

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

CONSIDERATIONS ON SOME RECENT CRITICISM OF THE FOURTH GOSPEL

IN many books written during the first thirty years of this century it was assumed that recent research had proved with more or less certainty that the Fourth Gospel could not be regarded as a historical document. It was said to belong to the "library of devotion" and its spiritual value was generally freely admitted. Writers who, like the late Bishop Gore, regarded it as historical and even as the work of an Apostle, were inclined to pass lightly over its evidence with regard to the earthly life of Jesus, in order to find, in the Synoptic Gospels, ground which, to some extent, was common to them and to their opponents. This they did in the hope of producing some agreement.

But this renunciation did little good. The more extreme critics replied by treating the matter peculiar to the First Gospel as the most unreliable stratum of the Synoptic record; by treating the matter peculiar to the Third Gospel as largely due to the "artistic" capacities of its author. Any passages in Q or the Second Gospel which did not fall in with the theory that Jesus was a man with all the prejudices and more than a common share of the fanaticism of His time were attributed to the "creative memory" of the Disciples after the Resurrection, or, at best, to the experience that they had of salvation through Christ and to the influence of His Spirit on the prophets or in meetings for worship. This was especially the case with such passages as Matt. xi. 25, 27; Luke x. 21, 22; Mark ii. 5-12; Mark xiii. 32; Mark xiv. 62.

Even this drastic treatment of the historical sources of Christianity was not sufficient. Critics were found who said that all we knew for certain about Jesus was that he was a political agitator who was put to death by Pontius Pilate and whose body was thrown, after death, into the common pit reserved for the burial of criminals.

But this afforded such an unsatisfactory explanation for beliefs that undoubtedly underlie the acknowledged Epistles of St. Paul, that a further step had to be taken. It was supposed that the Second Gospel was produced "in some populous corner of Rome" to satisfy the curiosity of the readers of the

Pauline Epistles about the Divinity whose worship was presupposed in them. "The ineffable epic of Paul has become an artificial legend which is believed to have taken place in Palestine forty years before the destruction of Jerusalem. The mysterious servant of God has become the victim of Pontius Pilate . . . Jesus is materialized clumsily enough. . . . The combined efforts of imaginative Jews and mystic Greeks gave a god to the modern world. He will pursue his career much longer and on a much higher level than all former gods. He is beautiful, strong and kind, because so many men have given him the best of themselves. The generations have kept him alive, aggrandized him and exalted him. He dominates them, as a nameless monument dominates the dead men who constructed it" (P. L. Couchoud, *Mystère de Jésus*, pp. 98, 101f.) It is useless to make concessions to a method of criticism that will take refuge in such a paradox as this.

If it be urged that the critics who would reduce Jesus to a myth are extremists who have but a small following and whose objections do not merit serious attention, it must nevertheless be set down to their credit that they have discovered the weak point in the position of the extreme Liberal Protestants and Eschatologists. They have pointed out that a strict Jew like St. Paul could never have applied to a crucified Galilean carpenter scriptural expressions only properly applicable to God. "Is it," asks Couchoud, "of a workman like this that Paul said 'Whosoever shall call on his name shall be saved', or 'Every knee shall bow before him' when the Scripture said this of God? Did this tent-maker attribute to a carpenter the work of the six days of creation? Has he confounded a man with Jahve?" (op. cit., p. 85).

Such critics point out that Christianity could not have commenced with the apotheosis of a man, for it was Christianity that made this idea for ever impossible. "Why," they ask, "should men have died rather than accept the apotheosis of an emperor when they were prepared to substitute for it that of one of his subjects?" (op. cit., pp. 87, 113). However little we may agree with the explanation of the origin of Christianity proposed by the mythical school, we are not justified in passing over the objections which it urges to the explanation of the origin of Christianity given by more moderate critics, as if they were of no importance. If the more moderate critics cannot

answer these objections (and there is no evidence that they can), their solution of the problem must also be decisively rejected also. Harnack could say that he would rather reject all the evidence of Christianity than admit the supernatural (quoted in D'Arcy, *Nature of Belief*, p. 160); and the sooner it is recognised that the difference between criticism of this kind and the traditional attitude towards Christianity is fundamental the better.

We shall, therefore, make no further apology for reopening the question of the historical value of the Fourth Gospel. In his *Biblical Essays* (first published in 1893) Bishop Lightfoot wrote: "The genuineness of St. John's Gospel is the centre of the position of those who uphold the historical truth of the record of our Lord Jesus Christ given us in the New Testament. Hence the attacks of the opponents of revealed religion are concentrated upon it" (p. 47). Now many writers who certainly cannot be called opponents of revealed religion either put the question on one side, in the vain hope of conciliating their opponents, or say that it does not matter who the author of the Gospel was or even accept the "critical" opinion that it is the work of a "theologian", a mere book of devotion, and not historical in the usual sense of the word.

Such a hammer of the Modernists as Sir Edwyn Hoskyns in his *Riddle of the New Testament*, treats the contents of the Gospel as mainly "theological" and asks how it is that "no living scholar can confidently claim any part of it, as it stands, to be definitely historical?" This is a curious application of the principle that a living dog is better than a dead lion. Why the fact that a man was living in 1931 should make his opinion prevail over that of men who were alive between that date and, say, 1880, is not obvious, unless some decisive discovery relating to the authorship and character of the Gospel was made between these dates. But in fact no such discovery has been made. The only change which has taken place is in the manner in which such questions are regarded. This is subjective, and that it may well prove to be ephemeral is shown by the position taken up with regard to it in some recent books written by men who once believed that the Gospel contained little matter that was historical.

The method of counting heads is much favoured by those who desire a short and easy way of discrediting arguments for the apostolic authorship or for the historical importance of the

Gospel. But, in itself, it has no more value than the question: "Have any of the Rulers or of the Pharisees believed on him?"

The present position is that Dr. Bernard, Dr. Temple and Dr. Strachan maintain that the recollections of the Apostle John are behind that Gospel, although he was not the actual writer of the book. Dr. Raven is almost inclined to believe that he was the author and certainly believes that he was the inspirer of the book. In answer to those who say that it does not matter who wrote the Gospel, so long as it contains something that may be regarded as spiritually true, he says: "If we are to estimate its value, it will make a vast difference whether the author's personal equation is the natural result of years of remembrance, or a sophisticated attempt to accommodate Christianity to philosophy, or to produce a fictitious apologetic, or to construct an esoteric allegory." His general conclusion is that the Gospel is the work of an eyewitness—"the story of its author's discipleship, love's memory of Love incarnate, with the mark of a great devotion writ plainly upon it" (*Jesus and the Gospel of Love*, p. 227 and *passim*).

But the most remarkable thing about recent books on the Fourth Gospel is the way in which they ignore the external evidence for its authorship. Many attempts have been made to refute this evidence, and it must be admitted that it falls short of what we might desire, although it is stronger than that which can be offered for the authorship of any other book in the New Testament. But the method of ignoring it seems to have been much more successful in producing a general belief that the Apostle was not the actual author of the Gospel, than the attempt to refute it has ever been. Sir E. Hoskyns contents himself with saying that it is "wholly elusive" (op. cit., p. 282). Archbishop Temple dismisses it very briefly and regards the "Elder" as the actual writer of the Gospel and as a sort of amanuensis of the Apostle, basing this theory principally on the ground that the man who wrote the Second and Third Epistles was the writer of the Gospel and he called himself "the Elder". Archbishop Bernard treats the matter at greater length, but also decides that the "Elder" was the amanuensis, and a good deal more than the amanuensis, of the Apostle. As there is no good evidence to connect "John the Elder" with Ephesus and not much that he ever existed, these judgments seem unduly positive and summary.

The main objection to the apostolic authorship of the Gospel is undoubtedly to be found in its contents. It is urged by some who do not even try to refute Bishop Lightfoot's and Bishop Westcott's arguments for the apostolic authorship that these men did not fairly face the difficulty that one of the Twelve would not have produced his story of the life of Christ in this form. There is some truth in this. There are certain fantastic theories for the production of the Gospel by a visionary who was so bemused with his visions that he did not know and did not even care whether what he wrote in a historical form was history or the product of a "creative memory", which had not been brought forward in the time of these great men; but there is little doubt that if such theories had been brought forward, they would have been adequately dealt with.

The strange thing is that most of these theories have now been quietly dropped; and, in a book like the last edition of Dr. R. H. Strachan's *The Fourth Gospel* (S.C.M. Press, 1941) many of the objections to the apostolic authorship of the book from its contents have been answered or set on one side as of no importance.

Whereas it used to be urged that the Johannine Jesus was drawn like a God walking among men with no human weakness or ignorance, now Dr. Strachan regards the Johannine portrait as intended to set the human characteristics of Jesus in at least as clear a light as His divine characteristics, as an answer to Docetism. The divine and human elements in Jesus are "naïvely" set side by side.

"The Divinity of Jesus, as also in the First Epistle, is never stated in the form of a dogma. It is His humanity that is stated dogmatically" (op. cit., p. 5). Historical fact is important to the Evangelist, because he believed that Jesus came in the flesh. Even the story about Lazarus is not to be regarded as invention, because this would have played into the hands of the Docetists (p. 29f.). "If we begin by assuming that theological interpretations of Jesus always lie under the suspicion of forsaking the firm ground of factual history, it is useless to pursue the question further" (p. 36). "This Evangelist speaks of a human personality, Jesus Christ. Like all the Evangelists, he also believes that Jesus is the Son of God, a Divine Being. He never speaks of Him as One whose person and mission must be interpreted in terms of a unique relationship to God, simply

because the orthodox tradition demands it; nor even solely because this tradition is verified in his own experience and in the consequences it has had for the world. This Evangelist never behaves as though he were imposing an interpretation on the facts of Jesus' life and teaching. He always speaks as though the facts themselves had a voice and a purpose in their own precise historical situation " (p. 37).

This is excellent; but what has become of the old dogma which so many "competent scholars" have reiterated for so many years past that this Gospel is not only different from the Synoptic Gospels in its presentation of the life of Christ, but flatly contradicts them?

One would expect that a writer who has so well disposed of the main objection to the apostolic authorship of the Gospel would at least consider the external evidence for it at some length, but this he does not do. He says that the author is clearly a Palestinian Jew (pp. 47, 50), and has a curious suggestion that the "other disciple" who took Peter into the palace of the High Priest may have been a member of the guard, or even its commander, and may also be the disguise under which the Evangelist introduces himself into his Gospel, as Mark is supposed to have done in the figure of the young man who was seized by the guard in the Garden of Gethsemane (p. 85).

Dr. Strachan says that the external evidence for the authorship of the Gospel is "very indecisive" up to A.D. 180, and that there are signs that the apostolic authorship of the book was questioned in the Church during this interval. He admits that Irenaeus accepts the Gospel as the work of the Apostle, which some critics will on no account admit, or, if they do admit it, they say that he was either mistaken or allowed himself to make what he knew was a false statement in the interests of orthodoxy. He does not say that whatever reliable evidence Irenaeus had by direct tradition came to him long before 180 when he was in Asia as a boy, and that, if the value of this evidence is questioned on account of his supposed extreme youth, this is neutralised by his appeal to the recollection of an undoubtedly older companion in his letter to Florinus (*Euseb. H.E. V. 20*).

Dr. Strachan says that Justin was acquainted with the Gospel, "but his infrequent quotation of it has led some to think that he does not regard it as a work that was generally

recognized as authoritative" (p. 88). He says nothing about Tatian, Justin's pupil, who included the Fourth Gospel in his Diatessaron as quite on the same level of authority as the other three, nor does he remark that the only works that we have by Justin are apologetic works, one addressed to the Roman Government and the other to the Jews. Quotations from the Gospels would have little weight with the people for whom these books were written. If we only had the Apology of Tertullian, we might assume that he set small value on this Gospel or even did not know of it, but, as we have many of the books that he wrote for Christians, we know how absurd such a conclusion from partial evidence would have been. Years before Justin went to Rome subjects peculiar to the Fourth Gospel were used by members of the Roman aristocracy to decorate their tombs.

We have already noticed that Dr. Strachan has said that the apostolic authorship of the Gospel was questioned before 180.¹ The only evidence that he gives for this is that some unknown persons thought it necessary to insert xxi. 24 because doubt was felt at an early date as to the *apostolic* authorship of the Gospel. In order to support this theory he has to assume that when these persons said that the "Beloved Disciple" wrote "these things", they were referring to the whole Gospel (p. 88). But on page 339 he says: "If, on the other hand, we come to the conclusion on other grounds, as we must, that the Beloved Disciple is not the author of the Gospel, we are driven to accept the former interpretation, and to take *these things* as referring to the story recorded in verses 15-22."

Which of these interpretations does this author expect us to receive? If we take the second, the evidence for the supposed objection to the apostolic authorship of the Gospel vanishes, unless he is prepared to revive our old friends, the Alogoi, and to establish them at Ephesus at the end of the first century as a band of "Old Believers" who did not approve of the novelties propounded by the Fourth Evangelist, according to the theory of Dr. Streeter.

It may be noted here that Dr. Strachan gets over the difficulty of accounting for the reception of the Fourth Gospel at

¹ It is difficult to understand why, at so early a date, any one should have wished to ascribe the Gospel to an Apostle, if it was written by a close friend of an Apostle and under his inspiration. The Church was satisfied with Gospels said to be written by Mark and Luke; why should it not have been satisfied with the "great Unknown", and why did he remain unknown?

Ephesus, in spite of the difference between it and the Synoptists, of which Dr. Streeter has painted such a lively picture in *The Four Gospels* (pp. 416, 418), by supposing that even the Second Gospel was not known at Ephesus when the Fourth Gospel was published (p. 28). But this does nothing to explain why it was accepted by the Church at large.

Dr. Strachan refuses to accept the explanation of John xxi. 24 offered by Dr. Bernard, namely, that "wrote" means "caused to be written" (p. 339), but he supposes that this verse and those that go before it imply that the Beloved Disciple was dead, and he interprets the words "witnesseth these things" as referring to "an abiding spiritual influence". "The facts come from the Beloved Disciple himself, *who beareth witness of these things* and had also made a written record of them" (p. 340).

Why then must we come to the conclusion that the Beloved Disciple is *not* the author of the Gospel (p. 339)? The only clear reason that Dr. Strachan gives is that, if we regard the Beloved Disciple as the author, "the terms of such a reference can hardly be called modest. It is a much simpler interpretation to suppose that the author of the Gospel is referring to someone other than himself" (pp. 82f.). Canon Streeter also allowed this superficial objection as sufficient excuse for setting on one side all the evidence that there is for the apostolic authorship of the Gospel. Yet it offered no difficulty to Lightfoot, Westcott or even Sanday, in his pre-modernist days (*Criticism of the Fourth Gospel*, p. 80). Surely this objection is a matter of opinion and not of scholarship.

Dr. Strachan says, quite rightly, that the real basis on which the authorship of the Gospel must be decided is the internal evidence, as the external evidence falls short of complete proof. But he goes on to say that the internal evidence "points to a very close connexion of the work with the Apostle, but strongly supports the position that the actual work itself should be ascribed to a non-apostolic author" (p. 88). For this statement he brings forward no strong evidence at all, except his objection that the author would not have spoken of himself as the Beloved Disciple.

He supposes that the Disciple had a friend (he drops the idea of Canon Streeter's little boy who saw Jesus on the cross and who had a brief connection with the Beloved Disciple) to whom he may have "owed his own soul". We are told that

this friend was the Evangelist and that he claimed the special authority of the Beloved Disciple but we are not told where he did this. Fortunately, "inasmuch as the personality of this disciple remained an integral part of his own life and experience, a control was set on the free creative activity of his own mind" (p. 84).

"Nevertheless, the Gospel owes its essential form and style to the writer's capacity for imaginative reflection" (p. 31). The dramatic element is very apparent in the stories of the woman of Samaria and the man born blind. There are few characters in the Marcan stories. This is the mark of a popular tale. "On the other hand various characters appear in the Lazarus story. All this is evidence that the literary mind of the Evangelist has been at work on a tradition transmitted to him in simpler popular form" (p. 32). What has become of his close contact with the Apostle and the control which it is supposed to have exercised on his "free creative activity"?

On p. 273 we are told that the last discourses are not to be regarded as free compositions of the Evangelist. "The testimony of the centuries to the place which they have taken in the experience of Christians, makes it plain that readers have felt that they were listening to the voice of Christ Himself." But on p. 277 we are told that both the discourses and the prayer are to be "regarded as the utterance of a great Christian prophet". It is not clear whether this prophet is the Evangelist or some one else. In any case what has become of the close connection with the Beloved Disciple and his reminiscences and even his supposed writings?

On xix. 35 the commentary says that the first time the word "he" is used it refers to the Beloved Disciple and that the second time that it is used (to translate *ἐκεῖνος*) it refers to Christ. It is also said that in verse 34 "witness is also given by the Evangelist" (p. 322). What this means we really do not know.

The whole matter is summed up in these words. "Some unknown genius has, for the first time in the literature of our religion, both consciously and unconsciously used his God-given power of artistry to fashion a portrait of Jesus and His ministry, suitable to the needs of the contemporary Graeco-Roman world for the expression of his own faith. His own faith, which is the faith of his Church, is his inspiration" (p. 32).

We do not know what to make of all these contradictions and improbabilities. Why posit "an unknown genius" when a suitable author for the Gospel is acknowledged to have existed and to have had a very close connection with it? Why imagine that such a book was produced "for the first time (and apparently also for the last time) in the literature of our religion" by the more or less unconscious artistry of the author, when it is not impossible for a Christian to believe that it was produced by one of Christ's Apostles under the guidance of His Spirit whom He had promised to send for this very purpose? If the Evangelist's own faith was the faith of the Church, why should the Church have hesitated to accept the Gospel?

All these difficulties seem to follow from a refusal to accept a well supported and perfectly reasonable tradition that the Gospel is the work of the Apostle John in his old age. The author has cleared away so many of the difficulties that critics have raised against this ascription on account of the content of the Gospel, that his refusal to go a step further and accept the universal tradition of the Church is very difficult to understand. It is still more difficult to understand why he and so many other recent writers mention the external evidence for the apostolic authorship of the Gospel in such a cursory manner and in such an unfavourable light.

Stockport.

H. P. V. NUNN.