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# THE AUTHORSHIP OF THE FOURTH GOSPEL<sup>1</sup>

IF we except the views of the Alogi, obscure second century heretics who denied the Johannine authorship, not on historical but on doctrinal grounds, there was never any doubt until modern times, that John, the son of Zebedee and one of the twelve apostles, wrote the fourth gospel. The remarkable differences that exist between the Syn. on the one hand and the fourth Gospel on the other are claimed by many moderns as militating against the ascription of the latter to one of Christ's disciples. These differences however, were equally well known to the ancients and nevertheless they regarded the son of Zebedee as author. It is difficult to resist the conclusion that a cogent reason for the modern denial is or at least, was, the clear and even startling portrayal in the fourth Gospel of the divine sonship of Christ. If it could be shown that the gospel was not in fact written by one of our Lord's immediate followers, but by a Christian of later date, the force of the historical evidence would be weakened thus making it easier to deny its claims. It was felt that time must be allowed for the growth of a belief in Christ's divinity such as we see illustrated in the fourth Gospel; and the Tübingen School, for example, assigned to it the date A.D. 160-170. To-day of course, in the light of recent research and manuscript discoveries<sup>2</sup> it is not possible to date it later than the first quarter of the second century and since the traditional date for the gospel is c. A.D. 100, this motive for denying the Johannine authorship has largely disappeared.

If the Gospel were written about the end of the first century and if John the Apostle did indeed survive till then, it might be thought to make little difference to the accuracy of the narrative, whether it was written by him personally or by one who was his contemporary. Nevertheless though the Apostle is now generally allowed to have had a large part in providing the material of the Gospel, it is still denied by many moderns that he actually wrote it. It is suggested for example that the Gospel clearly distinguishes between the *writer* and the eyewitness in xix, 35 and xxi, 24. It is allowed that in these passages the eyewitness is the Beloved Disciple, John the son of Zebedee. In xix, 35, '*his* witness is true', it is argued, the writer of the Gospel is testifying to the truth of the Beloved Disciple's witness, and 'He knoweth that he saith true' is a statement by the writer that the Apostle, now very old, is fully conscious of the truth of his witness, Bernard.<sup>3</sup> This interpretation is by no means

<sup>1</sup> Extract from the forthcoming *Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*, and here printed with permission.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the Rylands Fragment (early second century) containing John xviii, 31, 32, 37, 38.

<sup>3</sup> *St John in International Critical Commentary*.

obvious. Why should one who was *ex hypothesi* not an eyewitness testify to the truth of the witness of one who was? It would surely be more natural to invoke the eyewitness in corroboration of the writer's own statement. As for Bernard's interpretation of the following statement (He [ἐκεῖνος] knoweth that he saith true), he has to admit that it is quite natural to interpret the ἐκεῖνος, as the actual writer of the Gospel (cf. John ix, 37 where Christ uses ἐκεῖνος of himself). But if it does so refer, then we are more or less obliged to identify witness with writer, for otherwise we should have a needless repetition of the preceding sentence. Why should it be thought unlikely that the writer should refer to himself in the third person? After all, St Paul does so in II Cor. xii, 2-5. To put it at its lowest John ix, 35 may equally well be taken in this way and since tradition has in fact always so taken it, we conclude this is the right interpretation.

It is asked further how we are to account for the strange reticence of the Evangelist regarding the actual name of the Beloved Disciple—Strachan<sup>1</sup> notes the traditional theory that the author here refers to himself as the son of Zebedee, but that as author, he keeps himself in the background (p. 82) 'Yet', he says, 'the terms of such a reference can scarcely be called modest. It is a much simpler interpretation to suppose that the author of the Gospel is referring to someone other than himself. Then the epithet "whom Jesus loved" becomes intelligible.'

But surely Strachan has smoothed out one difficulty only to raise a greater—for while it is easy to understand why the son of Zebedee does not name himself if he is indeed the author of the Gospel, it is by no means easy to see why the son of Zebedee is not mentioned by name if the gospel were written by someone else.

Moreover, is the title 'the disciple whom Jesus loved' in the mouth of that disciple such an offence against modesty? Given that Jesus had in fact a special predilection for the youngest of the apostles, John would naturally be struck by the wonder of it and might explain it simply on grounds of his being the Benjamin of Christ's immediate followers and not because of any special merits he might possess.

It is then, it seems, on such grounds as these that we are asked to distinguish between the witness to whom we owe practically all the information in the Gospel and the writer who records it for us, while at the same time rejecting a constant tradition which identifies the two. 'Speaking generally', says Dr Bernard, 'one cannot distinguish by any features of internal evidence, those parts of the Gospel narrative which plainly rest upon the report of an eyewitness, and those which may be referred to the evangelist' (p. lxxviii). One should go further. Even if the evidence of the Gospel were compatible with the theory that the writer, not himself an eyewitness, gathered his information from one who was,

<sup>1</sup> *The Fourth Gospel, its significance and environment.*

it is clearly more intelligible on the assumption that the eyewitness wrote it himself. There are whole pages of the Gospel where it is unthinkable that anyone but the witness wrote them—or at least dictated them word for word, which comes to the same thing (e.g., chap. i, 19 ff, chap. vi, chap. ix, chap. 13–17). Indeed Dr Bernard at times seems to allow to the ‘writer’ of the Gospel, a role hardly greater than that of scribe. But no Catholic would object to the suggestion that John, like Paul (Roman xvi, 22) used a scribe to write down his compositions.

It is further pointed out that the Apocalypse, admitted to be by John the Apostle, has no reticence like the Gospel on this point, but gives the name of John openly and repeatedly—why then not the Gospel also, if indeed the Apostle wrote it?

Without pretending to solve every difficulty it may be observed that the Apocalypse is very different from the Gospel. It is a book of prophecy in which the identity of the prophet has considerable relevance. The Gospel on the other hand is a record of the deeds and words of Jesus Christ in which there is much less need to name the author.

Many critics have gone further and attempted to identify the writer of the Gospel as distinct from the witness. It is recognized that the author of the Gospel also wrote the Johannine epistles. Now John ii and iii each starts by naming the writer as ὁ πρεσβύτερος, *the Presbyter or Elder*. This term, it is argued, is used in Acts xv, 4, 22 to distinguish the disciples of the apostles from the apostles themselves and this is the sense in which Irenaeus uses the term οἱ πρεσβύτεροι τῶν ἀποστόλων μαθηταί (V. 5, 1, and cf. V. 33, 3; V. 6, 2). There is no example in second century literature, they say, of the term Presbyter being used for an apostle, cf. Bernard, p. xlvi.

Who is this ‘Presbyter’ who wrote the Gospel and epistles? The critics refer us to a statement of Papias who, while describing the sources of his information, says he tried to find out all that the presbyters reported as being said by Andrew, Peter, Philip, Thomas, James, John, Matthew, or any other of the disciples of our Lord—and also what Aristion and the presbyter John say. It seems clear that two Johns are indicated here and this is the view of Eusebius himself (HE III, 39, cf. Barty<sup>1</sup>). Eusebius mentions the fact that there are two tombs at Ephesus bearing the name of John and suggests that perhaps the John not the apostle wrote the Apocalypse. No one in tradition ever suggested he wrote the Gospel. Yet this is the individual brought in to fill the role of πρεσβύτερος in John ii and iii, and claim authorship of the Fourth Gospel, as well as the epistles. Bernard adopting substantially the view of Harnack sums up: ‘John the presbyter was the writer and editor of the Fourth Gospel, although he derived his narrative material from John the son of Zebedee’ (p. lxiv).

<sup>1</sup> Art. *Jean le Presbytre*, *Dictionnaire de la Bible*, Supplément, col. 845.

On what grounds is based the assertion that the term πρεσβύτερος is never used of an apostle? It is necessary of course to exclude beforehand, John ii and iii and to interpret Papias' use of the word as 'disciple of an apostle' though many think he uses it also of apostles.

Moreover the total number of references to 'presbyter' in the literature of the first two centuries is not so large as to warrant any categorical assertion of the kind. Further, the appellation πρεσβύτερος at the head of John ii and iii surely singles the author out in a very special way, far too special a way, one might think, for a mere disciple of an apostle, otherwise practically unknown. Yet on the assumption that it is the Apostle himself, how suitable a name! John, the last survivor of the Twelve and now no doubt far older than all those he lived with, is surely *the* Elder par excellence, cf. Bardy 846.

One further question remains to be asked. If the critics are correct, then the composition of the Fourth Gospel was closely similar to that of the second. As Mark was the follower of Peter and recorded his memories in Peter's old age, so John the Presbyter, a disciple of the son of Zebedee would have recorded *his* memoirs in the Apostle's old age.

But if this be so, how can one account for the startling difference in tradition? Whereas the part played by Mark has always been plain in the record of tradition and the Gospel is under his name not Peter's nothing similar is to be found in the tradition of the Fourth Gospel. There is not the faintest suggestion that the Presbyter or anyone else but the Apostle wrote it, cf. reply of *Bib. Comm.* E.B. 180.

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