

**An Extract from B.H. Streeter, *The Four Gospels. A Study of Origins Treating the Manuscript Tradition, Sources, Authorship, & Dates*, 4<sup>th</sup> impression, revised. London: MacMillian and Co., Ltd., 1930. pp.436-442.**

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**THE HESITATION OF ROME**

The view that the Fourth Gospel was the work of the Elder John explains more easily than any other theory the evidence of a certain hesitation in accepting the Gospel as authentic in certain quarters. This otherwise complicated problem becomes comparatively simple if, pursuing the clue previously found fruitful, we study *separately* the history of the reception of the Gospel in each of the Apostolic Sees—Antioch, Ephesus and Rome. We may begin with Rome.

The most notable theologian of the Church of Rome during the period A.D. 190 to 235 was Hippolytus. On his death a

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statue of him seated was set up, and this was discovered in an old cemetery at Rome in 1551, and is still preserved in the Lateran Museum. On the chair of the statue is inscribed a list of his numerous works. Near the beginning of the list is mentioned a "Defence of the Gospel and Apocalypse of John."<sup>1</sup> No one defends what nobody attacks. We must, then, infer that there were people who rejected both. The only question is, were these heretics or members of the Church? Hippolytus was a vigorous opponent of the Montanists and the various Gnostic sects. But the Montanists not only accepted but attached special value to the Fourth Gospel, for it was their authority for the doctrine of the Paraclete, whom they believed to be specially manifested in their own prophet. Most of the Gnostics accepted the Fourth Gospel. Heretics who, like Marcion, rejected it, rejected other Gospels also. The Ebionites accepted only Matthew, other heretics only Mark. But, so far as we are aware, there was no heretical sect which in any special way impugned the Fourth Gospel. But in Hippolytus' Defence the Fourth Gospel and Apocalypse are classed together; there is thus a slight presumption that the attack on both books was made by the same persons. And in regard to the Apocalypse, we have long known of a very vigorous attack made on it inside the Church by an apparently orthodox Roman presbyter named Gaius.

Gaius, in this respect like Hippolytus himself, was a zealous opponent of the Montanist heresy; and, in a book against the Montanist leader Proclus, he went so far as to say that the Apocalypse was written, not by the Apostle, but by his notorious opponent the heretic Cerinthus. Two late fourth-century writers, Epiphanius and Philaster, both of whom had access to works of Hippolytus now lost, speak of persons who ascribed both the Gospel and the Apocalypse to Cerinthus, and who, among other arguments to discredit the Gospel, stressed the discrepancy in order between it and the Synoptics. Epiphanius names these

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<sup>1</sup> ὅπ ρ τοῦ κατὰ Ἰωάννην εὐαγγελίου καὶ ἀποκαλύψεως. Cf. Lightfoot, *Clement*, ii. p. 325.

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persons *Alogi*. In Greek this is a quite tolerable pun—since ἄλογοι may be translated equally well by “Anti-Logosites” or “Irrationalists.” Obviously they did not call themselves by such a nickname, and we never hear of them anywhere else either by that or any other name. This suggests that they were not a sect at all, but merely a group within the Church who held their own private opinions on a subject in regard to which no one view was yet regarded as *defide*. That the Gospel also was ascribed to Cerinthus by Gaius himself is now known;<sup>2</sup> thus the opposition to it can be definitely localised in orthodox circles in Rome.<sup>2</sup>

The existence within the Church of individuals who rejected the Fourth Gospel explains the emphasis laid by Irenaeus in the passage already quoted (p. 8) on his argument for the *a priori* and eternal necessity that the Gospels could be neither more nor less than four. The main object of this elaborate construction is to establish a major premiss from which can be drawn later on the conclusion that “all those are vain, unlearned and also audacious, who represent the aspects of the Gospel as being either more in number than four or fewer.” He proceeds to condemn Marcion who had only one Gospel; Valentinus who admitted more than four; and, along with them, certain others whom he does not name. These, he complains, “in order to make void the gift of the Spirit which in the last times at the Father’s good pleasure was poured out on mankind, do not admit that aspect presented by John’s Gospel in which the Lord promised that he would send the Paraclete; but set aside at once both the Gospel and the Prophetic Spirit.” Since by the phrase about “the Prophetic Spirit” he evidently means the Apocalypse, it seems that Irenaeus, like his pupil Hippolytus, had occasion to defend both the Gospel and the Apocalypse of John. But Irenaeus makes it clear that the motive of the opposition to both these works was hostility to the idea of the outpouring of the Spirit in the latter days, *i.e.* to the Montanist movement towards which, at any rate

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in its more moderate form, he himself had considerable sympathy.<sup>3</sup> Thus, whether or not Gains himself rejected the Fourth Gospel, it is fairly clear that others who rejected both it and the Apocalypse did so because the doctrine of the Paraclete in the one, and of the Millennium in the other, seemed to give support to Montanist extravagances. But the objectors are nowhere accused of being heretics, and it is implied that they recognised the other three Gospels; and, as no sect is known which accepted these and rejected John, we should naturally conclude that they were a party inside the Church.

We turn now to the Muratorian fragment on the Canon. This may well, as Lightfoot argues,<sup>4</sup> be from another work of Hippolytus. In any case it seems to represent the official view of the Roman Church about A.D. 200.

In this document the Gospel of Luke, about which no one at Rome had any doubts, is dismissed in seven lines; but twenty-five are given to John. Of Luke it is asserted “neither did he (*ipse*) see the Lord in the flesh and he too (*idem*), as he was able to ascertain (wrote).” Of what the author said about Mark only the last line is preserved, which reads, “but at some he

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<sup>2</sup> From the discovery of two passages in a commentary of Barsalibi. The evidence is conveniently summarised by H. J. Lawlor, *Eusebius*, vol. ii. p. 208.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Bacon, *op. cit.* p. 241.

<sup>4</sup> Clement, ii. p. 411 f.

was present, and so he set them down”; but we must infer from the emphatic *ipse* and *idem* in his somewhat disparaging remarks about Luke that they are more or less a repetition of a similar statement made about Mark, another Gospel accepted at Rome. But while he goes out of his way to insist that Mark and Luke are *not* eye-witnesses, in speaking of John the emphasis is all the other way: “It was revealed to Andrew, one of the Apostles, that John was to write all things in his own name, and they were all to certify. And, therefore, though various elements are taught in the several books of the Gospel, yet it makes no difference to the faith of believers, since by one guiding Spirit all things are declared in all of them....” A little later, quoting the opening words of the first Epistle of John, the writer proceeds: “For so he declares himself not an eye-witness and a hearer only,

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but a writer of all the marvels of the Lord in order.” Surely all this looks like a reply to arguments that the Fourth Gospel was not by an Apostle on account of its divergences, especially in the matter of order, from the Synoptics, which Epiphanius tells us were put forward by the Alogi. The author says, in effect: there are no real contradictions between the Gospels; and if they differ in the matter of order, John is to be preferred, since he was an eye-witness, while the others were not.

At Rome, then, by the end of the second century, the Fourth Gospel was accepted by the Church; but there had been opposition. Some of the opposition had been unintelligent—the attribution of the Gospel and Apocalypse to Cerinthus is grotesque. It had not denied the antiquity, only the apostolicity, of the works in question; for Cerinthus was a contemporary of John. And the opposition was from a group of orthodox and conservative leanings; for it was not only anti-Montanist in intention, it was equally (since the Gnostic Cerinthus was to these zealots a name of reproach) anti-Gnostic. All the same, the fact that it was possible to attribute the Fourth Gospel to an arch-heretic and yet to regard oneself as championing orthodoxy is eloquent. It could not yet have been one of the Gospels which the Roman Church accepted as authoritative.

Some hesitation of the Roman Church to accept the Gospel is less remarkable than would at first sight appear. It was partly the result of the cautiously conservative attitude which it habitually adopted in such matters, and of which its attitude towards the Epistle to the Hebrews—which was known at Rome by A.D. 96 but not accepted as Pauline till the fourth century—is the classical example. But it was probably more affected by a general suspicion of the traditions of the Church of Ephesus, due to the fact that the Ephesians were in the habit of quoting Apostolic authority for a date and method of observing Easter which Rome believed to be the reverse of Apostolic. Strange, too, as it seems to us, the doctrine of the Logos would by some be regarded as a hazardous speculation, savouring

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of that Gnostic theory of Emanations which threatened to destroy belief in the Unity of God, against which the main battle of the Church was directed in the second century. And it cannot be said that the phrase *δεύτερος θεός*, “a second God,” used by Justin Martyr, the great champion of the Logos doctrine at Rome, was altogether reassuring. Yet again, the fact that the Fourth Gospel was highly appreciated by Gnostics would tell against it. Heracleon, the Valentinian, is known to have written a commentary upon it in Rome about A.D. 160. Thus when, a little later, the Gospel and the Apocalypse became the principal authorities quoted by

the Montanists in support of their view that their own prophets had a new revelation from the Paraclete which superseded that of the official Church, we can understand the desire of some conservatives to discredit them completely.

There is a good deal to be said for the hypothesis that it was Justin Martyr who first effectively commended both the Fourth Gospel and the Logos doctrine to the acceptance of the Roman Church. Justin had been converted to Christianity at Ephesus, and his whole philosophy is based on the doctrine of the Logos. But, apart from the Logos doctrine, he has only two quite certain, along with half a dozen more doubtful, reminiscences of the Fourth Gospel. But of Matthew and Luke he has over a hundred reminiscences or quotations; and even to that small part of Mark which has no parallel in either Matthew or Luke he has two allusions. Moreover, there are cases where he quotes to support his argument texts from the Synoptics very badly adapted to prove his point, while forbearing to quote sayings of Christ recorded in the Fourth Gospel which would have been quite conclusive. In fact, he acts like a modern apologetic writer trying to establish the pre-existence of Christ, but, in deference to critical objections, attempting to do so without reference to the Fourth Gospel.

Justin quotes the Apocalypse, and definitely refers to it as the work of the Apostle John, but we may not infer that he

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attributed the Gospel to the same author. In his First Apology he refers to the “Memoirs of the Apostles which are called Gospels,” and in the Dialogue with Trypho<sup>5</sup> he speaks of the “Memoirs which were composed by them (the Apostles) and their followers.” This certainly would be an appropriate description of the four Gospels known by the names of the two Apostles, Matthew and John, and two followers of Apostles, Mark and Luke. But in another context he gives two statements, both of which are found in Mark and one in Mark only, as being derived from the “Memoirs of Peter” (cf. p. 447). If, then, that was the title by which he referred to the Gospel of Mark, the phrase “Memoirs of the Apostles and their followers” would be equally applicable to Gospels attributed to the two Apostles Matthew and Peter and to the two followers of Apostles, Luke and John the Elder. But whatever view we take on this point we are not entitled to infer from Justin that all four Gospels were as yet recognised in the Church of Rome. Justin is writing a defence of Christianity in general, and is not concerned with local diversities; hence his language would be perfectly justified if, in his time, John was publicly read in Ephesus but not at Rome. Moreover, in view of the statement, quoted in the Acts of his Martyrdom, as to his paucity of following (to which attention has been already called (p. 71)) and of the fact that he wore the gown of the professional philosopher, it is not unlikely that Justin himself, the Logos doctrine, and the Gospel which he had imported from Ephesus, were all regarded with some suspicion by the conservative element in the Roman Church. And it may have required the glory of martyrdom, as well as a growing appreciation of the apologetic merits of the Logos doctrine, completely to dispel this.

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<sup>5</sup> *Apol.* 1. 66; *Dial.* 103.