THE DATE AND PURPOSE OF THE GOSPEL BY JOHN

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Questions as to the date, origin, purpose and authorship of the Fourth Gospel, pel, which critical scholars of the past generation thought were settled, have arisen again in acute form. There is an increasing tendency by critics to abandon earlier conclusions: that the writer utilized Synoptic materials, that the book was sub-apostolic in date designed for Greek-thinking people, and that its theology reflects a long period of development. This paper calls attention to these trends and the reasons for them and suggests that more attention should be given to indications that a Palestinian origin *before the destruction of the temple is* sufficient to account for the distinctive emphases of this Gospel.

The case for apostolic authorship has been well stated by Alfred Plummer (CGT), B. W. Westcott and Wm. Sanday and need not be reviewed here. This view was defended with great effectiveness a generation later by W. Scott Holland, then Regius Professor of Divinity in the University of Oxford, and commended by Dr. J. Armitage Robinson as offering "the most important contribution of recent times to the discussion of Johannine authorship."[1] The burden of Holland's study is that the details mentioned in this Gospel cannot be satisfactorily explained as E. F. Scott had explained them—i.e., as due "to the fine instinct of the literary artist"[2] —but only as memories of an eye-witness. He notes, for example, that in John's reference to the Feast of Dedication details are included—such as Solomon's Porch, the winter weather, etc.—items which are meaningless unless they are details provided by a vivid *memory* of the experience. Details such as "Sychar," Aenon near to Salim, and Bethany beyond Jordan, which have no reason for inclusion, since they contribute nothing to the theme, are inexplicable unless recollections from memory by the eye-witness.[3] Holland's arguments showing that Clement of Alexander was wrong in calling this a "Spiritual Gospel" because it was independent of historical facts, appears to this writer, quite convincing. Instead, for the author of the First Epistle and the Gospel of John, "the body is itself the organ of the spirit."[4]

This Oxford scholar's position receives support from a Cambridge scholar of this present generation. J. N. Sanders argues effectively that because the Gospel of John is theological it need not be less historical.[5] He proceeds to demonstrate that John may not have been dependent on Luke but that probably both were dependent upon a common source, that the Joannine materials are used independently, and that the picture of the family in Bethany, featured in the eleventh chapter of John, is not a "figment of the imagination" but a study from real life told by an eye-witness.[6]

In a monograph published in 1938 another Cambridge scholar argued with great effectiveness that the author of the Fourth Gospel may not even have known the Synoptics, much less have been influenced by them.[7] This author is convinced that once the assumption that John knew the first three Gospels is abandoned many of the problems relative to similarities and differences become simplified. He believes that the relatively "advanced" Christology may be due not to a lapse of time but rather to a different place of origin—since it is well known that "advance" in some places is more rapid than in others. An increasing number of scholars think of the Johannine theology as having matured at about the same time as that of Paul, i.e., about 60 A.D. and hence to have arisen from an independent "tradition."[8] Some who do not regard the apostle as the author, nevertheless agree with the book itself, that the author was an eyewitness, one who was not dependent on other written documents, but rather on his "Spirit-inspired memory."[9] This (modern)

view is in marked contrast to that of the previous generation in which a later authorship was assumed. The elder Grant wrote:

> He is also determined to make Jesus as un-Jewish, even as anti-Jewish, as possible . . . As a consequence he mingles fact and theological interpretation so thoroughly that we can scarcely separate them, even with the help of the Synoptics.[10]

John was regarded with great reserve and suspicion because he emphasized the "Christ of Faith" and because it is allegedly part fact, partly legend, and partly pagan ideology—such is the view of Bultmann today.[11]

Considerations favoring a date prior to 70 A.D.

A revolt from this second century dating of John's Gospel was led by C. C. Torrey who emphasized the Aramaic element in the Gospels, and by F. C. Burney who stressed the Aramaic origin of the Gospel.[12] E. R. Goodenough was also a pioneer in advocating an early date.[13]

It is not without significance that the oldest New Testament texts now extant are portions of the Gospel by John. The oldest of these contains only the fragment John 18:31-33, yet is dated by the palaeographers at 125-135 A.D. It renders untenable theories of a late date, such as those advanced by A. Loisy, and proves that this Gospel was in existence by the end of the first century.[14] In the same year Bell and Skeat published a fragment of a hitherto unknown gospel fragment called Egerton Payprus 2, dated before the middle of the second century. It testifies to the acceptance of these four Gospels as equally authoritative.[15] The influence of the Fourth Gospel is apparent in this excerpt:

> Turning to the rulers of the people he spake this saying: Search the Scriptures, in which ye think that ye have life; these are they which bear witness of me. Think not that I came to accuse you to my Father; there is one that accuseth you, even Moses, on whom ye have set your hope. And they said, we know well that God spake unto Moses, but as for thee we know not whence thou art . . .[16]

This passage contains excerpts from John 5:39, 45; 9:29; 7:30; 10:39 as well as from the other three Gospels. In addition there is the recently published complete text of John's Gospel dated by experts at approximately the end of the second century.[17] Thus, in these three recently published materials we have manuscripts for John's Gospel that are earlier than for any other New Testament book.[18]

Archaeology has disproved many theories of a later origin of this Gospel. Tomb inscriptions have proven that names found in the Fourth Gospel, and previously assumed to have been unknown before the second century, were known prior to the Fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.[19] Placenames also, such as "Gabbatha," reflect a knowledge of Jerusalem available only to one who was in residence there prior to 70 A.D. If the author of the Fourth Gospel was a non-Palestinian who visited Jerusalem after 70 A.D. he could not readily identify the stone pavement which was then buried under the debris of the ruined city, as it has been ever since (until recently exacavated).

The Dead Sea Scrolls offer conclusive evidence that it is not necessary to posit an origin in the second century to account for elements in John's Gospel which have resemblances to words and ideas current in Hellenistic thought. The Essenes who lived at Qumran moved in a circle of ideas which have much in common with the Gospels, especially the Fourth. In phraseology, concepts and symbols the Qumran Scrolls and the Fourth Gospel seem to be contemporary in several respects. These include vocabulary—"darkness and light," "truth and error," "doing

the truth," "the Spirit of truth," and "the works of God"—and concepts such as "covenant," conflict between light and darkness, the hostility of "the world," and the importance of unity and community.[20] It appears therefore that the author of the Fourth Gospel was acquainted with words and ideas familiar to Palestinians in the middle of the first century.

In addition to the foregoing there are considerations which point to a time and place of origin prior to the Jewish Revolt of 66-70 A.D. The Fourth Gospel, especially in chapters 4-12, is dominated by a controversy with "the Jews." The intensity of this struggle appears to fit a situation before the fall of the temple better than the situation after. By 70 A.D. the sacrificial system and the priesthood had been destroyed along with the temple. The Jewish national state and a central religious authority in Judaism no longer existed (except in the rabbinic school at Jamnia).[21] It may be assumed that Judaism was weaker after this disaster, and less formidable as a foe of the young church. The crucial issue *before* the termination of the official cultus, the priesthood and the Sadduccees was the relationship of Jesus Christ to Judaism. This is reflected in the earliest extant Christian document (I Thessalonians). About the middle of the first century of our era Paul wrote concerning the Jews:

> They killed the Lord Jesus, and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they please not God, and are contrary to all men: forbidding us to speak to the Gentile that they may be saved, to fill up their sins always; but wrath is come upon them to the uttermost. (I Thessalonians 2:15)

These words, and others like them in Galatians, were written when Christianity was in the minority and on the defensive. When Justin Martyr wrote to Trypho the Jew, a century later, Christianity was in the ascendency and Judaism on the defensive; consequently the tone of this argument is relatively mild and persuasive. By the *end* of the first century the central issue was the relation of the Church, not to Judaism, but to Rome as is reflected in the book of Revelation.

It is difficult to imagine a situation, in the Diaspora, after the Jewish revolt, in which the central conflict would be between church and synagogue, as Van Unnick suggests.[22] By this time the church and synagogue were probably separated even in the provinces, although data on this is extremely scanty.[23] Scott Holland's contention that this Gospel represents the recollections of an old man, far removed from contemporary events, recalling details of his early Palestinian residence, seems somewhat less plausible than the assumption that the dialogues of the Gospel reflict issues contemporary to the time of writing, i.e., conditions in Palestine in the mid-first century. Cullmann has pointed out that the central issue of the Fourth Gospel is the tension in Palestine between Christians with a Greek background and those with a Hebrew background. Among the distinctive emphases in the Fourth Gospel which reflect orientation favorable to the Hellenists are a distrust of the priesthood and temple worship (John 2:13-22; 4:20-24), an appreciation of the Samaritans (John 8-48), and the Shekinah, once resident in the temple becoming incarnate in Jesus as the "glory as of the only begotten from the Father" 1:14).[24] Cullmann concludes that the Synoptics were written primarily for the Hebrew Christians of Palestine and the Fourth Gospel for the Hellenists, both being of equal antiquity. If his hypothesis is valid it helps explain why the controversy between Jesus and the Jews is so prominent in this Gospel. However, while much of the dramatic setting and immediate issues were Palestinian in origin they are suffused with insights which are relevant to the world at large, the Hellenists being the bridge between Jewish and Gentile Christians, as the book of Acts indicates (Ac. 11:19-26).

In summary, factors which loomed so large in earlier discoveries, attempts to account for alleged Alexandrian and Ephesian influences which posited a locale in Diasporia seem much less convincing since the Dead Sea Scroll discoveries indicate that many of the same issues were present in Palestine during the middle of the first century. Gardner-Smith has convinced many, including C. H. Dodd, W. F. Howard, C. K. Barrett and others, that the so-called "advanced Christology," did not necessitate a half-century of reflection but could have been discovered in the same generation as that of Paul; indeed the affinity between John and Paul is very close. From many directions, but especially in England, scholars are now favoring an early Palestinian origin. Concludes Robinson:

> When we look to the background, strictly speaking, rather than to the eventual environment, of the evangelist and his tradition, I detect a growing readiness to recognize that this is not to be sought at the end of the first century or the beginning of the second, in Ephesus or Alexandria, among the Gnostics or the Greeks, either in space or in time, beyond a fairly limited area of southern Palestine in the fairly limited interval between the Crucifixion and fall of Jerusalem.[25]

Against this is church tradition, preserved primarily in Eusebius, which gives the locale of the Fourth Gospel as Ephesus. The internal and external evidence for the date and locale needs to be re-examined. The above considerations are limited to a consideration of internal evidence. For this standpoint what is a better explanation for the prominence of Jewish unbelief in John's Gospel than the assumption that it reflects the religious situation of the first century prior to the Jewish revolt when the church was confronted, not by the paganism of the empire, but by a proud, complacent Judaism?

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FOOTNOTES

1. W. S. Holland and W. J. Richmond, edit., *The Fourth Gospel* (London: J. Murray, 1923) p. vi.
2. E. F. Scott, *The Fourth Gospel,* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1906), p. 19.
3. W. Scott Holland, *op. cit.,* p. 58.
4. *Ibid.,* p. 66.
5. J. N. Sanders, "Those Whom Jesus Loved," *New Testament Studies,* Sept., 1954, p. 332.
6. Sanders suggests that the "Beloved Disciple" was Lazarus, *op. cit.* p. 33.
7. P. Gardner-Smith, *Saint John and the Synoptic Gospels,* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1938), *passim.*
8. J. A. T. Robinson, "The New Look on the Fourth Gospel," *Studia Evangelica,* Edited by Aland, Cross, Danuelous Riesenfeld and Van Unnik, (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1959), p. 346.
9. R. M. Grant, *Earliest Lives of Jesus* (New York: Harpers, 1961), pp. 7-9. On rather precarious grounds he thinks Nicodemus was the author of John's Gospel.
10. F. C. Grant, *The Gospel of John: Harpers Annotated Bible Series* (New York: Harpers, 1956), p. 7.
11. Cf. R. Bultmann, *Theologie Des Neuen Testaments* (Tubingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1953), pp. 350-361.
12. F. C. Burney, *The Aramaic Origin of the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: 1922) *passim.*
13. E. R. Goodenough, "John, A Primitive Gospel," JBL, 64 (1945), pp. 145-182.
14. C. H. Roberts, *An Unpublished Fragment of the Fourth Gospel in the John Rylands Library,* 1935. See also F. C. Kenyon, *The Bible and Archaelogy,* (1940), pp. 217, 226.
15. H. I. Bell and T. C. Skeat, *Fragments of an Unknown Gospel,* (1935), pp. 1, 2.
16. *Ibid.,* p. 28.
17. Victor Martin, edit., *Papyrus Bodmer II, Evangile de Jean,* chap. 1-21 (Geneve: Bibliotheca Bodmeriana, 1956, 1958).
18. Alan Richardson, *The Gospel According to St. John* (London: SCM Press, 1959), p. 17.
19. W. F. Albright, *The Archaeology of Palestine,* (London: Penguin Books, 1954), p. 244.
20. F. L. Cross, *The Ancient Library of Qumran and Modern Biblical Studies* (Doubleday, 1958), p. 155.
21. H. Leitzmann, *The Beginnings of the Christian Church* (tr. by B. L. Wolff) (New York: Charles Scribners, 1937), p. 240.
22. W. C. Van Unnik, "The Purpose of John's Gospel," *Studia Evangelica,* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1959), p. 410.
23. Leitzmann, *op. cit.,* pp. 243ff.
24. Oscar Cullmann, "The Significance of the Qumran Texts for Research into the beginnings of Christianity," JBL, Dec. 1955, pp. 213-226.
25. J. A. T. Robinson, "The New Look and the Fourth Gospel," *Studia Evangelica,* p. 342.