

# Understanding St. John

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THERE have been many commentaries on the Fourth Gospel, and there will be many more : one, which is imminent, promises to be a notable contribution to scholarship. But probably no commentary on this wonderful Gospel will ever be as satisfactory as a good commentary on some other book may be ; for what the reader needs even more than a commentary is a guide to the profundities and intricacies of the Evangelist's thought. This Dr. Dodd has supplied, as perhaps no other living scholar could have supplied it—with magisterial depth and learning.<sup>1</sup>

Some readers may find it easiest to start tunnelling in this very rich mine at Part III, *Argument and Structure*, as more readily intelligible than the earlier parts. It is a masterly exposition of the design of the Gospel and of the lines of thought running from end to end of it. Dr. Dodd distinguishes the Proem (i. 1-18, the Prologue, i. 19-51, the Testimony ; the Book of Signs (ii-xii) ; and the Book of the Passion (xiii-xvii, the Farewell Discourses, and the Passion Narrative itself). Of these, his treatment of the first is a model of lucid and penetrating exposition ; but it is perhaps in the second that his originality and ingenuity are particularly notable. Having carefully tested the "displacement theories", he is of opinion that it is impossible to improve on the Gospel's present arrangement, which is dictated by theological aims ; and he proceeds accordingly to expound the scheme of its seven episodes and the subtle connexions of thought between them.

The first—the *New Beginning*—may be taken, as a specimen both of the expositor's skill and also of the element of conjecture sometimes involved in tracing the connexions. This episode (ii. 1-iv. 42) comprises two 'signs'—the turning of the water into wine, and the cleansing of the temple—and two great discourses, with Nicodemus and with the Samaritan woman. 'Water into wine' (even without the Philonian parallels, showing that the supersession of water might be a familiar symbol of the higher order of life) is readily understandable as a symbol of the transcending of the Jewish ceremonial-religion (with which the water pots are explicitly associated), or of any other religion on that level, by the new religion ; and the allusion to the third day may be taken, further, as a sign that, for this Evangelist, "the whole of the incarnate ministry of the Lord has the character of the 'third day' of His glory".

The meaning of the cleansing of the temple is less obvious, even if there is an allusion to Zech. xiv. 21—no Canaanite, i.e., no trafficker, will be allowed in the Temple on the Day of the Lord. Dr. Dodd (in part following Origen) takes "Destroy this temple" as referring not so much to a future, literal destruction as to this very 'sign'—the cleansing which has just taken place. The Scriptural phrase, "the

<sup>1</sup> *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* by C. H. Dodd. Cambridge University Press, pp. xii and 478, 42/-.

zeal of thy house will eat me up" (*sic*), then means that this cleansing, representing "the destruction and replacement of the system of religious observance of which the temple was the centre", will involve the death of Christ (with which indeed the Synoptists do closely connect it); and this, in turn, will lead to the new temple, the risen Body of Christ, the Christian Church ("he spake of the temple of his body"). Thus the second 'sign' is made to say virtually the same as the first.

In the discourse with Nicodemus, the theme of new birth is used by the Evangelist in such a way as to bring the 'regeneration' (*palin-genesia*) of the Jewish apocalyptic future into the present. Equally, it is used in such a way as would remind Hellenistic readers of their conception of rebirth into a new level of existence. And both conceptions are placed on a deeply religious level. The Father's Only Son, descending from above, is the bringer of this new life; and in connexion with his re-ascent, the Old Testament figure of the brazen serpent is used in a way reminiscent of the image of God "drawing up like a magnet", in the so-called Hermetic literature. But the reason for the choice of the verb, "lifted up," is deliberately left obscure, to be elucidated as the reader proceeds. In the end, he is to discover that the cruel "lifting up" on the gibbet *is* the exaltation in glory by which Christ saves the world. At this point, iii. 16 comes in, showing God's love as central to the whole process. The discourse goes on to introduce the constant Johannine themes of light and judgment. (The Evangelist's presentation of the whole ministry of Jesus as the coming of the light which is itself also judgment is characterised by Dr. Dodd elsewhere as a great creative achievement of religious thought.) Ch. iii. 22-30, which Dr. Dodd will not have removed to another position, seems to be a covert allusion to Christian baptism with Spirit, and might help the uninitiated reader to link water and Spirit in the person of Jesus. And the allusion to baptism by Jesus Himself leads suitably to the explanatory appendix, iii. 31-36.

The discourse with the Samaritan woman, again, seems to contrast the old 'water' of Judaism with the springing 'water' of the new life, leading on to a contrast between the old worship—or the syncretistic worship perhaps symbolised by the Samaritan—and the new, which is 'in spirit', that is, belongs to the world of spiritual reality. This is to be inaugurated—is now being inaugurated—by the Messiah, whose rôle, as already in action, is brought out further by the dialogues with the Samaritan men and with the disciples.

This crabbed summary does scant justice to the richness and beauty of the exposition; but it may serve to indicate the way in which Dr. Dodd tries to give coherence to a large number of subtly interwoven strands, and to illustrate his thesis that, although at every turn there are deep inner meanings for the baptized Christian reader, yet the section "presupposes no indispensable ideas beyond those which a serious and intelligent Hellenistic reader might fairly be expected to entertain, with the Prologue as his guide to the resetting of these ideas".

In this scheme, each episode contains the whole theme of the Gospel: all through the series, the story of man's refusal of divine life and light is told with terrific irony. But the seven great episodes are themselves linked into a progressive series, through which is traceable a develop-

ment : the New Beginning, the Life-giving Word, the Bread of Life, Light and Life, Judgment by the Light, the Victory of Life over Death, Life through Death (for, to bring life to Lazarus, Jesus risks his own life in Judaea—an anticipation of the Passion). A brief Epilogue (xii. 37-50) sums up the theme. It is not entirely clear (at least without further pondering) that Dr. Dodd's divisions and connections are the inevitable and only possible ones. Occasionally they may even seem a trifle far-fetched. But at the very least he has found a way of interpreting this whole section, which usually tends to appear episodic and perplexing, coherently and with great force.

In the Book of the Passion, the Farewell Discourses represent the private teaching to the disciples, and develop, on a different plane, the message of the Signs. They are followed (reversing the Evangelist's order in the previous section) by a comparatively straightforward narrative, the story of the Cross, with relatively little that is distinctively theological. Such theological elements as there are, however, prove to be highly characteristic and significant. And the post-resurrection material is, of course, of unique quality. The Evangelist has so heavily underlined the triumph, the Kingship, the completeness of Christ in his death, reigning from the tree, that, in a sense, he has less than the other Evangelists to say through the Resurrection. He concentrates rather on Christ's re-establishment of contact with the disciples. Dr. Dodd hazards the guess that the perplexing contrast between the "Touch me not" to Mary Magdalene, and the invitation to Thomas to come and feel the Lord, is due precisely to the fact that in the meantime full contact has been established by the bestowal of the Holy Spirit : Jesus has, by then, 'ascended'. It is difficult to see quite how this is relevant to touching or refraining from touch ; and Dr. Dodd may not carry all his readers with him here. But it is, to say the least, a very thought-provoking suggestion.

I said that some might like to start reading at Part III, simply because a reader familiar with his Gospels, but not learned in the thought of the ancient world, might find entry at this point less formidable than elsewhere, and would be able at once to gain much from the rich suggestiveness of the exposition. To read St. John devotionally, with the guidance of Part III, will itself be a profound spiritual experience. But having gone thus far, no serious reader will wish to desist : more treasures await him. Once again, Part II, may be found less exacting than Part I. It is a brilliant and lucid treatment of the "Leading Ideas" of the Fourth Gospel—Life, Knowledge, Truth, and so forth, and the titles of Jesus. No one can read it without having his eyes opened to new depths of meaning everywhere, for it is little short of a theology of the whole New Testament. This section contains, incidentally, much that is very fresh and unusual. For instance, in the phrase "the lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world", most commentators see a sacrificial allusion—either to the Paschal lamb or to the sheep, dumb before her shearers, of Isa. liii. But Dr. Dodd exposes the considerable difficulties attaching to both these, and instead argues for a Messianic sense, adducing the apocalyptic figure of the 'bell wether' leading the flock of Israel (compare the Lamb of the Apocalypse), the Messiah who removes sin from His

people. Dr. Dodd is not concerned to deny sacrificial overtones to the idea. Indeed, his interpretation of the Gospel as a whole leaves no room for the school of thought which finds in it little or no sacrificial teaching. His interpretation of this particular verse thus springs from no bias in this direction; and his vigorous argument for the Messianic as the primary connotation demands serious attention. In xix. 36 again ("a bone of him shall not be broken"), he inclines to see a reference from Psalm xxxiv to the protection of the godly, rather than an allusion to the Passover ritual. But here it must be confessed that it seems perilously near to mockery to quote with reference to a dead body the Psalmist's words about God's loving protection.

Part I, *the Background*, is likely to make the severest demands on the reader. Few, if any, writers could have marshalled so complex a mass of ideas with such consummate skill and lucidity. But at best it is heavy going. It is, however, by no means a merely academic exercise. Indeed, there is a masterly economy of phrase, and hardly a sentence is irrelevant to the primary purpose of elucidating the Fourth Gospel itself. The point of this section is precisely that the Gospel cannot be rightly understood without some attempt to grasp its background. As has already been seen, Dr. Dodd holds that, although the Gospel, obviously, contains multitudes of allusions to specifically Christian beliefs, and even veiled references to the Christian *arcana* of Baptism and Holy Communion, which none but Christians would fully appreciate, yet it was intended, in part—perhaps even primarily—for a wide public of devout and thoughtful non-Christians in a great Hellenic city such as Ephesus. If so, it would appear, however, that the Judaic element (to which full justice is indeed done) is very evident, and that the Evangelist often starts from the ground of Judaism rather than from remoter Greek thought. Sometimes, admittedly, it can be said that a doctrine (as, for instance, that of the Son of Man in this Gospel) has more affinity with the Hermetic treatise *Poimandres* than with Jewish apocalyptic. At another time, the Evangelist is detected using Greek terms, though with characteristically Hebrew connotations. But sometimes Dr. Dodd seems almost to have to strain the evidence to find a message for the Greeks in what seems, at least superficially, to be more Judaic. Perhaps we might postulate the 'God-fearers'—devout Gentiles round the fringe of the synagogues—as the *point d'appui*. At any rate, the Evangelist makes skilful use of elements in this syncretistic background in order to win his readers into a full Christian faith. Constantly the distinctively Christian doctrine—the word made flesh—challenges Jew and Greek alike: the Greeks' abstract is embodied (the Evangelist is leading a public nurtured in the higher religion of Hellenism to the historic actuality of the story); while the Jews' future hopes are shown to be already realized. The declared aim of the Gospel (xx. 31) is not, Dr. Dodd argues, incompatible with this apologetic motive, however applicable it may be also to the already Christian reader, whose faith will be deepened and increased.

This conception of the Fourth Gospel as primarily apologetics for the religious non-Christian is by no means universally accepted, and is one of the most interesting elements in Dr. Dodd's position. His

examination of the difficult Hermetic literature, of Hellenistic and Rabbinic Judaism, and of Mandaeism (which last, he is able to show, is of comparatively small importance) establishes that much of the Fourth Gospel would indeed be immediately recognized by a cosmopolitan religious public as speaking a language with which they were familiar. And the very fact that in the later, more exegetical, parts of his book, Dr. Dodd is able to illuminate and give fresh edge to thought after thought by allusions to ideas previously expounded from this background, goes a long way to confirm his position. One interesting example (from the Rabbinic side) is his application of a hint from G. Klein, which takes up a Rabbinic interpretation of the Name of God as *I am He*, or (sometimes) *I and He* (that is, God and Israel), and detects this behind the Fourth Evangelist's use of the *I am* phrases and behind his stress on the solidarity of Jesus with God.

If all this is true, then it is all the more significant that the notoriously startling note, "the Word became flesh," is sounded so near the beginning of the Gospel, and that its resonance is so clearly heard throughout. If the Evangelist is making all possible concessions to his Hellenistic-Jewish public, he is at the same time a master of his message, and can move freely without ever losing hold of the essential *skandalon* of the Incarnation.

This brings us to Dr. Dodd's fascinating Appendix, in which he discusses the historical aspect of the Gospel. Like other commentators, he recognizes the Evangelist's own concern for the historicity of the Incarnation: as has just been said, 'became flesh' is the watchword. He notes, too, the probability that a good deal of early pre-Johannine tradition (though not necessarily Marcan at all) may lie behind the Gospel, and shows that a first step in analysing it out is a vigorous definition of distinctively Johannine terms and ideas, such as this book indeed offers. While recognising that apostolic authorship cannot be absolutely disproved, he justly exposes the weakness of some of the alleged evidence in its favour. And, in any case, he shows that, however close to historical tradition the Evangelist may stand, he arranges his material freely so as to make it a vehicle for his message. What one would like to know is how the Fourth Gospel was 'published'. Dr. Dodd's study seems to make it clearer than ever that it must have been intended to be read and pondered as a whole—not merely to be listened to, still less to be heard in fragments as lections. Can it be that it was, actually from the first, copied in considerable numbers so as to be available to non-Christian readers?

This great work, containing little reference to previous exponents of the Gospel in the modern period, is an essentially independent testament of a life-time's profound thought and study—the crowning gift to us of a great expositor. Few of us will be able to master all its immense erudition. But no devout and serious student can read even a little of it without recognizing it as a spiritual treasure among a million.