

NEW WORK ON ST JOHN'S GOSPEL

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TWO groups of Christian scholars have met recently—one at Oxford, the other at Louvain—to consider the Gospel of St John; and the papers read at both meetings are now published.¹ The English group was mostly Anglican, the Continental one (French, Belgian and Dutch, but using the French language) was Catholic; but this difference only appears obviously in two or three of the contributions to the English volume. Together these books are a striking witness to contemporary interest in the most sublime of Christian documents. This interest is particularly keen just now for several reasons including, besides a general stimulus coming from the Qumrân discoveries, the recent publication of an important new manuscript of the fourth Gospel² and, in the field of Johannine theology, Dr C. H. Dodd's great work, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (1953). It is in this theological field that the books we are reviewing make their chief contribution. The Catholic volume in particular offers some really distinguished pieces of biblical theology; indeed it is only fair to say, and one may say this without any *parti pris*, that of these two books the one that carries an *imprimatur* is by far the more important. The English work is relatively slight in scope and quality.

To assess so much and such various material, comprising the findings and self-questionings and judgments, whether tentative or conclusive, of some of the best biblical scholars and exegetes alive today, is a task that might test an expert reviewer; and this reviewer is no expert. But two things may be attempted: to give the general drift (for there is one—or rather two) common to both

1 *Studies in the Fourth Gospel*. Edited by F. L. Cross (Mowbray, 12s. 6d.). *L'Évangile de Jean. Études et Problèmes*. (Desclée de Brouwer, n.p.). Foreword and concluding chapter by F. M. Braun, O.P. The *Studies* contain lectures given at the Fourth Theology and Ministry Convention which met at Oxford in September 1956 under the presidency of the Bishop of Oxford. *L'Évangile de Jean* represents the work of the eighth of the 'Journées bibliques de Louvain' and was published in 1958. It contains an ample international bibliography of recent work on St John. The English book gives a short list of works available in English.

2 V. Martin, *Papyrus Bodmer II, Évangile de Jean*, cc. 1-14, Cologny-Genève, 1956; and cf., in the French book under review, 'Un nouveau Codex de papyrus du IV^e Évangile', pp. 59-60.

books; and to pick out and briefly characterize the major particular contributions. The former task is facilitated by the admirable editing of the Catholic volume which is a model of lucid and intelligent composition: the intricately various material has been reduced to the utmost possible simplicity and clarity. Every fifty pages or so the reader's efforts are rewarded with a page or two of summary, while the whole book is finally recapitulated in ten beautifully clear pages by Père Braun, who also contributes the Foreword and one chapter of synthesis on the background to the Gospel. When the French combine their taste for logical order with genuine learning and a sensitive awareness of detail, what supremely good pedagogues they are.

In general, then, these books (but, I repeat, the French one far the more thoroughly) work over two subjects or sets of subjects: the Jewish first-century background to St John and the particular theological vision contained within his Gospel. This vision is analysed in terms of three main themes to which the contributors are always returning: the progressive forward movement of St John's narrative towards the 'hour' of Christ, his glorification by the Father through the 'uplifting' on the cross (e.g. 12, 23-33; 17, 1); then this glory itself; and thirdly, this glory as shared by the Christian, here and now, in a 'realized eschatology,' as the presence in us, already, of the Messianic kingdom and so a certain share in the Son of God's victory over sin (hence the 'sinlessness' of the Christian as declared, paradoxically, in 1 John 3, 9).

So the approach is alternately either chiefly historical, exploring the time-context and setting of John's Gospel, or chiefly theological, aimed at elucidating his thought in itself, directly, as a medium of divine revelation. Of course the two methods interweave and co-operate. The chief focus of interest of the historical approach at present—and notably in the Catholic work—is first-century Judaism, with the Qumrân texts under the spotlight. And the trend of present research is more and more to relate St John, as P. H. Menoud says (p. 23), to the 'milieu palestinien' or to a 'cercle chrétien originaire de Palestine'; it is to root St John firmly in the first century and in his own race. For the origin of most of the material assimilated and transformed by John there is no need to look beyond the boundaries of first-century Israel. This is not crudely to exclude all other influences, but only to acknowledge the direction along which the bulk of the evidence is at present

converging. This Jewish terrain is emerging as more 'hellenisé' than it used to be considered; and currents of heterodox Judaism are discernible to which G. Quispel (followed by P. H. Menoud and, more tentatively, Père Braun) allows the name 'pre-Gnostic' (p. 198). Thus the contrast which used to be drawn so sharply between Judaism and Hellenism—with St John explained largely in terms of the latter—is breaking down. It is no longer difficult to see the author of the fourth Gospel as a Palestinian Jew of the first century. A modest conclusion, perhaps, but as the Dead Sea scrolls are more and more deciphered, further results in this direction may be expected.

But most of us are perhaps more interested in the relations between St John and the other New Testament writers. This subject—including that of the unity of authorship of the Johannine writings—gets less attention here than does the non-Christian Jewish background or the more purely Hellenistic affinities, real or supposed; though on this latter point Dr Kilpatrick's attack on the thesis—which Dr C. H. Dodd has supported with his authority—that would interpret John through the *Hermetica* should be mentioned (*Studies*, pp. 36 seq.). As to the Synoptists, the only study here of their connections with St John is one by Mgr Cerfaux, on the 'Johannine Logion' in Matthew (11, 25-30 = Luke 10, 21-22). Mgr Cerfaux argues compellingly that this text has no literary connection with St John at all; it is 'solidement ancré et bien en place dans la tradition synoptique'. The line connecting John with the apostolic *kerygma* appears curiously independent of other first-century Christian writing. More or less in this connection again is Père Boismard's brilliant rehandling of the hypothesis of an Aramaic original of St John's Gospel (pp. 41-57). His method, following and extending the work of the English scholar M. Black, is to examine the textual variants in the oldest versions of St John (Latin, Syriac, Ethiopic, etc.): and while admitting that the thesis of an Aramaic original has not yet acquired 'droit de cité' (Lagrange, it will be remembered, would not admit it; nor does Dodd), Père Boismard evidently thinks that he is not on a wild-goose chase. And Père Braun, though cautious as usual, seems to agree with him.

To turn to more theological matters, the outstanding papers of this type are Professor W. Grossouw's 'La Glorification du Christ'—with which should be read Dr U. E. Simon's 'Eternal

Life in the Fourth Gospel' (*Studies*, pp. 97 sqq.)—, Père de la Potterie's study of 1 John 3, 6–9 (the sinlessness of the Christian) and the Abbé Van den Bussche's profoundly interesting paper (the longest in the book and one of the most remarkable) on the 'Structure' of John 1–12. Grossouw's analysis is a good example of how much can be got out of St John by a scrupulous attention to shifts of meaning within the terms he uses, in this case the word *doxa*. It is an interpretation of John by John, and so an attempt finally—and most rewardingly—to define his 'originality'. And the stress is laid, eventually, where all the other writers in this volume lay it, who treat of St John's theology: 'l'originalité de la vision johannique est donc de considérer, avec une logique très poussée, la vie et la mission de Jésus en fonction de sa fin, de placer dès le début l'existence du Christ sous le signe de la *doxa*, qui ne fut révélée aux disciples que par la résurrection, l'ascension et l'envoi de l'Esprit. C'est ainsi qu'on peut parler d'une conception *eschatologique* conséquemment soutenue'. And it is thus too that the Church is part of the Evangelist's vision; for her task is to perpetuate and extend on earth the glory of Jesus, as this was revealed to the Apostles and received by them. And she does this 'par la force de l'Esprit et en vertu de son envoi en ce monde; elle le fera, précisément, *en n'étant pas de ce monde*' (my italics). Those who belong to Christ 'possèdent donc déjà sa *doxa*'. And a last, pregnant, paragraph compares St John's conception of the glory of Christ with the Synoptists' and St Paul's. But the stress on the believer's share, here and now, in the glory of the Incarnate Word raises problems which, as expressed particularly in that astonishing passage in 1 John (3, 6–9), make us turn to P. de la Potterie's study of this text (pp. 160–77). This contribution, so calm and balanced and penetrating, has a kind of classic finality. It does not, of course, pretend to say the last word on that text, but as far as it goes—which is a long way—it is an extraordinarily satisfying statement. One cannot do justice to it here. The Old Testament and the Apocryphal writings, the Qumrân texts and the New Testament are in turn drawn upon to set the text against the background of Jewish and Christian eschatology. But all this is only a preliminary to what P. de la Potterie most wants to say. This comes with his analysis of the two crucial terms in verse 9, *sperma* and *menein*. He takes 'God's seed' to mean, directly, the word of God, the truth given to the baptized, in submission

to which and in the degree that they submit to it, they are delivered from sin, are 'led by the Spirit', to use St Paul's phrase (Galatians 5, 16 is a striking parallel to 1 John 3, 9). A comparison, then, of St John's two characteristic ways of using the term *menein* helps to correlate his declaration of Christian sinlessness with his apparent self-contradiction in 1 John 1, 8. St John has an 'exhortative' use of *menein* according to which the believer's supernatural state of union with the Son and the Father and deliverance from sin is conditional upon obedience to two commandments, 'toujours les mêmes: demeurer (*menein*) dans la parole, demeurer dans la charité' (cf. 8, 31-32; 15, 9). On the other hand there is a 'declarative' use of *menein* which simply states the fact that God's word *is* in us, as though nothing more remained to be received or done—e.g. 1 John 2, 14; 2 John 2. St John, it is clear, adopts alternatively two points of view: the 'human', pastoral standpoint whence he sees all Christians as liable to sin; and the 'divine' standpoint whence he contemplates the supernatural reality, 'de la parole de Dieu qui, en fait, demeure en nous, avec sa force permanente de sanctification'. Stated thus briefly and baldly the distinction may seem a trifle obvious, even banal; and certainly this deceptively quiet-toned study requires a very careful reading if its power is to be felt. Its main point, I think, lies in its identification of *sperma*, 'seed', in our passage, with God's word or truth; but to see what this has to do with sinlessness one must grasp St John's 'conception dynamique et très biblique de la parole et de la vie'. This intimate linking of life and *truth* is perhaps particularly cheering to a Dominican reader; and one may be grateful to the Jesuit exegete who has so compellingly shown fresh historical reasons for taking it as the key to one of the sublimest and also one of the most difficult passages in the New Testament.

I have already noted the particular interest of the Abbé Van den Bussche's long chapter on the 'structure' of St John's Gospel, chapters 1 to 12. The first stress here is on the unity of the Gospel, and this is a point on which nearly everyone now seems agreed. The last important critic to treat John more or less as a compiler of bits and pieces was R. Bultmann; who, according to Père Braun, seems to be now 'dépassé'—thanks, among others, to C. H. Dodd. But if all, or nearly all, are agreed that St John is an author in the fullest sense, and his work a very compact organic

whole, the disputes continue over the precise interior shape or pattern of his work. The solution proposed by Van den Bussche—a basic two-fold pattern: 1, 19–12, 50 and 13–20—is powerfully argued (against, among others, Père Boismard) and will probably gain a wide acceptance. After a consideration of 1, 19–51, as introductory to the account of our Lord's public career, the eleven following chapters are viewed as falling into three sections, respectively that of the Signs (cc. 2–4), that of the Works (cc. 5–10) and that of the final march to Jerusalem (cc. 11–12). The distinction between Signs and Works may seem odd, since both terms denote miracles; but it is intelligible and convenient from the point of view of the dramatic progress within the Gospel narrative, as the Abbé makes us see this. 'Dramatic', in fact, is the right word to indicate, in a general way, the quality that his analysis most evidently brings out. This is partly an effect of the critic's own style; or at least this style—terse, rapid, energetic and not devoid of irony—is admirably suited to its task. There is a controlled excitement in it that springs right out of the subject-matter and communicates itself to the reader. One has the same sort of impression here as one gets from first-class literary criticism; as when the internal logic of some great poem is expertly traced out. But then, of course, this *is* literary criticism; and quite appropriately if, and to the extent that, the fourth Gospel is a work of literary art. And that it is literary art, in a strong sense of the term, the Abbé shows, I think, very convincingly indeed; though to show this was no part of his expressed purpose. He shows us the massive and subtle construction of St John's Gospel, with its great series of carefully selected, closely interrelated, intimately contemplated scenes. And through it all moves that single tremendous Figure, absolutely self-consistent; the Lord of life who marched to death, and through death to life.