

A NOTE ON THE INTERPRETATION OF THE FOURTH
GOSPEL

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The avowed purpose of the Fourth Gospel, as stated in John 20:31, is that "these things were written that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye may have life in his name." But in what sense were these words intended? What special content had they for the author and for his Christian readers. The words in themselves are not particularly striking, and might well have been written by any or all of the synoptics; and yet we are perfectly conscious that in the Fourth Gospel they have a unique import, not less because of the distinctive features of the component parts of the Fourth Gospel than because of the total impression which the book makes. To explain more fully than has yet been done the cause or causes of these differences, and thus to illumine somewhat the inner character of the Gospel, the following considerations are urged.

It is to the background of this writing that I desire to draw attention afresh; for to the present writer it seems that certain features of this background have been neglected, if not actually overlooked. Briefly, the view presented here is that the Fourth Gospel represents a new and rather sharply-defined development in the Gospel message, due—amongst other causes—to two important factors; or, perhaps more accurately, to one primary and one supplementary factor.

The primary factor to which I allude was the persecutions under Domitian. Although somewhat in retrospect (assuming that the Fourth Gospel was written not far from 105-110 A. D.), it would appear that these persecutions had vastly more to do with the production of this latest Gospel and with its distinctive character than has hitherto been recognized. In fact, to me this book is not wholly intelligible on any other assumption.

First, as to general considerations. The Fourth Gospel first made its appearance in those churches of Asia Minor which

figure so prominently in the 'trials' of the latter part of the first century. It was for the Christians of this region that the Fourth Gospel was unquestionably written; and its author—whatever his name or antecedent history—completely identified himself in thought and feeling with these Christian readers of Ephesus and vicinity.

The generally marked influence of the persecutions in the second half of the first century on the literature of the period is well known. For example, the Book of Hebrews has for its scarcely veiled purpose the fortifying of its Christian readers against persecutions which may burst forth afresh at any moment. "Ye have not yet resisted unto blood", the author reminds his readers in 12:4, after enumerating a long list of heroic faithful ones who have resisted (ch. 11); and from this point on to the close of the book there is an ominous note as to the sacrifices which Christians may yet again be called to make. The days of Nero were not yet effaced from memory, clouds were darkly hovering, and no extraordinary prophetic vision was needed to see that at any moment the storm might break afresh. To forestall so far as possible the disastrous moral and religious effects of this storm Hebrews was written.

Not very long afterwards the Apocalypse made its appearance, at the very height of the Domitian persecutions, as it seems. Passive resistance is its note, to stand firm at any cost. Christians may well afford to do this, is its implied argument, since "to him that overcometh" is to be granted forthwith every desirable reward; whereas for the persecutors was destined an awful retribution. The Domitian persecutions, therefore, as is universally recognized by scholars, form the immediate occasion for the production of the Apocalypse.

And then, after just the appreciable interval needed in which to make a careful appraisal of the new conditions confronting Christians as a result of these persecutions, appeared the Fourth Gospel, with its distinctly new features, *the fruitage of the transforming experiences through which the Christians of Asia Minor had lately passed.*

This, to my mind, is the main clue to the different portrait of Jesus presented by the Fourth Gospel, as contrasted with the synoptic representation; a Jesus who, despite an intensely loving tenderness toward "his own" and those with receptive

spirit, is toward critic and opponent aloof, cold, unmoved by threat or danger, consciously superior to a degree which at times approaches arrogance, though without actually becoming thus petty. This Jesus, who from the outset of his ministry pointed to himself and without the least embarrassment or diffidence made the most astounding claims, has been a source of perplexity both to exegete and to Christian teacher of harmonizing disposition; for the portrait is too diametrically opposed to the earlier synoptic type for the problem to be blinked. But is the transformation so very mysterious after all in view of what had happened in the interval referred to? Is not this Jesus of the Fourth Gospel simply the heroic Jesus of the synoptics, with an intensification of those personal characteristics which were most significantly the by-products of the recent conflict between Christian and non-Christian? It would seem so. The Domitian persecutions could not fail to widen the gap between Christian and non-Christian. The Christian who had been lukewarm before could hardly remain lukewarm thereafter; he must either become less Christian in feeling or more intensely Christian. Christianity would therefore become more militant in character, though its polemic would necessarily be a polemic of the spirit rather than a polemic of the sword. But if this be the resultant trend in the character of Christianity and of many individual Christians, could it fail correspondingly to affect the conception of Jesus as well? Hardly. It was inevitable that those traits would be emphasized, and hence magnified, which experience had exalted. Hence the Jesus of confident bearing, perfect assurance and unshaken poise became the model for the Christian to follow. In debate with opponents Jesus had never been defeated, but on the contrary his answers had been final, unanswerable; let the Christians of Asia Minor answer their opponents in the same way, with equal confidence and with equal conviction of finality. Whereas Jesus was anything but indifferent to the salvation of the whole world, and indeed was sent for the express purpose "that whosoever believeth on him should have eternal life", he knew that many would deliberately reject the opportunity to win 'eternal life', and hence was unmoved when the majority, including his own neighbors of Nazareth, rejected him; so let his followers in Ephesus and vicinity remain unmoved though the majority there too reject

the gospel with scorn and derision. And lastly, Jesus had both in preaching and in practice given a new meaning to 'glorification', viz., martyrdom, and had rejoiced in the same; therefore let Christians likewise rejoice if it be their lot to partake of the same 'glory'. Such, it appears to me, was the direction of the influence which the Domitian persecutions unconsciously but strongly exerted on the earlier portrait of Jesus. The face of the Master is in a measure ennobled, but the set lines of a Puritan sternness are at the same time finely chiseled there. I am not unmindful of the more immediate background of the Fourth Gospel, religious sects, heresies, etc., nor of the indelible traces left by the same on this Gospel; but these false teachings have simply determined the direction and objective of the polemic spirit already engendered by the bitter experiences referred to above.

I stated at the beginning of this paper that two factors in the Fourth Gospel had been neglected. The second factor to which I refer was the dimming of the earlier confident expectation in an immediate Second Coming. This feature has been recognized, to some extent, but not apparently with just the bearing and force which I have in mind. That is, the fact that apocalyptic eschatology has either been suppressed or repressed in the Fourth Gospel is well recognized, but the exact connection between this fact and its causes has not been so certainly determined. My belief is that the doctrine of the Second Coming was subordinated in the Fourth Gospel for the simple reason that faith in this doctrine had become exceeding tenuous, and that the author represented those Christians who, to put it negatively, had no strong convictions on this point.

Let us consider briefly what had been the development in regard to this belief in the quarter century or so preceding the appearance of the Fourth Gospel. So late as the time of the Gospel according to Matthew, and perhaps actually stimulated afresh by the "wars and rumors of wars" connected with the destruction of Jerusalem, the author is led to remind his readers of Jesus' words to his disciples, "Ye shall not have gone through the cities of Israel till the Son of Man be come" (Mt. 10:23), so close at hand to his own day does the author believe the Second Coming to be. Even in Luke's second treatise the Second Coming is still a prominent consideration (Acts 1:11).

But by the end of the century the repeated disappointments over this expectation were having the cumulative effect of weakening both faith and fortitude. The need, therefore, of discovering some other basis for faith was becoming very evident, possibly even urgent. This basis should be less treacherous than the hope in the Second Coming had proved. The new basis they found was imitation of the Master, the only enduring basis which experience had yet revealed. Crude and imperfect as were these first efforts to show that Christians were to follow their Lord in a spiritual sense, they had the merit of aiming to elevate men God-ward by presenting as their ideal and goal a transcendent as well as a human Jesus. Not, as in the doctrine of the Second Coming, by a great material reward to compensate for a brief period of waiting and privation, but by actually 'overcoming the world' as Jesus himself had done, was the Christian to become one with Jesus and with the Father. Thus it was that the dimming of the hope in an immediate Second Coming made room for and presumably hastened the development of the new apologetic represented in the Fourth Gospel, while the Domitian persecutions were influential in determining its character.