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A. M. Hunter

Excerpt

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THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN

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In order to read a New Testament book intelligently, we must know, if possible, who wrote it, where, when, why and for whom. The first of these questions we will leave to the end, because it is far from simple, and consider first some of the other important problems.

WHERE AND WHEN THE GOSPEL WAS WRITTEN

Where was the Gospel written? Some have guessed Antioch, others Alexandria; but by far the strongest claim belongs to Ephesus in Asia, so that John's Gospel is often called 'the Ephesian Gospel'. The claim rests on the testimony of Irenaeus (Bishop of Lyons *c.* 180) who had known the aged Polycarp, the personal friend of the Apostle John and others who had seen Jesus. This is what Irenaeus says: 'John, the disciple of the Lord, who leaned on his breast, himself issued the Gospel while dwelling in Ephesus' and he adds that John lived there 'till the times of Trajan' (98–117).

This long residence of the Apostle in Ephesus is asserted or implied by a number of early Christian writers, including Justin Martyr and Polycrates (who had both lived in Ephesus). Some very late and dubious evidence that the Apostle died an early martyr's death should be rejected.

When was it written? The discovery in 1920 of a papyrus fragment of the Gospel (now one of the chief treasures of the John Rylands Library in Manchester) proves that the Gospel was circulating in Egypt about A.D. 130, and must—if we allow a generation for the book to travel from Ephesus—have

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been written not later than A.D. 100. How early we date it depends on whether we think 'John' knew the Gospels of Mark and Luke. If he knew them, the Gospel's date can hardly be earlier than 90. If he did not—as more and more scholars believe—we may date the Gospel as early as 80, perhaps even earlier. But the traditions about Jesus in the Gospel must of course be a good deal earlier.

THE LANGUAGE OF THE GOSPEL

In what language was the Gospel originally written? The answer is: Greek—though one or two scholars have argued for Aramaic (a Semitic tongue resembling Hebrew). John obviously had Greek readers in mind. This is why he translates Hebrew and Aramaic words (Siloam, Gabbatha, Golgotha, etc.) for the benefit of his readers, and why he is at pains to explain Jewish religious practices and burial customs.

Yet, if he did write in Greek, the presence in his style of many Aramaic idioms (not of course now traceable in the idiomatic English of the N.E.B.) strongly suggests that his mother-tongue was Aramaic. This is something to be remembered when we come to discuss the Gospel's authorship.

ITS ARRANGEMENT

Do we have the Gospel in its original order? Fifty years ago scholars had a craze for rearranging the chapters of the Gospel. An example of this rearrangement will be found in Dr Moffatt's translation of the New Testament. This was not merely the scholars' wilfulness. Scribes may have displaced passages when copying manuscripts. Moreover, it is undeniable that if we reverse (say) the order of chapters 5 and 6 we seem to improve the geography of Jesus' movements. Yet all such rearranging implies that we know the order John intended—a pretty big assumption. We must not confuse 'feelings' about the right order with 'proof' of it.

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Significantly, most recent scholars call a halt to this reshuffling; and we do not feel justified in doing any in this book.

ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

What is the relation of John to Matthew, Mark and Luke? It has long been recognized that in many ways John stands apart from the first three Gospels, commonly called 'Synoptic' (because they exhibit a common outline of Jesus' ministry). What are these differences?

(1) In the Synoptics, Jesus' ministry is located in Galilee with but one recorded journey to Jerusalem in the south. In John, Jesus makes several visits—generally at festival times—to Judaea and Jerusalem. Indeed, though John records the Galilean ministry, he also records an earlier Judaeian ministry and a later Judaeian one (after the Galilean one is over).

(2) On one or two points of chronology John diverges from the first three Gospels. Thus, he sets the cleansing of the Temple at the beginning of Jesus' ministry (not at the end, as in the Synoptics); and he dates the crucifixion a day earlier than the others.

(3) John does not chronicle certain important episodes found in the Synoptics—the Baptism of Jesus and the Temptation, the Transfiguration, the institution of the Lord's Supper, the Agony in the Garden. On the other hand, he has various new stories to tell about Jesus—the dialogues with Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, Jesus' activity in Jerusalem from the feast of Tabernacles to that of Dedication (7–10), the raising of Lazarus, the foot-washing, the inquiry before Annas, besides certain appearances of the risen Lord.

(4) Like the Synoptics, John declares that Jesus wrought miracles, recording in fact seven of them; but he calls them 'signs' (not 'mighty works', as in the Synoptics); and he always stresses their spiritual meaning by following up the 'work' with an explanatory saying or 'word'.

(5) Instead of the short, pithy sayings and numerous parables

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found on Jesus' lips in the Synoptics, John ascribes to Jesus long discourses whose themes are life, light, truth, judgement, Christ's person and his relation to the Father.

(6) On certain points of theology John seems to diverge from the Synoptics. Thus, in the Synoptics the main theme of Jesus' preaching is 'the kingdom of God', in John it is 'eternal life'. Again, whereas in the very first chapter of John men acclaim Jesus as Messiah, it is well on in the ministry, according to Mark, before this happens.

Are these differences real and serious? Once the argument was that if John disagreed with the Synoptics, we should distrust his testimony. To follow the Synoptics, said the critics, was the way of wisdom. Nowadays we realize not only that these differences are *overdrawn* but that often, where they do exist, John is to be followed. Here are a few examples.

Not only do the Synoptics drop unwitting hints that Jesus visited Jerusalem more than once in his ministry, but many scholars are convinced that there was, as John records, a Judaeen ministry before the Galilean one began, and a later ministry in the south after the Galilean one was over.

Many believe that John is right about the date of the Last Supper.

Though John does not record Jesus' Baptism, the institution of the Lord's Supper, and the Agony in the Garden, he shows quite clearly that he knew about them (1: 32; 6: 51; 12: 27).

The distinction between the Synoptics' treatment of the miracles as 'mighty works' and John's treatment as 'signs' has been too sharply drawn. Closer study shows that even in the first three Gospels Jesus' mighty works are 'signs'—for those who have eyes to see.

Nor is it true to say that the Jesus of John's Gospel always speaks in long discourses and without parables. There are at least half-a-dozen parables, and some sixty short pointed sayings like those found in the Synoptics, e.g. 3: 3, 'unless a man has been born over again he cannot see the kingdom of God'.

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Finally, a passage like Matt. 11: 27, 'Everything is entrusted to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son but the Father, and no one knows the Father but the Son and those to whom the Son may choose to reveal him'—so reminiscent of much in John's Gospel—warns us against the unwisdom of magnifying the theological differences between John and the Synoptics.

Nonetheless, the differences being what they are, the question arises: Did John know the earlier Gospels?

Not so very long ago the unanimous answer was: Yes, John knew Mark and probably Luke. The case for John's knowledge of Mark rested chiefly on his apparent borrowing of phrases from Mark in the stories of the feeding of the multitude (e.g. 'twenty pounds of bread') and the anointing at Bethany (e.g. 'oil of pure nard'). Verbal points of contact in their references to Martha and Mary suggested that John also knew Luke. But odd verbal coincidences like these can naturally be explained by the theory that (say) the story of Jesus' anointing was current in the oral tradition of the Gospels and that both John and Mark, quite independently, got their accounts of it there. This, plus the fact that where they are recounting the same story, John and Mark show such striking differences in the telling of it, has led many modern scholars to deny John's dependence on the Synoptics outright.

THE GOSPEL AS HISTORY

If John is independent of the first three Gospels, what is the historical value of his story of Jesus?

At one time—and not long ago—it was the fashion among scholars to 'take a poor view' of John as history. How considerably they have revised their opinions in the light of advancing knowledge may be illustrated by the judgement of one of the greatest of them: 'There is a growing body of evidence,' wrote T. W. Manson, 'that the Fourth Gospel enshrines a tradition of the Ministry which is independent of

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the Synoptic accounts, bears distinct marks of its Palestinian origin, and is on some points quite possibly superior to the Synoptic record.'

The point is worth illustrating.

A comparison of the sequence of events in John 6 (the feeding, the walking on the water, the return to the west side of the Lake, Peter's Confession) with its counterpart in Mark 6–8, shows that John's whole account hangs together as a unit and may fairly claim to be historically superior to Mark's.

This is only one of several possible comparisons. If this is so, the presumption is that in other passages, not paralleled in the first three Gospels, we are handling trustworthy traditions. To this presumption we may add a practical test. Where something recorded by John only helps to make sense of the story of Jesus as we know it from the Synoptics, it has a fair claim to be reckoned authentic. Thus:

John alone tells us that two of Jesus' disciples had previously followed John the Baptist (1: 35 ff.).

John testifies to a Judean ministry before the Galilean one (3: 22 ff.).

John tells us that after the feeding of the multitude a Messianic uprising seemed imminent (6: 15).

John testifies that there was a later ministry, lasting some months, in the south and before the Passion (7: 10 — 11: 54).

John records that Jesus appeared informally before Annas, the ex High Priest, after his arrest (18: 13 ff.).

On each of these points we may reasonably suppose John to be right.

If now we turn from John's history to his geography, there is the same tale to tell. Once it was the fashion to treat John's notes about topography with grave suspicion. Now, at place after place—Aenon near Salim, Bethesda, Gabbatha, etc.—the archaeologists have proved him right. Nor is this all. Most of the place-names which occur only in John belong to southern Palestine; while Galilean place-names common in

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the Synoptics—Chorazin, Caesarea Philippi, Decapolis, etc.—do not occur. It looks as if John's special traditions about Jesus were associated with southern Palestine—another point to remember when we discuss the matter of authorship.

Consider next the sayings set on Jesus' lips by John. Once men like Matthew Arnold declared that if Jesus spoke as he does in the first three Gospels, he could not have spoken as John represents him in the fourth. Three reasons may be noted why we cannot now endorse this extreme judgement.

(1) Very often the teaching of Jesus in John's Gospel is expressed in the same poetic forms as we find in the first three. Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus, for example, has sayings like

'That which is born of the flesh is flesh:
That which is born of the Spirit is spirit' (3: 6)

which show that parallelism, or 'rhyming of thoughts', which marks Jesus' teaching in, say, the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew.

(2) Many 'Johannine' sayings of Jesus are at once so reminiscent of, yet different from, sayings in the Synoptics that quite obviously John had access to a tradition of Jesus' teaching independent of the earlier Gospels. For example:

'The man who loves himself is lost, but he who hates himself in this world will be kept safe for eternal life' (12: 25).

There are many more like this in John. Now, such evidence makes it likely that some sayings *found only in John* are no less genuine. In fact, some are so clearly 'uninventable' that they must be genuine; for example 5: 17: 'My Father has never yet ceased his work, and I am working too', a saying which flatly contradicts the statement in Gen. 2: 3 that God rested from his work on the seventh day.

(3) In *A Death in the Desert* Browning makes the dying Apostle John say,

What first were guessed as points I now knew stars
And named them in the Gospel I have writ.

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This exactly describes much that we find in John—‘points’ in the earlier Gospel tradition which have become ‘stars’ in the Fourth Gospel. Thus, Jesus’ claim to unique Sonship in Matt. 11: 27 (already quoted) is elaborated in such ‘Johannine’ sayings as these:

‘The Father loves the Son and has entrusted him with all authority’ (3: 35);

‘the Father knows me and I know the Father’ (10: 15).

Or, again, the five sayings in John about the Holy Spirit seem to amplify sayings of Jesus about the Spirit in the earlier Gospels. This, again, is a point which could be abundantly illustrated.

If these Johannine sayings of Jesus often bear the marks of John’s own style and of Christian experience, they should be regarded not as John’s ‘inventions’ but as ‘inspired paraphrases’, made under the Spirit’s influence, of what Jesus really said. 14: 25 f. probably supplies the true clue: ‘I have told you all this while I am still here with you; but your Advocate, the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and will call to mind all that I have told you.’

In John’s version of Jesus’ teaching we have to reckon with three elements: (1) the sayings of Jesus—‘I have told you all this’; (2) the memory of the disciples—‘will call to mind’; and (3) the interpreting Spirit—‘will teach you everything’. Only those who take a low view of the Spirit’s guidance of the Church will regret the presence of the third element in John’s record of Jesus’ teaching.

THE BACKGROUND OF THE GOSPEL

Is the background of John’s Gospel Jewish or Greek? Not long ago it was commonly held that in John we see the Gospel beginning to be changed by its contact with Greek thought; and scholars set out to prove that John’s thinking was like that

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of Philo the Hellenistic Jew of Alexandria (20 B.C. to A.D. 50) or resembled the Greek Hermetic literature, i.e. mystical writings, purporting to give knowledge of God, produced in Egypt between A.D. 100 and 200. On the other hand, his debt to the Old Testament and, in places, to the Jewish rabbis seemed no less clear. Was John then equally indebted to Jew and Greek?

If nowadays most of us would stress the basic Jewishness of John's Gospel, it is because of the discovery in 1947 (and later) of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Down at Qumran, on the north-western shore of the Dead Sea, we have uncovered evidence of members of a Jewish sect who thought and spoke in terms very like John's. Anybody who reads one of these Scrolls, called *The Manual of Discipline* (which sets forth the rules of the sect), will not have gone far before he lights on the very un-greek phrase 'to do the truth' (John 3: 21). A little later, an allusion to 'the light of life' will recall John 8: 12. Further on, the *Manual's* words about creation—

By his knowledge everything has been brought into being,
And everything that is, he established by his purpose,
And apart from him, nothing is done

will ring another bell in his memory (John 1: 3). Above all, he will find parallels in the Scrolls to John's great contrasts between light and darkness, truth and error, spirit and flesh. And he will be forced to conclude that, for the most part, we do not need to look beyond Palestine for the soil in which John's theology grew.

To say this is not to deny that John sometimes borrowed words like *Logos* (= word) belonging to the religious vocabulary of the Hellenistic world around him. This, after all, is only what we should have expected from one living in a city like Ephesus. But it is to assert that the basic background of the Gospel is Jewish and Palestinian.

When we try to assess its Christian background, three things need to be said.

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John's Purpose and Audience

First, as C. H. Dodd has shown in his *Apostolic Preaching*, behind John's Gospel, as behind the earlier ones, stands the earliest preached Gospel, or *kerygma* (=the message proclaimed).

Second, the view once held that John was, spiritually speaking, a disciple of Paul, will no longer hold. We can hardly imagine a disciple of Paul who has nothing to say about Christ as the Second Adam and never once uses the verb 'justify', or the phrase 'the righteousness of God'.

Ultimately, of course, the central figure behind John's Gospel is Jesus Christ—at once 'the Jesus of history' and 'the Christ of faith'—as he lived and wrought in the soul of the evangelist by the power of the promised Spirit.

JOHN'S PURPOSE AND AUDIENCE

Why and for whom did John write his Gospel? 20: 31 appears to provide the answer: 'Those [signs] here written have been recorded in order that you may hold the faith that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that through this faith you may possess eternal life by his name.' But instead of 'hold the faith' some manuscripts read here 'come to believe'. Did then John write to confirm believers in their faith or to win unbelievers to the faith? Perhaps he had both aims. But this verse by itself will not answer our question. We must consider the character of the Gospel as a whole.

One or two modern scholars have thought that John designed his Gospel as 'a missionary tract for the Jews of the Dispersion' (i.e. the many Jews scattered about in the world outside Palestine). But this view does not account for John's practice of explaining Jewish festivals and religious practices for the benefit of his readers who would not have needed such explanations if they were Jews, or his presentation of the chief gift of the Gospel as 'eternal life'—a subject which would certainly interest Gentiles quite as much as Jews. That he had in mind the needs of the religiously minded public