style of the synoptic sayings than to the Johannine dialogues and discourses. If we acknowledge that already the Synoptics presuppose a process of translation of Jesus' sayings from Aramaic into Greek and, furthermore, exhibit transformations and expansions according to the changing situation of the communities and the development of the tradition, we must assume an even more thoroughgoing process of transformation in the Johannine tradition. The transformation of language seems to imply a transposition from one cultural context into

another, and the Fourth Evangelist may point to these developments when he attributes his view of Jesus to the remembrance of the disciples in post-Easter times (John 2:22; 12:16) and to the teaching of the Spirit-Paraclete (John 14:26; 16:13-15) by which the disciples were enabled to truly understand Jesus' words and fate. It cannot be assumed that "remembrance" is here conceived as a mere verbal reproduction of the original sayings of Jesus. "Remembering" here rather points to the process of an increasingly deeper and Scripture-related understanding of Jesus' identity and message, including a transformation of his words and of the style of his discourses.

Of course, the above conclusion is hard to accept for many pious readers, as it comes into conflict with dogmatic presuppositions about the accuracy and credibility of the canonical writings. The Johannine Jesus, or rather the Johannine Evangelist, did not act according to what conservative Bible doctrines claim. From here, the reluctance of many (especially North American) authors to acknowledge critical consequences not only about John's "authenticity" but also about the historical accuracy of the Johannine narratives and discourses is conceivable. The ideas that the wine miracle at Cana (John 2) might be a mere theological fiction, that the historical Jesus might not have called Lazarus from the tomb (John 11), and that possibly not one single word of the Johannine Jesus was actually uttered by the earthly Jesus—neither the famous "I Am" sayings, nor the fundamental last word on the cross—may scandalize pious feelings, but academic scholarship cannot avoid honestly considering such options if the arguments of historical reasoning convincingly point in that direction. For this very reason, I remain skeptical of the general tendency of the "John, Jesus, and History" project, which gives, in my view, too much credit to a revisionist perspective on scholarship that claims more historical accuracy for John than a critical assessment of the sources actually allows.

In the present article I will demonstrate the deliberate transformation language has undergone in the composition of the Fourth Gospel by referring to the theme of the "kingdom

of God" and the language of the "kingdom" in John. With this theme we also enter one of the battlefields where the issue of "John *or* the Synoptics" was debated most fervently in earlier scholarship: the field of eschatology, and the question which "type" of eschatology can be attributed to Jesus himself (see further, Frey 2003). In the nineteenth century the question was posed like this: Did Jesus really teach in an apocalyptic manner about an externally coming kingdom and the Parousia of the Son of Man? Or did he teach in a philosophically more acceptable way about an inner kingdom and the present possession of life? The difference between synoptic and Johannine eschatology is obvious (on the latter see Frey 2000; 2005), and in my view there can be no doubt that the synoptic teaching is generally closer to the language and to the Jewish (apocalyptic) context of the earthly Jesus (cf. Frey 2006), while Johannine eschatology is based on a thoroughgoing christological development. This example should prevent us from linking John's theological language all-too easily with the Jesus of history.

Eschatology as a Test Case for Johannine Historicity

Before examining the language of the "kingdom" very briefly in the Synoptics and then in John, I will point to some major tendencies of the earlier debate on eschatology to show that the historical preference for the Synoptics (i.e., for Mark and the sayings tradition) in the reconstructions of the historical Jesus was a major achievement that should not be abandoned in future efforts to reassess historical traditions in John.

From the very beginning of critical New Testament scholarship, eschatology was regarded with strong suspicion. Critics had pointed to the fact that if Jesus' expectation of the Parousia is to be attributed to himself, its non-fulfillment after almost two thousand years means that he himself had erred and that, consequently, Christian doctrine as a whole might also be unreliable. The challenge was either to accept the lack of credibility of the Christian teaching or to explain that the failed eschatological expectation was inaugurated not by Jesus himself but only by his disciples. Such a fundamental questioning of Christian doctrine, as

made public by the famous “fragments” of Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694–1768), stimulated apologetics to “save” Christianity from the accusation of deception—or even to “save” Jesus from the apocalyptic expectations attributed to him in the Synoptics, which appeared unacceptable in an enlightened context.[3] Thus, Johann Salomo Semler (1725–1791) suggested that Jesus and also his apostles had simply adapted themselves to the mindset of their addressees. The real teaching of Jesus was not characterized by Jewish elements such as the expectation of an outward kingdom to be expected in the future, but simply by morality and spiritual veneration of God at present. The elements of future-oriented eschatology in Jesus’ teaching were therefore interpreted as a mere adjustment to the views of his contemporaries. Consequently, God’s kingdom, as proclaimed by Jesus himself, was considered not as an outward, political and imminent kingdom, but rather as an inward, spiritual, and already present reality. Interpreters during the nineteenth century widely rejected the “future-oriented” aspects of eschatology or only hoped for their individual immortality. Semler and many other interpreters after him found Jesus’ eschatology truly expressed in the Gospel of John, whereas the synoptic views were considered an adjustment to the Jewish mindset that could never be considered the “true” (i.e., Christian) religion. The teaching of the Johannine Jesus was thus deemed “true” not according to developed criteria of historical analysis but according to philosophical and theological preferences within the intellectual climate of the 19th century.

The battlefield of eschatology was the teaching attributed to Jesus. But until the late nineteenth century, scholarship had not yet arrived at a solution to the Synoptic problem, let alone the Johannine question. Luther’s individualistic translation of Luke 17:21 (“*Das Reich Gottes ist inwendig in euch*”; “the kingdom is *internally within you*”) could serve as a key for

[3] Koch 1970, 55 lucidly illustrates “the strained effort to save Jesus from apcalypticism” (“das angestrengte Bemühen, Jesus vor der Apokalyptic zu retten”); cf. also Frey 2006, 27-42.

understanding the kingdom of God as an internal, present reality that progressively leads to a growth of morality in human society. This was often combined with sayings from the Fourth Gospel, which many interpreters at that time still thought to be authentic to some degree. Thus, John was used as an additional testimony for Jesus' own eschatological teaching. From a "modern" viewpoint, the Johannine brand of eschatology—the teaching of eternal life as a present possession—was more acceptable than the synoptic Jesus' sayings about the Son of Man coming with the clouds (cf. Mark 14:62 etc.). Thus, until the "(re)discovery of eschatology" in the school of "consequent eschatology" (i.e., in the works of Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer), idealistic and liberal Protestants widely preferred John over the Synoptics regarding theological and partly also historical aspects. Without methodological clarity they selected what they found convincing or appropriate. Compared with those earlier (and some later) scholarly attempts, the so-called "critical consensus" of reconstructing the historical Jesus largely without John was a decisive progress. To ignore these insights in the quest for "John, Jesus, and History" would run the danger of abandoning methodological clarity and entering again a foggy and unclear situation.

Jesus and the Kingdom in the Synoptics and in John

I can only very briefly mention the main aspects of the Jesus' teaching about the "kingdom of God" according to the Synoptics, which is, in my view, the basic source for historically reconstructing Jesus' view of the kingdom and of his own time and mission in face of the kingdom (cf. Frey 2006, 68-79). In my view, the sayings about the "kingdom" in the Gospel of Thomas are a secondary, de-apocalypticized transformation of the earlier tradition (cf. Popkes 2006), and can therefore be bypassed here.

There can be no reasonable doubt that the idea of, and the preaching about, the "kingdom of God" was the very center of the message of the earthly Jesus. In the synoptic tradition the idea is expressed much more frequently than in any other contemporary text, and the particular linguistic forms (Jeremias 1973, 40-44) and phrases used to describe it are

largely unparalleled in contemporary Jewish sources (see here see Hengel and Schwemer 1991, esp. 2, correcting the earlier views of Camponovo 1984, 437; Lindemann 1986, 200). In Mark, the term “kingdom of God” is used with a strong focus on Jesus’ own words, and, in spite of some redactional passages in Luke and especially Matthew, the usage is similarly focused on Jesus’ own words in the other two Synoptic Gospels. The term is used in the context of different literary genres, in parables and sayings, and it is also explicitly linked with Jesus’ activity as an exorcist and healer (Luke 11:20; Matt 12:28). Most strikingly, and also in contrast with contemporary texts, the kingdom is not only the “object” or a central theme of Jesus’ teaching, but rather the power or the dominating reality that moves and inspires his words and deeds (Luz 1980, 483). Thus, it is rather certain that the earthly Jesus spoke about the kingdom of God and understood his actions and probably his mission in general in close connection with that kingdom. The question is only the mode in which he spoke about the kingdom, most particularly which temporal mode: Did he see the kingdom realized or present, or did he expect the kingdom to come or, at least, to come to a final fulfillment or victory, in the future?

Scholars have most fervently debated about the temporal aspects of the kingdom. Whereas the school of “consequent eschatology” in its rejection of liberal interpretation interpreted Jesus’ eschatology as totally future-oriented, the British school of C. H. Dodd (1935) stressed the aspect of the presence of the kingdom and suggested the idea of a “realized eschatology” in Jesus’ own preaching. The only appropriate solution of the problem is still in accord with the groundbreaking study by Kümmel (1953), who demonstrated that it is impossible to accept one of the two types of sayings as authentic while rejecting the other type as non-authentic (cf. also Merkel 1991; Frey 2006, 68-79; Hengel and Schwemer 2007, 406-30). Thus, Jesus must have spoken of a kingdom “to come” (as in the Lord’s Prayer; Matt 6:10//Luke 11:2), but also of a certain kind of “presence” of the kingdom of God in his own works—chiefly his exorcisms and healings (cf. Luke 11:20//Matt 12:28). Such a “bi-

temporal" view of the kingdom, often viewed as self-contradictory in itself, has found some confirmation by parallels with the eschatology of the Qumran community, where we also find (although for different reasons) a simultaneity of end time expectation and awareness of present fulfillment or present communion with the angels (cf. Frey 2007, 60-61; Kuhn 1966). More recent scholarship has not led to "better" solutions. The construction of a "non-apocalyptic" Jesus with a non-temporal (i.e., merely present-oriented) view of the kingdom (cf. Perrin 1967; 1976, 1-15) are strongly motivated by a "modern" hermeneutical agenda that deliberately departs from the Jewish and "apocalyptic" thought world of the synoptic Jesus' sayings about the kingdom (cf. Borg 1986; 1987; Crossan 1991; against that, Allison 1994). Such a Jesus, hermeneutically distanced from his Jewish environment and thought world, cannot claim much historical probability. Historically it is much more probable that the earthly Jesus was strongly shaped by his Jewish, and partly also apocalyptic, context (see Hengel and Schwemer 2007).

The synoptic sayings about the kingdom of God include a number of statements that can serve as parallels for understanding the two sayings about the kingdom in John 3:3 and 3:5. Of particular interest here are a number of sayings about "entering" (εἰσέρχεσθαι or εἰσπορεύεσθαι) the kingdom of God (cf. Mark 9:47; 10:15 parr; Matt 5:20; 18:3; 23:13; Acts 14:22). Other sayings use different terms, such as "inheriting" (κληρονομεῖν) the kingdom of God (Matt 5:5; 25:34; cf. Gal 5:21; 1 Cor 6:9-10; 15:50) or "eternal life" (Mark 10:17 parr; Matt 19:29; Luke 10:25; 18:18), and some sayings use the term "entering" without mentioning explicitly the realm that will be entered (but possibly referring implicitly to the kingdom; Matt 7:13//Luke 13:24; Luke 11:52; cf. also Matt 25:21, 23; Rom 11:25; Rev 21:27; 22:14). All these sayings imply a certain future orientation, but even more strongly the notion that the "kingdom" is a realm to which entrance is granted. Some of the sayings, especially in Matthew, mention "rules" or conditions for entering (Matt 5:20; 7:21; 18:3), whereas the rule stated in Mark 10:15 (on receiving the kingdom "like a child") seems to deny that any

condition need be fulfilled. It is, therefore, quite probable that the historical Jesus uttered sayings about entering or inheriting the kingdom, while the more detailed statements regarding rules or conditions might be secondary developments in the early church (most strongly documented in Matthew's tradition). John's idea that "entering the kingdom" depends on being "born by water and spirit" (John 3:5)—i.e., on Christian baptism—seems to be in accord with such developments.[4]

Commented [PA1]: Any thoughts on 4:2, clarifying that Jesus himself did not baptize with water?

Most interestingly, there is already a kind of interchangeability between "kingdom" and "life." The sayings in Mark 9:43, 45 on "entering life" (εἰσελθειν εἰς τὴν ζωήν) are paralleled with Mark 9:47 on entering "the kingdom of God" (εἰσελθεῖν εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ), and both terms are also used with the term "inherit" (κληρονομεῖν; cf. Mark 10:17//Luke 18:18; Luke 10:25; Matt 19:16). A difference may be that "entering" or "inheriting" life is more consistently related to the future, whereas the term "kingdom of God" is also used in terms of the kingdom as inaugurated or even present in the person of Jesus (cf. Matt 11:11-12; 12:28; Luke 17:21). Thus, the term that becomes predominant in the Johannine tradition is not unattested in the earlier Jesus tradition, and it is—in contrast with John—consistently related to the future, to the life to be inherited or even to be seen in its

[4] Most probably, Jesus and his disciples did not 'baptize' in the manner John 'the Baptizer' had immersed repenting Jews in the river Jordan, as the ministry and message of the earthly Jesus significantly differed from that of the Baptizer, and for his ministry, a rite of eschatological purification with water 'replacing' the fire of judgment was not necessary. Only in early post-Easter time the followers of Jesus adopted the rite 'Baptism', albeit with a different meaning. The question whether Jesus himself had baptized (so John 3:22; 4:1) or only his disciples (thus the 'correcting' aside in John 4:2) mirrors the considerations of a later period when baptism was firmly established practice in the Jesus movement. To imagine that practice even for the time of Jesus' ministry or for Jesus himself is in accord with the general tendency to read back later conflicts, practices and viewpoints into the time and ministry of Jesus,

expected appearance (Mark 9:1; Luke 9:27, most probably not an authentic saying of Jesus but also reflecting a development of the early tradition).

John's eschatology (cf. Frey 2000; 2005) focuses on the present realization in the presence of Jesus (or the proclamation of the word), and on the present gift of "eternal life" to those who believe in Jesus. The predominant phrase is not "to enter," "to inherit," or "to see" life (thus, negatively, John 3:36b), but rather "to have" eternal life (cf. John 3:15, 16, 36a), which is conceived of as a present possession. Thus, "The one who believes in the Son has eternal life" (John 3:36a; cf. 6:47) and "has passed from death to life" (John 5:24), whereas the one who does not believe is already condemned (John 3:18) or remains under God's wrath (John 3:36b). Although it must be stressed, with respect to important trends of earlier scholarship (cf. Frey 1997), that eschatological expectation is not totally absent from John (contra, e.g., Bultmann), the Johannine focus on the present possession of life and on eschatological fulfillment in the presence of Jesus marks an important shift from earlier traditions—a shift that can only be explained in terms of the distinctive shape of Johannine Christology. John 3:1-21 (or rather, 3:1-36) is the first passage in which this type of eschatological teaching is communicated (cf. Frey 2000, 241-310). It is, therefore, no coincidence that John 3 is also the passage where the term βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ is used in two sayings. We can observe in this chapter how John adopts traditional terms and deliberately changes them into his own terminology. The central synoptic term of eschatological salvation is thus transposed into the phrase "eternal life" (ζωὴ αἰώνος), which appears also for the first time in this context and now becomes the predominant term of eschatological salvation in the text of the Gospel of John.

John 3:1-21 is obviously a first climax of the Gospel. After the Prologue, the witness of the Baptist, the "week" of Jesus' first encounter with his disciples and the "prototypical" sign at Cana, and the cleansing of the temple during Jesus' first stay in Jerusalem, the chapter provides the first extensive dialogue of Jesus, notably with a representative of "the Jews,"

and, as its closure, Jesus' first revelatory discourse (John 3:11-21). When Nicodemus disappears from the scene, the Johannine Jesus addresses his audience, and we can see (even from the tenses used in 3:13 and 3:16) that the discourse is actually phrased from a post-Easter perspective that already presupposes Jesus' death and return to the Father. Thus, the Johannine Jesus addresses in this passage, as usual in this Gospel, not only his own contemporaries (i.e., the disciples, "the Jews," or here Nicodemus) but also and primarily the extra-textual readers who are to understand the theological message of the Gospel. In this first revelatory discourse we find the first explicit scriptural reference in the words of the Johannine Jesus (John 3:14), a dense combination of christological titles (the "Son of Man" in 3:13, 14; the "Son" in 3:16, 17) and of references to Jesus' descent from heaven, his mission, and even his death and its soteriological effects. Here it is that we also find the first explicit treatment of the "eschatological" themes of "life" and "judgment" in the Fourth Gospel.

The two "kingdom" sayings in the opening dialogue with Nicodemus have been called "an erratic block of 'Synoptic' material in the Fourth Gospel" (Dodd 1963, 360). The term "kingdom of God" does not appear in John after these references, and the terms "king," "kingdom," and "kingship" are only used with regard to Jesus, not to God (1:49; 6:15; 12:13, 15; 18:33, 36-37, 39; 19:3, 14-15, 19, 21). This is, of course, in accord with the theological views of the Fourth Gospel, but why, then, did John not completely omit the term "kingdom of God" rather than using it twice in the dialogue with Nicodemus? Some scholars who advocate the independence of the Johannine tradition take the avoidance of the term βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ as an argument for their view and ask why the Evangelist, if he were indeed aware of the synoptic tradition, would adopt it in various passages while avoiding Jesus' preaching of the kingdom of God almost entirely (e.g., Becker 2001, 215). However, the argument can also be turned the other way: John 3:3 and 3:5 show that the Evangelist knew at least some sayings of the synoptic type, and it seems to be no coincidence that he inserts them at the

beginning of the first dialogue of Jesus where the question of "salvation" is dealt with—notably, a dialogue with a representative of the Jews.

The two logia in John 3:3 and 3:5 lead back to a tradition of sayings or a traditional saying with impressive parallels in the synoptic tradition (esp. Matt 18:3, Mark 10:15, and Luke 18:17), although the exact relationship between the two Johannine sayings and their synoptic parallels is difficult to determine. A direct borrowing from the Synoptics is not suggested here; rather, the Evangelist may have taken the saying(s) from his own community tradition. The question is only whether he adopted both sayings from tradition, or whether only one of the two sayings is traditional, while the other is his rephrasing with regard to the present context. In my view, the latter is more probable. Compared with John 3:5 and its mention of "water and spirit," the version in John 3:3a (γεννηθῆναι ἄνωθεν) resembles closely the language of the Evangelist, especially the use of the spatial metaphor ἄνωθεν. Thus, John 3:5a seems to be closer to the community tradition, whereas John 3:3a provides a "riddled" version of the same tradition, shaped for the present context in order to introduce the ambiguity of the term ἄνωθεν, which is then used to provoke the misunderstanding of Nicodemus (John 3:4) and repeated in John 3:7. Further, the second line of John 3:3 also seems to be adjusted to its context within the dialogue, with the idea of "seeing the kingdom" echoing of the idea of "seeing the signs" mentioned in John 2:23-24 (cf. 3:2). Thus, John 3:3 as a whole has been phrased by the Evangelist with regard to the present context, whereas John 3:5 seems to be a part of the community tradition adopted by the Evangelist, with its mention of baptism ("being born from water and spirit") as the communal initiation rite and with the phrase "enter the kingdom of God." It is most likely, therefore, that John 3:5 is a traditional logion shaped by the Johannine or pre-Johannine (Theobald 2002, 70) community and adopted quite positively by the Evangelist. The origin of the saying seems to connected to the tradition of rules for entering the "kingdom of God" as presented in the synoptic tradition, possibly to an earlier version of Matt 18:3 (Theobald 2002, 79-80). Although some kind of

saying about “entering the kingdom of God” (possibly Mark 10:15) may go back to the Jesus of history, the Johannine version, with its mention of Christian baptism as a “condition” for entering, is certainly a post-Easter development.

The comparison of John 3:5 with its synoptic parallels suggests that a direct borrowing from Mark or Matthew is improbable. If the saying is rooted in the synoptic tradition, we must assume that the transformation of the material and its adoption by the Johannine community took place before the time of the Evangelist, in a “pre-Johannine” community tradition. This example shows that there were early contacts between the synoptic traditions and the Johannine community (which was certainly not as “closed” as many scholars have suggested). At the same time, this observation does not preclude the view that the Fourth Evangelist himself also knew one or more Synoptic Gospels. There are, in my view, strong arguments for the assumption that John knew Mark and possibly also Luke (see Frey 2003; also Hengel 1989), but his adoption of synoptic material is always selective and critical, and thus quite distinct from Matthew’s or Luke’s “dependence” on Mark. But if so, it is even more remarkable that the Evangelist did not feel any need to change or “correct” the saying taken from his community tradition according to other versions he might have been aware of. This example demonstrates that the Evangelist was not looking for “historical” or “critical” accuracy. He could adopt a saying from his community tradition and even create a similar version with a slightly different wording (3:3) in order to shape the dialogue according to his didactic technique of double entendre and misunderstanding. This shows a remarkable or even bewildering degree of creativity, not only in the use of Synoptic traditions, but also in the adoption and reshaping of his own community traditions.

The tradition—and presumably also the Johannine community—regarded baptism (“being born in water and spirit”), the rite of joining the Christian community, as precondition for entering the kingdom of God. But, notably, joining the community is not identified with entering the kingdom, for in this saying the term “kingdom of God” still implies a certain

distance or a notion of expectation (as a realm yet to be entered or “seen”). But how did the Evangelist understand his community tradition. How did he translate it into his own theological language and concepts? Nowhere in the Fourth Gospel (nor in the Johannine Epistles) is the term “kingdom of God” adopted again, and the metaphor of “entering” appears only in other contexts—e.g., in connection with the metaphor of the “door” and “entering” by the door (John 10:1-2, 9)—but not with the kingdom.

We must assume that the Evangelist, when phrasing by himself, uses other terms to express the same ideas. John 3 provides the clue to understanding this process of replacement of terms and transformation of theological language: from “the kingdom of God” to “eternal life.” This can be demonstrated by structural similarities between different sayings in John 3. Here I will first point to a significant conditional structure and then to the structural parallel between John 3:3, 5 and 3:14-15, 16, 36b.

According to John 3:3, 5, the condition for salvation is fulfilled by human beings (ἐὰν μή τις . . . οὐ δύναται): If someone is not “born from above” (or “from water and spirit”), he or she cannot enter into, or see, the kingdom. The same is said positively (using an imperative) in 3:7—“You *must* (δεῖ) be born anew/from above.” In the discussion to follow, however, the conditions to be fulfilled are placed on the part of Christ. In 3:13, the notion “from above” is adopted with regard to Christ, who has come from above, or more precisely, from heaven. This idea also appears in a conditional structure, by use of εἰ μή (cf. 3:3, 5), but now in the sense that the condition has already been fulfilled: only the one who has descended from above is able to reveal the truth about the heavenly things. In 3:14-15, another christological precondition for salvation is added: the Son of Man must (δεῖ) be lifted up so that all who believe will have eternal life. There is also a kind of “condition” on the part of humans, now expressed by a participle (πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων; 3:15, cf. also 3:16), but it is now subordinate to the fundamental christological event of Christ’s uplifting on the cross and his mission into the world and into death (cf. 3:16).

Although the syntactical structure is slightly different, we can trace the change of terms and the "translation" of the traditional phrase from 3:5 (and its prefiguration in 3:3) into more Johannine terms. A further corresponding phrase occurs in the closure of the chapter in 3:36.

3:3 ἐὰν μή τις γεννηθῇ ἄνωεν

3:5 ἐὰν μή τις γεννηθῇ ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος

3:15 πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων ἐν αὐτῷ

3:16 πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων ἐν αὐτῷ

3:36a ὁ πιστεύων εἰς τὸν θἰὸν

3:36b ὁ δὲ ἀπειθῶν τῷ υἱῷ

3:3 οὐ δύναται ἰδεῖν τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ

3:5 οὐ δύναται εἰσελθεῖν εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ

3:15 ἔχῃ ζωὴν αἰώνιον

3:16 μὴ ἀπόληται ἀλλ' ἔχῃ ζωὴν αἰώνιον

3:36a ἔχει ζωὴν αἰώνιον

3:36b οὐκ ὄψεται ζωήν

The structural parallel between these five sayings also suggests a semantic connection. While 3:3, 5 mention the condition for entering the kingdom of God, 3:15, 16, and 36a mention the condition for participating in eternal life. In 3:3 and 5, the condition is the act of "being born from above / from water and spirit," while 3:15, 16, and 36 call for belief in Jesus (the Son/the Son of Man). The motif of the "kingdom of God" mentioned in 3:3, 5 is thus replaced by the motif of "eternal life" in 3:15, 16, and 36. Furthermore, the term "eternal life" is presented for the first time in 3:15 and 3:16—the term is in fact "defined" in the present context as an equivalent or replacement for the traditional term "kingdom of God," and it thus corresponds to the meaning of this central term of the earliest Jesus tradition: participation in eternal salvation and communion with God. The term "eternal life" (or its equivalent, "life"—

see van der Watt 1989), expresses this notion in a linguistic form that is less strongly related to Palestinian Jewish texts and traditions and thus might have been more accessible to readers in the Greek-speaking world.[5] In John, however, the gift of "life" or "eternal life" is characterized as a present gift for those who believe in the present, notwithstanding the dimension of expectation or hope that life will endure physical death, and that therefore it will last forever. However, in the expression ἔχειν ζωὴν αἰώνιον (John 3:15, 16, 36; cf. 5:24; 6:47; etc.) the focus is clearly on the present, and we can recognize a marked contrast with the notion of the "kingdom of God," and also of "life," as presented in the synoptic tradition. John's eschatology represents a shift from the future to the present that is not unprepared in the Synoptics or in Paul, but which nevertheless constitutes a new and distinctive feature within the New Testament.

The example of John 3 shows how language of the kingdom, which was so characteristic of the earliest Jesus tradition (and most probably of Jesus' own preaching), has been transferred into the typically Johannine language. "Eternal life" was, as the Johannine Epistles show, a characteristic element of the theological language of the Johannine community. The Johannine school, and the Johannine preachers in their respective contexts, most probably focused on that term (not on the traditional phrase, "kingdom of God"). Of course, the term ζωὴ αἰώνιος is not a new invention; it goes back to Daniel 12:2-3 and is also used (though rarely) in the Synoptics and in Paul. And, here again we find a most remarkable connection between the "kingdom" and "eternal life" in Mark 9:43-47.[6] Furthermore, there is no reason to deny that Jesus might have spoken about "life" (in his Aramaic idiom). But other

5 Although the term ζωὴ αἰώνος is rooted in Palestinian Judaism (Dan 12:2), it sounds less specifically Jewish, as its usage in Plutarch (*Is. et Os.* 1 = *Moralia* II 351d-e) and other non-Jewish authors may confirm.

6 Cf. Mark 10:17 par; 10:30 par; Luke 10:25; Matt 19:16; Rom 2:7; 5:21; 6:22-23; Gal 6:8. See also Luke 18:29-30, where the phrase "kingdom of God" is closely connected to the term "life."

critical conclusions are unavoidable: Although Jesus most likely spoke about the “kingdom of God” as already inaugurated or even present among the disciples or in his own deeds, a phrase such as “Whoever believes has eternal life” (John 6:47) presupposes the shift from the pre-Easter proclamation of the Father to the post-Easter belief in Jesus (John 14:1) and is most certainly a teaching developed in the post-Easter (or even Johannine) community. This conclusion seems even more certain in the case of other, more complicated sayings of the Johannine Jesus, about the gift of “eternal life” or “having” “eternal life,” such as John 3:14-15 and 3:16, 3:36, and 5:24. Although some of them may come from a community tradition adopted by the Evangelist, they are all far from the original language of the Jesus of history.

Hermeneutically, it is remarkable that the Evangelist shows his awareness of the correspondence of the two terms. He knows the terminology of the older Jesus tradition, and he openly demonstrates (to all his readers who have access to the earlier Gospel writings or to the preaching shaped from there) that in his work a “translation” or transposition of the theological terminology has taken place. Also in the narrative asides about the post-Easter “remembrance” of the disciples, which constituted their later, retrospective understanding (and thus actually the Johannine view) of Christ and his mission (John 2:22 and 12:16), the Evangelist demonstrates a hermeneutical awareness of the transformation processes behind his work, and he does not conceal them from his readers. Instead, he points his audience quite openly to those processes and explains them as an effect of the Spirit (John 14:26; cf. 16:13-15).

Jesus as King and the Kingdom of Jesus in John

John’s replacement of the term “kingdom of God” reflects not only didactic but also theological motivations. We therefore should also consider passages that portray Jesus as a “king” with a “kingdom” (cf. Hengel 1995; Frey 2000, 271-77). Within the dramatic structure of the Gospel, God’s kingdom is ultimately transferred into Jesus’ kingdom, and in Jesus’ kingdom God’s kingdom comes to its fulfillment. As early as John 1:49 Jesus is proclaimed

"king of Israel" (which here seems to be simply a variation of the title "Messiah"). Whereas the attempt of the crowd to make Jesus their "king" (John 6:15) is clearly considered to be mistaken, Jesus is positively addressed as "king" in a scriptural quotation that comments upon his entry into Jerusalem (John 12:15). The quotation is presented as an explanatory note by the Evangelist, who quickly adds that the disciples did not understand this prior to Jesus' glorification (John 12:16). Thus, the true understanding of Jesus' "kingship" was not accessible for his contemporaries, neither for the crowd, who mistakenly hailed him as political king, nor was it clear for his disciples before his crucifixion. Only after his glorification, under the influence of the Spirit, did the disciples remember his way, his words, and the Scriptures. Only then did they understand his real identity and dignity, including his true kingship. Thus, Jesus' kingship seems to be rooted in the events surrounding his death.

The above conclusion is confirmed by the fact that the terms βασιλεία and βασιλεύς become the dominant theme in Jesus' last dialogue: the encounter with Pontius Pilate. Thus the term abandoned after John 3:5 comes to a massive but very different "revival" at the end of the Gospel. To be sure, this also is displayed in the synoptic tradition. In Mark, Jesus is accused before Pilate, and Pilate asks (Mark 15:2), "Are you the king of the Jews?" The use of the title "king" in the Passion account might, therefore, be stimulated by the denunciations of the Jewish leaders, deliberately playing upon the political aspects of Jesus' alleged messahship in order to make him appear dangerous. In Mark, Jesus himself answers with a very brief σὺ λέγεις, which is difficult to interpret, but remains silent with regard to the further questions of Pilate. John, instead, elaborates the encounter between Jesus and Pilate to develop an impressive, dramatically well-structured scene, in which the terms "king" and "kingdom"/"kingship" are quite prominent and function as a guiding theme. The climax come in John 18:36-37, where Jesus, in the style of his revelatory discourses, confirms his royal dignity and explains that his "kingdom is not from this world."

The ending of the Gospel narrative, then, is not marked by the motif of the "kingdom of God," but by the prevailing idea of Jesus' kingship inaugurated on the cross, from where he rules as the true, but quite different, "king." One could even read the whole narrative of Jesus' trial and crucifixion as a tale of a king's "installation"—an ironic reversal that nevertheless contains a deep truth. Here Jesus proclaims himself "king" directly when he says βασιλεύς εἰμι (18:37), he is crowned with a crown of thorns (19:2), clothed in a purple robe (19:2), and hailed by soldiers (19:3; Χαῖρε ὁ βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων). He is presented three times as ὁ ἄνθρωπος (19:5) and ὁ βασιλεὺς ὑμῶν (19:13-14)—acclaimed negatively by the crowd (19:15: σταύρωσον), enthroned in the "exaltation" on the cross, and proclaimed "king" by its title in three languages (19:19-20). Exalted from the earth (cf. John 12:34), Jesus begins to draw all humans to himself—i.e., he begins to rule as the true but totally different king over those who listen to his voice (cf. 18:37). Thus, according to the Johannine Christology, in Jesus' kingship God's own kingship has become visible. As the one who sees Jesus sees the Father (John 14:7, 9), and as true faith in the Father is linked with faith in Jesus (John 14:1), so is God's kingdom manifested in the kingship of the exalted and glorified crucified one.

Accordingly, from a post-Easter perspective, as represented in the Fourth Gospel, one cannot speak of the "kingdom of God" apart from the reign of Jesus Christ, the crucified one, and the "eternal life" given by Jesus in the present to those who believe in him.

Conclusion

The paradigm of the "kingdom of God" and "of Christ" respectively sheds light on the profound transformation of the theological language the earlier tradition of Jesus' words has undergone in the Fourth Gospel. Admittedly, the other Gospel authors also interpret creatively Jesus' words and change numerous details to adapt the message to their respective context and to the situation of their readers. But the procedure in John is different and more fundamental. When comparing the two roughly contemporary works by Matthew and John, the contrast is quite clear. According to Matthew, the disciples are to teach what Jesus has

commanded them (Matt 28:20a), so that the teaching of the earthly Jesus is thought to be extended into the post-Easter time, and the ideal of the transmission process is that not even the smallest letter disappears from the law (Matt 5:18). Against that, John is well aware of the fact that the transformation of the words of Jesus, of his theological terms, and of the whole style of his discourse has to be a much more thoroughgoing one, and he refers to the work of the Spirit who reminds and teaches the disciples (14:26) and guides into all truth (16:13) to justify those processes.

There is good reason to assume that there were intense discussions within the Johannine circle about the legacy of such a transformation of earlier tradition. John 16:13-15 stresses that the Spirit will not take from his own, but take his teaching from what belongs to Jesus, and that he will glorify Jesus. This sounds like a defense of Johannine preachers against the critical question that they might phrase their teaching all-too boldly "from their own" and in obvious difference from what was known as the traditional teaching of Jesus (as, e.g., the teaching of "God's kingdom"). With reference to the Spirit, John defends his "new" design of the story of Jesus, according to which Jesus now proclaims himself, while the earlier tradition is shaped by the proclamation of the kingdom of God. In John, there is no "messianic secret," for Jesus proclaims plainly and openly his own dignity or even divine authority, and the Johannine feature corresponding to Mark's 'messianic secret'is the misunderstanding of the disciples during the earthly ministry of Jesus. For John, a true understanding of Jesus, his acts, his words and his fate was only made in the post-Easter perspective (cf. John 2:22; 12:16) and through the assistance of the Spirit-Paraclete (John 14:26-7; 16:13-15). The Johannine image of Christ, his message, ministry and true meaning is thus a creation of post-Easter reflection under the guidance of the Spirit. It is therefore impossible to isolate single sayings of Jesus in John and attribute them to the Jesus of history, and the conservative attempt to attribute as much as possible to the earthly Jesus appears to be mistaken in view of the character and literary subtlety of the Fourth Gospel. It is more promising to understand and appreciate the

process of transformation that has happened not only to the story of Jesus but also (and even more) to the style of his teaching.

It is the Fourth Evangelist himself who provides the hermeneutical logic for this transformation, claiming that it was the Spirit that enabled and legitimated him (and other disciples) to retell the story of Jesus in a context and situation different from that of the addressees of the earlier tradition or even of the time of the earthly Jesus. Therefore, the search for mere historical accuracy may miss the fundamental intention of the Gospel of John. This intention should always be in view when questions of John, Jesus, and history are posed.