

Some Recent Contributions to the Study of the Fourth Gospel.

"For as long as I can remember, I have had more love for St. John's Gospel than for any other book. Bishop Gore once said to me that he paid visits to St. John as to a fascinating foreign country, but he came home to St. Paul. With me the precise opposite is true. St. Paul is the exciting and also rather bewildering venture; with St. John I am at home."

William Temple—*Readings in St. John's Gospel.*

I.

The aim of the two articles which I am presenting under the above heading is to record briefly some of the progress made in recent years in the criticism and interpretation of the Fourth Gospel.

A convenient starting-point is Dr. C. H. Dodd's valuable review of J. H. Bernard's Commentary on John in the I.C.C. series (in *The Congregational Quarterly* for July, 1929). The reviewer states that Bernard's work is the first "full-sized" English commentary on this Gospel since Westcott's, which was apparently completed in substance before 1887, and that it therefore provides the opportunity for a very interesting survey of the progress made in the forty years' interval between the two in "the most difficult critical and exegetical task which the New Testament student can undertake."

It is claimed that advance has been notable in three main directions. *Firstly*, textual criticism had made progress "by the discovery of new MSS. and by vastly more thorough study of the ancient versions. But the changes necessary in Westcott and Hort's text are not so extensive as might have been expected—or as may yet have to be the case pending further criticism." *Secondly*, "linguistic study has made great advances, both in the field of Greek and in the field of Semitic speech which in one way or another lies behind the N.T. writings. The new study of Hellenistic Greek has delivered N.T. scholars from the classical obsession which was the bane of the Westcott school (and diminished the value of the R.V.)." *Thirdly*, the new

advances in "higher criticism" were even more important. "In Westcott's time it was an axiom, with conservative and radical critics alike, that the Gospel was a seamless robe, the work all through of a single mind, transmitted to us in the form (apart from merely textual variations) in which it was composed. Serious inroads have been made upon this theory from all sides. It has come to be widely held that many of the difficulties of the Gospel may be due to accidental displacements since the work was completed. Dr. Bernard e.g. printed chapter six before chapter five. With regard to authorship, the I.C.C. abandons the traditional theory and attributes it to 'John the Presbyter' who is conceived as dependent on the reminiscences of John son of Zebedee, the latter being identified with the Beloved Disciple." Dr. Dodd claims that "the adoption of such a theory by so cautious a scholar may well be taken as marking the definite victory of criticism over tradition in one of its most strongly entrenched positions," even though, in Bernard's actual commentary, as distinct from his introduction, "the concession to criticism is almost illusory."

This illuminating survey by Professor Dodd, necessarily brief, may well be compared with Dr. W. F. Howard's full treatment of "The Fourth Gospel in The Twentieth Century" (in his book *The Fourth Gospel in Recent Criticism And Interpretation*, pp. 33-105).

Incidentally, in Professor Dodd's contribution to *The Study of Theology* (ed. Kirk, p. 229) written ten years after the review cited above, a somewhat less confident estimate of the progress of criticism seems to be implied. "Indeed the state of Johannine criticism can perhaps best be represented by a series of questions. . . . there is no agreed answer to such questions. Johannine criticism is still in a state of flux."

In the light of these general surveys of Johannine criticism, we go on to consider some recent contributions by English scholars to the elucidation of particular problems, all of which are inter-related.

DATE AND RELATION TO SYNOPTIC GOSPELS.

A significant discussion of these questions appears in Mr. P. Gardner-Smith's book *St. John and the Synoptic Gospels* (1938). The author challenges the prevalent axiom of "critical orthodoxy" that the Fourth Gospel is a good deal later than the Synoptics and probably in a relation of literary dependence upon two of them (Mark and Luke). He suggests that John is much earlier than is commonly supposed, and is independent of the other Gospels. His main thesis is that the so-called "Johannine agreements" have been over-stressed, for even

where there are verbal coincidences suggesting literary dependence, the sayings are such as might easily be handed down in oral tradition. Moreover the Johannine background and context is often entirely different, and the most satisfactory way of accounting for the complex of agreements and differences is to suppose that John used Church tradition which was in currency before the composition of the Synoptic Gospels.

Mr. Gardner-Smith examines a large number of passages in seeking to prove his theory. To take one example only, he discusses the accounts of John the Baptist given by the various evangelists. It has often been observed that in the Fourth Gospel the Baptist is not accorded the same degree of independence as in the Synoptics. The latter depict him as a preacher of righteousness with an eschatology and an ethic in his own right, as a person of considerable significance in himself. But in the Fourth Gospel he is insignificant except as a witness to the Christ who is greater than he. The identification of John the Baptist with Elijah (made by Mark) is denied, and his witness to the light is not the most telling testimony to Christ. With regard to chronology, it is implied in John 3 that the ministries of Jesus and the Baptist overlapped, whereas according to Mark 1.14 the Galilean ministry began after John's imprisonment. The more usual opinion of critics as to these discrepancies is that the deliberate depreciation of the Baptist in the Fourth Gospel is due to the growth and opposition of a "Baptist party" whose tenets called for refutation. But Mr. Gardner-Smith offers quite a different explanation. He suggests that John wrote his Gospel at a time when Mark's tradition was not yet regarded as binding upon the Church, and he gives this solution not only for the one problem cited above, but for many similar instances of discrepant record as between the Fourth Gospel and the Synoptics. In his view, John is independent of the other Gospels and is based largely upon oral tradition. In appraising this important work, which has almost convinced some of our leading scholars (see e.g. W. F. Howard *Christianity According to St. John*, p. 17—with some reservations), there are at least three significant points to be borne in mind.

(1) Any theory which largely depends on an appeal to oral tradition is not susceptible of decisive proof or refutation. Oral tradition is such an inchoate and undetermined body of material that we have no precise standards of reference, and every critic is tempted to resort to it to find anything he needs. Gardner-Smith constantly appeals to it, and though many of his claims are not unreasonable, in the nature of the case they remain speculative (compare the many unverifiable conjectures of some of the Form Critics). An appeal to written documents is all too

often indecisive enough, but at any rate it can be checked and discussed in a much more satisfying way than an argument which is hidden in the spacious recesses of oral tradition.

(2) It seems very doubtful whether due allowance has been made in this book for the gradualness of the process by which the Synoptic Gospels became standard and canonised works. The writer frequently uses Johannine discrepancies to assert John's ignorance of Mark and Luke, and suggests, implicitly at any rate, that it is inconceivable that the Fourth Gospel should deliberately contradict the others. But Mark's Gospel did not become canonical, which means to say substantially unalterable in the judgment of its readers, for many years after its composition. It must be remembered that Luke and Matthew freely altered, corrected and supplemented Mark, and Matthew especially soon won an easy pre-eminence over it in the esteem of the Church. Hence, there seems to be little ground for thinking that John, if he had known Mark, would have regarded it as sacrosanct. These facts are of course familiar to such a scholar as Mr. Gardner-Smith, but they do not seem to have been sufficiently present to his mind in the writing of his book, and he gives the impression of labouring under an anachronistic attribution of canonicity to Mark.

(3) With regard to the dating of the Fourth Gospel, the main emphasis of Gardner-Smith's book is on Johannine discrepancies at points where dependence upon the Synoptics has generally been assumed. It is natural that attention should be largely fixed on such material in a work of this kind. But surely one is justified in suggesting that where the date of a document is in doubt, the material which is peculiar to itself affords the most decisive criterion. Are the large tracts of peculiar Johannine record of such a nature as to be consonant with a very early date? If Mark and John are deemed to be almost contemporaneous, as Gardner-Smith suggests may possibly be the case, how are we to account for the familiar and considerable differences in selection of facts, in the setting of the ministry of Jesus, in the types of discourse, and so on, especially if both Gospels are held to be very largely dependent on oral tradition? We cannot solve all such difficulties by referring to the difference between the communities from which the two books emanated. Gardner-Smith puts in a plea for Ephesus as an advanced community where Christian thought would mature more quickly than at other centres. But even allowing for this, there are certain apologetic and polemical emphases in John which seem to demand a comparatively late date, such as his anti-Docetic teaching, for which there would be no occasion in the early days of the Church,

To sum up, Mr. Gardner-Smith seems to have made it an open question whether John actually read Mark and Luke, but he does not carry conviction in suggesting that the Fourth Gospel may possibly be almost contemporaneous with Mark.

Having sought to maintain the relative lateness of John as over against the Synoptics, we must acknowledge, however, that it is not as late as much of past criticism would have us believe. There are definite reasons for modifying the older estimates in this connection. For instance "An Unpublished Fragment of the Fourth Gospel," edited by C. H. Roberts (1935) and regarded by him as part of a copy made in Egypt during 130-150 A.D., precludes a very late date for the Gospel, and allowance being made for circulation suggests a time no later than about 100 for its composition (if the Ephesian origin of John is to be maintained). As Kenyon put it "This would have been invaluable for controversial purposes sixty years ago . . . and a conclusive refutation of those who would bring the Fourth Gospel far down into the second century." The bearing of "Fragments of an Unknown Gospel," which probably quote from John, is in the same direction.

PLACE OF ORIGIN.

The discussion of date inevitably involves, as suggested above, some consideration of the Place of Origin of our Gospel. It is not surprising that Mr. J. N. Sanders, pleading for an Alexandrian origin in his book, *The Fourth Gospel in the Early Church*, emphasises the fact that the Rylands and Egerton Papyri (referred to in the previous paragraph by their other names) demonstrate that the Fourth Gospel was to be found in Egypt before 150 A.D. He draws out the significance of other familiar phenomena, e.g. the wide use of John by Alexandrian Gnostics, the likelihood of a Christian Logos-doctrine being developed at Alexandria, the large Jewish population of the city and a possible "John the Baptist sect." the uncertain orthodoxy of Alexandria as a ground for the reluctance of the early church to accept the Fourth Gospel. Most scholars who have discussed Sanders' arguments seem to feel that he has made a strong presentation of his positive hypothesis, but that his dismissal of the Ephesian theory is too facile, as is his severance of the First Epistle of John from the Gospel (following C. H. Dodd in the *Bulletin of the John Rylands' Library*, April 1937, on "The First Epistle of John and the Fourth Gospel"). It should be noted, however, that his thorough and painstaking examination of the use of the Fourth Gospel in the Fathers and Gnostics is a valuable contribution, largely unaffected by his point of view. Sanders makes it clear that

John was not regarded as Scripture by any wide section of "orthodox" Christianity until the last quarter of the Second Century.

It is interesting to note that the American scholar, A. M. Perry, had an article in *The Journal of Biblical Literature* for June 1944, entitled "Is John an Alexandrian Gospel?" and written before Sanders' book came to his hand. He confesses some of the difficulties in the inquiry, such as "the long night which obscures the history of the Church in Egypt down to the end of the Second Century." Briefly he examines the historical development of the Alexandrian Church, the style and thought of John, and the external evidence (he considers that the Rylands Papyrus suggests, without proving, that John was the first Gospel of our four to circulate in Egypt, and that Egypt was the first place where it circulated). The tradition concerning Johannine authorship and the counter-tradition of the early martyrdom of John he regards as both of little weight. "External tradition regarding New Testament questions is not infrequently mistaken." In conclusion, Perry suggests that if we accept the Alexandrian provenance of the Gospel, as he inclines to do, some fresh light might be cast on a number of New Testament problems, e.g.: would not a new perspective be given to the question of the antiquity and authenticity of some, at least, of its traditions? And would not acceptance of its virtual independence of Paul considerably enlarge our estimate of the common underlying, or "pre-Pauline" tradition of the Church? The writer does not claim to give irrefutable answers to the questions he is discussing, but feels that the evidence warrants raising anew the question "Is not John an Alexandrian Gospel?" Other American scholars such as Kirsopp Lake and R. M. Grant seem to be equally sympathetic.

BACKGROUND OF THOUGHT.

The background of thought of this Gospel can hardly be separated from the questions of its place of origin, but a word may be said perhaps, regarding that mingling of Jewish and Hellenistic elements which constitutes one of the problems of interpretation. Dr. W. F. Howard's study entitled, "The Johannine Sayings of Jesus," *Expository Times*, August 1935) was important for its full appreciation of the Palestinian background. He wrote "It is indeed significant that scholars are now beginning to think it possible that the non-Synoptic portions of the Fourth Gospel may go back to traditions which originated in Palestine. Studies relating John with rabbinic literature help to remove the prejudice which puts down every mystical

note in the Gospel to late and non-Palestinian influence. Yet much work has to be done in discovering the sayings of Jesus . . . which have been sometimes obscured through the transforming medium of the Hellenistic idiom as well as of the targumitic paraphrase of the Evangelist" (compare the strong emphasis on the Jewish setting in Howard's *Christianity According to St. John*, pp. 47., 125, etc.). Among those who have most strongly argued for a dual background of thought is C. H. Dodd in "The Background of the Fourth Gospel" (*Bulletin of John Rylands Library*, July 1935). In fact Dodd describes four forms of religious thought which were influential in the world of the Fourth Gospel, viz. Rabbinic Judaism, Hellenistic Judaism, Greek Philosophy and the Higher Paganism, and Gnosticism. Further reference to this suggestive study may be made later in these papers.

HISTORICAL VALUE.

As to the Historical Value of John, whether there is a "recoil from historicism" in the general treatment of the Gospels or not, it is certainly true to say that there has been a rise in the stock of the Fourth Gospel in this regard. To give some particular examples, there is a growing recognition that Jesus may have exercised an early Judean ministry, and John's dating of the Last Supper is very generally preferred to that of the other Gospels. Some scholars would have it that as a consequence of the work of the Form Critics and the depreciation of the historical value of the Synoptics, all the Gospels are now on much the same level. But this process of "robbing Mark to pay John," as W. F. Howard has called it, is far from commanding general assent. It is interesting to note that two writers engaged recently, in chronological and historical research on New Testament themes, have made very liberal use of the Fourth Gospel, viz., George Ogg, in his book, *The Chronology of the Public Ministry of Jesus*, and A. T. Olmstead in his *Jesus in the Light of History*. The latter postulates that the narrative materials in John are taken from an original Gospel of the Son of Zebedee, written in Palestine about 40 A.D. On the basis of this hypothesis, preference is generally given to the order and substance of the Johannine account in narrative passages. But the theory is assumed to be valid without any argument or discussion! It is the weakness of some commentaries also, which are suggestive theologically, that they do not give sufficient consideration to the grave historical "cruxes" in John. Howard appears to be justified, for instance, in saying of Hoskyns' great commentary that "he has concealed with a cloud of words his judgement on the historical question."

AUTHORSHIP.

Finally, a mere paragraph on the authorship of the Fourth Gospel. This is a question as to which subjective preference is rife, and the attitude taken towards the external evidence especially varies greatly among scholars. One of the best brief summaries of the controversy appears in Vincent Taylor's little book, *The Gospels: A Short Introduction*. To sum up very inadequately, I should say that the theory of non-apostolic authorship has gained strength in recent years, usually in the form of attributing the work to John the Elder or to an Elder unknown by name (the name "John" is not, of course, attached to the Gospel explicitly). Generally the author is conceived as being in close dependence upon the Apostle John. The traditional ascription has not been without some support, e.g., in a trenchant book by H. P. V. Nunn *The Son of Zebedee and the Fourth Gospel*. Perhaps the profoundest conclusion with regard to the problem of authorship, and I do not think this at any rate can be described as an evasion, is that of Hoskyns "There was a workshop in which the Fourth Gospel was fashioned . . . but the author has done his best to cover up his tracks. He has so burnt himself out of his book that we cannot be certain that we have anywhere located him as a clear, intelligible figure in history. So anonymous is his book, so intentionally anonymous, that there is in it, apart from the shy little 'I suppose' of the last verse, no ego except the Ego of Jesus, the Son of God."¹

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¹ A further paper will follow on recent contributions to the interpretation of the Fourth Gospel.