

Some Recent Contributions to the Study of the Fourth Gospel.

II.

INTERPRETATION.

IN passing from critical questions to problems of interpretation, we are entering upon a more inviting and fruitful field. It seems to be the common judgment in recent times that the discussion of critical issues in connection with the Fourth Gospel has not brought many assured results, and that study is most profitably focused upon the interpretation of the work. Thus C. H. Dodd ventured to say (in a statement greatly beloved of examiners!) "If the solution of the Synoptic problem was the most spectacular success of the nineteenth century critics, the Johannine problem represents their most signal failure." (*The Present Task In New Testament Studies*, 1936.)

I cannot claim to have any original contribution to make toward this very difficult task of interpretation, to which so many distinguished scholars have addressed their energies. All that I seek to do here is to direct others to recent work which I have found illuminating. Discussion will be limited, rather arbitrarily perhaps, to Sir Edwyn Hoskyns' Commentary, a brief monograph by C. H. Dodd, and W. F. Howard's book *Christianity According to St. John*.

I begin with Sir Edwyn Hoskyns' two-volume Commentary (ed. F. N. Davey, 1940). This notable work contains a fascinating account of the interpretation of this Gospel in recent times, and some interesting observations on the right approach to it. The opening sentence of the section on "The Problem of the Fourth Gospel," is a key to the author's consistent attitude:—"The Gospel according to Saint John is a strictly theological work." He goes on to specify what he means both positively, and negatively, by ruling out other methods. "The two themes which form the ground-bass of the whole book—the Word of God and Eternal Life—refuse to be simply dissolved in the ideas of the author or merely identified with his peculiar spiritual experience."

Hoskyns insists strongly upon the fact that any true interpretation must be such as to account for the great place which this

Gospel has always occupied in the devotion of the ordinary Christian. "Whatever the Fourth Gospel may be, it is not a text-book of metaphysics. Primarily it is the text-book of the parish priest and the inspiration of the straight-forward layman."

There is obvious force in this point, though one would expect Hoskyns to give more consideration to the fact that there is a deceptive simplicity of direction in the Fourth Gospel, which frequently reveals the difficulty of its conceptions while rendering it very accessible to popular devotional use. As has already been suggested, Hoskyns considers that we have relied far too much on historical criticism in the attempt to expound John, and that we must return to the more theological outlook. Criticism has proceeded on the supposition that somewhere or other in human experience, the Fourth Gospel could come to rest, and its obscurities would vanish before the progressive march of critical knowledge. The Fourth Gospel has, however, not come to rest, because the theme of the book is beyond human knowledge, and because, if it did come to rest, it would have "denied the theme which in fact it never denies." It should be borne in mind that not every "liberal" scholar believes in the all-sufficiency of historical and literary criticism to the extent that Hoskyns suggests. E. F. Scott's significant essay "The Limitations of the Historical Method" (in *Studies In Early Christianity*, ed. S. J. Case, 1928) is evidence of this. Scott says: "The historical method has its well-marked limitations. No one can dispute its value, but the exclusive use of it has led, in almost every instance, to a false emphasis or a concealment of the very fact that needs to be examined. Its worth is at best preliminary . . . It still remains true that the final word in New Testament research belongs to the theologian."

I have limited discussion above to Hoskyns' general approach to the Gospel, as it is obviously impossible to give many instances of his actual exposition of the text. It may be helpful, however, if I seek to sum up the main merits and weaknesses of his treatment.

(1.) He always treats the Gospel as a very serious theological writing on an inexpressibly great theme. In his own terms, he regards it as demanding a sustained "energy of understanding," and he offers us a rare theological concentration and sensitiveness in his exposition. There is never anything trivial or superficial in his treatment.

It is here perhaps, that his work most obviously excels that of "liberal" writers at their worst. In his attacks on some of the modernists, Hoskyns probably has in mind scholars like Streeter, who make too facile a recourse to psychological and mystical data, and too immediate an analogy with modern situations. Streeter's

approach in *The Four Gospels*, while it has some justification in the well-known hesitations of the Church regarding John, completely obscures the fact that though the author used a new terminology, the *content* of his teaching was profoundly unaccommodating to the syncretistic tendencies of his day, and more in accord with later "orthodoxy" than almost any New Testament writing. It would be truer to say that the incipient Gnostic movement rather than the Gospel of John was "modernism" in its own day.

(2.) Yet it seems to me that Hoskyns' theological concentration too has its dangers. For instance, I do not feel that he sufficiently conveys the sense of release and confidence which the New Testament writers had attained in Christ, because of his deep concern with theological problems as such. He deals admirably with the theological issues facing the writer of John's Gospel and the 1st. Epistle of John, but he does not seem to me to emphasize adequately that this was a man whose problems were *solved* because he had found complete rest in Christ. The strain and burden of the mystery seem to be more obvious in Hoskyns' pages than the serene joy which the Johannine Christ bequeaths to His disciples.

(3) Again, the theological approach sometimes overreaches itself in the discovery of over-subtle parallels and allusions. This appears to be the case in Hoskyns' treatment of John ix. 7. ("Siloam" applied to Christ), of xiii. 21. (the reclining position of the Beloved Disciple marks the verity that the true disciples are in Jesus as Jesus is in the Father), of xviii. 1. ("The garden is important to him . . . The Passion and Resurrection which effected the salvation of the world are contrasted with the Fall in the Garden of Eden"), of xix. 28-30. ("If it be assumed that the author intends his readers to suppose that the Beloved Disciple and Mary the Mother of Jesus remain standing beneath the Cross, the words 'He bowed His head' suggest that He bowed His head toward them, and the words: 'He handed over the Spirit' are also directed to the faithful believers who stand below. This is no fantastic exegesis, since verses 28-30 record the solemn fulfilment of vii. 37-39.")

These examples are a few random cases of over-curious and strained exegesis, when all due allowance has been made for the subtlety and allusiveness of the evangelist's mind. In the interpretation of the texts just cited, and of others like them, Hoskyns gives too uncritical a hearing to patristic exegesis, which he quotes freely. It should be remembered, too, that he has exerted a great influence (Canon Charles Smyth ventures to say that for many of his generation "the two outstanding names in the history of Christian thought in England in the present century are those

of G. K. Chesterton and Sir Edwyn Hoskyns,"—see the memoir introducing Hoskyns' *Cambridge Sermons*) and that his disciples are apt to be more extreme than their master. I once heard a quite fantastic exposition of part of the Passion narrative in the Fourth Gospel by a disciple of Hoskyns, in which a plethora of astonishing parallels with Genesis was produced. (e.g. Jesus bowing His head on the Cross, probably in sleep (?), reminds us of the Sabbath rest of God in Genesis!) This kind of exegesis can discover anything anywhere, and would be more aptly called "eisegesis"!

In spite of these criticisms, one cannot but pay tribute to Hoskyns' work as a whole. Any reader who turns to his discussion of the Prologue, or of the discourse to Nicodemus, or his careful examination of such words as "Paracletos" (p. 549) or "Hagiazein" (p. 590) will surely be impressed by the mingling of exact scholarship and theological insight.

Much briefer notice must be given to C. H. Dodd's monograph *The Background of The Fourth Gospel* (originally published as an article in *The Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, and reprinted).

Dodd suggests that the interpreter who keeps the *readers* of the Gospel in mind rather than seeking to penetrate directly into the secrets of the author's mind, will find his task more compassable. The Fourth Gospel seems to have been composed in such a way that readers who had no more than a most superficial acquaintance with Christianity could follow it with understanding. The Prologue, and the teaching of this Gospel on Re-birth and the Living Bread, for example, could well be appreciated by religiously minded people as yet outside Christianity, but aware of their own needs, and sensitive to certain strains of current religious thinking. It may be that some of the silences as well as some of the characteristic features of the work may be one to the fact that the author is writing for such people in addition to his Christian readers.

Dodd goes on to consider the main forms of religious thought which were influential in the world to which the Fourth Gospel belonged, and discusses in a very illuminating way its relation to Rabbinic Judaism, Greek Philosophy and the Higher Paganism, Hellenistic Judaism and Gnosticism. Interesting examples are given of cases where our exposition ought to be determined by these various strata of thought.

In conclusion, it is suggested that the approach to the Gospel from the point of view of its readers and their background is preferable to an approach by way of the Synoptic Gospels. The latter method makes us unduly aware of the Hellenistic elements in "John," whereas to approach it as it might have been received

by its first readers, to whom these Hellenistic ideas were part of the axiomatic structure of any religious philosophy, is to realize the radically Christian substance of the teaching. Here is something quite new to Hellenistic thought and destined to transform it. "From the standpoint of the history of religion it is not the Logos doctrine of the Fourth Gospel that is its new and original contribution to religious thought, and not its speculative philosophy at all: it is the announcement that the revelation of Godhead is to be sought in the words and deeds, life and death of a Person who taught in Palestine and was crucified under Pontius Pilate."

In this brief but stimulating monograph, Dodd seems to me to hold the right balance between, let us say, Streeter and Hoskyns. He is as aware of the Hellenistic milieu as the one, but as aware also of the distinctively Christian emphasis as the other. There is much in this brief work, of which I have given such slight extracts, which makes it, as W. F. Howard has observed, indispensable for the student of the Fourth Gospel.

A contribution of more questionable value to Johannine studies was Dodd's article "The First Epistle of John and the Fourth Gospel" (*Bulletin of the John Rylands Library, April 1937*). In this he sought to strengthen the view held by some scholars that the Epistle is not from the same hand as the Gospel. In spite of a painstaking comparison of grammar, idiom and style, and an instructive examination of the theology of the two writings, the main thesis of the paper does not appear to have been established. There are a number of artificialities in the argument (e.g. the statement that the teaching of I. John i. 4 that "God is light" is not paralleled in the Gospel) and it is not surprising that this piece of criticism has failed to win as much general assent as most of Dodd's work, in spite of the valuable material which it presents.

(Incidentally, most of Dodd's points in his last-named study may now be found in his Commentary on the Epistle of John in the Moffatt Series).

W. F. Howard's book *Christianity According to St. John*, deserves much fuller treatment than I can give. It supplements on the theological side what the author had already given, with more attention to critical matters, in his book, *The Fourth Gospel In Recent Criticism and Interpretation* (now brought up to date in a third Edition). It is difficult to select from such a rich and suggestive work, but it seems to me that the following are the most significant contributions which it makes:

(1) It lays strong emphasis on the Jewish character of the language and thought of the Gospel. Howard speaks of the "overwhelmingly Jewish tone and setting of the Gospel," in a more pronounced way than he did in his earlier book, where he

was more sympathetic to the idea that the evangelist had laid under tribute "all the best thought in the contemporary world."

Recent criticism seems to be thrusting the "Greeks" further and further away from the centre of the Fourth Gospel. Hoskyns, Temple and Howard, for instance, agree in regarding them as purely peripheral. Their case seems to be a sound one, but there is some danger of excessive vehemence in asserting the Jewish background. After all, John's distinctive message was more offensive to Jews than to the Hellenistic world, and readers of the kind described by Dodd in *The Background of the Fourth Gospel*, would be most likely to profit by it (cf. also W. L. Knox, *Some Hellenistic Elements in Primitive Christianity*.)

(2.) Howard deals very suggestively with "three methods of theological emphasis" in the Fourth Gospel, which he calls "explicative emphasis," "mandatory emphasis," and "proleptic emphasis."

The first is that of "unfolding to the eye of the reader some feature in the ministry of our Lord which was known to the primitive tradition; where, however, it was not conspicuous, but was indicated by some shadowy saying or vague allusion." (E.g. the conception of Jesus' ministry as a sifting, critical, event, which lies behind the difficult words of Mark iv 10-14, is much more fully developed in John. In view of the well-known difficulties of the passage in Mark iv, this is a somewhat unhappy illustration, though admittedly Dr. Howard is dealing with explications by John of the *earlier tradition*, and not necessarily with explications of the original words of Jesus.

The second method, that of *mandatory emphasis*, crystallizes in a phrase a conception of Jesus which is found in solution in the earlier tradition. (i.e. the conception of Jesus as being "sent by God"). The phrase "Ho pempas me" occurs in the Gospel twenty-six times and "apostello" occurs eighteen times for the Son's mission from the Father.

It is tempting to think, in view of Howard's point here, that if the Fourth Gospel had used the expression "the Apostle of God" (as Hebrews iii. 1. does) this designation of Christ might have become much more dominant in Christian theology.

The third method, that of *proleptic emphasis*, is "that Johannine characteristic by which the end is seen from the beginning, so that instead of a gradual self-disclosure, the revelation in its fulness is proclaimed by anticipation from the opening of the ministry." Illustrations are given from the Marcan and Johannine treatment respectively of (1) the Messianic Secret, and (2) the Transfiguration.

This description of John's treatment of the earlier tradition in terms of a three-fold emphasis and elaboration, is a useful way of

summing up the familiar facts. We may compare Hoskyns' suggestive comments on the treatment of the Synoptics in the Fourth Gospel.

(3.) Howard's discussion of "Eschatology and Mysticism" is important. He challenges the common antithesis made between the two, and argues convincingly, I think, that there is a Johannine eschatology which is an integral part of the Gospel. This is not by any means the only New Testament writing where eschatology and mysticism occur together, in spite of apparent contradictions. The evidence is so skilfully marshalled and discussed that one feels grave doubt as to the view of C. H. Dood in his book *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments*, that "in this Gospel, even more fully than in Paul, eschatology is sublimated into a distinctive kind of mysticism"—a view which Howard explicitly questions. An interesting appendix cites a modern parallel (for the passage from mysticism to eschatology) in the hymns of Charles Wesley. This evaluation of eschatology as a positive and integral part of John's theology may be compared with the similar approach by Hoskyns and R. H. Strachan (*The Fourth Gospel, Its Significance and Environment*, 1941, p. 12-14). This goes beyond treating the eschatological elements as "concessions to an earlier point of view" (as E. F. Scott and G. H. C. Macgregor regard them).

Other parts of this book are equally masterly and stimulating. It is doubtful if we have in English a more admirably balanced treatment of Johannine thought, accompanied by complete understanding of critical issues, than we find in W. F. Howard's books. Incidentally, *Christianity According to St. John*, should be of particular interest to Baptists, as the lectures of which it is composed were delivered at Regent's Park College, and the author acknowledges special indebtedness to the late Dr. Wheeler Robinson.

In this study I am much aware of the many qualifications that have been made, and of the attempts to strike a delicate balance between the views of our leading scholars, following one here and another there. The Fourth Gospel is so curiously fashioned and so many sided, that it is difficult to come to clear-cut decisions on some of the most important issues.

But if it demands much of us, it has a correspondingly rich reward to offer, if we will enter into its world. Dr. Newton Flew in *The Idea of Perfection in Christian Theology*, quotes from Heitmuller on apt characterisation of that world as contrasted with that of the first three Gospels. It is the contrast between "the bright crowded streets of a city and the stillness of a lofty cathedral, where the light is only poured through windows of stained glass. There is some gain and some loss. The cathedral

calm of the Fourth Gospel is not so tense with life as the open-air preaching of the first three." But on the other hand, the Fourth Gospel is nearer to the attitude of the modern preacher, in that it is able to present the life and death of Jesus in the light of what they have already meant, after a considerable interval, to the world. His life is the ladder by means of which there is a holy trafficking between heaven and earth, His death a "stairway of glory" by which He enters upon His universal reign.

DAVID R. GRIFFITHS.

(The name "John" is used of the Gospel or its author, without implying any particular theory of authorship.)

Nervous Disorders and Character, by J. G. McKenzie. (Allen and Unwin, 5s.)

This would be a most useful little book for ministers who have not the time to master the standard works on psychology, yet feel the want of some reliable help in the psychological understanding of problems that crop up in pastoral work. The book is competent, clear and Christian. It recognises the value of the work of Freud and other great pioneers without slavish adherence to their theories or blindness to their limitations. In particular Professor McKenzie challenges the assumption that the psychotherapist has only to discover to the patient the origins of mental conflict for that conflict to disappear. He holds that the root origin is always in some defect of character structure, and that there can be no cure that does not integrate a man's personality. He is not, therefore, merely concerned with the removal of distressing neurotic symptoms, but with the unification of the self, which requires a right adjustment to spiritual things, which in its turn involves faith in God. "Pathological trends of character cannot really be cured unless the patient comes consciously under the influence of religious ideals." That is why psychologists need to be pastors, and pastors need to have some knowledge of psychology if they are to know how to deal with the mental obstructions that hinder faith in God. This book is devoid of padding; almost every page is worth re-reading. We ministers would be better pastors if we thoroughly mastered it.

F. C. BRYAN.