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Is Johannine Archaeology Really Necessary?

by J. S. King

Mr. King has already written on a Johannine topic in THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY (55:3, July, 1983, 145-57) under the title 'There and Back Again'. He returns to this area with a stimulating critical discussion of some recent approaches to the Johannine writings.

J. L. Martyn, fastening onto R. E. Brown's well-known five-stage model for the composition of the Fourth Gospel, has argued that 'in three respects the Fourth Gospel is comparable to what archaeologists call a "tell"'.¹ He cites as evidence 'numerous literary strata' which 'to some extent may be differentiated from each other', material in the strata which 'reflect communal interests, concerns and experiences' and argues that 'this literary "tell" exhibits a remarkable degree of stylistic and conceptual homogeneity'. He concludes 'now, taking into account all three of these observations, one sees that we are dealing with a stratified literary deposit from what the archaeologists would call a single, continuous occupation. In other words, the literary history behind the Fourth Gospel reflects to a large degree the history of a single community which maintained over a period of some duration its particular and rather peculiar identity'.²

Martyn himself detects three periods: (1). 'The Conception of a Messianic Group within the community of the Synagogue'; this is the early period. (2). The middle period when 'part of the group is born as a separate community by experiencing two major traumas: excommunication from the Synagogue and martyrdom'. (3). The late period with a 'movement towards firm social and theological configurations'. In this period both the first and second editions of the gospel are published.³ R. E. Brown in *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* presents the history of the Johannine community in four phases; from its beginning until its exclusion from the synagogue; its situation at the time when the Gospel was written; the period of internal divisions (reflected in the Epistles) and the final disappearance of both the resulting groups in the second century, absorbed, either by the emerging great church or by Docetism, Gnosticism and Montanism. J. Painter finds this reconstruction 'generally convincing' and goes on to suggest that 'the evangelist composed not one but three versions of the farewell discourse; (1). 13:31-14:31; (2). 15:1-16:4a; (3). 16:4b-16:33'.⁴ He maintains that 'each

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¹ J. L. Martyn, *The Gospel of John in Christian History* (New Jersey, 1979), 90; cf. R. E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John* (London, 1971), I, xxxiv-xl.

² *Ibid.*, 91.

³ Cf. *ibid.*, pp.93-112.

⁴ J. Painter 'The Farewell Discourses and the History of Johannine Christianity' *NTS*, 27, 1981, 525-543. This quotation 526.

stratum of the discourse reflects a situation of crisis in the history of Johannine Christianity, and that that this is the focus of the evangelist's reformulation of the teaching material'.⁵

I do not intend to contest directly the evidence that is most commonly adduced in support of such reconstructions. I want to suggest tentatively that such reconstructions do not offer the only explanation of the evidence and that the peculiar eschatological perspective of the Fourth Gospel might well provide an alternative explanation. Further, the 'tell' model 'fossilizes' a living tradition by insisting upon a uniformity of presentation and interpretation at any given 'level'. It thus presupposes and demands a rigidity that is alien to John's apparent method. John can include apparently contradictory material in his narrative as is evidenced by chapter 6, yet this can assist the presentation of his theology as C. K. Barrett has demonstrated.⁶ Moreover, some of the evidence based on the idea that John intended to provide an exact chronological or topographical scheme is subject to a heavy discount for, while there are connected narratives like 2:1-4:54, many of the chapters seem to be self-contained narratives very loosely connected to what precedes, see for example 5:1; 6:1; 7:1 and 9:1. Even the notorious 14:31 does not have to be followed by 18:1 for both C. H. Dodd and E. C. Hoskyns have mounted defences of its present position. It may well be that John is essentially a preacher; both C. K. Barrett and B. Lindars have proposed that much of the Fourth Gospel originated in homilies. This not only accounts for the fact that there are 'loose connections' between the narratives but also for the apparent inconsistencies with the narratives themselves. It needs to be remembered that sermons are peculiarly appropriate for what might be described as dialectical treatment and also that the total Gospel suggests an author who 'was able to see its total significance in its parts; to present, not a miscellaneous collection of the deeds and words of Jesus, but a unified conception of his person'.⁷

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THE ESCHATOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Let us consider various features of the eschatology of the Fourth Gospel which may well provide the alternative explanation to Johannine archaeology. It has long been agreed that this eschatology can be described as 'realized'; 'in many ways John is the best example in the NT of realized

⁵ *Ibid.*, 526.

⁶ Cf. C. K. Barrett, *New Testament Essays* (London, 1972); the essay is entitled 'The Dialectical Theology of St. John'.

⁷ C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* (London, 1978), 26.

⁸ R. E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John* (London, 1971), I, cxvii.

eschatology'.⁸ This has been put more controversially by Dodd. Arguing that the Fourth Gospel is closest to the teaching of Jesus, he wrote: 'in the Fourth Gospel the crudely eschatological elements in the kerygma are quite refined away'⁹ and 'all that the Church hoped for in the second coming of Christ is already given in its present experience of Christ through the Spirit; and on the other hand this present experience penetrates the record of the events that brought it into being, and reveals their deepest significance'.¹⁰ Dodd has put his hand on the essential key; the present experience significantly influences the way that John writes his Gospel.

Dodd himself developed the use of the key; he argued that 'in its origins and in its governing ideas it (the Eucharist) may be described as a sacrament of realized eschatology. The Church prays "Thy Kingdom come"; "Come, Lord Jesus." As it prays, it remembers that the Lord did come, and with Him came the Kingdom of God. Uniting memory with aspiration, it discovers that He comes. He comes in His Cross and Passion; He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels'.¹¹ D. E. Aune has developed this idea in an important direction. To summarize his magisterial thesis is difficult but the main ideas for our present purpose may be briefly put. He suggests that the most important historical development within the early church was the rise of the cultic worship of the exalted Jesus within the primitive Palestinian church. A subheading gives the essential clue; 'Worship in the Spirit as a Proleptic Experience of Eschatological Existence'.¹² Within early Christianity 'the phenomenon of realized eschatology is primarily to be found in the Fourth Gospel and the Odes of Solomon'.¹³ He suggests that 'the focal point of the problem is not merely the paradoxical juxtaposition of present and future, but rather the proper understanding of the phenomenon of realized eschatology with the Johannine community, together with an understanding of the precise mode or modes whereby eschatological salvation was believed to constitute an essential factor in the present experience of the community'.¹⁴ We have to seek to understand 'the significance of the dominance of the realized aspect of eschatological salvation within the Fourth Gospel'.¹⁵ Developing an insight that is held by a number of scholars —

⁹ C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and its Development* (London, 1936), 155.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 174.

¹¹ C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (London, 1935), 204.

¹² D. E. Aune, *The cultic setting of realized eschatology in early Christianity* (Leiden, 1972), 12.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

for example Barnabas Lindars — Aune suggests that 'the essential elements of the theology of the Fourth Gospel were developed within the context of the worship, preaching and teaching of what we may ambiguously designate as "the Johannine community"'.¹⁶ It is here that the Eucharistic experience becomes decisive; 'in early Christian worship the fact that the Parousia of the exalted Lord was both expected and experienced in the celebration of the eucharist, underlines the function of the cult in the realization of eschatological expectation'.¹⁷ Aune develops this insight; 'as the focal point of early Christian eschatological expectation, the Parousia had both a soteriological and a juridical function. Soteriologically, it envisioned the final unity of the exalted Lord of the church with his people. Juridically, it signified the final and decisive bestowal of condemnation upon all those who had refused to respond with belief to the proclamation of the Gospel. In view of the great soteriological importance of the parousia in the future, it would be remarkable if this experience were not somehow drawn into the present and actualized within the context of early Christian cultic worship'.¹⁸ It is in this situation that one would expect an emphasis both on the intensity of the opposition of the world and the assurance of salvation occasioned by Christ's victory over the world. This is what we find pre-eminently in the Farewell Discourses, though not only there.

As he sought to demonstrate his thesis, Aune made little use of the Farewell Discourses. He did, however, suggest convincingly that 'the "coming" referred to in the Farewell Discourses was an integral element in the recurring cultic vision of Jesus'.¹⁹ Thus a convincing study concludes 'the Jesus of the Fourth Gospel is depicted as the dispenser of eschatological life and judgement because that is the primary way in which he was experienced within a cultic setting by the community'.²⁰

If for the sake of argument we accept the broad outline of such a theory, it seems to me that the dominance of the present cultic experience suggests that the right way forward is not to indulge in Johannine archaeology but to see whether the Johannine presentation reflects what we

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 90; cf. *ibid.*: 'The Sitz im Leben of the realized eschatology of the Fourth Gospel is the pneumatic worship, preaching and teaching of the Johannine community in which the vision of the living and exalted Jesus seen in his eschatological and Parousia glory was perceived by the believing congregation through the medium of illumination by the Spirit of God'.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 89; cf. *ibid.*, 94: 'More simply put, the doctrine of the future Parousia and the present cultic experience of the Parousia have had a reciprocal effect on one another'.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 126.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 135.

know of primitive Christian eschatology from elsewhere. In short, as I shall seek to suggest, we do not have to accept that at one stage in the history of the Johannine community there was dialogue and subsequent clash with the synagogue and then at a later stage, reflected in the Farewell Discourses — and possibly in the Epistles — another clash with the 'world'.

THE SON OF MAN

The dominance of realized eschatology may also be seen in John's portrayal of the Son of Man. Lindars has summarized F. J. Moloney's discussion in *The Johannine Son of Man*; 'as Moloney has shown in his very full study of the subject, John uses the title (Son of Man) to show how the earthly Jesus anticipates now functions which belong to his future glory'.²¹ Moloney asserts 'in the Fourth Gospel this vindication is drawn back into history. In the Synoptic tradition the cross was the lowest point of Jesus' suffering. In John it becomes the place of his elevation and glorification, two concepts which are continually linked with 'the Son of Man' (3:14; 8:28; 12:23;32;34; 13:31 see 19:5). The glorification no longer belongs to the future, as we find that again John has drawn the traditional eschatological theme of glorification back into history'.²² It seems to me that this emphasis too will have an impact on the presentation of judgement in the Fourth Gospel; what we might have expected to occur in the future actually occurs in the present; 'the Johannine Son of Man is the human Jesus, the incarnate Logos; he has come to reveal God with a unique and ultimate authority and in the acceptance or refusal of this revelation *the world judges itself*'.²³

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This suggestion receives striking support from Martyn; within the context of his two-level drama understanding of the Fourth Gospel he makes an important point. He argues that John's positive concern (is) to lead his readers to a direct confrontation with Jesus as the Son of Man'.²⁴ Noting that the two-level drama had its origins in Jewish Apocalyptic — the most likely background for Son of Man — Martyn suggests that 'John's two stages are past and present, not future and present'.²⁵ He continues 'The traditional motif of the Son of Man as judge, so prominent in 5:27, is directly acted out in 9:35-41. In the midst of the church-

²¹ B. Lindars, 'The New Look on the Son of Man' *BJRL* 63, 1981, 437-62. This quotation, 61.

²² F. J. Moloney, *The Johannine Son of Man* (Rome, 1976), 217.

²³ *Ibid.*, 220, my italics.

²⁴ J. L. Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (Nashville, 1979), 134.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 137.

synagogue tension of his own day John hears the Son of Man say: "For judgement I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind". It is precisely the contemporary level of the drama which makes clear that judgement by the Son of Man takes place essentially on earth and in the present, not in heaven and in the future'.²⁶

For our present purpose Martyn carries the argument one decisive step further. In a significant discussion he relates the Paraclete to the Son of Man; 'that the Paraclete continues Jesus' "suit with the world" suggests that his function is closely related to Jesus' office as the Son of Man. We have already seen that judgement at the hands of the Son of Man is for the Fourth Evangelist emphatically an event of the present. Now we see how the Son of Man's presence is effected. By continuing Jesus' "suit with the world" the Paraclete makes effective Jesus' presence as the awesome Son of Man'.²⁷

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It is well known that the term 'the Jews' may not occur in the Farewell Discourses whereas 'the World' occurs some 38 times. This has led some scholars to suppose that a different hostile situation is in view. This does not appear to be so. I have suggested that it is not certain whether 'the Jews' appear in the Farewell Discourses; this has to do with the problem of locating the beginning of those discourses. Painter may well be correct in arguing that the first discourse begins 13:31 in which case we have an instance of 'the Jews' and also of Son of Man. This may well provide the clue if we put this together with 18:20 where 'the Jews' and 'the World' are identified. Although few commentators comment on the manifest oddity of this verse, that of speaking to the world in the synagogue, Barrett is correct to look beyond the sense of *tout le monde*; 'but the special Johannine use of Kosmos should be recalled . . . Here, as often in John, the world is represented by the Jews'.²⁸ This identification may also be classically seen in 7:1-9 where the hatred of 'the World' is a reference to the 'Jewish' attempt to kill Jesus. In three of the Johannine Son of Man passages — 3:13-14; 5:27 and classically 9:39 — judgement is either explicitly mentioned or may be inferred from the context. Given a possible background as the embodiment of the faithful in Israel and the cosmic dimension of his judgement it is inconceivable that it can explicitly be said that the Son of Man judges 'the Jews'. Martyn is correct in his assertion that the Paraclete is closely related to Jesus' function as the Son of Man and that this judgement is 'emphatically an event of the

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 141.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 145.

²⁸ C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John*, ad. loc.

present'.²⁹ We do not have to think of a Johannine community in dialogue with the synagogue, then in conflict with the synagogue and then later still beleaguered and at conflict with the world. The entire presentation from John's particular eschatological perspective is concerned with one situation in which the Son of Man is present in the cult and Christian experience mediating now salvation and judgement.

While it is true to say that there is a Johannization of the Son of Man, this development is not without some parallel in the Synoptic tradition. The obvious example is Mk 2:10: 'But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins'. This is not the occasion to rehearse the well-known difficulties of this verse. There seems no good reason for believing that this saying is a creation of the early church for this can be accepted only if there are insurmountable difficulties in handling it as a saying of Jesus. Similarly there is little to be said for the suggestion that Son of Man here means man for it is not the case that man generally can forgive sins. There is much to be said for the suggestion that the 'saying stated Jesus' authorization to forgive. This authorization is stated if Jesus spoke of himself as the Son of Man. In this case the point of the saying is that Jesus claims to be the Son of Man, and claims that the Son of Man has authority to forgive sins, not merely when acting as heavenly judge, but also here and now on earth'.³⁰

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We would appear here to have an example of what W. F. Howard called John's 'explicative' handling of the tradition. By 'explicative' he understood the taking of some fairly inconspicuous feature of the primitive tradition and unfolding it.³¹ Such an 'unfolding' would be in the interests of what Howard called the 'proleptic': 'that Johannine emphasis by which the end is seen from the beginning'.³²

THE JEWS AND THE WORLD

It is beyond the scope of this present paper to suggest in detail what that one situation is but the most likely hypothesis is that we are in fact concerned with a Jewish Christian community embroiled with the synagogue. Out of loyalty to the wider implications of the Son of Man's cosmic function, as well as considering the Jewish background of the title, John

²⁹ J. L. Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, 145.

³⁰ I. H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (Exeter, 1978), 216, discussing the Lucan parallel. The reader is referred there for a full discussion of the problem. The view accepted here goes against that put forward by M. Casey in *Son of Man: the interpretation and influence of Daniel 7* (London, 1979), 228-29 and G. Vermes in *Jesus the Jew* (London, 1973), 67-69 and 180.

³¹ W. F. Howard, *Christianity according to St. John* (London 1943), 22.

³² *Ibid.*

has broadened his canvas in the one situation to the position where 'the Jews' can represent 'the World' and 'the World' 'the Jews'. This may be clearly seen in the Farewell Discourses. While there is at most one instance of 'the Jews', there is no doubt that we are still concerned essentially with opposition that can be characterized both of 'the Jews' and from 'the World'. This is most prominent in the second discourse where we not only have a clear reference to exclusion from the synagogue and the possibility of martyrdom alongside the Jewish associations of the allegory of the True Vine but also in 15:18-25 clear and unmistakable references to the hatred of the world and its persecution of Christ. In his quest for each discourse being occasioned by a separate crisis, Painter has no alternative but to refer to 'slight modifications (which) seem to have been made to 15:18-25 to relate the theme of Jewish hostility to the later experience of the Johannine community, isolated from the synagogue and facing a hostile world, perhaps at the time of the third version'.³³ This is inherently improbable and the 'slight modifications' seem to me to destroy the basis for the accurate reconstruction of both the individual discourse and the occasion.

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Finally that a church may simultaneously suffer from both the Jews and the world — rather than our having to think of different occasions separated in time — may derive some support from the difficult 1 Thes. 2:14; 'For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus which are in Judea; for you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews'. There seems little doubt that 'your own countrymen' includes at least a primary reference to the Gentile fellow citizens of the Thessalonian Christians. For our present purpose it is significant that Paul then majors on the apostasy of the Jews and its consequences. That apostasy continued in the persecution or driving out of Paul and his companions. *Diōkhō* means to pursue; the compound *ekdiōkhō* is used nowhere else in the New Testament and the problem is to know what precise value to give to the prefix. If we give both the prefix and the aorist their normal value we probably have a reference to the events described in Acts 17: 1ff. where the hasty retreat amounted to a being driven out. Paul and his companions experienced what might accurately be described as opposition from the Jews and the world.

This Thessalonian passage may also provide another clue in its difficult claim 'But God's wrath has come upon them at last'. *Phthanein* has obviously been examined in great detail because it occurs in Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom in Mtt. 12:28 — Lk. 11:20. Again there is

³³ J. Painter, *op. cit.*, 534.

no opportunity to review the many interpretations but it is difficult to remove totally any realized element. The same is true here and would appear to do justice to the aorist tense. There seems to be no reason to look for 'the concrete act or series of acts which embody God's anger against the Jews'.³⁴ There is a sense in which the wrath of God, already revealed in the death of Christ and still to be openly revealed at the Parousia, as 1 Thes. 1:10 declares, is now to be experienced not only in the experience of Christians but also in the cult. This wrath is also even now experienced by the enemies of Christ and his church. That Paul was perhaps not uninfluenced by the cultic experience and the cultic use of language may be seen in 1 Cor. 16:22.

CONCLUSION

This paper has sought to suggest that, while significant advances in Johannine scholarship have followed the excavation of the Johannine 'tell', there is perhaps another explanation for the evidence. This has been discovered by examining generally the particular Johannine eschatological perspective, which seems to account for some of the evidence adduced in favour of such a 'tell'. It has also been suggested that, while this particular eschatological perspective is specially Johannine, traces of it may be found elsewhere in the New Testament. This seems an altogether more probable hypothesis than that suggested by Painter for the three versions of the Farewell Discourses where the first is caused by the abandonment felt by the delay of the Parousia, the second by the struggle with the synagogue and the third when the separated community felt the hostility of an alien world. For this to be convincing there has to be a demonstration of the successive nature of events. Without allowing for 'slight modifications' — which in reality are very significant modifications — this is impossible. There remains a further insuperable problem for those who urge us to accept the Johannine 'tell'; the rejection of Jesus by 'the Jews' receives extensive coverage in the Gospel whereas the rejection by 'the World' is not discussed in any detail. We have argued that John identified 'the Jews' and 'the World'. The Johannine eschatological perspective and the significance of the cult in the realization of that perspective seem to account for the evidence.

³⁴ E. Best, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (London, 1972), *ad. loc.*