

CHAPTER I

Introduction

John the evangelist obviously did not write a theological treatise, but a Gospel, a narrative of the ministry of Jesus Christ that stands alongside three broadly similar narratives in the New Testament. Moreover, the Greek words *theologia* and *theologos* (theology and theologian) are nowhere to be found in the New Testament. These terms only gradually came to be applied to discourse about God in the Christian tradition, however, so it is no surprise that John does not use them or that we do not find them in the New Testament. Yet in antiquity John was given the title of theologian, if not already in the second century by Papias, then in the fifth by Philip of Side, who quotes him.¹ Certainly the title has seemed apposite, for John more than any of the other Gospel writers deals with theological matters. That is, in John's Gospel more than in any of the others, Jesus, the Son, talks about his relationship with God, the Father.

Christian theology begins with the fact of Jesus Christ. That fact became first the object of faith and then the object of thought. "It was a complex fact: a man who is Son of God, dead yet living, weak yet Lord. It demanded that God be seen as Father of a Son, the two of them acting through a Holy Spirit who is at once immanent in the 'hearts' of the faithful and transcendent over them."² John more than any other New

¹ See C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, 2nd ed. (London and Philadelphia, 1978), p. 103. Yves M.-J. Congar, OP, *A History of Theology*, trans. and ed. Hunter Guthrie, SJ (Garden City, NY, 1968), p. 29, ascribes the attribution of *theologos* to John to Eusebius of Caesarea.

² Yves Congar, OP, "Christian Theology," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York, 1987), vol. xiv, p. 456.

Testament writer deals with Jesus Christ as the object of distinctly Christian faith and reflects, as he leads the reader to reflect, upon the meaning and importance of this faith for those upon whom the Holy Spirit has come. Anyone who has read the rest of the New Testament will readily acknowledge that John deals with the same subject matter. The Fourth Gospel presupposes the same fact of Jesus Christ as the object of faith but at the same time introduces new ways of describing him and thinking about the character and implications of this faith.

Therefore, it scarcely seems necessary to defend theology as the discipline or discourse that is appropriate to deal with the subject matter of the Gospel of John. Nevertheless, the problem of how to treat the theology of John, or in what context to understand it, has engaged and divided New Testament study for a good part of this century. One question has been how to organize and present the theology of the Gospel of John. To present John's theology under the doctrinal rubrics of a classical Christian orthodoxy that was centuries developing seems anachronistic. Yet it is quite obvious that there is a strong relationship between the two, as between no other New Testament writing and the theological doctrine of the ancient church.³ Another question concerns the cultural and religious traditions represented and assumed by this Gospel, so familiar are its themes and yet so distinctively framed. One must also ask what manifestation of early Christian religion or what life-setting in the early Christian church lies behind this unique Gospel. The religious issues and life that surely underlie this Gospel find expression in theological concepts and forms. To ignore the centrality and importance of such theological expression to the fourth evangelist, and the readers for whom he wrote, would be an even greater mistake than to read the Gospel primarily in light of later Christian dogma or creeds. The theological content and narrative form of the Gospel of John are its most obvious characteristics. The life-setting – while also very important – remains implicit, and in the nature of the case hypothetical, although we shall see that the Gospel

³ On the relation of the Gospel of John to the development of christological doctrine, see T. E. Pollard, *Johannine Christology and the Early Church* (Cambridge, 1970).

itself provides evidence that allows one to make significant inferences about the circumstances of its origin. An appreciation of the Gospel's origin lends depth and perspective to our understanding of the text.

Questions about the origin of the Gospel of John, particularly authorship and its relationship to the Synoptic Gospels, were already the subject of discussion in Christian antiquity. Modern introductions to the New Testament have concerned themselves with such questions as the date and place of composition of the individual books, their authorship, intended readers, purpose, sources, and stylistic features. In the case of the Gospel of John, the questions of date, place, and authorship once loomed very large. The discussion of them has reached an impasse, however, if not a solution, and there would be no point in attempting to resolve them in this book, although it will be worthwhile to note what is at stake in these matters. Questions of readers, purpose, sources, and style and literary character have more recently come into the foreground of discussion as more profitable, and we shall deal with them in some detail before attempting to treat the theological themes of the Gospel directly.

The title of this book is *The Theology of the Gospel of John*, and we repeatedly refer to this Gospel by that traditional name. The John in question is, presumably, the prominent member of the twelve, brother of James and son of Zebedee, who is mentioned not infrequently in the Synoptic Gospels and with Peter in the early chapters of the Book of Acts. Christian readers have since the second century assumed that the Beloved Disciple, who first appears in chapter 13 and to whom the Gospel is ascribed (21:24), is this same John. Given John's prominence in the Synoptics and Acts, together with the fact that he is not otherwise mentioned by name in the Gospel of John (but see 21:2), this seems a reasonable conclusion. On the other hand, it requires believing that John as author, although he modestly refrained from naming himself, could nevertheless refer to himself as the Beloved Disciple. Moreover, all the Synoptic episodes in which John figures are missing from the Fourth Gospel. (See, for example, Mark 1:16–20, 29–31;

3:13–19; 5:35–43; 9:2–8, none of which have Johannine parallels.) Nevertheless, when this Gospel was accepted by most Christians as authoritative – something that happened toward the end of the second century – it was taken to be the work of that disciple and Apostle who was an eyewitness of Jesus’ ministry.

Irenaeus, the first great theologian of the church after John, writing toward the end of the second century, makes frequent use of the Gospel of John, refutes what he regards as heretical or erroneous interpretations of it, and calls the author John the disciple of the Lord. (Already a decade before Irenaeus, Tatian, in composing the *Diatessaron*, a compilation of the four Gospels, had used the Gospel of John as equally authoritative with the Synoptics.) Earlier, there are hints and indications of the use and influence of the Gospel in Justin Martyr at the middle of the second century and in Ignatius of Antioch as early as the second decade, while between them Polycarp clearly seems to have known the quite closely related First Epistle of John.⁴ But the clear attribution of the Fourth Gospel to the Apostle John had to await the latter decades of the second century. As we enter the third century, however, the Gospel of John is frequently cited as such, and there seems to be little or no trace of any doubt about its origin and authorship. Clement of Alexandria called it a spiritual Gospel, in distinction from the others, and that has proven an apt designation.

A generation later Clement’s brilliant student Origen wrote a commentary on the Gospel of John, in which he took issue at points with earlier interpretations, particularly those of a certain Heracleon, who was a learned exegete and a disciple of the great gnostic teacher Valentinus. Valentinus apparently wrote his own gospel or treatise known as the *Gospel of Truth*. As the title by which it is known already implies, the *Gospel of Truth*, although not a narrative, has strong affinities in termin-

⁴ See Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* III.11.1–6, who rejects gnostic interpretations of the prologue of the Gospel of John; Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 61, who quotes John 3:5; Ignatius, *Romans* 7:2–3, who refers to the seemingly Johannine themes of water (4:10; 7:38), bread (6:33), and blood (6:53); and Polycarp, *Philippians* 7:1, who apparently reflects knowledge of 1 John 4:2–3 or 2 John 7.

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ology and conceptuality with the Gospel of John. Obviously the Gospel of John was known and cherished by gnostic Christians. Whether for that reason it was suspect among many other Christians cannot be known for sure, but it is a reasonable surmise, and we do know there were otherwise orthodox Christians who opposed the Gospel of John and rejected its authority.⁵ Doubtless the Gospel eventually prevailed and became a part of the New Testament, not only because of its intrinsic quality but also because of its attribution to the Apostle.

Our concern is not with the identity of the author *per se*, which cannot be established on the basis of New Testament evidence, but with the meaning and implications of this Gospel's claim that it is the work of an eyewitness or is at least based on the testimony of an eyewitness. What does this claim imply for any assessment or presentation of the theology of John? Certainly that such theology cannot hang in the air, so to speak, unrelated to or unaffected by the *realia* of history. As much as the history of Jesus may be selectively presented (20:30; 21:25) and interpreted (14:25–26; 16:12–15), it is the history of Jesus, in whom the word became flesh, and that fact is of crucial importance for understanding the Fourth Gospel. At least one major aspect of the role of the Beloved Disciple is to underwrite the authority of the Gospel as a first-hand witness to Jesus' ministry (21:24; 19:35). Thus this disciple is presented as an historical personage, whoever he may have been. At the same time, he is also a figure of symbolic significance, a kind of ideal disciple of Jesus. His role, with its claim of eyewitness authority for the Gospel, must be taken into account in any treatment of its theology, and in ways we shall have to examine.

As to date and place of origin, probably neither question affects our apprehension of Johannine theology in a way germane to its presentation. We shall assume the traditional view that the Gospel of John was written late rather than early

⁵ Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, p. 14, refers to the *allogoi*. See the important unpublished work of Joseph Daniel Smith, Jr., "Gaius and Controversy over the Johannine Literature," Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1979.

in the first century. The earliest writers to comment on the Fourth Gospel took it to be late, in the time of the Roman Emperor Trajan (AD 98–117), and many stated that it was written with the other canonical Gospels in view. Whether the latter view is correct is a matter we shall have to examine, but the reflective, retrospective character of the Gospel's narrative supports the tradition that it is a relatively late Gospel, not an earlier one, and most critical scholarship has assented. The occasional argument that John is an early Gospel is the child of modern criticism, not ancient tradition.⁶

Tradition has it that the Gospel was written in Ephesus. If one visits the ancient site of Ephesus today, a modern guide will confidently confirm this as she shows the Church of St. John, erected at the site at which the Apostle supposedly composed the Gospel and was later buried. Not surprisingly, modern gospel criticism has become quite skeptical of this tradition. Among other things, in the early second century Ignatius of Antioch wrote a letter to the church at Ephesus, in which he makes a good deal of Paul's residence there, but says nothing of John's having worked or written there also. In fact, he does not mention John at all. But according to the tradition of the late second century, John would have been in Ephesus more recently than Paul, much closer to the time of Ignatius himself. If John had written his Gospel in Ephesus just a quarter of a century before, would Ignatius have ignored that fact while extolling Ephesus' connection with Paul? Moreover, Ignatius himself seems to know the Gospel of John or its constituent traditions. Of course, this whole argument assumes that the Gospel of John was actually written by the Apostle of that name. If this was not the case, but it was rather the work of some other ancient witness, this argument loses a great deal of its force.

In examining the sketch of church life in Ephesus found in Acts 18 and 19, one finds a setting in which Christian believers of Jewish origin like Paul, Priscilla, Aquila, and Apollos are

⁶ Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, p. 100, cites the statements of Irenaeus (*Against Heresies* II.22.5 and III.3.4) quoted by Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History* III.23.3f.) that John lived until the time of Trajan (AD 98).

engaged in conversation and controversy with other Jews, who do not believe in Jesus. Moreover, there is a group there whose members seem to be followers of John the Baptist (19:1–7). Paul debates with other Jews in a synagogue, where he is ultimately rejected (19:8–10). Through Paul God works mighty miracles, and the pretensions of Jewish exorcists who illegitimately pronounce the name of Jesus are exposed (19:13–16). In fact, there are some remarkable correspondences between the Acts portrayal of the church at Ephesus and some recent proposals about the setting and purpose of the Gospel of John. Nevertheless, cogent arguments have also been made for John's origin in Syria or Alexandria.

As reckless as it would be simply to dismiss ancient traditions of an Ephesian origin of the Gospel of John, or for that matter other ancient traditions of the Gospel's origin, neither can such traditions be used uncritically in an effort to establish a solid base from which to understand this Gospel. Most early statements about the Gospel of John express an obvious interest in its authenticity and validity. While they should not be regarded as baseless for that reason, neither can they be taken at face value. Fortunately, the kinds of introductory questions most relevant for understanding Johannine theology can best be addressed on the basis of a study of the text of the Fourth Gospel itself and an effort to set it in its historical context. The stylistic character and quality of the Gospel, its purpose in relation to its anticipated readers, and its sources can only be adequately assessed and understood on the basis of such a study.

Therefore, in Chapter 2 of this book the character, sources, and historical setting of the Fourth Gospel will be discussed. There is first of all a brief sketch of the general setting of the Gospel in the religious world of its time (Chapter 2, A). The Gospel draws upon broadly familiar terms and concepts. This is followed by an initial or provisional assessment of the literary character and sources of the Gospel of John. Much can be learned by paying attention to its movement and structure, as well as the ways in which it is parallel to but different from the Synoptic Gospels (Chapter 2, B). We shall examine these

matters with a view to asking about the reasons behind, or causes of, its differences.

The obvious facts that the Gospel of John, like most New Testament writings, is full of references and allusions to the Old Testament and that it constantly refers to “the Jews” as a people or group opposed to Jesus raise questions about the relation of this Gospel to Judaism that cannot be avoided in any effort to understand its purpose, message, and the particular emphases of its theology (Chapter 2, c, 1). Jesus was a Jew, as was Paul, and neither is intelligible historically outside a Jewish context. If they can be understood in a Christian context, that is in no small part because Christianity has imbibed a great deal from its parent religion. In the Gospel of John we may witness to a critical stage in the relationship of Christianity to Judaism. Indeed, we may find here a point at which what we have now come to know as two distinct religions are coming into being, precisely over the question of the role ascribed or denied to Jesus and the implications of various confessions of loyalty to Jesus for the old community and a new one just now taking shape. This sunderance, which lies at or near the root of Christianity *per se*, had an important bearing on Christian theology, which is reflected nowhere more clearly than in the Fourth Gospel.

In this connection it will be instructive to compare and contrast the Fourth Gospel not only with other Gospels, but with the message of early Christianity, particularly as represented by the Apostle Paul and with the very closely related Letters of John (Chapter 2, c, 2). If the latter are not the work of the author of the Fourth Gospel himself, they were certainly written by a disciple, someone so heavily influenced by him that he imbibed the style and vocabulary of the Gospel as well as its literary themes. Obviously, the Gospel of John shares a common subject matter with the rest of the New Testament. If the lines of connection cannot be drawn with certainty from our vantage point, they are nevertheless real. Moreover, Paul’s Letters also reflect the centrality of Jewish-Christian issues, as do the Letter to the Hebrews and several other New Testament books (for example, the Gospel of Matthew).

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The theological themes of the Fourth Gospel (Chapter 3) then arise directly out of its historical setting in ancient Judaism, early Christianity, and particularly the nexus and polemic between them. While to see these themes or doctrines simply as the product of such polemic fails to do them justice, neither can they be fully or properly understood apart from this historical and polemical context. The order of our treatment of these themes will thus reflect the ancient conflict and context. Our general framework of revelation to the world (Chapter 3, b) and to the community (Chapter 3, c) sets the theological, as well as historical, context of these themes. The revelation of God in Jesus Christ is the projection of God himself as light and life into a world of darkness and sin, creating within that world a new one, the community of those who follow Jesus and live in love and fellowship with him and therefore with God, and one another. This is not only a theological statement, but one that assumes an historical setting and sequence: first Jesus; then the church. It is, of course, the case that the theological themes of John's Gospel have generated a life of their own within the Christian church, and have contributed enormously to the development of its theology. Also, the theme of revelation within the Gospel has contributed importantly to the function of the Gospel itself as a source or medium of revelation in the church. The latter consideration, important as it may be, is not, however, the subject of our treatment.

The final part of the book (Chapter 4) deals with three issues that arise out of the Gospel of John and our treatment of its theology: mythology, anti-Semitism, and the nature or essence of Christianity. Obviously, these matters are too large and important to be dealt with exhaustively or definitively here. Nevertheless, they are indicative of the importance of the Fourth Gospel in several aspects or dimensions: for the understanding of the gospel message in the modern world; for its relation to other religions, particularly its parent faith, from which it has been so long estranged; and for the Christian church's understanding of who she is and what she is about.

CHAPTER 2

The setting and sources of Johannine theology

A THE GENERAL RELIGIOUS SETTING

If the question of authorship was the crucial problem and issue for late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century scholarship, the question of the background or setting and sources of the Gospel came to dominate twentieth-century research and the determination of the nature and character of Johannine theology. At issue is the question of the Johannine world. From what world of Hellenism, Judaism, or early Christianity does the Fourth Gospel stem? Quite obviously these are not mutually exclusive possibilities, for it is clear that whatever else its background, the Gospel of John stems from some early Christian environment. Moreover, recent scholarship has shown us that Judaism itself existed within the cultural and conceptual world of Hellenism, distinctive though it may have been.¹

1 *Hellenism*

Within the broader Mediterranean world, John was once thought to have originated among Greeks or pagans, that is, among Christians who had not previously been Jews.² Such a

¹ This insight is associated with the work of Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in their Encounter in Palestine During the Early Hellenistic Period* (Philadelphia, 1974).

² The title of Benjamin W. Bacon's book, *The Gospel of the Hellenists*, ed. Carl H. Kraeling (New York, 1933), seems to represent that view, although by "Hellenists" Bacon actually meant the Greek-speaking Jewish Christians we encounter in Acts 6 and 7.