

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

THE FOURTH GOSPEL IN THE EARLY CHURCH

I

IN 1943 a book entitled *The Fourth Gospel in the Early Church: its Origin and Influence on Christian Theology up to Irenaeus*, being the Kaye Prize Essay for 1939, by Mr. J. N. Sanders, was published by the Cambridge University Press. This book propounds a theory as to the origin and nature of the Fourth Gospel which is not as novel as the author seems to suppose it to be, but which is supported by arguments which have certain elements of originality.

The Gospel is supposed to have been written by an unknown author in Alexandria, well acquainted with Rabbinic lore and Christian teaching, who had access to valuable traditions about the life of Jesus which may have been collected by the "Beloved Disciple". The Beloved Disciple was not, of course, the Apostle John. This author was familiar with "the type of speculation which later crystallised into the Gnostic systems of the second and later centuries". He deliberately wrote his book "in the language of this Proto-Gnostic theosophy . . . in order to commend the saving truths of Christianity to such persons as might appreciate and accept a thorough-going restatement of the Christian Gospel in terms of contemporary religious and philosophical thought . . . The reluctance shown by the Early Church to accept the Fourth Gospel as Scripture seems to indicate that the traditional ascription to John the son of Zebedee, writing at Ephesus, is without foundation in fact" (p. 85).

Mr. Sanders believes that the Church at Alexandria was full of heresy until the end of the second century. It was from there that the heretics Valentinus and Basilides came to Rome. We cannot be sure that Valentinus (A.D. 130) knew the Gospel, but his followers Heracleon and Ptolemy certainly did. Heracleon wrote a commentary on it about A.D. 160. Ptolemy ascribed it to "John the Disciple of the Lord" (Irenaeus *Haer.* i. 8. 5). Irenaeus identifies this disciple with the Apostle in *Haer.* i. 9. 2. According to Mr. Sanders the great advantage of his theory is

that it explains why the Fourth Gospel was used and valued by Alexandrian heretics and why they attributed it to the Apostle John,¹ "while Catholic writers only used it sparingly and said nothing about its authorship".

Mr. Sanders naturally has to account for the rise of the tradition that the Gospel was written at Ephesus by the son of Zebedee and this he does by supposing that it

"was introduced into Asia Minor, with the Gnostic ascription to John; there this John was identified with their John the Presbyter, already identified with the Apostle . . . The acceptance of the Fourth Gospel in Asia Minor is to be explained by the support which it gives to the Quartodeciman position. It was from Asia Minor that Irenaeus received the Fourth Gospel, and his use of it marks the final stage in its acceptance as Scripture, for he challenged the Gnostic interpretation of the Gospel and vindicated it as the *regula veritatis*, a position which it has held in Catholic theology ever since" (p. 86).

It is only fair to Mr. Sanders to note that he puts forward his theory as to the place of origin of the Gospel as possible, but not as proved. He also believes that the author of the Fourth Gospel "preserved the essential truth of the Christian Gospel under the new form into which he . . . so thoroughly transposed it", and that Irenaeus "really understood and interpreted the Fourth Gospel correctly" (p. 87).

Mr. Sanders thinks that when the Gospel was brought to Rome, the more simple members of the Roman Church rejected it altogether, because it came from such a hot-bed of heresy as Alexandria and was approved and commented on by persons who were known to be heretics. Hence the rise of the sect for which the Cypriot bishop Epiphanius, writing about 200 years afterwards, invented the name *Alogoi*, because they were so insignificant that he could find out nothing about the name of their founder, or the nature of their opinions, except that they objected to the Gospel, because the order of events described in it did not correspond with the order of events described in the Synoptic Gospels and that they were foolish and ignorant enough to ascribe it to Cerinthus, an Asiatic heretic of the end of the first century, who held opinions diametrically opposed to the teaching of the Gospel with regard to the person of Christ.

Irenaeus also mentions certain persons who rejected the Gospel through their dislike to the teaching of Montanus and

¹Ptolemy in his *Letter to Flora* called the Evangelist "the Apostle": Basilides quoted the Gospel, according to Hippolytus (*Adv. Haer.* vii. 10); it is also quoted in the *Clementine Homilies* xix. 22.

to his claim to special inspiration by the Spirit. He regards these persons as in danger of committing the unpardonable sin against the Holy Ghost, but thinks them of so little importance that he only devotes a few lines of his long treatise on Heresies to them, although, if their theories had prevailed in the Church, they would have invalidated the whole of the arguments which, as Mr. Sanders notes, he drew, and rightly drew, from the Gospel (Irenaeus, *Haer.* iii. 11. 9). There are also traces in Tertullian and in Eusebius that certain persons found a difficulty in accepting the Fourth Gospel, not because it came from Alexandria and was admired by Valentinian heretics, but because the order of events in it differed from the order of events in the Synoptic Gospels. There is no evidence at all that it was objected to on account of its use of terms which were characteristic of early Gnosticism or because of its Christology.

So Mr. Sanders' suggestion that the Gospel was written at Alexandria and was objected to at Rome because of its place of origin and because of the heretical persons who used and admired it is founded on nothing better than conjecture. He does not mention that there is good evidence from the paintings in the Catacombs of Domitilla and Priscilla at Rome that the noblest and most highly educated section of the Roman Church accepted the Gospel long before the Valentinians had any opportunity of showing the Romans how much they valued it.

The Catacomb of Domitilla was constructed at the end of the first century by Domitilla, the niece of Domitian, as a burial place for her family and dependants. She was the wife of T. Flavius Clemens who was put to death by Domitian, almost certainly because he was a Christian, while Domitilla was banished. Their two sons whom Domitian intended to be his successors and whose names he changed to Vespasian and Domitian disappear from history without leaving a trace and were probably put to death with their father. Dr. Streeter believed that the "Theophilus" to whom St. Luke dedicated his Gospel was T. Flavius Clemens. However this may be, it was not to St. Luke's Gospel, but to St. John's Gospel that this noble family turned when they desired to find symbolic pictures with which to adorn their burial place. When the catacomb was first discovered it contained a picture of the Good Shepherd and to this day a picture of two persons sitting at a table on which are bread and fish is to be seen. Both these

pictures are dated by the best authorities at the beginning of the second century at the latest.

The mystic idea underlying the meal of bread and fish must have been taken from a combination of the miracle of the loaves and fishes and the discourse about the bread of life which follows it in the Fourth Gospel only. There may possibly also be a reference to the repast of bread and fish mentioned in the last chapter of the Gospel. That this idea is not without foundation is shown by a later picture in the "Crypts of the Sacraments" in the Catacomb of Callixtus which was probably painted towards the end of the second century. Here the scene has been developed into a picture in which seven men (the number of disciples that went fishing in the sea of Galilee) are represented as sitting at a table furnished with bread and fish with the baskets in which the fragments of the miraculous meal were taken up standing on each side of it.

This idea took such a hold on the imagination of the Early Church that, even in the Middle Ages, representations of the Eucharistic meal are occasionally found in which the table is supplied with bread and fish in place of bread and wine. In another well-known picture in the Crypts of the Sacraments the mystic Fish is represented resting on a basket containing loaves of bread and a flask of wine, thus combining both ideas.¹ In the Capella Graeca in the Cemetery of Priscilla which is attributed by all the Roman archaeologists to the end of the first century or the beginning of the second there is a representation of the raising of Lazarus and of a Eucharistic feast in which the baskets of the miracle of the loaves and fishes are shown at each end of the table, while the table is furnished with bread and fish. Close to this crypt is the burial place of the Acilii Glabrones, another of the noble families in Rome, some of whom were Christians in the first century. Domitian made one of them who had been consul fight with wild beasts in his private amphitheatre and afterwards put him to death, almost certainly because he was a Christian (Dion Cassius lxxvii. 13;

¹ *Bull. Arch. Christ.* for 1865, pp. 31-40; Di Rossi, *Roma Sotterranea*, Vol. I, p. 186. See also Quintilian, *Inst. Or.* iv, introduction; Suetonius *Domitian*, xv; Dion Cassius, lxxvii. 13; Eusebius, *Ch. Hist.* iii. 18. Di Rossi also gives a drawing of an inscription from the cemetery in which the Apostle Paul was buried which he dates between A.D. 107 and 110. On it are represented two loaves and two fishes as symbols which needed no explanation of the hope of immortality inspired by the Eucharist (John vi. 58).

Juvenal, iv. 99-101; Marucchi, *Catacombe Romane*, p. 428; Lancianni, *Pagan and Christian Rome*, p. 4).

Surely the opinion of such families as the Flavii and the Acilii Glabrones as to the value and authenticity of the Fourth Gospel is of more weight than the rejection of it by a body of men who were ignorant enough to ascribe it to Cerinthus, for which they received a well-merited castigation from Epiphanius. Moreover, as we have seen, the members of these noble families had every reason not to accept the Gospel lightly, or without examination into its credentials. They forfeited their lives and possessions and even the lives of their children because of their Christian faith.

Mr. Sanders supposes, as we have mentioned, that the Gospel was accepted at Ephesus and treated as on an equality with the other three, because it seemed to give support to the custom of the Asiatic Church of observing Easter on the 14th of the month Nisan.

“The local pride of the Ephesian Christians, who had already raised their ‘Presbyter’ John to the Apostolate by identifying him with the son of Zebedee, and their anxiety to have apostolic support in the Quartodeciman controversy induced them to see in the Fourth Gospel a work of the Apostle John. *This could have happened very easily, and almost unconsciously* [italics ours]. There is a considerable likeness between the Gospel and the Epistles: the Epistles are the work of a man named John (the ‘presbyter’, it is true, but that is easily ignored); and it is not difficult to guess that the Fourth Gospel was written by the Beloved Disciple, or that the Beloved Disciple was John the son of Zebedee; then the two Johns are identified and the ‘Ephesian tradition’ results” (p. 39).

It is not clear where Mr. Sanders believes Irenaeus was while this remarkable development of opinion was going on. On page 86 he says that Irenaeus “received” the Gospel from Asia Minor, which may mean that he had left that country and gone to Gaul or Rome. But he assigns to that Father a share in the extremely dubious transaction by means of which the Gospel came to be regarded as the work of an Apostle by saying, “The mention of Ephesus as the place of composition appears first in Irenaeus, and *may well be his own contribution to the tradition*” (p. 6; italics ours). Irenaeus is further said to have confused two distinct persons named “John” because he was “anxious for apologetic reasons” to assert the apostolic authorship of the Fourth Gospel (p. 6).

Apparently it was the Elders of the Church at Ephesus who added John xxi. 24 to the Gospel to indicate in a round-

about and not too positive manner that the son of Zebedee was its author and that he was a reliable person. Mr. Sanders adds, "the memory of the Elder does not seem to have been entirely obliterated, for Dionysius of Alexandria mentions that there were said to be two tombs at Ephesus, each of a man named John" (pp. 7, 8). Presumably one of these tombs contained the body of the "Elder": whose body did the other contain, if John the Apostle never was at Ephesus? Was it a fake erected to confirm the idea about the authorship of the Gospel which the Elders of Ephesus and Irenaeus desired to impose on the rest of the Christian world "for apologetic reasons"? It would be rather difficult to build a tomb of this kind "almost unconsciously".

At any rate these manoeuvres did succeed in persuading the whole Church, including the orthodox and intelligent *Alogoi*, that the Gospel had been written in Asia at an early date, for they ascribed it to Cerinthus, although they should have known better. For some reason, probably, as we have seen, because of their disapproval of its apparently Montanistic tendencies, they refused to accept the testimony of the Ephesian Elders as to its authorship. But the rest of the Church was totally misled. Mr. Sanders says that the traditions recorded by Clement of Alexandria, Polycrates and Dionysius of Alexandria "all seem to represent elaborations of the tradition found in Irenaeus, and have no authority independent of him" (p. 7). Nothing is said about the witness which Tertullian and Origen, who commented on the Commentary of Heracleon and who was the most learned man of his time, bear to the Gospel and its authorship.

It seems difficult to understand why Clement of Alexandria who was a younger contemporary of Irenaeus and who was head of the Catechetical School of Alexandria should have so tamely accepted and "elaborated" the fables put out by the Elders of Ephesus and Irenaeus. He must surely have found some lingering tradition floating about at Alexandria with regard to the "great and daring genius" (p. 85) who wrote the Gospel there. Mr. Sanders says that "the break which Demetrius made with the native traditions and customs of the Alexandrian Church was so thorough that the alien tradition was accepted without question", and would also have us note that Clement was an Athenian by birth (p. 46). Demetrius was bishop of

Alexandria in the time of Clement and Origen. There is no evidence whatever that he made any doctrinal reformation in the Church of Alexandria. The *Dictionary of Christian Biography* states that there is some slight evidence that he made some changes in the peculiar church order of Alexandria by appointing more bishops for the surrounding towns, but the doctrinal revolution appears to be the product of Mr. Sanders' "creative imagination", to use Canon Streeter's favourite term.

Eusebius, whom Mr. Sanders quotes when it suits his purpose to do so, states that the Church of Alexandria was founded by St. Mark and that he appointed one Annianus, "a man distinguished for his piety and admirable in every respect" to carry on his work (*Ch. Hist.* ii. 16, 24). It is true that the statement of Eusebius with regard to St. Mark does not seem to rest on any better foundation than tradition, but, even so, a tradition reported by so ancient an author is preferable to the quite unsupported hypothesis of a twentieth-century student.

Mr. Sanders, as one might expect, states at great length the reasons which have induced him to present his revolutionary theory which contradicts not only the tradition of the whole of ancient Christian authors but also the opinion of such eminent critics as Harnack, Streeter and Strachan, not to mention Archbishop Bernard and Archbishop Temple.

He disposes in a summary manner of the idea that the Gospel could have been written by the son of Zebedee. He would apparently like to believe the fable that he was put to death early by the Jews, but hesitates to trust the weight of his theory to such thin ice. He, therefore, brings forward the old objections that it was unlikely that a Galilean fisherman would be "known to the High Priest", and that it was hardly decent of the writer of the Gospel to refer to himself as "the Disciple whom Jesus loved" (pp. 44, 45).

He has, moreover, two new objections of his own: First, that the son of Zebedee could not have stood beside the cross, if, with the rest of the Disciples, he forsook Jesus and fled, and secondly, that an eye-witness would not have written a Gospel "by the working up of narrative and teaching *pericopae* of very diverse character into a connected whole". "This", he says, "seems to indicate that the author worked on material supplied to him by other people, and so could not have been an eye-witness. He may have used other Gospels—Mark for

instance, which, if he did use it, he handled very drastically" (p. 44).

With regard to the first of these objections, it seems only necessary to remark that if the Synoptists record that all the disciples forsook Jesus and fled, they also record that Peter returned from his flight and followed Jesus to the Palace of the High Priest. There seems, therefore, no reason why John should not have found his way to the foot of the cross.

We can see no force at all in the second objection. The author of the Fourth Gospel could not have framed his narrative in any other way than that in which he did frame it, whether he was an eye-witness or not, if his purpose was, as he himself states, not to write a complete life of Jesus, but to present a selection of accounts of incidents in His life and examples of His teaching such as was calculated to encourage believers and to produce faith in unbelievers.

We may note, in passing, that Mr. Sanders pays no attention to the graphic notes of place and time in the Gospel which induced even Canon Streeter to suppose that his visionary and mystical Evangelist must have paid a visit to Jerusalem in search of such local colour as might lend verisimilitude to his visions and persuade his readers to believe that he was one of those "who had seen the Lord".

It having been thus "proved" that the Apostle could not have been the author of the Gospel, Mr. Sanders brings forward "the Elder", that *bonne à tout faire* of the household of Criticism, in a new role. This time he is the author of the Epistles, but not the amanuensis of the Apostle, or the person who "put his ideas into shape".

Mr. Sanders produces certain arguments brought forward recently by Dr. Dodd which are supposed to prove that the Epistles and the Gospel could not have been written by the same author.¹ If these are accepted as conclusive, "it follows that the 'presbyter' who wrote the Epistles did not write the Gospel and also that it is no longer necessary to hold that the Gospel was written in Asia Minor . . . One can, therefore, look for the place of the Gospel's composition which fits in best with the external evidence of its use and reception by the early Church" (p. 11).

These arguments are as follows: The Epistles "represent

¹ In the *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* xxi (1937), pp. 129 ff.

a stage more primitive, though not necessarily earlier in time, in the development of a common theology than that found in the Fourth Gospel." (pp. 8, 9). This is shown by "the fact that whereas the author of the Gospel has completely transmuted the original Christian eschatology, substituting, as it were, 'ultimate in value' for 'final in time' as the meaning of *ἔσχατος*, the Epistles present the phase of 'futurist eschatology' and employ the primitive vocabulary", such as the words *παρουσία*, *ἔσχατη ὥρα* and *ἀντίχριστος*. This depends on a modern theory that, when the members of the Church found that Christ did not immediately return, they solaced their disappointment by believing that the only "coming" that was to be expected was a spiritual coming into the hearts of believers.

It is not easy to understand why any one should say that in the Fourth Gospel *ἔσχατος* means "ultimate in value" when out of the seven times that the word is found in the Gospel it is never used in this sense, while it is found six times in the expression "at the last day" which is unquestionably used in a "primitive" sense. John v. 28 should not be overlooked, nor should John xii. 48, and it is possible that some trace of the *ἀντίχριστος* is to be found in the reference in John v. 43 to the one who will come in his own name.

In the production of this belief in "realized eschatology", as far as it was accepted at all, the words recorded by the Fourth Evangelist as part of the last discourses of Jesus no doubt had a large share. But it does not follow that the Evangelist altogether put on one side and discarded that part of eschatological belief which looked forward to a second coming of Christ to judgment in the future, although experience may have taught him that it was not to be expected to occur in the near future, or at any definite date.

As far as we can see Mr. Sanders does not regard the last chapter of the Gospel as being the work of an editor who did not write the rest of the book. He should, therefore, not omit to notice that in this chapter a second coming of Jesus in the "primitive" sense is distinctly foretold (*vv.* 22, 23). In John xiv Jesus is represented as saying, "If I go away and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to myself, that where I am, ye may be also". This looks extremely like a relic of "futurist eschatology" in that part of the Gospel which is supposed to teach "realized eschatology" to the

exclusion of any other ideas on the subject. The fact is that both ideas seem to have been held together in differing proportions, according to the character and experience of various believers.

St. Paul also taught the doctrine of the indwelling of Christ in the faithful, but he did not therefore give up the anticipation which he apparently shared with the whole Church that he and all other men would have to stand before the judgment seat of Christ (Rom. xiv. 10; 2 Cor. v. 10). Even in his later Epistles (if Criticism will allow us to consider them to be in any sense his) when he had apparently abandoned the expectation that Christ would come in his lifetime, he speaks of those who love His appearing (2 Tim. iv. 8). In the same Epistle there is a curious reference to certain heretics who taught that the Resurrection was past already (2 Tim. ii. 18). One wonders if their teaching was due to a misunderstanding of the "realized eschatology" which is to be found in such passages as John v. 24 where it is said that those who hear the word of Christ and believe on Him that sent Him shall not come into judgment but shall have eternal life and have been transferred from death unto life. If St. Paul's doctrine of justification by faith was perverted into the idea that we may do evil that good may come even in his lifetime, this misunderstanding of a difficult saying might easily have been produced, and a meaning given to it that it was never meant to bear.

However this may be, "futurist eschatology" was certainly more prevalent and better understood in the Church as a whole than "realized eschatology" which is apparently only intelligible and attractive to a few very spiritually minded persons. This is clearly shown by the fact that references to the Second Coming and the Last Judgment appear in all the Creeds and in all stages of Christian art. It is possible that the representations which are rarely found in the Catacombs, but not elsewhere, of a single person standing before the judgment seat of Christ may be intended as a symbol of some kind of syncretism between "futurist eschatology" and "realized eschatology", but it would not be wise to be dogmatic about this. The appearance of some words which are regarded as only proper to "futurist eschatology" in the Epistles should not, therefore, be regarded as a decisive proof that the Gospel and Epistles are by different hands and belong to different schools of thought.

It is also objected that in the Epistle the death of Jesus is spoken of as being an *ἰλασμός*, "a primitive conception that is quite out of keeping with the Gospel's presentation of the death of Jesus as His glorification" (p. 9). Here it seems to have been forgotten that in John xi. 49-52 Caiaphas is represented as making an inspired prophecy of the nature of the death of Jesus which the Evangelist endorses and explains as meaning that Jesus died not only for the people of Israel, but "that He might gather into one the sons of God who are scattered abroad", a statement which accords very well with 1 John ii. 2, where the word objected to occurs. We also cannot see why the death of Jesus should only have one aspect and why it should not be regarded as a propitiation for sin as well as a glorification.

It is also objected that in the Gospel the Spirit alone is spoken of as the Paraclete, whereas in the Epistle Jesus is spoken of as the Paraclete (1 John ii. 1). Mr. Sanders does admit in a note that in John xiv. 16 Jesus speaks of the Spirit as *another* Paraclete, but he tries to get out of this difficulty by translating the verse, "I will send you another as a Comforter", which cannot be regarded as at all probable.

The other objections urged are not convincing, unless we are to grant that a writer must always use the same word in the same sense and must use all the words that he has employed in one book in another book which has quite a different aim.

For example, the objection is put forward that the writer of the Gospel uses *θέλημα σαρκός* in John i. 13 to express the same thing for which the writer of the Epistle uses the words *ἐπιθυμία σαρκός* in 1 John ii. 16. But we venture to suggest that an examination of the passages will show that they are not intended to express the same thing.

There is also a complaint that *οὖν* only occurs once in the Epistle while "it may almost be called the favourite particle of the author of the Gospel". That this is so is undoubted, but the continual use of *οὖν* in the Gospel is accounted for by the fact that the Evangelist at least wishes to induce his readers to believe that he was writing history and that, to him, history consisted of a series of events bound together by a strict sequence of cause and effect and was also a process which was under the immediate and effective control of God. In the Epistle there was no need for the use of the particle to enforce this idea.

So much attention is paid to the imaginary differences between the Epistle and the Gospel, that no attention is paid in this part of the book to their resemblances, but it is only fair to Mr. Sanders to note that on page 86 he admits that the greatest difficulty that his theory has to face is that "it leaves unexplained the close affinity there is between the Gospel and the Johannine Epistles, which seem fairly certainly to have been written in Asia Minor. In spite of the difference of authorship [this is calmly assumed to be a proved fact] the Gospel and Epistles have much more than an accidental similarity". He, therefore, has to assume that it is probable that the Alexandrian author of the Gospel somehow got hold of the Epistles and made use of the ideas contained in them, which seems to be a very "lame and impotent conclusion".

Mr. Sanders gives many quotations from Ignatius, Polycarp, the Epistle to Diognetus, Justin Martyr, Tatian, Athenagoras and Theophilus to prove what has been perfectly well known since the days of the Tübingen School, namely, that, although all these authors show familiarity with ideas which are only found in the Fourth Gospel, none of them quote it exactly to the letter, except in short phrases, and none of them, except Theophilus, states that the author was named "John".

The venerable argument that in writing to the Ephesians Ignatius mentions Paul by name but not John is brought forward once again and this is treated as positive proof that John the Apostle never was in Ephesus, although Ignatius in another place in the same letter speaks of "Apostles" in connection with the Ephesian Christians (*Ad Eph.* xi. 2). Why it should not also prove that the "Elder" was never there, if he were the important person which all critical theories assume that he was—so important that Polycarp could refer to him as "John" and couple him with others who had "seen the Lord" without ever suspecting that he would be misunderstood by his simple minded and juvenile hearer, Irenæus—does not appear (p. 6).

It is admitted that Polycarp quotes words which are practically a quotation from the First Epistle, but this is regarded as only likely, if the "Elder" were the author of the Epistle and Polycarp his disciple. Some words which might be taken as a reminiscence of the Gospel are dismissed as being of no importance, because Polycarp, like Ignatius, may have been acquainted with some tradition about the sayings of Jesus

which the author of the Fourth Gospel also used (pp. 6, 14). What Mr. Sanders does not pause to consider is that the writings of Ignatius and Polycarp consist entirely of Letters, written with regard to the specific occasion of the journey of Ignatius to Rome and that there was no obvious reason why the Fourth Gospel should be quoted in them, or any reference made to its author.

The method with which this author deals with quotations in Justin Martyr may be judged from the following words (p. 27):

“Apology I. xi. 4, καὶ γὰρ ὁ Χριστὸς εἶπεν. Ἄν μὴ ἀναγεννηθῆτε οὐ μὴ εἰσέλθητε εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν. This reads like a conflation of Jn. iii. 3, εἰ μὴ τις γεννηθῆ ἄνωθεν, οὐ δύναται ἰδεῖν τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ, and 5, εἰ μὴ τις γεννηθῆ ἔξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος, οὐ δύναται εἰσελθεῖν εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ, but it may equally well be a quotation of a saying of Christ’s taken from oral tradition, perhaps of the saying which lies behind the passages in the Fourth Gospel.”

But he does not mention that the passage in Justin goes on, “For it is plain to all that it is impossible that those who are once born should enter into their mothers’ womb”. This is, to say the least of it, another close link with the passage in the Fourth Gospel.

The device of supposing the existence of a school of “Johannine writers” or of an “oral tradition” from which both Justin and the writer of the Fourth Gospel may have drawn the passages in which their writings resemble each other is anything but novel. Why it is inapplicable to the example given above we shall show later on.

Mr. Sanders himself admits that “certain passages [in Justin] are most naturally explained as reminiscences of the Fourth Gospel”, and says that “Justin’s writings illustrate . . . the first tentative use which was made of the Fourth Gospel by an orthodox writer, and this tentativeness makes it difficult to believe that Justin regarded the Fourth Gospel as Scripture or as the work of an apostle” (p. 31). In this he was anticipated by Canon Streeter, although *he* does not ascribe the way in which Justin used this Gospel to any connection with the Valentinians. His explanation is that Justin used it “like a modern apologist” in a hesitating way, in the hope that he would not offend the Fundamentalists and obscurantists of his time. Neither of these writers mentions that many ingenious Germans have promulgated a similar theory at least from 1875, or that Dr. E. A. Abbott in 1882 also denied that Justin valued

the Fourth Gospel and even doubted if he used it. Dr. Abbott ascribed any similarities that may be found between the Fourth Gospel and the writings of Justin to "traditions which were known to the Fourth Evangelist", just as Mr. Sanders does. He also anticipated to some extent the theory that the Gospel was regarded with suspicion in A.D. 150 because of its supposed connection with the Valentinians. When he has to account for the fact that it was accepted so soon after this date by the whole of the Catholic Church, he falls back, as Mr. Sanders does, on the argument that this was due "to the intrinsic power of this most spiritual treatise" (Salmon, *Introduction to N.T.*, pp. 64, 70). If only the study of the history of New Testament criticism were now part of a theological course, we might be spared the continual eruption of supposedly "novel" theories about the composition and nature of the Gospels.

II

As we have already seen, Mr. Sanders' principal argument for his theory that the Gospel was written at Alexandria and brought to Rome by the Valentinians, and that it was only accepted there after a hard struggle and after the lapse of many years (p. 38) is that the quotations from it in authors before the time of Irenaeus are few and not verbally exact and that the name of the author is nowhere mentioned.

But he does not point out that the quotations from the other Gospels by these writers are often not verbally exact, and that even their quotations from the Old Testament, which they unquestionably regarded as inspired Scripture, are not exact either. Nor does he observe that the only writings that we have after the letters of Ignatius and Polycarp until the time of Irenaeus are apologetic writings addressed either to the rulers of the Romans or to the Jews, and not to the members of the Church. The persons to whom the apologetic writings were addressed knew nothing and cared less about the authors of the Gospels. Therefore, even Tertullian never mentions the names of these authors in his Apology, and his quotations from the N.T. are very few in number. If we only had this book, we might infer that he "knew nothing" of the apostolic authorship of the Fourth Gospel, but, as we have many of the writings which he addressed to his fellow Christians, we know how absurd such a supposition would have been. But Justin does speak of

the Gospels as "Memoirs of the Apostles" and states that they were written by "Apostles and their followers" without the slightest hint that he regards one of the Gospels which he ascribes to an Apostle as in any way inferior to the others (*Dialogue*, 103).

Moreover one would like to know how it was that in A.D. 150, before the Church of Ephesus had, according to Mr. Sanders' theory, accepted the Fourth Gospel as canonical and possibly before it had even compassed the supposedly easy feat of transforming its "Elder" into the Apostle and before Irenaeus had confirmed this fraudulent attribution "for apologetic reasons", Justin could describe the authors of the Gospels in exactly the same terms as anyone would use now, who wished to describe them in a few words, without mentioning their names, if he believed that the Fourth Gospel was written by the son of Zebedee and that the Apostle Matthew was at least the authority behind that part of the First Gospel which is its distinctive feature.

But the most remarkable omission in Mr. Sanders' list of authorities is that he makes no mention at all of the *Diatessaron* of Tatian. Anyone who puts himself forward as a critic of the New Testament ought to know by now that an Arabic version of this Harmony of the Gospels which puts the Fourth Gospel on exactly the same level as the other three and which cannot possibly be derived from the writings of a "school", or from a tradition common to Tatian and the writer of the Fourth Gospel, was published in 1888. It is extraordinary that a modern critic should try to adopt the attitude taken up by the writer of *Supernatural Religion* before this Harmony was discovered. Whether this omission was made "unconsciously", or whether the existence of the *Diatessaron* was "easily ignored", or whether it is due to "apologetic reasons" we do not venture to enquire. The fact remains that no mention of the *Diatessaron* is made, and this, in itself, is sufficient to discredit the argument from the sparing use which is made of the Fourth Gospel in the works of Justin and Tatian which were addressed to Pagans and to Jews. Justin was Tatian's teacher and in all probability was as much inclined to put all the four Gospels on the same level as his pupil.

It should also be noted that Justin is said, in a rather late martyrology, to have been connected in some way with the

site on which the church of S. Pudenziana now stands. This site was given to be used as a church by the family that owned the Catacomb of Priscilla in which, as we have seen, certain pictures, much earlier than the time of Justin, have been discovered which were suggested by events described in the Fourth Gospel. It has been found in many instances that late martyrologies, even when they contain unhistorical statements, are often correct in their references to sites in Rome.

If Justin was brought into contact in this way with the descendants and memories of the noble Christian families that used the narratives of the Fourth Gospel as symbolic pictures with which to express their faith in the Resurrection and the saving power of the Eucharist, it is hard to see why his use of the Gospel should be described as "tentative" and as implying that he did not receive it as Scripture or regard it as having an Apostle as its author. It is far more probable that he used it as he did because he desired to employ the most suitable methods of persuasion available in dealing with the people whom he was trying to induce to take a favourable view of Christianity. To the Romans he quoted the moral precepts which are so common in the Synoptic Gospels and to the Jews he quoted the Old Testament. It is also probable that he did not fully understand the Gospel himself. He was not born a Christian, as Irenaeus almost certainly was, neither was he brought up from early youth in the traditions of a Church where the Fourth Evangelist (whether he was the Apostle or the Elder) had taught for many years, if we are to believe the tradition of the whole of the Catholic Church and of all the heretics who have left us any record of their beliefs on this point.

It should also be noted that Irenaeus himself in his recently discovered *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* makes very sparing use of quotations from the New Testament in general and from the Fourth Gospel in particular. If chance had not preserved for us his *Refutation of Heresies*, and if we only had his *Demonstration* from which to judge the way in which he regarded the Gospels, it would be quite possible for a critic to argue that Irenaeus only used the Fourth Gospel "tentatively" and that he did not regard it as Scripture, or as having an apostolic author. We should then be left in the curious position that the first ascription of the Gospel to the Apostle came from Clement of Alexandria and that he also bore witness to the fact that

the Apostle had lived and worked in Asia. We suppose it would also follow that we should have to ascribe the testimonial given to the Gospel in xxi. 24 to the Elders of Alexandria, who of all people ought to have known that it was not the work of the Apostle, if Mr. Sanders' theory is true.

There is no more insecure basis on which to erect a theory about the authorship of any book of the New Testament than the silence of Christian authors of the first two centuries, if we take into account the small number of their writings that have come down to us in comparison to what must once have existed in such a literary age.

We may also note that critical authors of the twentieth century are generally silent with regard to the fact that Celsus, whose date is given by Keim as coming between the time of Justin and that of Irenaeus, was acquainted with the Fourth Gospel and quoted it without hesitation against the Christians as a book which none of them would be able to repudiate (Origen, *Contra Celsum*, i. 70; ii. 36).

Mr. Sanders tell us that the author of the Fourth Gospel adopted Gnostic terminology, but he does not give us any examples of this (pp. 47, 65). In point of fact the only term used by the Fourth Evangelist which can be fairly called Gnostic is *πλήρωμα* and that had been used by St. Paul before him (John i. 16; Col. i. 19; ii. 9). Even this word could have a meaning which had nothing to do with Gnosticism at all (Matt. ix. 16; Euripides *Ion* 1412). The word *γνώσις* had nothing necessarily heretical connected with it. When St. Paul desires to use it with a reference to heresy he is compelled at the early date when he wrote to attach to it the adjective *ψευδώνυμος* (1 Tim. vi. 20; contrast Rom. xv. 14; but a sign of the bad sense of the word is to be discerned in 1 Cor. viii. 1, 10, 11). The word *λόγος* was another which had no necessary connection with Gnosticism, although it was possible to spin out of its use in the Gospel some of the ideas of a succession of derived beings in which Gnosticism delighted in its later phases.

It is to be noted that the favourite Gnostic word *νοῦς* is not used either in the Gospel or in the Epistles. The word *σοφία* is not used either. If anyone in the New Testament is to be accused of using this Gnostic term it must be St. Paul, St. Luke and St. James (1 Cor. i. 24; Luke xi. 49; Jas. iii. 17),

but their use is fully explained and excused by the use of this word in the Old Testament. The word *δύναμις* is never used in the Fourth Gospel, but it is in the Synoptists as a way of avoiding the mention of the name of God (Matt. xxvi. 64; Mark xiv. 62). We have not seen it suggested that the Synoptists adopted Gnostic terminology. *Βόθος*, *συγή* and *αἰών* are never found in the Gospels in their Gnostic sense. The only use of *αἰών* which might possibly be called Gnostic is found in Heb. i. 2. It is true that the Fourth Evangelist uses *ἀρχή*, but it is in its obvious sense as an abstract noun and not as a personification. If the Valentinians chose to misinterpret the use of *ἀρχή* in the first verse of the Gospel (pp. 57, 63), this was not the fault of the author, who was using the word in a natural sense and most probably thinking of its use in Gen. i. 1. He also uses *φῶς* and *σνοτία* in a perfectly natural sense, no doubt with the first chapter of Genesis still in his mind. If he uses *ἕως*, he uses that also in a sense which need not be considered as peculiar to the Gnostics. He had numerous precedents for his use of the word in the Synoptic Gospels and in the rest of the Bible (Deut. xxx. 19; Matt. vii. 14; xix 17; Luke xii. 15; Col. iii. 4).

We do not see that Mr. Sanders has any justification for writing,

“There is a remarkable similarity between the Valentinian terminology and that of the Fourth Gospel which may conceal a larger identity of ideology than one is inclined to admit. This appears to require some explanation, and the explanation which appears to the present writer to be the most obvious is that the author of the Fourth Gospel, seeking to present the saving facts preached by the Christian *kerygma* in such a way that they would be understood by his contemporaries and fellow-countrymen, deliberately borrowed his terminology from the religious systems current at the close of the first century or a little afterwards, and thus, if the theory of the place of the Gospel's origin suggested in this essay is true, ‘spoiled the Egyptians’ very literally. If this is so, then he gave a brilliant demonstration of the way in which the *kerygma* must be re-stated anew to every generation in terms they understand” (p. 65).

There seems to be a contradiction in this passage. First Mr. Sanders says that the Fourth Evangelist made use of terminology which resembled Valentinian terminology and afterwards he says that he borrowed his terminology from the religious systems current at the close of the first century or a little afterwards. Surely the terminology of the fully developed Valentinian system differed from that of the Docetic sects which flourished at the end of the first century. The Valentinians had

to deliberately put a strained sense on the words used by the Evangelist in order to find any support for their theories from his writings.

Again we cannot understand why Mr. Sanders should say that the Fourth Evangelist "re-stated the *kerygma*", if by the *kerygma* is meant the account of the miracles, death and resurrection of Jesus which is contained in a brief form in the Second Gospel and in a briefer form still in Acts x. 37-44, a passage which we have heard described by a modern theologian as being notes for a sermon embodying the *kerygma*. The part of the Fourth Gospel which is original and which, if we are to believe Mr. Sanders, contains a number of words similar to those used by the Valentinians employed for the purpose of "re-stating the *kerygma*" in terms which the persons who lived in the early second century could understand consists not of *kerygma*, but of *didache*, to use the jargon of modern theology, that is to say of teaching ascribed to Jesus and of comment by the Evangelist.

(*To be concluded.*)

Stockport, Cheshire.

H. P. V. NUNN.