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0521673283 - The Spiritual Gospel: The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel in the Early Church

Maurice F. Wiles

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

## COMMENTARIES AND COMMENTATORS

Theological scholarship in recent years has shown an especial interest in the interpretation of the Fourth Gospel and in patristic exegesis of the Bible. Within the brief period between 1953 and 1956, three major works on the Fourth Gospel have been published in England.<sup>1</sup> On the continent the work of Père Daniélou and others has shown a revival of interest in early Christian exegesis. This study is devoted to the exegesis of the Fourth Gospel in the early Greek fathers in the hope that it will be of value in both fields of study.

The Fathers knew well the fascination of the Fourth Gospel. Origen describes the Gospels as the first-fruits of all Scripture, and the Gospel of St John as the first-fruits of all the Gospels,<sup>2</sup> and we have in fact more than one work of major importance in commentary upon it. There are some books of the Bible whose interpretation has been so completely revolutionised by modern critical methods that the exegesis of earlier centuries is unlikely to add much of value to our understanding of them. There is probably no book of which this is less true than the Fourth Gospel. It is of such a nature that it seems to reveal its secrets not so much to the skilful probings of the analyst as to a certain intuitive sympathy of understanding. We need not, therefore, despair of finding amongst such early interpreters significant examples of a true insight into the meaning of the Gospel.

It is also a particularly valuable field within which to study the pattern of early exegesis. One of the most interesting features of such a study is the contrast between the schools of Alexandria and of Antioch. From Alexandria, we have considerable portions of the commentary of Origen, the most renowned of her exegetes, and practically the whole of the commentary of Cyril, the most powerful of her leaders. From Antioch, we have (in translation) the com-

<sup>1</sup> C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (1953); C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St John* (1955); R. H. Lightfoot, *St John's Gospel* (1956).

<sup>2</sup> O. I, 6.

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mentary of Theodore of Mopsuestia, the most renowned of her exegetes, and the homilies of John Chrysostom, the greatest of her preachers. We have thus abundant material for a comparative study of the methods of the outstanding representatives of the leading exegetical schools of the period.

Primary attention in this study has been given to the three commentaries of Origen, Cyril and Theodore. Theodore's commentary has only come to light in comparatively recent times, and is therefore not so generally well known.<sup>1</sup> There is an obvious fascination in comparing the work of Theodore with that of Origen, the two most famous exegetes of Antioch and Alexandria, in commentary upon the same book of the Bible.<sup>2</sup> In many respects however, Cyril, though not so pure an example of Alexandrian scholarship, provides a better standard of comparison. In the first place his commentary has survived in a far more complete form than that of Origen. Secondly, Cyril and Theodore were contemporaries, whereas Origen's commentary is at a remove of almost two centuries from that of Theodore. Thirdly, Cyril is far less prone to personal eccentricities of exegesis, which often mar the work of Origen and which render it less readily usable for the purpose of comparative study.<sup>3</sup>

Our main concern, therefore, will lie with these three commentaries, with their method in the work of interpretation and with the meaning that they find in the text of the Fourth Gospel. But before embarking upon such an analysis of their thought, a brief survey must be given of our knowledge about the historical occasions of their composition. Moreover, although these three works

<sup>1</sup> It was discovered in 1868 and first published in Syriac by Chabot in 1897. It was not translated into Latin until 1940. See J. M. Vosté, 'Le Commentaire de Théodore de Mopsueste sur Saint Jean, d'après la Version Syriacque'. See also p. 5 n. 3 below.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. J. Guillet, 'Les Exégèses d'Alexandrie et d'Antioche: Confit ou Malentendu?', p. 260. Guillet carries out an interesting comparison of Origen's and Theodore's interpretations of Psalm iii.

<sup>3</sup> The most important factor making for the more controlled nature of Cyril's exegesis is his recognition of the principle that not everything that is said in the Bible need necessarily have a spiritual sense. See A. Kerrigan, *St Cyril of Alexandria: Interpreter of the Old Testament*, p. 50 n. 2, who quotes a clear affirmation of Cyril to this effect from Glaph. in Gen. bk. iv (P.G. 69, 192 B). The Commentary on St John also contains a warning against forcing a spiritual meaning out of passages which ought to be treated historically (Cyr. in John ix. 4; II, 154, 7-12).

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are the most important for our purpose, they were not isolated phenomena. They stand within a developing tradition of interpretation, within which other writings of importance have come down to us in complete or fragmentary form. These too must be included in our preliminary survey.

The earliest commentary on the Gospel known to us is that of Heracleon, a Valentinian Gnostic, who probably wrote about A.D. 170.<sup>1</sup> We cannot be certain that his work represents a full commentary on the Gospel, but it seems most probable that it does. It is clear from Origen's quotations that he dealt at least with continuous passages of the Gospel of some length. Origen's remark that Heracleon makes no comment on John iv. 32 suggests that this is exceptional and that his commentary is normally verse by verse.<sup>2</sup> It is true that there are long sections of Origen's commentary (including the whole of the last two surviving books) in which he makes no reference to Heracleon whatever. It is therefore possible that Heracleon's work was incomplete, but there are other more probable explanations. In view of the length of time and the varied and unsystematic nature of Origen's writing of his own commentaries, it seems more likely either that he grew tired of referring to Heracleon (his later books are certainly less expansive than his earlier ones) or that he did not always have his commentary readily available for reference.

Origen's commentary was begun at a comparatively early stage in his literary career before his departure from Alexandria. The most likely date is about A.D. 225. The first five books were composed there, but the work was interrupted by the upheaval surrounding his final removal from Alexandria.<sup>3</sup> The method of composition appears to have been by dictation to stenographers—a fact which helps to explain its prolixity and unsystematic character.<sup>4</sup> Only eight and a half books have survived; by the last of these (Book 32), Origen has reached Chapter xiii of the Gospel. If, therefore, he covered the whole of the Gospel, the completed work must have been of prodigious length. However, as Jerome speaks only of thirty-two books and there is an almost complete lack of surviving fragments

<sup>1</sup> Cf. G. Salmon in *D.C.B.* vol. II, p. 900; A. E. Brooke, 'The Extant Fragments of Heracleon', pp. 33–4.      <sup>2</sup> O. 13, 34.      <sup>3</sup> O. 6, 1–2.      <sup>4</sup> O. 6, 2.

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of the later texts of the Gospel, it seems most likely that the work was never finished.<sup>1</sup>

We do not possess any other commentary from the third century, though the period was one of importance for the development of the interpretation of the Gospel.<sup>2</sup> The theology of Irenaeus, worked out in conscious opposition to Gnosticism, involved a serious grappling with the meaning of the Fourth Gospel. Not only Gnosticism, but modalist and monarchian heresies also were forcing the Church to pay ever-increasing attention to the problem of its correct interpretation. With the impact of Arianism this pressure was increased. It seems that a considerable number of commentaries were written in the course of the fourth and early fifth centuries, but in most cases only fragments of them have survived.

Probably the earliest of these was written by Asterius the Sophist in support of the Arian cause.<sup>3</sup> It is described by Theodore as a prolix work, which contrives to say nothing of any value for a true understanding of the Gospel, but achieves its great length by spending many words on matters that are entirely obvious.<sup>4</sup> Such judgments need always to be received with caution, and Theodore himself is certainly unusually brief by contemporary standards. It is perhaps more significant that Theodore still finds it necessary to refer to the work of Asterius more than half a century after its publication. Theodore of Heraclea, who receives high praise as an exegete from both Jerome and Theodoret, also appears to have written a commentary on the Gospel about the middle of the fourth century. But as he too was a supporter of the Arian cause, it is not surprising that only small fragments of his work remain.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Jerome, *Ep.* 33, 4.

<sup>2</sup> The catalogue of works recorded on the statue of Hippolytus shows him as having written a work on the Fourth Gospel, but it has not survived (cf. A. d'Alès, *Théologie de Saint Hippolyte*, Introduction, p. iv).

<sup>3</sup> The surviving fragments of the works of Asterius are to be found in G. Bardy, *Recherches sur Saint Lucien d'Antioche et son École*, pp. 341–54. Although they do not seem to include actual fragments of the commentary, they do include quotations which throw some light on his exegesis of the Gospel.

<sup>4</sup> T. 2, 4–11.

<sup>5</sup> Jerome, *De Vir. Ill.* 90; Theodoret, *H.E.* 11, 3. (See C. H. Turner, 'Greek Patristic Commentaries on the Pauline Epistles', pp. 497–8 and 'The Early Greek Commentators on the Gospel according to St Matthew', p. 107, where he speaks of Theodore as 'one of the earliest and ablest exegetes of the Antiochene school'.)

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But the majority of the commentaries stood in the tradition of Nicene orthodoxy and especially within the tradition of Alexandrian exegesis. Didymus the Blind, head of the catechetical school of Alexandria, Apollinarius of Laodicea, who was orthodox at least on the issue of Arianism, and Ammonius, one of the celebrated 'Tall Brothers', all appear to have written commentaries on the Gospel, and fragments of their work are to be found in the *Catena*.<sup>1</sup>

In the last decade of the fourth century we have another exposition of the Gospel in the Antiochene tradition. The homilies of John Chrysostom on the Gospel were delivered in Antioch itself before his departure from the city in A.D. 398. Although delivered as sermons, they appear to have been preached to a well-instructed congregation and contain thorough and careful exposition fully worthy of comparison with more specific works of commentary.

The commentaries of Theodore and of Cyril, both of which are to be dated early in the fifth century, thus find their place within a succession of no mean magnitude. Theodore's commentary is to be placed in the later part of his life, probably in the first decade of the fifth century.<sup>2</sup> Of the original Greek text only fragments survive. Like others of his works, however, it was translated at an early date into Syriac. This version has now been rendered into Latin by Père Vosté and thus made more easily accessible.<sup>3</sup> In his introduction

<sup>1</sup> In the case of Didymus, we have the express statement of Jerome (*De Vir. Ill.* 109). In the other two cases our judgment is based solely on the extent of material attributed to them surviving in the *Catena*. Apollinarius is not strictly an exegete within the Alexandrian tradition; C. H. Turner ('Greek Patristic Commentaries on the Pauline Epistles', p. 500) says of him that 'his exegetical position was therefore influenced more by his geographical connexion with the city of Antioch than by his opposition to the teaching of its school in the sphere of theology'. None the less the work of commentary on the Fourth Gospel is so essentially theological an exercise that it is not surprising that the *Catena* fragments should reveal a closer affinity to Cyril of Alexandria than to any other writer in this particular sphere.

<sup>2</sup> J. M. Vosté, 'Le Commentaire . . .', p. 541; 'La chronologie de l'activité littéraire de Théodore de Mopsueste', pp. 77–80.

<sup>3</sup> *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium: Scriptores Syri*, Series 4, Tomus 3 interpretatus est J. M. Vosté. The surviving Greek fragments have been collected by R. Devresse and printed as an appendix to his *Essai sur Théodore de Mopsueste*. The reliability of the Syriac translation is generally agreed. Vosté ('Le Commentaire . . .', p. 534) speaks of its 'fidélité admirable'. F. A. Sullivan, who is in general inclined to be critical of the Syriac translations, believes it to be 'quite faithful to the Greek text', though he regards the translations of ch. i and the last section of the Gospel following

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to the commentary, Theodore not only refers to the earlier work of Asterius, but also to his desire to write in defence of Basil against Eunomius; this shows that he too has the Arian controversy much in mind. He carefully distinguishes the work of the commentator from that of the preacher. The task of the commentator is to make clear the meaning of the text. If that meaning is obvious, it is not his job (as it is the preacher's) to elaborate upon it. On the other hand, he must be prepared to spend much time on the more difficult texts. In particular this means that he will have to dwell in detail on any texts which have been perverted in current heretical teaching.<sup>1</sup>

Cyril's commentary is one of his earlier works. There is difference of opinion about its exact date, but there seems to be general agreement that it is to be dated before the outbreak of the Nestorian controversy in A.D. 428.<sup>2</sup> The anti-Arian purpose, which is present in the work of Theodore, is still more explicit in the work of Cyril. His avowed purpose is a *δογματικώτερον ἐξήγησις*, which will counter the false teaching of heresy at every point.<sup>3</sup> Like Theodore, therefore, he sees it as his especial duty to unmask the errors of heretical interpretation, and to that end he includes in the commentary a number of excursuses, which are often only very loosely attached to the actual text of the Gospel. But he goes further than Theodore in including in the commentator's task a full, positive exposition of the doctrinal implications of the Gospel.

xx. 23 as less precise than the main body of the work (*The Christology of Theodore of Mopsuestia*, p. 125). Many of the Greek fragments for the second half of the Gospel are in the form of an epitome rather than direct quotation and are clearly less reliable than the Syriac.

<sup>1</sup> T. 2, 12–27.

<sup>2</sup> For summaries of recent discussions of the date of the Commentary, see J. Liébaert, *La Doctrine Christologique de Saint Cyrille d'Alexandrie . . .*, pp. 191–6; H. Chadwick, 'Eucharist and Christology in the Nestorian Controversy', p. 151 n. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Cyr., Praefatio (1, 7, 13).

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## CHAPTER I

THE AUTHORSHIP AND PURPOSE  
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Towards the close of the second century, there appears considerable and widespread testimony to the Johannine authorship of the Gospel. Theophilus of Antioch quotes the opening phrases of the prologue as the words of John, one of the inspired men.<sup>1</sup> He does not explicitly say that the John was the disciple of the Lord, though that may well have been his intention. Ptolemaeus, whose exposition of the prologue is quoted by Irenaeus, expressly attributes it to 'John, the disciple of the Lord'.<sup>2</sup> Heracleon also believed the Gospel on which he was commenting to be the work of a disciple.<sup>3</sup> In fact the considerable Gnostic interest in the Gospel was probably motivated at least in part by the desire to find in it apostolic authority for their teaching.<sup>4</sup>

In addition we have four fuller accounts of the writing of the Gospel. The anti-Marcionite prologue describes the Gospel as dictated by John to his disciple Papias 'while still in the body'. This presumably implies that it had something of the character of a last will and testament of the aged disciple.<sup>5</sup>

The Muratorian Canon ascribes the writing of the Gospel to the disciple John at the encouragement of his fellow-disciples and bishops. The Gospel is said to incorporate not only the recollections of John but of all the apostles. The writing down was the work of John and the Gospel was, therefore, published under his name.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Theophilus, *Ad Autolyicum*, 2, 22.

<sup>2</sup> Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 1, 8, 5 (Harvey, vol. 1, p. 75).

<sup>3</sup> O. 6, 3. Origen is disputing Heracleon's assertion that John i. 18 is to be attributed 'not to the Baptist but to the disciple'.

<sup>4</sup> J. N. Sanders, *The Fourth Gospel in the Early Church*, p. 65.

<sup>5</sup> *Rev. Bén.* XL (1928), p. 198.

<sup>6</sup> H. Lietzmann, *Kleine Texte für theologische Vorlesungen*, No. 1, *Das Muratorische Fragment*, p. 5. None of these sources can be dated with precision, but they can all be placed with a considerable degree of confidence in the second half of the second century.

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Clement of Alexandria gives a similar, less elaborate but more significant account. He writes: 'But, last of all, John perceiving that the external facts had been made plain in the Gospel, being urged by his friends and inspired by the Spirit, composed a spiritual Gospel.'<sup>1</sup>

Finally Irenaeus declares that the Gospel was written after the others, by John, the disciple of the Lord, who also leaned on Jesus' breast, while he lived at Ephesus.<sup>2</sup>

Over against this testimony, we hear of only one other suggested attribution of authorship. The heretical Alogoi, in their opposition to the Gospel, are said by Epiphanius to have ascribed it to Cerinthus.<sup>3</sup> It has been argued that the tentative use made of the Gospel by Justin 'makes it difficult to believe that he regarded the Fourth Gospel as Scripture or as the work of an apostle'.<sup>4</sup> However, even the fact of Justin's knowledge of the Gospel cannot be regarded as proved beyond doubt. If, indeed, the tradition was unknown earlier in the second century it had established itself securely by the end of the century, and from that time on was the universally accepted view in need neither of question nor of proof.

Irenaeus' description of Ephesus as its place of origin has further support of about the same date in statements of Polycrates<sup>5</sup> and of Clement.<sup>6</sup> Here again only one dissentient voice has survived in all the early literature. Ephrem Syrus records a tradition that John wrote the Gospel at Antioch, where he lived until the reign of Trajan.<sup>7</sup> But apart from this one isolated exception the connection of the Gospel with Ephesus appears regularly as a part of the unvarying tradition.

The other feature which is common to more than one of these early traditions is the allotment of some part in the origin of the Gospel to others in addition to the individual apostle himself. The different forms of this part of the tradition were inconsistent with one another, but that the Gospel was written in some sense at the prompting of others was also generally accepted.

<sup>1</sup> Eusebius, *H.E.* 6, 14, 7.<sup>2</sup> Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 3, 1, 1 (vol. 2, p. 6).<sup>3</sup> Epiphanius, *Pan. Haer.* 51, 2-3.<sup>4</sup> Sanders, *op. cit.* p. 31.<sup>5</sup> Eusebius, *H.E.* 5, 24, 2-3.<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 3, 23, 6-19.<sup>7</sup> Sanders, *op. cit.* p. 7; M. Goguel, *Introduction au Nouveau Testament*, vol. II, pp. 180-1.



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For all the later commentators, therefore, it is an accepted fact that the author of the Gospel is none other than John, the son of Zebedee. To speak of finding confirmation of this fact from the internal evidence of the Gospel itself would be misleading. One cannot confirm that about which one is not in any doubt. Rather the commentator, knowing the secret of the authorship, is enabled to recognise the hidden evidences of his firsthand authority, which he has deliberately left within his record.

Irenaeus, as we have seen, identifies John with the beloved disciple and this identification is universally assumed. The 'other disciple' known to the high-priest of John xviii. 15 is also assumed to be John without the need for any discussion of the matter.<sup>1</sup> The indirect method of referring to himself is regarded as a suitable means of emphasising the unimpeachable nature of his authority without at the same time abandoning a proper humility.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly he has given evidence of the unquestionable nature of his testimony in John xix. 35. Different reasons are suggested as to why such emphasis should be laid on the witness to this particular occurrence. Theodore suggests that the issue of water and blood was not visible to all the bystanders, but was a personal revelation to himself alone.<sup>3</sup> Chrysostom declares that so degrading an occurrence in the life of Christ demanded by its very nature especially reliable testimony.<sup>4</sup>

John xxi. 24 is generally regarded as John's own seal of authority. His claim to be the one whom Jesus specially loved is a part of the guarantee of his utter reliability. Jesus, the Truth, would not so have loved one who would desert the truth. His humility is shown in the continued maintenance of his anonymity.<sup>5</sup>

The Muratorian Canon had pointed to the opening words of the first epistle of John as evidence for eyewitness authorship of the Gospel,<sup>6</sup> but the 'we beheld' of John i. 14 does not appear to be so

<sup>1</sup> T. 233, 23-6; Chr. 83, 2; Cyr. *in* John xviii. 15 (III, 29, 26-7). Cf. Westcott, vol. II, p. 273.

<sup>2</sup> Chr. 83, 2; Cyr. *in* John xviii. 15 (III, 29, 27-30, 24).

<sup>3</sup> T. 242, 27-34.

<sup>4</sup> Chr. 85, 3.

<sup>5</sup> Cyr. *in* John xxi. 24 (III, 169-70). Cf. Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 3, 5, 1 (vol. II, pp. 18-19).

<sup>6</sup> H. Lietzmann, *op. cit.* pp. 5-7.

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used. The extreme doctrinal importance of the verse naturally monopolised the commentator's interest at that point.<sup>1</sup>

The author, therefore, was John, the Galilean fisherman and the beloved disciple. As a Galilean fisherman, he ought not to be expected to be a polished author. Origen is not afraid to assert of him that he does not express his point at one place with perfect clarity because he is no professional writer.<sup>2</sup> To Origen of course this is but one example of the general truth that there is nothing remarkable about the form or style of Scripture as a whole, but that God has entrusted his treasure to an earthen vessel so that its effectiveness might be recognised as due not to the wisdom of men, but to the power of God.<sup>3</sup> Chrysostom actually argues that John must have belonged to the poorest category of fisherman. No reason, he says, other than extreme poverty would have persuaded a father to allow his son to follow his footsteps in so mean a trade. Moreover, John fished not in the sea, but in a small lake; he had to mend his own nets and is described by St Luke in Acts iv. 13 as without learning.<sup>4</sup>

More significance, however, attaches to the fact of Christ's special love for John, which has earned him the title of Beloved Disciple. This has a greater importance as providing a clue towards the character and intention of his work. At its simplest level, Chrysostom declares that this love was the essential motive of his writing.<sup>5</sup> More important is the spiritual proximity to the mind of Jesus implicit in such a privileged position. Origen finds this most vividly portrayed in the picture of John reclining at supper on the bosom of Jesus. Just as it is the fact that the only-begotten Son is in 'the bosom of the Father' that constitutes him able to reveal God to men, so John's reclining upon the bosom of Jesus symbolises his ability to declare the deepest truths of the Gospel.<sup>6</sup> John's unique and exalted

<sup>1</sup> Cyr. in John xiii. 23 (II, 366, 30–367, 5) quotes the verse in the singular form ('I beheld. . .') applying it specifically to the evangelist, but he interprets it of his spiritual understanding rather than of his historical testimony.

<sup>2</sup> O. 13, 54.

<sup>3</sup> *De Principiis*, 4, 1, 7; extract in *Philocalia* from Book 4 of the *Commentary on St John* (Fragment no. 15 in Brooke's edition of the *Commentary*).

<sup>4</sup> Chr. 2, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Chr. 88, 2.

<sup>6</sup> O. 32, 20 (John xiii. 23). Cf. Origen, *In Can. Can.* bk. 1 (P.G. 13, 87B: G.C.S. ed. Baehrens, p. 93).