

## THE JOHANNINE AUTHORSHIP OF APOCALYPSE, GOSPEL AND EPISTLES

The above title suggests a scholarly examination of the subject, but the writer of these notes has no claim to be a scholar. The ideas he presents are merely thoughts which have come to him in the peace and quiet of a country convent chaplaincy. Perhaps they may encourage other non-experts to meditate on subjects usually left to those possessing a high standard of professional knowledge.

By general acknowledgment the books attributed to St John were written in the following sequence: first, the Apocalypse; next, the Gospel, and last of all the three epistles. I hope to show that the unity of authorship throws light on the books themselves.

John, then, had seen his Master in heavenly glory, a sight so overwhelming that even the Beloved Apostle fell as one dead at the Sacred Feet. Such an experience, repeated many times in the course of his prayer-visions, must have left an unfading impression on his mind, so that when he came to write his gospel he invented nothing but did see his Lord aureoled in glory all the time.

The Fourth Gospel is called the Gospel of Glory. In it there is no description of the Transfiguration, apart from a possible reference in the text: "We beheld His glory", but throughout we are shewn a transfigured Christ, as though the glory on the Mount was His normal state. Now, John alone begins his Gospel in heaven. Not to Nazareth or Bethlehem are we taken, but to the Trinity in heaven. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Next, we are told how this Word created all things; and so to the coming of the Creator-Word into the world. He had made: "The Word was made flesh. . . ."

Again, John consciously models his first chapter on *Genesis*—"in the beginning". I suggest that here we have the influence of his apocalyptic vision of the Woman in glory with her Child, and how they were assailed by the great dragon. This scene of those three may well have suggested to John another grouping of the same three in the account of the Fall. If so, how natural that John should remember the opening words of *Genesis* and repeat them, the more so as *Genesis* described how God created, and John will tell how all things were created by the Word, and that nothing was made that He did not create.

Further, the vision of the sun-clad Woman may have influenced John to describe how it was that this Woman of destiny, *the Woman*

of Scripture, was the providential instrument for calling forth from her Son the first manifestation of His power at the Cana marriage feast. Another link between the Apocalypse and the Fourth Gospel may be seen in its account of the Crucifixion, in which Mary's place at the foot of the Cross and the proclamation of her motherhood are narrated. Now, John had seen the heavenly vision of the Mother and Child, a vision which may well have had for him a double meaning: Mary and her Child in the one case, and the Church and her children in the other. John knew we are all members of Christ, and therefore his mind would have an easy passage to the thought of Mary's universal motherhood. Eager, then, would he be to tell how that motherhood was heralded by the Son Himself from the pulpit of the Cross.

I now come to the epistles—at any rate to the first. By the time the aged apostle had written the epistles he had had time to notice growing tendencies, just as at the time of writing his gospel he had probably seen the beginnings of St Peter's supremacy being questioned, since Peter had fallen so gravely. So John, seemingly, took up his finished manuscript, with its perfect ending: "These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ . . .", and added the great story of Peter's appointment as the One Shepherd of the One flock, a story proving beyond all doubt that Peter had not been deposed—he was to feed and to rule the flock Christ had died for.

So with another matter: John in his gospel had stressed the divinity of Christ, as though he underlined in the phrase "The Word was made flesh" the name "Word". But he had lived to see the beginnings of a docetic denial of the reality of Christ's flesh, and so he wrote his first epistle with its emphasis on the word "flesh" in the same phrase. "This is the test by which God's Spirit is recognised; every spirit which acknowledges Jesus Christ as having come to us in human flesh has God for its author" (Knox tr.). Indeed, the Apostle begins the epistle by affirming he has "handled", as his eyes have seen, this Incarnate Word. So the epistle helps us to understand the gospel. I think, too, St John wished also to stress the social aspect of charity. In his gospel he had heard and told of the promulgation of the New Commandment in the Upper Room, when the Sacrament of Unity and social communion was instituted: in the epistle he labours the necessity of this charity being communal, "We know we have passed from death to life because we love the brethren"; "if we love one another, God abideth in us". Text after text shows this anxiety to supplement the gospel, in which he had emphasised the personal aspect of religion. John had no need to make retractions like an Augustine, but he certainly gives new and additional stresses, based,

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no doubt, on the experience of a long life and all that had taught him of tendencies within the Christian fellowship.

May these few thoughts encourage others to explore the Scriptures however slight their technical equipment to do so.

ARTHUR VALENTIN

*St John's Lodge,  
Kiln Green, Twyford, Berks*