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THE FOURTH GOSPEL IN THE EARLY CHURCH¹

(concluded)

THE heresy which the Fourth Evangelist certainly had in mind was the Docetic heresy. This he did not combat by adopting its terminology, but by stressing the fact that the Word became flesh. Certain critics have imagined that he invented all the incidents in which Jesus is represented as being weary, or thirsty, or sorrowful, as a refutation of this heresy and that they fit in very ill with the rest of the representation which he gives of Jesus as an omniscient divinity moving among men without any share in their weaknesses and sufferings. It has also been regarded as probable that the Evangelist insisted so strongly that Jesus went to Calvary "carrying his cross for himself" (John xix. 17) as a refutation of the Gnostic theory (which, according to Irenaeus, was also the theory of Basilides) that Simon was crucified instead of Jesus, while Jesus took the form of Simon and stood by to mock the vain fury of the Jews (p. 54). If this is a correct interpretation of the intention of the Evangelist, it seems to be the only place in which he "re-stated the *kerygma*" as a refutation of a current heresy. But it is also possible that he may have been stating a fact and that Jesus may have carried His cross for a time until He was compelled to yield it to Simon through exhaustion. There is, however, not the slightest attempt in this passage to make the words used resemble the terminology of the Docetic or any other heretics.

A far more probable explanation of the use which the Valentinians made of the Gospel than that given by Mr. Sanders is that they found it already so much valued by the Church that they were compelled to try to make it fit in with their system and to use it as a mine for "proof texts".² Heretics of all colours

¹ A critique of *The Fourth Gospel in the Early Church*, by J. N. Sanders, continued from pp. 173-191.

² This is not mere conjecture. Tertullian says that Valentinus seems to have used the whole of the Scriptures (*integro instrumento uti videtur*), but that he "laid violent hands on the truth, only with a more cunning mind and skill than Marcion. Marcion expressly and openly used the knife, not the pen, since he made such an excision of the Scriptures as suited his subject-matter. Valentinus, however, abstained from such excision, because he did not invent Scriptures to square with his own subject-matter, but adapted his matter to the Scriptures; and yet he took away more and added more, by removing

have continually tried to prove their theories out of the Bible and abuses which have crept into the Church have been supported from the same source. A monk is said by Erasmus to have tried to prove that it was right to put heretics to death by quoting the text from the Vulgate "*hominem haereticum devita*"¹, and even Augustine excused persecution by quoting the injunction "compel them to come in".

Origen says that the Jew of Celsus stated that Christian believers "like persons who in a fit of drunkenness lay violent hands on themselves have corrupted the Gospel from its original integrity to a three-fold, four-fold and many-fold degree and have remodelled it, so that they might be able to answer objections". This is exactly what most Modernists believe that the writers of the Gospels did, and Mr. Sanders' theory of the manner of composition of the Fourth Gospel would probably have come under the condemnation which Origen pronounces on such procedure. Origen also says, "Now I know of no others who have altered the Gospel save the followers of Marcion and those of Valentinus and, I think, also those of Lucian. But such an allegation is no charge against the Christian system, but against those who dared to trifle with the Gospels" (*Contra Celsum* ii. 26, 27).

It is true that we have no other evidence that the followers of Valentinus altered the Gospel, although we have evidence that they put a strained interpretation upon it, but it is more probable that Origen knew what he was talking about than that Mr. Sanders has rightly described the way in which the Fourth Evangelist "re-stated the *kerygma*" in the terms of "Proto-Gnostic theosophy" or the way in which the Gospel was introduced to the Church by certain Valentinians who regarded it as favourable to their system. In point of fact the Gnostics were so far from being satisfied that they could prove their systems from Scripture that, when they were refuted from it, they took refuge in a supposed secret oral tradition derived from the Apostles and known to them alone (Irenaeus, *Haer.* iii. 2. 2). Hence their name "Gnostics" which means those who *know* the truth.

the proper meaning of every particular word and adding fantastic arrangements of things which have no real existence" (*De Praescriptione* 38).

¹ By treating *devita*, "avoid", as if it were composed of *de*, "from", and *vita*, "life"!

Before we leave this subject we must notice another "proof" which Mr. Sanders gives in support of his theory. Some fragments of papyrus have been found in Egypt containing words resembling those in the Fourth Gospel and these are held to prove that the Gospel was known in Egypt before 150. This, he says, is the earliest evidence for the existence of the Gospel, if it is not certain that Ignatius knew of it. Apparently he would like us to infer that it is also evidence that the Gospel was *written* in Egypt. But all that it is evidence for is that Egypt has a dry climate in which fragments of papyrus, which would decay elsewhere, are preserved. It would be as absurd to use the existence of these fragments as a proof that the Gospel was written in Egypt as it would be to assume from the fact that certain Epicurean writings have been found in Herculaneum that the Epicurean school of philosophy took its rise there (p. 39).

In dealing with the everlasting discussion about the fragment of Papias from which the existence of the Elder John is inferred Mr. Sanders has the curious argument that the title *πρεσβύτερος* is given to the second "John" who is mentioned "to *distinguish* him from the Apostle" (p. 7). As Papias called the group of "disciples of the Lord" whom he previously mentioned *πρεσβύτεροι* and *οἱ ἀπόστολοι* it takes an extremely refined critical sense to understand how one person can be distinguished from another by giving both the same title. If the use of the word *πρεσβύτερος* with the name of the second "John" is intended to distinguish him from anyone it is surely intended to distinguish him from Aristion since both he and the second "John" are called "Disciples of the Lord".

A theory which needs subsidiary support of this kind is not very stable. If the Gospel had been a product of an Alexandrian Jew who desired to "re-state the *kerygma*" in the terms of Proto-Gnostic terminology, it would have resembled the Epistle to the Hebrews far more closely than it does. This Epistle is the work of a cultivated man who is certainly well acquainted with Jewish ideas and the methods of exegesis in use at Alexandria. He is quite ready to use philosophical terms when it suits his purpose to do so. The consequence was that his book was for some time regarded with suspicion at Rome and only the less educated Christians were inclined to accept it as the work of St. Paul, until a time came when the advance

of barbarism had made it difficult for readers to discriminate between differing Greek styles.

But the Gospel is the work of a man who thought in Aramaic, if it is not a translation from that language. He is mainly interested in problems which were discussed by Jews in their native land before the fall of Jerusalem. From the Prologue with its slightly philosophic tinge he plunges without any break into a description of scenes in which such questions are mentioned as whether John the Baptist was "Elijah" or "the Prophet". John calls Jesus "the Lamb of God", a thoroughly Palestinian Jewish idea. A good deal of the rest of the book is taken up with disputes between Jesus and the Jews about the right way in which to keep the Sabbath and several verses are devoted to the points in dispute between the Jews and Samaritans, which could not possibly interest Alexandrian Jews and which have certainly nothing to do even with "Proto-Gnosticism".

Of course "the great and daring genius" who wrote the Gospel may have written it in this way in order to induce his readers to think that he was an Apostle and was writing about the sort of thing that might be supposed to have happened in Palestine during the life of Jesus. But if he did this, he left himself little opportunity for "re-statement" and for introducing a "terminology" which would commend the Gospel to his contemporaries. What happens to the Gospel when it is "re-stated" in contemporary language we can see from the recent broadcasts the script for which was produced by Miss Dorothy Sayers. But anything more unlike the Fourth Gospel than this script cannot be imagined.

We think that we have shown that the words used by the Fourth Evangelist have no Gnostic tinge, but can all be found either in the other Gospels or in some other part of the Bible. The one possible exception—*logos*—can easily be traced to Palestinian and pre-Christian sources. We have given an explanation of the way in which the Gospel is used in the fragments of Christian literature which have survived before the time of Irenaeus which is far more satisfactory than that given by Mr. Sanders and which has been accepted as satisfactory by all critics except a few of the most radical type.

The weakest and most objectionable part of Mr. Sanders' argument is that in which he accounts for the ready acceptance

of the book in Ephesus and for the fraudulent ascription to an Apostle which it received there, because it seemed to sanction a local custom which was not approved by the members of the Church of Rome. He does not mend matters by ascribing the process by which the "Elder" was transformed into the "Apostle" to "local pride". He also blackens the memory of Irenaeus by giving him a considerable share in this deception. It is quite futile to say that this ascription could have taken place "very easily and almost unconsciously" in such a community under such circumstances. Even if it is allowed that such a thing is possible, it leaves quite unexplained how the whole Church (with the exception of the intelligent *Alogoi*) immediately accepted the Gospel as the work of an Apostle, and how the whole Church (including the *Alogoi*) came to believe that it was written in Asia and began to invent legends of the Apostle's adventures there.

The only parallel that we can think of is the acceptance of the Forged Decretals by Pope Nicholas the First in the middle of his controversy with Archbishop Hincmar of Rheims. These were, no doubt, accepted, without an unreasonable amount of examination, because of the "local pride" of the Roman Church, and because they helped to prove that the Pope had supreme jurisdiction over all other bishops. That an unscrupulous Pope, secure of his position, should do such a thing and be able to compel the Western Church to accept his opinion in the darkest of the dark ages is credible enough. But this fraud was manifest as soon as learning and a critical spirit revived under the influence of the Renaissance. Roman Catholic writers say as little as is possible about this episode in Church history now, and have long ceased to use the Decretals as a proof of the universal jurisdiction of the Holy See.

But, on Mr. Sanders' hypothesis, the Elders of Ephesus and Irenaeus succeeded not only in persuading their own age, which was an age of education and easy and rapid transport, but even most of the supremely intelligent and acute critics of the present day that the Gospel was written in Asia and in persuading not a few of them that it had a more or less close connection with the Apostle John.

All theories which fail to admit that the Gospel was written in Asia and had some connection with the Apostle or, at least, with some other equally well-informed Disciple of the Lord end

by charging the Elders of Ephesus with downright fraud or with a culpable neglect to discover the truth which is almost equivalent to fraud. They also charge Irenaeus with incredible and blameworthy ignorance or carelessness, or with a share in this fraud. Mr. Sanders apparently does not consider that Irenaeus was a fool, for he tells us that he was more far-seeing than the *Alogoi* and that he interpreted the Gospel correctly. The only other way in which his conduct can be explained is to credit him with indifference to truth "for apologetic reasons". In the words of Dr. Sanday we hope that a day will come when, even in a certain school of New Testament criticism, "it may be considered as wrong to libel the dead as to libel the living" (*Criticism of Fourth Gospel*, p. 81).

Moreover "the great and daring genius" who is supposed to have written the Gospel must have shown most of his daring in writing the Gospel, as he did write it, by disregarding "factual truth" in the interests of "faith truth". If the Gospel was written by the Apostle John, or even by some other Disciple who had been with Jesus during most of His ministry, or if it were composed from reminiscences left by either of these men without any intention of re-stating the *kerygma* in the terminology of Proto-Gnostic theosophy, it might be regarded as an honest, if compressed, account of what actually happened. But if it was written by an Alexandrian Jew, in the form in which we have it, with the intention of commending even "valuable traditions about the life of Christ" to a thoroughly heretical Church, we are afraid that we cannot acquit this author of some intention to deceive. Whatever his intention may have been, the form in which the Gospel was cast did delude all the most learned men of the end of the second century and of many succeeding centuries into receiving it as the work of an eye-witness of the life of Jesus.

We suppose we must exempt the Elders of Ephesus and Irenaeus from the charge of being thus deluded, since they accepted the book either because of "local pride", or for "apologetic reasons".

Mr. Sanders admits that the Evangelist has "preserved the essential truth of the Christian Gospel". We hope he will come to see that he has imagined a person for his Evangelist who would be quite incapable of producing such a Gospel.

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