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PART I
THE BACKGROUND

1. THE SETTING IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

There is a scene in the early part of Goethe's *Faust*, where the hero, yearning for the light of revelation (which nowhere burns more brightly than in the New Testament), sets himself to translate the Gospel according to John. At the very first clause however he finds himself in a difficulty. How is it to be rendered? 'In the beginning was the Word.' But how can so high a value be set upon the mere word? Surely, 'In the beginning was the Thought'. But again, is it truly thought by which all things were made? Is it not rather Power? Or should he boldly render the sense of the passage, 'In the beginning was the Deed'?

The difficulty which baffled Faust at the beginning of his task is one which besets the student of the Fourth Gospel all through. He finds it impossible to satisfy himself regarding the meaning of the text without raising prior questions involving the whole universe of discourse within which the thought of the gospel moves. It is in general a sound maxim that any interpretation of the thought of a work as a whole should be based on a precise exegesis of the text. Through disregard of this maxim many elaborate interpretations of biblical and other documents have gone astray. It is true that exegesis always demands some kind of assumption regarding the general aim and the background of the work in hand; but in many cases this demand is fairly easily met, the required assumptions being such as are more or less obvious to the intelligent reader. But with such a work as the Fourth Gospel it is different. At every step the exegete is faced with the necessity of considering his text in the light of the ultimate meaning of the work. Thus Faust's difficulty was far from being one merely of translation or even of exegesis in the ordinary, restricted sense of the term. The question he raised is not a question of the meaning of the word *λόγος*, it is the question whether the proposition 'in the beginning was the Logos' belongs to a philosophy which gives primacy to abstract thought or to one which gives primacy to active power, or whether, indeed, the 'word' itself, as medium of communication, is after all an essential element in the author's meaning. That question cannot be decided either by the lexical meaning of the terms employed or by an elucidation of the propositions of which the Prologue is composed, in their proper interrelations. It receives an answer only when the student has made up his mind about the purport of the

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gospel as a whole. Thus in the study of this gospel, exegesis of the text, and interpretation in the wider sense, are interdependent to an unusual degree.

In order to work towards a sound interpretation of the Fourth Gospel it is necessary to consider the work in its true context of thought, so far as that is possible for us at this date. If we approach it without regard to any such context, we are in danger of imposing upon it a subjective interpretation of our own, for we shall in fact be placing it in the context of our preconceived notions, which may be foreign to the intention of the evangelist. This has often been done.¹ How then shall we define the true context?

It has often been tacitly assumed that the context is sufficiently defined by the place which the Fourth Gospel occupies in the canon of Scripture. It is one of a group of four writings designated 'gospels', and it is as a member of this group that it has been most often studied. In the pre-critical period the aim of the student was to 'harmonize' it with the other three. When the critical movement arose, the emphasis shifted to the differences and contrasts which an unbiased comparison brought to light. We may not unfairly surmise that the effect of this stage of criticism upon many minds was to leave them with the impression that John was inferior to the Synoptics in every quality that a gospel should possess—in the historicity of its narrative, the accuracy of its reported discourses, and the truth of its picture of 'the Jesus of history'. Where they could interpret John from the standpoint of the Synoptics they found it wanting, and where it could not be understood from that standpoint they were at a loss. The fact is that the Fourth Gospel belongs only in part to the same class with the Synoptics. Its true context is only partially that which it shares with the other gospels.

At a later stage of criticism attention was drawn to those aspects of the Fourth Gospel in which it stands together with the theological literature of the New Testament, and particularly with the Pauline Epistles. It became customary to describe the Fourth Evangelist as 'the greatest of the followers of Paul', and his work as 'deutero-Pauline'.

¹ In a book entitled *The Call of the Carpenter* by the once famous American labour leader Bouck White, ὁ πατήρ μου ἕως ἄρτι ἐργάζεται, κἀγὼ ἐργάζομαι (John v. 17), is explained as meaning (I quote from memory) 'My father is a working-man to this day, and I am a working-man myself'. That the Greek words could bear that meaning is undeniable. If one insists on placing them in the context of a philosophy dominated by the idea of the class-war, then such an exegesis is natural. But we have no reason to suppose that John or his readers had ever heard of that philosophy.

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That the evangelist has not escaped the powerful influence of the first great Christian theologian whose works are extant, is probable enough. But the actual range of Pauline influence upon Johannine thought has been exaggerated. Those who tie John down too closely to the Pauline tradition are inclined to undervalue his distinctive contribution to the religion and theology of early Christianity. Paul no doubt cleared up the Judaistic question, and asserted the ecclesiastical, spiritual, and intellectual independence of gentile Christianity once for all. He also set an example of using current modes of thought to illuminate the Christian Gospel. In this sense he may have prepared the way for Johannine Christianity. Further, his work at Ephesus must have directly influenced the circle within which the Fourth Gospel was written, if it did not influence the author.¹ It may be that Paul's 'cosmical Christology', as it is called, was a suggestive factor in stimulating the thought of the Fourth Evangelist. But it is not safe to assume that Paul was the only begetter of that Christology, and in any case the whole setting of it in Paul and in John is so different that it is precarious to postulate any direct connection—certainly any literary connection—between them. Paul's treatment of the doctrine of the Man from Heaven has little in common with the Johannine doctrine of the descending and ascending Son of Man, beyond their common foundation in the primitive Christian attribution of the title 'Son of Man' to Jesus, and possible non-Christian ideas which each approached in a different way. The distinctively Pauline presentation of Christianity, as we find it in the four *Hauptbriefe*, moves on lines strikingly different from Johannine thought. If in Colossians and Ephesians (assuming the latter to be Pauline) Paul approaches nearer to John, we may profitably observe that the development of thought, at least in Colossians, was called forth by contact with heretical or semi-Christian ideas of a 'Gnostic' cast in the province of Asia; and these ideas lead us directly into a world which, as we shall see, is more closely related to Johannine thought than anything which is specifically Pauline. Thus, it is only with caution that we can use Paul to interpret John. The resemblances which we note are largely in points where Paul himself was very likely not an originator. They belong to a Jewish-

¹ I assume here that the tradition which associates the Fourth Gospel with Ephesus is to be accepted. A case can be made out for Alexandria, and even for Antioch. But the Johannine epistles at any rate seem firmly rooted in the province of Asia. Whether or not they were the work of the evangelist, they are too closely connected with the gospel for an origin at geographically distant places to be considered probable.

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Hellenistic strain which was probably in Christianity almost from the beginning.¹

The fact is that the thought of this gospel is so original and creative that a search for its 'sources', or even for the 'influences' by which it may have been affected, may easily lead us astray. Whatever influences may have been present have been masterfully controlled by a powerful and independent mind. There is no book, either in the New Testament or outside it, which is really *like* the Fourth Gospel. Nevertheless, its thought implies a certain background of ideas with which the author could assume his readers to be familiar. How far are we able to reconstruct that background?

It is clear, to begin with, that the gospel has behind it the common Christianity of the early period, and that readers who shared the life and thought of the Church would find here much that was familiar, from which they could advance to its new and unfamiliar teaching. The evangelist presupposes the existence of the Church itself with its *κοινωνία*, under the leadership of 'the Twelve'. He presupposes the two primitive sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist. He presupposes also the *κήρυγμα* in which the primitive Church made known its faith to the non-Christian public.

The *kerygma* is essentially a proclamation of the facts about Jesus in an eschatological setting which indicates the significance of the facts. It is prefaced, or accompanied, by the announcement that the prophecies are fulfilled in these facts, which must consequently be regarded as inaugurating a new age, and a new order of relations between God and man; and it is attested by an appeal to the experience of the Spirit in the Church. The literary form which came to be known as *εὐαγγέλιον* is based upon the *kerygma*, and the Fourth Gospel no less than the others.² The main topics recur, and in the same order, as they are found in Mark and in the primitive forms of *kerygma* in Acts: the preaching of John the Baptist, the inauguration of Jesus as Messiah, His ministry in Galilee, His removal from Galilee to Jerusalem,³ His sufferings, death and resurrection, and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

¹ How long was it before the 'Hellenists' of Acts vi. 1 made themselves felt? Not more, certainly, than three or four years after the Crucifixion.

² See my book *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments*, especially pp. 164–75 (first edition), 65–73 (later editions).

³ vii. 1–14, which, although visits to Jerusalem have been recorded previously, announces a formal migration, but see pp. 384–6 below.

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It is in its treatment of the eschatological setting of the facts that the Fourth Gospel departs most notably from earlier renderings of the *kerygma*. The eschatology of the early Church has two sides. On the one hand we have the belief that with the coming of Christ the 'fulness of time' has arrived, the prophecies are fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is inaugurated on earth. On the other hand we have the expectation of a consummation still pending in the future. There is some tension between the two in almost all New Testament writings. They differ among themselves with respect to the relation conceived to exist between the fulfilment which is already matter of history, and the fulfilment which belongs to the future. In the Fourth Gospel the language of 'futurist eschatology' is little used. The sense of realization has extended itself over almost the whole field, and expectation has shrunk correspondingly. It has not entirely gone, for the Lord is represented as forecasting for His Church a universality which the evangelist can hardly have supposed to be fully realized in his time, and as speaking of a day when the generations of the dead will be raised up. We need not regard such expectations as merely vestigial remains of the eschatology of the primitive Church. They are a part of the evangelist's own faith. But it is nevertheless true that they no longer have the full significance which belongs to the hope of the second advent in some other New Testament writings. The all-important fact for this evangelist is that the universality of the Christian religion is already given in the moment when Christ being 'lifted up' begins to draw all men to Himself; and that the eternal life to which the dead will be raised is already the possession of living men in union with Him. This is the fulfilment, the day which Abraham rejoiced to see, of which Moses wrote, to which the Scriptures testify. It is not therefore accurate to say that the Fourth Evangelist has abandoned the eschatological setting of the original *kerygma*. He has transformed it by altering the perspective. The formula often used, that John has turned eschatology into 'mysticism', is misleading, unless it is clearly understood that this 'mysticism' (if that is the right word)¹ is based upon a fulfilment of history, within history; and this is the essential burden of eschatology in its Christian form. The evangelist's own formula is ἐρχεται ὥρα καὶ νῦν ἐστίν.

Yet when all this is said, it remains that the terms in which the nature of the fulfilment through Christ is set forth are strange to normal early Christianity as known from other New Testament writings, and seem

¹ See pp. 197–200.

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to carry the reader into other regions of thought. Similarly, while the instructed Christian reader would recognize the significance of allusions to Baptism and the Eucharist, there is no explicit reference to these as institutions of the Church—for example, no injunctions about baptism ‘in the Name’, as in Matthew, no account of the baptism of Jesus (which was treated as in some sort the prototype of Christian baptism), and no account of the institution of the Eucharist or command to repeat its celebration. What John says about rebirth ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος, and about the Bread of Life, while for the Christian reader it would be filled with meaning out of the sacramental life of the Church, carries a meaning of its own to readers with no Christian background, provided they are acquainted with certain forms of religious symbolism current beyond the frontiers of Christianity.

This in itself suggests that the evangelist has in view a non-Christian public to which he wishes to appeal. This suggestion finds some confirmation from a comparison of the opening of this gospel with that of Mark. In Mark, after a citation of prophecy, John the Baptist is introduced without any preparation, as a personage known to the reader, and then after a brief account of the preaching of John, it continues, ‘About that time Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in Jordan’. There is no attempt to explain who Jesus was. He comes abruptly on the scene, and we pass at once to a series of stories about Him. The Fourth Gospel begins with a Prologue which introduces on the one hand the eternal Logos, and on the other hand ‘a man sent from God, whose name was John’. The Logos is incarnate in a human person, and the ‘man sent from God’ identifies Him. Then at last we learn that His name is Jesus Christ. It is clear that a reader who knew nothing at all about Christianity or its Founder could read that exordium intelligently, provided that the term ‘logos’, and the idea of a ‘man sent from God’, meant something to him. But these are ideas which are in no way distinctive of Christianity.

The impression produced by this opening becomes even stronger as we proceed. As I shall hope to show, the gospel could be read intelligently by a person who started with no knowledge of Christianity beyond the minimum that a reasonably well-informed member of the public interested in religion might be supposed to have by the close of the first century, and Christian ideas are instilled step by step until the whole mystery can be divulged. If he was then led to associate himself with the Church and to participate in its fellowship, its tradition and its sacraments, he would be

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able to re-read the book and find in it vastly more than had been obvious at a first reading.

The evangelist takes leave of his readers (according to what must have been originally intended for the conclusion of the book, xx. 31) with the words: 'This has been written in order that you may hold the faith that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God, and that, holding this faith, you may possess life by His name.' If we lay stress upon the tense of the verbs, we must say that while the aorists πιστεύσητε, σχήητε, would necessarily have implied that the readers did not so far hold the Christian faith or possess eternal life, the continuous presents πιστεύητε, ἔχητε, do not exclude readers who were already Christians, and whose faith the writer may have wished to confirm by giving it a richer content. That he would welcome such readers is certain. Yet the continuous present could be justified, even as addressed to those who were not yet Christians, if the writer were thinking not so much of the moment of conversion, as of the continuing union with Christ, the condition of which is faith, and which means the perpetual possession of eternal life. If, without too narrowly observing grammatical forms, we try to enter into the author's intention, it must surely appear that he is thinking, in the first place, not so much of Christians who need a deeper theology, as of non-Christians who are concerned about eternal life and the way to it, and may be ready to follow the Christian way if this is presented to them in terms that are intelligibly related to their previous religious interests and experience.

It seems therefore that we are to think of the work as addressed to a wide public consisting primarily of devout and thoughtful persons (for the thoughtless and religiously indifferent would never trouble to open such a book as this) in the varied and cosmopolitan society of a great Hellenistic city such as Ephesus under the Roman Empire. In what follows I propose to take soundings here and there in the religious literature of that time and region, with a view to reconstructing in some measure the background of thought which the evangelist presupposed in his readers.

2. THE HIGHER RELIGION OF HELLENISM: THE HERMETIC LITERATURE

Augustine, in a well-known passage of the *Confessions* (vii. 9), writes:

Thou didst procure for me through a certain person . . . some books of the Platonists translated from Greek into Latin. There I read—not in so many words, but in substance, supported by many arguments of various kinds—that in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. By him were all things made, and without him was not anything made. That which was made in him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness and the darkness comprehended it not. And that the soul of man, though it bear witness of the light, is not itself the light; but the Word of God, being God, is the true light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world. And that he was in the world and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. But that he came unto his own and his own received him not, but as many as received him to them gave he power to become sons of God, even to them that believe on his name, I did not read there. Again I read there that God the Word was born not of the flesh nor of blood, nor of the will of man, nor of the will of the flesh, but of God. But that the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us I did not read there.

Augustine doubtless speaks for many readers of the Fourth Gospel at an even earlier period. They found that it fitted into the context of the Greek philosophy in which they had been trained. It is obvious that it has affinity with Platonic thought. When John speaks of *ἄρτος ἀληθινός* as distinguished from ordinary loaves, of *ἡ ἀμπελος ἡ ἀληθινή* and *τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινόν*, a Platonist would readily understand him to be speaking of the eternal 'ideas' in contrast to their phenomenal representatives. It would not be necessary for him to be acquainted with Plato's writings. The theory of a world of eternal forms, of which phenomena are the shadows, reflections, or symbols, had found wide acceptance, and in one form or another it reappears in various types of religious philosophy in the Hellenistic world.

The Logos-doctrine, however, to which Augustine specially refers, is no part of the original system of Plato, though it appears in the neo-Platonism of Plotinus. That doctrine owed more to the Stoics. From the time of Posidonius, who gave the Stoic philosophy a strong infusion

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of Platonism, the two schools approached one another, and on the popular level philosophy often took the form of a platonizing Stoicism or stoicizing Platonism. This mixed philosophy was one of the forerunners of neo-Platonism.

The fusion of Platonism and Stoicism provided an *organon* for thinkers of various tendencies who sought a philosophical justification for religion. A striking example is to be found in the so-called Hermetic literature. The extant Hermetic writings are the remnants of an extensive literature current in antiquity under the name of Hermes Trismegistus. The person so called was represented as a sage of ancient Egypt, deified after his death as the Egyptian Hermes, that is, the god Thoth. Much of this literature deals with astrology, magic or alchemy.¹ With this we are not here concerned. But the name of Hermes Trismegistus was also used by Greek writers on philosophical and religious subjects. A collection of such writings is extant in Greek MSS. of the fourteenth century and onwards, called by modern editors *Corpus Hermeticum*. Another important tractate of the same kind is preserved in a Latin translation among the works of Apuleius, under the title *Asclepius*. The Greek original, known as *Λόγος Τέλειος*, is partly extant in fragments and citations. The Latin version was known to Augustine, who accepted it as the translation of an authentic work of *Mercurius Aegyptius*, *Mercurii majoris nepos*, and quoted or summarized substantial passages from it in *De Civitate Dei*.² Extensive fragments of other writings of similar character are preserved in the form of excerpts in Stobaeus, or are known from citations in ancient authors.

It seems by now to be generally accepted that these writings were produced, in Egypt, for the most part in the second and third centuries A.D. A date in the first century is perhaps not excluded for one or two tractates, and it is possible that some of the citations may be from *Hermetica* later than the third century. They are all original Greek works, and not, as was at one time held, translations from Egyptian.³ Their teaching pre-

¹ We have now for the first time a full and authoritative account of the non-philosophical *Hermetica* in A. J. Festugière, *Hermès Trismégiste*, vol. 1, as well as an admirable account in brief of the Hermetic literature by the same author under the title *L'Hermetisme* (Lund, 1948). ² VIII. 23 sqq.

³ The monumental four-volume edition of the *Hermetica*, by W. Scott, completed by A. S. Ferguson (1924–1936), contains an immense amount of material for the study of this literature, but its text has proved to be unusable, since Scott emended the MS. text so irresponsibly that it amounts to a rewriting. We are fortunate now in having a thoroughly critical text (and on the whole a conservative text) in the Budé series,