

The Fourth Gospel in Recent Interpretation

F.F. Bruce

[p.2]

Any consideration of recent interpretation of the Fourth Gospel, in the English-speaking world at any rate, must give pride of place to C. H. Dodd's magnificent work on *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*

[p.3]

(Cambridge University Press, 1953). This volume presents the fruit of long years of study, and it is one of those books that must be lived with in order to be adequately appreciated. When Professor Dodd delivered his inaugural lecture in the Norris-Hulse Chair at Cambridge in 1938, he said: 'I am disposed to think that the understanding of the Fourth Gospel is not only one of the outstanding tasks of our time, but the crucial test of our success or failure in salving the problem of the New Testament as a whole. The Fourth Gospel may well prove to be the keystone of an arch which at present fails to hold together.' Whatever may be thought of Professor Dodd's attempt to put that keystone in place he has made a noble contribution to the task to which he earlier drew attention. He has given us, in fact, three books in one. Firstly, he gives us a survey of the variegated background against which the Evangelist wrote; secondly, he examines the leading ideas and keywords of the Gospel; thirdly, he analyses in detail the argument and structure of the Gospel. The Evangelist, he concludes, was concerned to commend Christianity to 'a wide public consisting primarily of devout and thoughtful persons... in the varied and cosmopolitan society of a great Hellenistic city such as Ephesus under the Roman Empire' in terms which would be familiar to them. Yet, however much he employed new thought-forms and new terminology to convey the Christian message, it was the authentic Christian message that he conveyed. He remains true to the apostolic preaching; he 'has deliberately set his feet firmly upon the ground of the common Christian tradition'; and he insists all the more on the *agape* character of the new relation into which believers enter with God and with one another 'because the crucial act of *agape* was actually performed in history, on an April day about A.D. 30, at a supper table in Jerusalem, in a garden across the Kidron valley, in the headquarters of Pontius Pilate, and on a Roman cross at Golgotha. So concrete, so actual, is the nature of the divine *agape*; yet none the less for that, by entering into the relation of *agape* thus opened up for men, we may dwell in God and He in us' (pp. 199f.).

Since Professor Dodd thus insists on the historical emphasis of the Fourth Evangelist, it is strange to find a liberal scholar, Dr. J. E. Davey, describing his book as one 'which breaks with the conservative tradition of British works on the Fourth Gospel' and suggesting that 'it goes too far in the surrender of historicity' (*The Listener*, Nov. 12, 1953). A more balanced assessment is made by Professor N. B. Stonehouse, a distinguished conservative scholar; who recognizes Professor Dodd's 'relative conservatism in many respects', while he concludes that he 'adopts an essentially mediating position' with regard to the historical character of this Gospel (*Westminster Theological Journal*, Nov. 1953, p. 68). But such an 'essentially mediating' position in this regard is nothing new among British scholars! And my own impression is that Professor Dodd ascribes a greater measure of historicity to this Gospel than certain other British scholars have done: he acknowledges that 'it is important for the evangelist that what he narrates happened' (p. 44).

In my judgment the least satisfactory part of his work is the appendix entitled 'Some Considerations upon the Historical Aspect of the Fourth Gospel'. In this appendix he says: 'I am not in this book discussing the question of the authorship of the Fourth Gospel. I should not care to say that the hypothesis is impossible, that the Johannine narrative rests upon personal reminiscences... But some of the evidence which has been adduced in favour of authorship by an eyewitness is subject to a heavy discount' (pp. 449 f.). It may be that Professor Dodd will express his mind more fully on these matters in a further work: we know that his studies on the Fourth Gospel include many other things 'which are not written in this book'. But if he could have found it possible to give more weight to the Gospel's own claim to be based on the testimony of an eyewitness, his book would, I suggest, have been even more valuable than it is. One can treat this claim seriously without underestimating the degree of 'transposition' which the apostolic preaching has undergone in order to be communicated in this Evangelist's characteristic key.

The affinities which have been pointed out by some scholars (notably by W. F. Albright in his contribution to the Dodd *Festschrift*, 1956) between the Fourth Gospel and some of the Qumran literature may lead to a fresh appreciation of the thoroughly Palestinian basis of the Gospel. This ap-

[p.4]

preciation will probably be stimulated the more by such a line of thought as found expression in the paper on 'The Purpose of St. John's Gospel' which Professor Van Unnik of Utrecht contributed to the Four Gospels Congress held at Oxford in September 1957. He argued that this Gospel was essentially a missionary document (taking the statement of the Evangelist's object in John xx. 31 quite literally), and that it was composed primarily in order to win Jews of the Greek-speaking Dispersion to faith in Christ. In some material respects this represents a restatement of the thesis of the late Karl Bornhduser of Marburg.

The Palestinian basis of the Gospel is further illuminated by Dr. Aileen Guilding's work on the relation between the successive themes of the Gospel and the triennial lectionary used in the synagogues of Palestine. Some aspects of this thesis were expounded in her Tyndale New Testament Lecture for 1956, and the argument will be presented in detail in a work shortly to be published by the Clarendon Press.

Quite a different approach to the Gospel is seen in the volume which Rudolf Bultmann contributed to the *Meyer-Kommentar* in 1941 (several further editions have appeared since then), The fact that his commentary first appeared in war-time meant that it did not for some time circulate widely in the English-speaking world. An English translation will probably be published before long. Meanwhile the English reader will find a convenient statement of some of Professor Bultmann's views in the section on the theology of the Johannine Gospel and Epistles in his *Theology of the New Testament*, Vol. II (S.C.M., 1955). He finds two main sources in the Gospel—a 'Signs Source' and a 'Discourse Source'; these he analyses on form-critical lines, laying special stress on the 'revelatory discourses'. These indicate the real character of this Gospel: it presents Jesus in terms of the heavenly Redeemer of gnostic mythology. The Evangelist 'demythologizes' the Gnostic substance while maintaining the Gnostic framework; that is to say, he transforms the cosmological dualism of Gnosticism into a dualism of decision. The coming of Jesus as the Light of the world is 'the judgment (*krisis*) of the world' in the sense that it makes possible for man the decision which sets him free from

bondage to a world shrouded in darkness. Thus the message of John is restated in the familiar terms of Professor Bultmann's existential interpretation of Christianity.

One interesting point that Dr. Bultmann makes is that all the sacramental elements in the Fourth Gospel are later accretions. This represents the opposite pole of interpretation from Oscar Cullmann, whose volume *Early Christian Worship* (S.C.M., 1953) contains an essay on 'The Gospel according to St. John and Early Christian Worship' which finds the whole Gospel permeated with sacramental teaching, so much so that it becomes an indirect source for investigating the sacramental faith and life of the early Church.

Within the past two years two important commentaries on St. John's Gospel have appeared in this country—one by C. K. Barrett on the Greek text (S.P.C.K., 1955), and one by the late R. H. Lightfoot based on the text of the English Revised Version (Oxford, 1956). It is a matter of interest that both these commentaries were originally intended for well-known series of commentaries—Dr. Barrett's for the Cambridge Greek Testament and Professor Lightfoot's for the Clarendon Bible, but both exceeded the prescribed limits of length and had to be published as independent works.

Dr. Barrett's commentary is one that will prove of great usefulness to theological students. All his qualities of careful and comprehensive scholarship are in evidence here. His grasp of what others have done in the Johannine field may be seen not only in this book but also in his revised edition of the late W. F. Howard's *The Fourth Gospel in Recent Criticism and Interpretation* (Epworth Press, 1955).

'The most illuminating background of the fourth Gospel is Hellenistic Judaism,' says Dr. Barrett (Commentary, p. 33). Like Philo, the Evangelist was well equipped with basic Hellenistic ideas, and set out to present in a persuasive manner an originally Semitic faith, although no literary relation can be proved between the two men. John was concerned to root the truth unfolded in Jesus, not so much in individual incidents, but in the total fact of the Incarnation. For example, instead of recording the institution of the Eucharist, he gives us the discourse of chapter vi in which we learn just what is meant by the Christian belief in Jesus as the bread of life. Superficially

[p.5]

he differs from the Synoptic Evangelists, but at a deeper level he is theologically akin to them, expressing the significance of their narratives in other terms, as he clarifies Jesus' relation to God and 'universalizes the manhood of Jesus' (p. 45), i.e., he represents Him not simply as 'a man' but as the Son of God who has taken upon Himself *humanity*. When he wrote, the problems which had beset the Church in the Pauline age were largely things of the past; our Evangelist and his contemporaries had to face the problems of Christian eschatology and Gnosticism.

As for the origin of the Gospel, Dr. Barrett suggests that John the apostle migrated to Ephesus, where he lived to old age and composed apocalyptic works. These were incorporated by one of his disciples in the Book of the Revelation about A.D. 96. Another of his disciples (or two others) wrote the Johannine Epistles; yet another disciple, of profounder mind than that which we discern in the Epistles, composed chapters i-xx of the Gospel, to which chapter xxi was added when the Gospel was published in orthodox circles. Like J. N.

Sanders (*The Fourth Gospel in the Early Church*, Cambridge, 1943), Dr. Barrett thinks that at first the Fourth Gospel was viewed with considerable reserve by orthodox Christians.

‘What does emerge from the evidence’, says Dr. Barrett, ‘is, not that the gospel as it stands is a first-hand historical document, but that those responsible for it were seriously concerned about the meaning and authority of the apostolic witness to the history of Jesus’ (p. 101).

While Dr. Barrett speaks of ‘the moral certainty that the gospel was not written by John the son of Zebedee’ (p. 112), Professor Lightfoot says of this traditional ascription that it ‘still receives support, and has never been shown to be impossible’ (p. 2). He notes, however, that ‘it has been increasingly realized that the value and importance of the book within the fourfold gospel does not stand or fall with its authorship by the son of Zebedee’ and appears to endorse ‘the growing conviction that not the fourth gospel only but all the gospels have been affected by the momentous events which took place in the development and expansion of the Church’s life and thought in the first century’ (p. 7). Dr. Lightfoot died before his work was finished; what now forms the Introduction to this volume has been compiled by C. F. Evans on the basis of a number of notes and separate studies left behind by Lightfoot. Some questions which we might have expected to find discussed in the Introduction are accordingly left unmentioned. In any case, Dr. Lightfoot believed that his business was to supply an exegesis of the Gospel and to interpret St. John by himself.

The crucial question of the historicity of the Gospel has been tackled more firmly in a number of minor works by various writers to appear in recent years. Among these we may mention *The Fourth Gospel as History*, by the late Bishop A. C. Headlam (Blackwell, 1948); *John who sate*, by A. H. N. Green-Armytage (Faber, 1953), *The Authorship of the Fourth Gospel*, by H. P. V. Nunn (Blackwell, 1952), *A Companion to St. John’s Gospel*, by the late Bishop J. S. Hart (Melbourne, 1952); and *The Disciple who wrote these Things*, by H. E. Edwards (James Clarke, 1953). In matters of authorship and historicity alike these books take a more conservative line than do the others we have looked at. A conservative line is also taken by the late Daniel Lamont (a former President of the I.V.F.) in his posthumously published *Studies in the Johannine Writings* (James Clarke, 1956). *The Fourth Gospel*, by Dr. J. A. Findlay (Epworth, 1956), presents the quintessence of fifty years’ reading and teaching on the part of a man gifted with unusual qualities of insight and exposition. The very originality of his work means that the reader will disagree in many details of interpretation while profiting greatly by the exposition as a whole. For the Fourth Gospel manifests its greatness in this, that each man brings something of himself in its exposition. The Fourth Gospel is a book which enables a man to find himself. In particular, no Bible student can rest until he has tried to penetrate the mind of St. John and grasp the significance of his work for himself. It is given to few to succeed, in this attempt, even to their own satisfaction. But success here will bring the reward described in one of the ‘unwritten sayings’ of Jesus: ‘Let not him who seeks cease until he finds, and when he finds he shall be astonished; astonished he shall attain the kingdom, and when he attains it he shall find rest.’

But the success which eludes the scholar may be found by others. The

[p.6]

testimony of the Christian Industrial League, a rescue agency working among the down-and-outs in the Skidrow district of Chicago, is that ‘in their work they have found that St. John’s Gospel is the best for dealing with these tough, hard men. Its straight, unequivocal words

F.F. Bruce, "The Fourth Gospel in Recent Interpretation," *Terminal Letter of the Theological Students' Fellowship* (Spring 1958): 2-6.

about sin and salvation somehow go home and carry conviction to the most abandoned; while its direct invitation wins a response that nothing else does' (A. M. Chirgwin, *The Bible in World Evangelism*, p. 113). I have thought that this aspect of the power of St. John's Gospel deserves to be taken into consideration by scholars grappling with the Johannine problem: it is very material to the solution of the problem!

© 1958 *Universities & Colleges Christian Fellowship* (<http://www.uccf.org.uk/>). Reproduced by permission.

Prepared for the Web in October 2007 by Robert I Bradshaw.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>
