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978-1-107-41237-8 - The Problem of the Fourth Gospel

H. Latimer Jackson

Excerpt

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## CHAPTER I

## ‘THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST JOHN’

It was once said of a Japanese gentleman who became a Christian : ‘The vision of glory which came to him while reading John’s account of Our Lord’s Life and Teaching was a vision from another and diviner world; he fell at the feet of Christ, exclaiming, “My Lord and My God.” . . . He saw the Divine majesty and the Divine grace of Christ; what could he do but worship Him?’<sup>1</sup>

Beautiful are the words. Springing, who can doubt it? from the inmost experiences of the venerated divine who penned them, they are also expressive of feelings which stir in thousands for whom the noble work which bears the name of John has been, if in varying manner, the revelation of a ‘vision from another and diviner world.’ Not, perhaps, the ‘most interesting’ of the records of the Life of Jesus, it is widely regarded as ‘the favourite Gospel’; as Luther puts it: ‘chiefest of the Gospels, unique, tender, and true.’<sup>2</sup> Herein Luther is in full agreement with Augustine: ‘in the four Gospels, or rather the four books of the one Gospel, St John the Apostle, not unworthily in respect of spiritual intelligence compared to the eagle, hath taken a higher flight, and soared in his preaching much more sublimely than the other three, and in the lifting up thereof would have our hearts lifted up likewise.’<sup>3</sup> In short, there is large and ungrudging witness to the ‘tender and unearthly beauty’<sup>4</sup> which pervades the often well-worn pages of the Johannine Gospel.

<sup>1</sup> Dale, *The Living Christ*, pp. 42, 46 f.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Das einzige zarte rechte Haupt-Evangelium’; Werke, Erlangen, 1854, lxiii, p. 115. Oberhey (*Der Gottesbrunnen der Menschheit*, p. v) alludes to it as ‘Des Neuen Testaments Allerheiligstes.’ And see the famous quotation from the *Wandsbecker Bote* (given at length by P. Ewald, *NKZ*, xix, 1908, pp. 825 f.): ‘Am liebsten aber les’ ich im Skt. Johannes &c.’

<sup>3</sup> On St John, *Hom.* xxxvi.

<sup>4</sup> Drummond, *Character and Authorship of the Fourth Gospel*, p. 2.

But it is safe to say that, of those by whom that Gospel is treasured as a hallowed thing, there are numbers who, approaching it and studying it with pre-conceived opinions and with fixed beliefs, are either unaware of, or prefer to shut their eyes and ears to, the grave difficulties which it presents. The Johannine problem, as it is called, has no real existence for such persons; as with the Japanese gentleman of Dr Dale's allusion so with them, they do not 'check their wonder and their awe' by vexing themselves with questions relating to the authorship and historicity of what is so dear to them as a sacred, a plenarily inspired, book. Accounting it the absolutely true narrative of discourse and incident, they make no room for doubt that it comes down to them from him who figures in it as the Beloved Disciple. Its title is decisive for them, 'The Gospel according to St John.' And in these and the like prepossessions and convictions they are, undoubtedly, representative of, and can appeal to, a belief which stretches back through long centuries to a far-distant past. 'No Gospel comes to us with stronger external evidence of its acceptance by the Church<sup>1</sup>' than does this Gospel; its familiar title preserves the very name borne by it immediately on its appearance in literature as the not only used but formally adopted work<sup>2</sup>; when, towards the end of the second century, the four Gospels emerge into the clear light of day this Gospel is one of them, and its authority is 'recognized as undoubtingly and unhesitatingly as that of the other three<sup>3</sup>.' A few early dissentients are met with; otherwise its Johannine authorship is assumed: 'the belief handed down that, in his old age, the Apostle John, the son of Zebedee, wrote his Gospel as a last testament to the Church<sup>4</sup>,' and that what it contained was a true narrative, went for a long time unchallenged, and 'ecclesiastical tradition has never assigned' the Gospel which bears John's name 'to anyone but the Apostle John<sup>5</sup>.'

Yet a day came when the gauntlet was thrown down boldly to traditional and conventional belief. As the situation (it still ob-

<sup>1</sup> J. Armitage Robinson, *Study of the Gospels*, p. 113.

<sup>2</sup> O. Holtzmann, *Das Evang. des Joh.* p. 115.

<sup>3</sup> Stanton, *GHD*, i, p. 162.

<sup>4</sup> Jülicher, *Einl.* p. 361.

<sup>5</sup> Soltau, *op. cit.* p. 103.

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tains) has been stated within recent times: 'no book of the New Testament has met with more sharply opposed criticism, nor in respect of the true estimate of any other has there been so fierce a conflict between love and hate.' What, it is asked, is the true nature of the Fourth Gospel? Is it a trustworthy record of the events it purports to relate? Must it, on the other hand, be regarded as 'an epic or a drama or a theological tractate<sup>1</sup>' if strictly historical it be not? A 'unique book' and to be approached 'with no ordinary reverence'; 'the time is past,' it is quickly added, 'when we can accept without a shade of misgiving the tradition of its authorship, and delight ourselves without a question in its narratives<sup>2</sup>.' Misgiving there is, and misgiving there must be; if questions be unavoidable, it is because, raised by the Gospel itself, they stare every honest student in the face.

To go back to the last decade of the eighteenth century. Although the start with Fourth Gospel criticism really began in England towards the close of the seventeenth century<sup>3</sup>, it was not until the year 1792 that it was bluntly asked, by an English clergyman, 'how any kind of delusion should have induced creatures endowed with reason so long to have received it (*sc.* the Fourth Gospel) as the word of truth and the work of an Apostle of Jesus Christ<sup>4</sup>.' Before long, in Germany, more hostile voices were raised, and with diversity of conjecture and hypothesis; one suggestion pointed to a genuine work of the Apostle with abundant supplementary matter by a later hand<sup>5</sup>; it was said that the real author

<sup>1</sup> Heinrici, *Der litterar. Charakter der neutest. Schriften*, p. 48.

<sup>2</sup> Drummond. *op. cit.* pp. 1 f.

<sup>3</sup> 'De eerste kritische twijfel openbaarde zich in Engeland, waarschijnlijk van de zijde der engelsche deïsten, eerst aan het einde der 17<sup>de</sup> eeuw.' Scholten, *Het Evan. naar Joh.* p. 24. And see Clericus (Hammond, *Novum Test. . . cum paraphrasi et adnotationibus*, 2nd ed., i, pp. 391, 395): *Confutare etiam non sum adgressus novos Alogos, quorum scripta non vidi. . . Idem hodie Alogorum imitatores. . .*

<sup>4</sup> Evanson, *Dissonance of the four commonly received Gospels*, p. 226. The 'shallow criticism,' as Luthardt called it, if of a particular passage, is generally significant of both the position and the manner of the sometime Vicar of Tewkesbury. His criticism was, no doubt, crude and marred by coarseness of expression, yet justice should be done to him as a pioneer.

<sup>5</sup> Eckermann (1796). Vogel (1801) cited the Evangelist to the divine tribunal.

of the Gospel was an Alexandrian Christian<sup>1</sup> or a disciple of the Apostle John<sup>2</sup>. With firmer grasp and fuller statement of the Johannine problem in its many ramifications<sup>3</sup> it was held incredible that the Gospel should have come from an Apostle's pen; and, albeit the scholar who thus confidently argued made show of retreating from his position<sup>4</sup> and controversy for the time being slumbered, it is none the less the case that the questions shrewdly raised by him in detail have appeared but to reappear in that Fourth Gospel criticism which since his day has grown into a 'mighty stream,' and a mass of literature<sup>5</sup> affords ample proof that 'the problem of the Fourth Gospel is still the most unsettled, the most living, the most sensitive in all the field of introduction<sup>6</sup>,' 'the cardinal inquiry, not merely of all New Testament criticism, but even of Christology<sup>7</sup>.' The delicacy and intricacy of the problem is generally admitted; as might be expected, there is wide divergence of view; the pleas vigorously raised in some quarters on behalf of traditional authorship and historicity are elsewhere deemed invalid and are as vigorously disallowed. Yet on both sides there is a tendency to make concessions, while there is general agreement that, whatever else it be, John's Gospel is a noble and inspiring work. In more radical quarters it is said of it that, not by the Apostle and not what we moderns call history, it nevertheless leads back to Jesus, and that, if its theological vesture be worn threadbare, it scintillates with and awakens faith<sup>8</sup>; attributed to an author who 'remains unknown' and who had 'not witnessed the earthly life of Jesus except through the eyes of others,' 'the Gospel is the work of a great religious thinker who had entered profoundly into spiritual fellowship with Christ<sup>9</sup>,' 'while the author makes Jesus speak and act as the real Jesus never spoke and acted, yet in the discourses and the works so lent to him there

<sup>1</sup> Horst (1803).

<sup>2</sup> Paulus (1821).

<sup>3</sup> Bretschneider, *Probabilia de evang. et epis. Joan. apos. indole et origine*.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Hilgenfeld, *Einl.* p. 697.

<sup>5</sup> No fewer than some 220 works on the Fourth Gospel are enumerated by Moffatt, *Introd. to N.T.* pp. 515 ff.

<sup>6</sup> Bacon, *Introd. to N.T.* p. 252.

<sup>7</sup> Luthardt, *St John's Gospel*, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Heitmüller, *SNT*, ii, p. 707.

<sup>9</sup> E. F. Scott, *Histor. and Relig. Value of the Fourth Gospel*, pp. 17 f.

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ceases not to be a living Christ<sup>1</sup>. As for the more conservative school of criticism, a relatively late date is readily admitted; an element of subjectivity; an 'apparent transference of the matured thought of the author to the lips of the speakers in his narrative<sup>2</sup>'; not a few, perhaps, would speak of 'an interpretation rather than a life<sup>3</sup>', and allow, nor yet of one section only in the Gospel, that 'it contains the reflections of the Evangelist, and is not a continuation of the words of the Lord<sup>4</sup>'; further, that, in the case of some of the Gospel contents, in respect at all events of detail, there is need of reservation. To revert, for a moment, to the former quarter; an earlier date is acquiesced in, and the terms 'pure romance' and 'down-right fiction' are more seldom heard or more guardedly used; here and there dependence on Apostolic notes and influences is allowed if it be held impossible to discover in the Evangelist St John himself. 'Even among those critics who regard the Gospel as concerned, on the whole, more with religious instruction than with historic accuracy, there are some who make the reservation that echoes of a true historic record are to be heard in it, so that it may be called a mixture of truth and poetry<sup>5</sup>.'

Thus much by way of rapid survey of Fourth Gospel research in its inception and its earlier stages, of the situation as it exists at the present day<sup>6</sup>. In the following pages we will attempt some discussion of the problems which confront the serious and open-minded student; and in the course thereof frequent resort shall be had to books which emanate from theological workshops both at home and abroad, nor need there be the slightest hesitation to include such as witness to the 'indefatigable industry, profound thought, conscientious love of knowledge' which are admittedly

<sup>1</sup> Loisy, *Quatrième Évang.* p. 119. From the closing sentences of a fine passage.

<sup>2</sup> J. Armitage Robinson, *Study of the Gospels*, pp. 114 f. See also Stevens, *Johan. Theology*, pp. ix ff.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Bacon, *Introd. to N.T.* p. 252. <sup>4</sup> See Westcott on *Jn*, iii, 16 ff.

<sup>5</sup> Wendt, *St John's Gospel*, p. 3. See also Sanday, *Criticism of the Fourth Gospel*, pp. 1-33; Holtzmann, *E'nl.* p. 436 ff.

<sup>6</sup> For a more detailed survey the reader should consult Loisy, *Le Quatrième Évangile*, pp. 36 ff.; Scholten, *Het Evan. naar Joh.* pp. 24 ff. See also A. V. Green, *op. cit.* pp. 65 ff. Reference might also be made to Albert Schweitzer, *Von Reimarus zu Wrede* (Engl. tr. *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*).

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characteristic of German scholarship<sup>1</sup>. At the close of this chapter some remarks shall be ventured in the hope of reassuring those who, having read thus far, may imagine themselves not only robbed of their security in respect of 'John's' Gospel, but asked to sit fast and loose to what, in their conviction, are of the fundamentals of the Christian faith.

It was said to an earlier generation that 'the assailants of (the Fourth Gospel) are of two kinds: those who deny the miraculous element in Christianity, those who deny the distinctive character of Christian doctrine,' and that the Gospel 'confronts both<sup>2</sup>.' There has been a moving on since then, with a consequent change of front; and now it would be widely allowed that such strong assertions, not altogether destitute of truth in certain cases, are by no means true all round. 'It is unjust to assume that those who question the authenticity of the Gospel according to St John are primarily impelled to do so by theological prepossession,' neither is it right to say that they are one and all prejudiced by 'its emphatic declaration of the divinity of Christ.' As a matter of fact 'there are many who are heartily devoted to that central truth, and yet cannot easily persuade themselves that the Fourth Gospel offers them history quite in the sense that the other Gospels do, cannot think that Christ spoke exactly as He is here represented as speaking, and consequently cannot feel assured that this is the record of an eye-witness, or, in other words, of the Apostle St John<sup>3</sup>.' And here perhaps it might be put on record that the traditional authorship of the Gospel has found a staunch upholder in a distinguished Unitarian scholar and divine<sup>4</sup>.

In anticipation of a comparison to be instituted later on be-

<sup>1</sup> Stanley, *Sermons on the Apos. Age*. To similar effect Sanday, *op. cit.* pp. 18 ff.; see also his recent pamphlet *In View of the End*. It is a pity that Mr Raven (*op. cit.* p. 105) should permit himself the sweeping generalization 'Teutonic unbelief.'

<sup>2</sup> Lightfoot, *Bibl. Essays*, p. 47. Cf. Düsterdieck, *Über das Evang. Joh.* p. 783.

<sup>3</sup> J. Armitage Robinson, *op. cit.* pp. 133, 113 f., 118; J. H. Bernard, Paper read at the Bristol (1903) Church Congress.

<sup>4</sup> The allusion is to Dr Drummond, sometime Principal of Manchester College, Oxford. See Sanday, *op. cit.* p. 32.

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tween 'John' and the 'other Gospels,' the following well-weighed words shall find a place here:

'The authors of our first three Gospels, in giving, or at all events professing to give, a simple narrative of incident and teaching, and reporting the impression which Jesus made on the first generations of disciples, show us a person with a double consciousness; to whom the Divine communion He enjoyed was as real as the human life He lived<sup>1</sup>.'

There is nevertheless 'the problem of the Person of Christ<sup>2</sup>.'

<sup>1</sup> Bethune-Baker, *Nestorius*, p. x. And thus Ammon (*Geschichte des Lebens Jesu*, publ. 1842, i, p. 82): 'In jedem Falle aber ist es ungegründet, dass in den drei ersten Evangelien die höhere Natur Jesu übersehen und vernachlässigt worden sei.' It might be said perhaps of the 'Hat Jesus gelebt?' controversy (the echoes which have passed from Germany into England) that it has forced a recognition that behind the human Jesus of the Synoptic representation there stands One who is conceived of as more than mere man.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. A. W. Robinson, *Are we making progress?* p. 19.

## CHAPTER II

### APPROXIMATE DATE OF THE GOSPEL

WITH a change of outlook for the Early Church<sup>1</sup> and a growing consciousness of new needs<sup>2</sup> a demand sprang up for records of the earthly life of Jesus, and hence the birth of a distinctively Christian literature<sup>3</sup>. In other words, men started on the composition of 'books'; and these in course of time were designated by a term which, passing from its original meaning<sup>4</sup>, was used in the first instance of the oral message and then of the document wherein the 'glad tidings' was contained: the 'One Gospel'—as set forth by the several pen-men; 'the Gospels,' their respective works. And there is abundant proof of much industrious activity, at a very early period, in the new field. The allusion Lk. i, 1 ff. is significant; and, although the word 'many' does not necessarily imply an extensive library, it would scarcely have been used by the Evangelist had but some two or three sources only have been at his command. Other evidence is available; and it consists, not in 'Christian romances' which belong to a somewhat later day, but in fragments of writings approximately near in date to the Canonical Gospels, together with possible allusions to one not otherwise known. It may accordingly be said of the Canonical Gospels that they are really specimens of a type or class of literature which, highly popular, spread far and wide.

A time came when the four Bible Gospels—the 'holy quarter-

<sup>1</sup> A realization that the 'Coming of the Lord' might be delayed, cf. 2 Pet. iii, 8 ff. Here and in some following paragraphs I have ventured to draw on a paper (on the Synoptic Problem) contributed by me to *CBE*.

<sup>2</sup> By reason of (i) the dying off of men who had seen and known Jesus, and (ii) the spread of the new religion.

<sup>3</sup> As distinguished from correspondence; the occasional writings known as 'Epistles.'

<sup>4</sup> *εὐαγγέλιον*, the reward given to the bearer of good tidings. See Jülicher, *Einl.* p. 252.



nion' of Eusebius—were fenced off as it were from other writings of the same family, 'canonized.' To mark off separate stages in the process is impossible; no express information is forthcoming, and it is a right view which suggests that the 'canonization' of all the New Testament writings was the issue of an unconscious growth. That no special sanctity attached at the outset to the Gospels is clear both from the attitude of Evangelist to Evangelist<sup>1</sup>, and also from the fact that when Tatian substituted his Diatessaron for them in all good faith exception was not taken to his action or to the 'harmony' which of course witnessed to an importance they already possessed. How precisely it came about that four Gospels were singled out from the rest, placed side by side, accounted authoritative and sacred, is not fully known; what can be said is that, as time went on, 'the caskets which enshrined the jewel of traditions concerning Jesus were identified with the jewel itself'; and, if the completion of the New Testament Canon as a whole cannot be dated earlier than the close of the Fourth century (in the case of Eastern churches somewhat later), it is certain that the Gospels had long before attained a position of supremacy in by far the larger part of the Christendom of the age. For Irenaeus they are 'Holy Scripture,' and he gives fanciful reasons as to why they are precisely four in number<sup>2</sup>.

Or to put it thus: the 'many' Gospels in circulation had been subjected to such tests as the critical acumen and spiritual insight of the day could apply; by degrees the superiority of some and the inferiority of others was determined; in the event four and four only were deemed worthy to survive, and they, the Canonical Gospels, remained masters of the field<sup>3</sup>.

They did not invariably stand in the to us accustomed order. No fewer than seven different arrangements have been reckoned up, of which two only however appear to have been at all widespread; the sequence Matthew, John, Luke, Mark<sup>4</sup>, and the more generally favoured sequence of the ordinary Bible<sup>5</sup>. These two

<sup>1</sup> To wit, the free handling of our Second Gospel by the First and Third Evangelists.

<sup>2</sup> Euseb. *HE*, v. 8.

<sup>3</sup> *Ecclesia quatuor habet evangelia, haereses plurima* (Origen).

<sup>4</sup> So in the Monarchian Prologues.

<sup>5</sup> The order which obtains in the Muratorian Canon.

arrangements, it is suggested, are alike significant; in the former case of values placed on the respective Gospels—those attributed to Apostles ranking above those attributed to disciples of the Apostles; the more familiar sequence being based on chronological principle, John regarded as last and Matthew first in order of composition<sup>1</sup>. As for the titles of the Gospels; in the earliest MSS. one general title, ΕΤΑΓΓΕΛΙΟΝ, covers the four, the separate books being simply headed ΚΑΤΑ ΜΑΘΘΑΙΟΝ and so forth. These titles are not to be assigned to the authors themselves; they were prefixed by others, and probably date from the period when the four Gospels were so collected together as to form one whole. And it is a safe assumption that those who prefixed them regarded, and meant to indicate, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John as authors of the Gospels so named<sup>2</sup>. Whether the verdict thus pronounced was well founded is quite another matter, and it is the business of students of Christian history to apply modern and approved tests.

To turn from such preliminary considerations to our Gospel. While the first three Gospels are 'sister-works,' it stands, as all admit, in a distinct category, by itself apart, and not only because of its position in the Canon but for other reasons<sup>3</sup> it is more frequently termed the 'Fourth Gospel' in the diction of Biblical research. And the subject to be approached and provisionally determined in this chapter is one which hinges on the question of its approximate date.

There are two extreme limits beyond which there is no need to travel in our search.

First; in the eyes of Irenaeus all four Gospels are Holy Scripture. Judging from the manner of his allusions, the rank thus acquired by them, however gradually, had ceased to be a novelty in the period marked by his literary activities<sup>4</sup>; and the inference

<sup>1</sup> So Jülicher.

<sup>2</sup> The word *κατά* might mean 'as used by,' or 'as taught by,' or imply direct authorship. The latter meaning is the one to be adopted. See Volkmar (*Die Evangelien*, p. ix f.), who has some caustic remarks on the subject.

<sup>3</sup> To avoid committals in respect to authorship, etc.

<sup>4</sup> Irenaeus, a native of Asia Minor, was born *ca.* A.D. 135–142. He may have paid several visits to Rome, but the scene of his chief activities lay in Gaul; a presbyter of the Church of Lyons he became its Bishop *ca.* A.D. 178: