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CRITICAL HANDLING OF THE EXTERNAL EVIDENCE FOR THE FOURTH GOSPEL.

By the Rev. H. P. V. NUNN, M.A.

IN recent years no great progress seems to have been made towards the solution of the problem of the authorship and historic value of the Fourth Gospel, if one is to judge from Professor Howard's book, "The Fourth Gospel in Recent Criticism" or from the Supplement to Peake's Commentary on the Bible.

In both these books Professor Howard states that recent investigations and discoveries have disposed of the theory that the Gospel is a production of the middle of the second century and that it proceeded from an Alexandrian or Hellenistic source. This is a step in the right direction which renders a good many theories obsolete.

The general fidelity of its author to a Jewish background which is only suitable to the first century is also established, and there is even a tendency to allow that there is a considerable element of factual history in the Gospel.

But, apart from these points, the feeling that is experienced after reading the different theories advanced by critics and enumerated in these books is one of bewilderment. The only point on which the majority are agreed is that the Gospel could not have been written by the son of Zebedee, although a number of the more sober critics consider it possible that his recollections may have done something to inspire it.

The external evidence is said to be "indecisive," but the chief difficulty is found in the content of the Gospel.

"Nothing," says Professor Howard, "can remove the difficulty raised by the self-revelation of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel" (*Supplement*, p. 30).

It is stated that the best solution of the problem is that "the Evangelist uses early Palestinian sources, but edits them with considerable freedom" (*Supplement*, p. 30).

In plain language this means that the Gospel contains a good deal of imagination and little history.

The difficulty alleged above as decisive by itself against the apostolic authorship is that the representation given in the Gospel of the course that Jesus followed in revealing Himself to men cannot be made to fit in with the quite recent theory of the "Messianic Secret."

But in another part of the Supplement Professor Howard states that Form Criticism has shaken the confidence of the critics in the completeness of the order of events set forth in the Second Gospel, while Dr. Vincent Taylor writes, "One happy result of this development is that it is no longer possible to treat the Marcan outline as a cast-iron scheme into which everything that cannot be inserted must be treated as unhistorical" (*op. cit.*, p. 29).

One wonders if this "result" of criticism is regarded as happy by all critics, for it plays havoc with the theories of those

Who, leaving John, Luke, Matthew and the rest,
Read Mark, but did not inwardly digest.

If so many "results" of criticism must be regarded as swept away by this new "result," what confidence can we have that other "results," obtained by methods that are essentially the same, will be more permanent?

Dr. Taylor, however adds, "But this advantage is altogether outweighed by the more serious consequence that, if this hypothesis is true, no connected account of the life and ministry of Jesus can be given." This confession of defeat on the part of a body of men who have tried so long and with such confidence to solve the problem of the historical character and authorship of the Gospels by relying almost entirely on internal evidence, may well turn our attention once more to the external evidence.

Critics have been trying for a long time with curious unanimity to persuade us that the question of the authorship of the Gospels is of very little importance, even to believers.

Yet they have dealt with the external evidence, especially that for the Fourth Gospel, in a way which shows that they have an uneasy feeling that, unless this is disposed of, their theories are by no means securely established.

Some have even gone so far as to deny the importance of documentary evidence altogether. In Dr. Sparrow Simpson's book on the Resurrection (p. 432), Harnack is quoted as saying, "Documents, when all is said, to what do they amount?"

The confusion that prevails among critics of the Fourth Gospel certainly seems to be the result of an attitude of mind which regards tradition as of no importance, documentary evidence as of very little importance and critical sagacity as of the highest importance.

Professor Howard himself admits that in Germany "originality rather than probability has been the guide of life, and in the desire to sustain a novel hypothesis important factors are often sacrificed, not because they are disproved, but because they are old-established."

In England, he says, "the religious value of the book is seldom out of sight." He seems to imply that this is generally so in Germany, where he states that "almost every pioneer" from England and America has gone to school.

This is serious condemnation indeed. One wonders why the opinions of a school of criticism that is admitted to act with no feeling of responsibility or reverence, but only with a desire for originality at the expense of a complete presentation of the case, should exercise such a fascination even on those who are well aware of its essential weakness.

If the Fourth Gospel were an anonymous theological treatise, like the Epistle to the Hebrews, the question of its authorship might not be important. But it purports to be a record of what Jesus said and

did, written by an eye-witness who states that he wrote to produce in other people the faith that what he had seen had produced in himself.

If the notes of time and place which are found in it are not the natural result of personal recollections, they must have been inserted to produce a fictitious verisimilitude.

Renan was quite justified in writing, "We must choose between two possibilities, either to recognize John the son of Zebedee, as the author of the Fourth Gospel, or to regard the Gospel as an apocryphal work composed by a person who wished to pass it off as the work of John, the son of Zebedee.

"There is no question here of legends, the production of the crowd, for which no one has any responsibility. A man who, to gain belief for his writings, deceives the public, not only as to his name, but also as to the value of his testimony, is not a maker of legends, he is a forger" (*Vie de Jésus*, p. 538).

The great French rationalist was too clear sighted and too straightforward to confuse his readers with vague talk about "free editing of Palestinian sources."

Even in its most extreme form, modern criticism is curiously unwilling to accept the obvious solution that the Evangelist was a forger.

Let us turn to a more recent writer. Professor Raven, who for many years had been convinced that the Fourth Gospel was a devotional treatise, the product in the main of Christian experience, writes, "If we are to estimate its value, it will make a great difference whether the author's personal equation is the 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" (*Jesus and the Gospel of Love*, p. 227).

Again, "If the Gospel is to be regarded as a poem or a devotional rhapsody, it will not help us to see God expressed in the historic Son of Man." "It will leave us predisposed to exaggerate the difference between the Christ of imagination and the Jesus whose human impact we can trace on St. Mark. Almost we are tempted to surmise that the artist who could produce so superb a revelation must himself be a more sublime spirit than his Master and that "John" and not Jesus is the revealer to us of God" (*op. cit.*, p. 285).

We may trace the development of this latter conception in three well-known critical writers :

Canon Streeter who imagines for the Evangelist a person who, when he was a child, had seen Jesus on the cross, and who, when he was a man, had been personally acquainted with the son of Zebedee and conceived a "mystic veneration" for him, is obliged to amplify these inadequate qualifications by the supposition that this person was a genius to whom "the category of development in the slow biological sense of the term does not apply" (*Four Gospels*, pp. 418, 433, 456, 457).

Dr. Jacks in the *Hibbert Journal* for 1934 would have us believe that the opinion of Dr. Martineau that "acts and words which transcend the moral level of the narrators authenticate themselves as coming

from Jesus " must now be abandoned, unless we are to do in the 20th century what the disciples did in the 1st, that is to make Jesus the object of a cult.

Bultman says that nothing need be changed in his book if the proper name " Jesus " is understood as representing the thought of the first Christian generation (Jesus, p. 17, quoted by Goguel, *Vie de Jésus*, p. 194).

We thus see that the supposition that the Fourth Gospel is not the work of an Apostle tends to lead first to the supposition that the Evangelist was an almost superhuman being, secondly, to the supposition that all the Evangelists were equal, if not superior to their Master, and thirdly, to the supposition that Jesus counted for nothing at all and that the whole credit for inventing what we call Christianity is to be given to the estimable people composing the first Christian generation whose character is so vividly described in 1 Cor. vi. 9, and Eph. ii. We must choose between the view of Dr. Raven, who describes the figure that Dr. Streeter has imagined for the author of the Fourth Gospel as " a psychological and moral monstrosity who outrages our standard of history by a device which presents to us the product of imagination and religious experience as a record of actual events " and the view that he was a man superior, not only to other men, to whom the slow category of development in the biological sense of the term universally applies, but also to Jesus Himself.

If we hold with Loisy that " The hypothesis of a romancer of genius cannot be entertained for a moment. For the editors of the Gospels did not perform the work of romancers, and they had no genius " (*A propos de l'histoire des religions*, p. 290), we are driven back on the hypothesis which is the last refuge of the " Critical " school that not only the Gospels, but the whole of the Christian faith is the product of a " Believing Community " that had only the most common-place events on which to believe.

Finally, Professor Raven says, " A man who could have written such a book as the Fourth Gospel and then added such a note as John xix. 35, is uttering what a normal man would call a lie, and a lie for which there is no discoverable motive. Again, " The more we admit the saintliness and devotion of the Evangelist, the less possible it is that he was responsible for an imposture " (*op. cit.* pp. 119, 201).

When the question is reduced to these terms, it almost ceases to be a question which scholarship alone can decide. Professor Raven appeals to the normal man : and in what follows we would appeal to him also. We have been told that the external evidence for the authorship of the Fourth Gospel is " indecisive." The force of this remark depends on what may be reasonably considered to be " decisive " in the circumstances. In a sense any evidence for the authorship of a book whose author we have not actually seen at work is indecisive—for us.

It is all a matter of degree. In the case of an ancient book when very little literature survives from the century next to its appearance we must be content with little evidence. It is to quality rather than to quantity that we must look.

But we think that our readers will agree that if any evidence does

exist, it should be treated fairly and neither set out in an incomplete form nor misrepresented.

Many of the "scholars" who dispute the apostolic authorship of the Gospel have seized with avidity upon a supposed quotation from Papias, an early second-century author whose works we only possess in minute fragments, to the effect that John the Apostle was made away with by the Jews.

This quotation is found in two late and unreliable historians called Philip and Georgius. It is quite possible that Georgius copied Philip and in any case we only know of the work of Philip from an epitomiser. Moreover, the important words are only found in one manuscript of Georgius and have every appearance of being an interpolation. But in the most important discussions of the subject which are to be found in Moffatt's *Introduction to the N.T.* and in Charles' *Commentary on the Revelation* these passages are not quoted in full and it is not made plain that one of them occurs in only one manuscript. The question is very complicated. For a further discussion of it the reader is referred to *The Son of Zebedee and the Fourth Gospel*, by the author of this paper.

As the mere fact that the Apostle was put to death by the Jews would not have prevented him writing the Gospel, certain "scholars" added, quite on their own authority, that this event happened early and probably at the time when James, the brother of John, was put to death by Herod. When it was pointed out that "John" is mentioned along with Cephas and James, the Lord's brother, in Gal. ii. 9, which referred to a later date, it was suggested that this "John" was "John Mark."

It was also asserted that the record in the Acts had been edited in the interests of the "Ephesian Legend" and that the name of John had been omitted in the account of the death of James.

In the last chapter of the Gospel it is stated that the Beloved Disciple "wrote these things." Such people as Harnack and Loisy regard this statement as a deliberate lie.

More moderate critics try to explain it away.

Dr. Stanton wrote that the words "wrote these things" seemed to be added "as an afterthought." The words "these things" are vague, and need not refer to the book (*Gospels as historical documents*, vol. III, p. 133).

Archbishop Bernard wished to translate *γράψας* by "dictate." Thus it would be possible to regard the Gospel as dictated by the Apostle to a scribe who afterwards "freely edited" the material. He produced some evidence to show that the word *γράφειν* is sometimes used in the sense of dictation, but he failed to produce any instance where this meaning is not clearly indicated by the context; for example, John xix. 19. Dr. Bernard also stated that the word "Elder" was a technical term which could only be applied to members of the second generation of Christians. "There is no example in the literature of the second century of the equation Elder equals Apostle" (*Commentary on St. John*, p. 47). If, therefore, the author of the Second Epistle calls himself an "Elder" and he was the author,

or, at any rate, the editor, of the Fourth Gospel, this proves that he cannot have been an Apostle.

But Irenaeus, who must surely have been better acquainted with the literary uses of his day than any 20th-century scholar, regarded the Gospel as being the work of an Apostle and yet accepted the Second Epistle as coming from the same hand.

Moreover, St. Peter speaks of himself when writing to "Elders" as a "fellow-Elder" (1 Pet. v. 1).

Irenaeus who is the main witness for the apostolic authorship of the Gospel meets with very severe treatment at the hands of the critics. Dr. Bacon, who is considered to be a star of the first magnitude in the critical firmament, writes of the "boastful and sophisticated claims" of Irenaeus, and Canon Streeter, with more moderation, speaks of him as "not an impartial or exceptionally well-informed witness" (*op. cit.*, p. 445).

The facts are these. Irenaeus who lived between about A.D. 140 and the end of the century wrote a book in refutation of heresies in which he accepted the Fourth Gospel as on the same level as the other three and as the work of the Apostle John. In his arguments he was able to assume that even those adversaries to whose systems the Gospel was most opposed would accept it without question, with the exception of one sect, to be dealt with later.

In a letter of unknown date written to a friend who had fallen into heresy and quoted by Eusebius he reminds this friend that when he (Irenaeus) was a boy he had seen him in Lower Asia in the company of Polycarp, endeavouring to gain his approbation.

He also recalls how Polycarp spoke of his intercourse with "John and with the others who had seen the Lord." And adds, "He remembered their words and what he had heard from them concerning the Lord and His miracles and teaching, having received them from eyewitnesses of the life of the Word. Polycarp related all things in harmony with the Scriptures" (*Euseb. Church History*, v. 20).

To a "normal man" this seems to be as decisive evidence as the nature of the case permits of. When we have seen how the critics deal with it, we shall be better able to judge what they think of its importance.

There is an article by von Hügel in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* on the Fourth Gospel which is probably little known to the general public, but which had a curious history and important results.

In the first instance Loisy was asked to write it. He was afterwards considered to be too "advanced" to meet with general acceptance.

When a high dignitary of the Church of England was consulted he stated that the article must be either very brilliant or very stupid.

As there was then no one among the "settled Anglicans" who was considered to have either the necessary brilliance or stupidity, the task was imposed on Baron von Hügel, who proceeded to consult Loisy on the matter. The story may be read in the *Memoires of Loisy*, vol. II, p. 452.

The Baron asked Loisy how it was possible to disregard the testimony of Irenaeus to the apostolic authorship of the Gospel.

The oracle replied that Irenaeus was only an ordinary witness. He knew only the tradition of his time. He had no special information. He was embarrassed to defend the Gospel against the "Alogoi."

We do not know what effect this reasoning produced on von Hügel, but we do know that he tried to improve on it by writing as follows:—"But Irenaeus was at most only 15 when he frequented Polycarp: writes thirty-five or fifty years later at Lyons, *admitting that he noted down nothing at the time.*" (Italics ours.)

This seems a clear and positive statement enough, but will it be believed that the time which the Baron states to have elapsed between the writing of the letter in question in the hearing of Polycarp is a matter of pure supposition, as is also the place from which the letter is supposed to have been written?

What Irenaeus actually wrote is as follows:—"I remember the events of that time more clearly than those of recent years. For what boys learn growing with their mind becomes joined to it: so that I am able to describe the very place in which the blessed Polycarp sat as he discoursed, and his goings out and his comings in, and the manner of his life and his physical appearance and his discourses to the people . . . *these things being told me by the mercy of God, I listened to them attentively, noting them down, not on paper, but in my heart. And continually through God's grace I recall them faithfully.*" (Italics ours.)

Let our readers judge on which side is the "sophistication" and the "impartiality" in a presentation of this kind.

It is certainly very strange that it should have been this article of von Hügel that induced Dr. Sanday to give up the views as to the apostolic authorship of the Gospel that he had so long ably maintained.

Canon Streeter rewrites the story of Irenaeus as follows with an equal disregard of his testimony. When he listened to Polycarp he was quite a small boy, capable of little more than gazing with wonder and admiration on the Methuselah-like beard of the venerable bishop. Neither his attention to what was said, nor his capacity for understanding it were sufficient to make his testimony of any value on the point of the authorship of the Fourth Gospel, which he heard ascribed to "John." He was taken away from Asia to Lyons after quite a short stay. At Lyons he would find no one able to correct his mistakes. When in later life he found out that he was probably wrong in attributing the Gospel to an Apostle, he deliberately continued to cling to his error, as he was under the strongest temptation to do so. For the corner stone of his system was that the tradition of the great churches was guaranteed by the fact that they had Apostles for their founders (*Four Gospels*, pp. 443, sqq.). In this presentation Dr. Moffatt generally concurs (*Introduction to N.T.*, p. 609). The statements that Irenaeus was quite a child when he was in Asia, and that he left that country, after a short stay, for Lyons are

nothing more than an imaginative reconstruction of history to make it fit in with the exigencies of a theory. The statement that Irenaeus would find no one in Lyons able to correct his misunderstanding of what he had heard in Asia is contradicted by Canon Streeter himself on page 71 of his book, where he mentions the well-known fact of the close connection between the churches of Asia and those of Gaul.

We leave the suggestion that Irenaeus concealed the truth about the authorship of the Gospel when he found it out to the judgment of our readers.

There is one other point which we should like to stress with regard to the evidence of Irenaeus and it is this.

His letter to Florinus with which we have been dealing is evidently written to a man who was older than himself and also in closer touch with Polycarp. It was written to rebuke this man, because he had not followed the teaching of Polycarp, but had fallen into heresy. In dealing with such a person, would Irenaeus have used arguments which he knew could be refuted by the better knowledge of his correspondent? The evidence of the letter is not based merely on the recollections of an immature boy, but is reinforced by the certainty that an older and better-informed follower of Polycarp could not contradict its contents.

How is it that all critics with whose writings we are acquainted have failed to notice this?

Lastly, we must deal with the sect which is supposed to have denied the apostolic authorship of the Fourth Gospel from the first day when it came out and with which, according to Loisy, Irenaeus found difficulty in dealing.

A certain Roman Presbyter called Caius who "flourished" during the first twenty years of the third century was prompted by his dislike for Montanism to deny the apostolic authorship of the Apocalypse and probably of the Fourth Gospel as well and to attribute them to Cerinthus.

A small body of followers probably gathered round this man, but the information that we have of them comes from Epiphanius, a bishop in Cyprus, who wrote a book on heresies in A.D. 374. He got his information from the Roman writer, Hippolytus, who wrote a book against Caius. This sect was so unimportant that it did not even possess a name. Epiphanius coined for it the name "Alogoi" which had in his eyes the advantage of being both a nickname and a pun, for it could mean both "Those who deny the doctrine of the Word" and "The unreasonable people." The members of this sect tried to justify their rejection of the Gospel by pointing out that the order of events in it differed from that in the Synoptists. There is no evidence that they objected to its Christological teaching, indeed Epiphanius expressly says that they disliked its doctrine of the Spirit in their conflict with the Montanists, but that in other matters they thought as the rest of the Church did.

Some fifty years earlier Irenaeus makes a very brief mention of a body of men who reject the Fourth Gospel and the prophetic Spirit. He says of them that "through these things they sin against the Spirit of God and fall into unpardonable sin" (*Adv. Haer.* III, ii. 9).

These people were probably also opponents of Montanism. But there is no evidence to connect them with the "Alogoi" of Rome. The fact that this body attributed the Fourth Gospel to Cerinthus proves that they had no spiritual ancestors going back to apostolic times and possessed no first-hand and authentic information about the authorship of the Gospel.

Their attribution of the Gospel to Cerinthus showed both their ignorance and their prejudice, for it was as absurd as it would be for a body of Fundamentalists fifty years hence to attribute the Commentary on St. John by Westcott to Loisy.

To say, as Loisy does, that Irenaeus felt himself embarrassed in defending the Fourth Gospel against the "Alogoi" is about as gross a misstatement as can well be imagined.

We have given above all that Irenaeus says about those who rejected the Gospel. He evidently thought them of so little importance as not to deserve any further notice. He would never have allowed a heresy which cut at the roots of his whole argument to go unrefuted, if he had thought it worthy of refutation. Even at the present day religious sects are not unknown whose opinions are too absurd to deserve refutation.

Yet this insignificant body of persons has been magnified by the critics into an important body of Fundamentalists who disliked the Christological teaching of the Gospel, because they had been brought up on the simple humanitarian teaching supposed to be contained in the Synoptists. They alone are supposed to have known the truth about its authorship : and we are left to assume that they were brutally ignored and crushed out by the Rulers of the Church who had adopted the "New Theology" of their time and whose interest it was to claim apostolic authority for their revolutionary opinions.

If this was so, it was the first and only time in history when the Rulers of the Church were on the side of the Modernists.

We think that we have shown that the external evidence for the authorship is so far from being indecisive, that the critics have been obliged to distort it if it is not to continue to be a serious obstacle to the acceptance of their theories.

This seems to prove that the evidence is as decisive as can reasonably be expected, if only it is left to speak for itself.

In the long run no critic who refuses to receive it can escape attributing fraud either to the author of the Gospel or to the people who endorsed it with their testimony or to both.

Evangelical Christianity in Spain, by Mr. Kenneth G. Grubb, is a penny pamphlet issued by the World's Evangelical Alliance for the Committee on Co-operation in Spain and Portugal. It contains a useful account of the chief facts in the history and present position of the Evangelical Churches.