

The Fourth Gospel: Its Purpose and Theology
Ernest J. Scott
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A certain lassitude with regard to the discussion of the Johannine problem, so far as the external evidence is concerned, has of late become perceptible, especially in advanced critical quarters. The feeling seems to be gaining ground that the opponents of the historicity of the record and its discourses can, to say the least, secure no advantage of position by approaching the Gospel on this side of its external attestation, or even from the point of view of its internal evidence so far as the latter is of the nature of a direct self-witness and not merely inferential or based on a comparison with the Synoptical narrative and teaching. In Mr. Scott's book we have an exposition of the Gospel which entirely and on principle dispenses with every presentation of the Johannine question. The author tells us that he simply takes for granted the results of the critical investigation, his position being that "which is now generally accepted by continental scholars". The first or second decade of the second century is broadly fixed upon as the date of composition. But, far from being enthusiastic about this preliminary assumption, the author says: "It may be granted that the external evidence is not sufficient to warrant a decisive verdict on either side." Some might consider this an understatement, but the interesting point to observe is the admission that the external evidence is at least equally balanced. Time was when opponents of the Johannine authorship would not have lightly made such an admission. But, whatever the motive, whether the conviction that the debate about externals has led to an *impasse*, or a general sense of weakness, at any rate Mr. Scott and others with him take refuge into the discussion of what the Gospel itself can teach concerning its date and origin. The whole discussion before us, far from being purely biblico-theological, is professedly critical, and throughout keeps in sight the purpose of solving the Johannine problem by feeling, as it were, the theological and ecclesiastical pulse of the Gospel. Now, it ought not to be overlooked that this is different from placing the internal evidence above the external in weight, because the latter is believed to be inconclusive; it amounts to favoring unduly a very particular kind of internal evidence, that derived from doctrinal and historico-philosophical considerations, and passing by a not inconsiderable volume of internal evidence of much more concrete and direct and emphatic character which the Gospel offers concerning its own origin and claim to truthfulness. Even *a priori* it would seem somewhat precarious to stake everything on an enquiry of this kind, for, as the author himself seems fully to realize, the results which his investigation yields ought to appear entirely untenable for anyone who should feel constrained by the sheer weight of external testimony to accept the Johannine authorship of the Gospel in the old solid sense of ascribing it to the Apostle, the son of Zebedee. In the preface he quite summarily, but we are compelled to believe justly, waives aside the view of Drummond, who would unite the Johannine authorship with the interpretation of the story and teaching as in large part unhistorical. The Damocles-sword of an exceptionally strong external witness (and we need only to read Zahn's and Drummond's presentations to be profoundly impressed with the strength of it) must perforce continue to hang above every such argument as Mr. Scott endeavors to weave. As to the nature of the argument itself, it is evident that the subjective factor must to a considerable extent enter into this. The explanation of the ideas and tendencies of a document out of an assumed historical milieu, and the dependence on this for fixing its approximate origin and date, will always remain a very delicate procedure. Notwithstanding his deftness of touch and uncommon skill in dovetailing the characteristic outlines of the Gospel into the historical situation as he sees it, we cannot altogether acquit the author of the fault of being too

imaginative and credulous in his search for adjustments to environment. He thinks the Gospel is essentially "a work of transition in which primitive Christianity is carried over into a different world of thought". The transition is, in the first place, one from the time in which the primitive tradition was still a living force to a modern time which felt itself separated from the historical origins. The message had to be reinterpreted into new modes of thinking, specifically its universalism required new expression. In the second place, the transition was one from Jewish to Hellenic culture, and the transposal in this sphere was made by means of the language of Greek speculation, which, while it modified the ideas of Jesus and was something alien to the whole spirit of His teaching, yet proved in some respects more adequate to the expression of the substance of the gospel than the Jewish modes of utterance Jesus actually employed, as is illustrated from the ideas of the Messiah and the Kingdom of God. In the third place, the Gospel carries over the revelation of Christ from the world of outward fact to that of inward religious experience, thus avoiding the twofold danger, threatening at the time, of sublimating the history of the life of Jesus into a philosophical allegory on the one hand, or of making religion a matter of mere tradition, destitute of inward impulse and spiritual reality, on the other hand. It is obvious that a view like this offers the largest conceivable opportunity for elucidating the doctrinal phenomena of the Gospel almost without a residue of the mysterious. What cannot be explained from the goal of the process of transition can always be explained as a remnant of the stage that formed its point of departure. As Mr. Scott assures us, the author, writing in such a period, is continually striving to find place within the same system for opposite types of thought and belief. There is in the Gospel "a union of opposites". It is gnostic and anti-gnostic, sacramentarian and anti-sacramentarian, traditional and allegorical alike. Nearly every sentence in it might be paralleled with another which appears to indicate a view of different tenor. We confess that we are vividly reminded by all this of the old Tübingen-criticism, and that not only so far as its general tendency-principle is concerned, but specifically so far as it made every doctrinal precipitate the product of the union or compromise of opposites. In the present case this method ascribes to the author of the Gospel a complexness and refinement of theological, polemical and ecclesiastical purpose which it seems difficult to reconcile with the impression of simplicity and straightforwardness it makes on the average reader. And, besides this, it carries the tracing of divergent strands of thought and the discovery of cross-purposes of policy to such an extreme as to place the Evangelist at not a few points flatly in contradiction with himself and to make him an object of our pity on account of the clumsiness of his methods. As a concrete instance, we may mention what is said about his attitude towards the Lord's Supper. The omission of the account of institution and the substitution for it of the account of the foot-washing are interpreted as expressive of the view that not a ritual ordinance but the inward spirit of love, truth, and peace was Christ's real bequest to his disciples. And yet, in the discourse following the feeding of the five thousand in chap. 6 the spiritual process of assimilating the nature of Jesus is associated quite definitely with the ordinance of the Eucharist. The statements towards the close of the chapter are direct allusions to the Eucharist as "the medicine of immortality". And it is granted "that John in this chapter lays an emphasis on the outward rite, which cannot be wholly reconciled with his higher, more spiritual view". "We are compelled to recognize that he himself was affected with the sacramental ideas, against which, in their crude and unreasoned form, he makes his protest." We must confess that the combination of such things in one mind and purpose appears not merely a strange inconsistency but a psychological riddle to us. The living personality of the Evangelist seems to evaporate under such criticism. What we have left is the pure abstraction of a mental field in which the various theological and ecclesiastical tendencies of the date of writing cross each other. And this dualistic self-contradictory signature is more or less

characteristic of the Gospel as a whole. The inconsistencies “to a great extent have their root in one grand antinomy which pervades the Gospel from end to end, and creates an actual cleavage in its religious teaching. The revelation through Christ is explained in the prologue as a temporary appearance in the flesh of the external Logos. This doctrine of the Logos, borrowed through Philo from the Greek philosophical thinkers, had nothing to do with the original Christian message. For the ethical view of the personal life of Jesus it substituted a view which can only be described as metaphysical. . . . No one can read the Gospel in any spirit of sympathy without feeling that the theological view is combined with another of altogether different character. . . . The doctrine of the Logos was . . . by its very nature inadequate to his purpose. It belonged to a world of abstract speculation, and Jesus had revealed the Father by His love and goodness, by the moral glory and divineness of His life. In the Fourth Gospel we have really two distinct conceptions, which are constantly interchanging but can never be reconciled.” We gratefully observe that in these statements and throughout the book due recognition is given to what the author calls the metaphysical element in the Gospel. Over against the attempt of Harnack and others to confine this to the prologue, as a mere accommodation to prevailing modes of thought, and to explain it away in the body of the Gospel, this is gratifying. The Logos-name may be confined to the prologue; the substance of the Logos-doctrine, with its implications of the preexistence, the deity and the life-giving power of the Son of God, is everywhere. Nor could we have seriously objected, if the author, for the purpose of sharply defining the peculiarity of this strand of teaching, had somewhat abstractly separated it from the other aspect of the religious significance of Christ in the conscious spiritual and ethical sphere of redemption. One might even become reconciled to Holtzmann’s well-known distinction between a “theological” and “soteriological” hemisphere, although the terminology of this is unfortunate, since obviously to the mind of the Gospel the “theological” is preeminently “soteriological”. But Mr. Scott goes much farther than all this. Wherever in his book he happens to touch on the distinction in question, he treats it, either explicitly or by implication, as an out and out antinomy. The metaphysical category and the religious or ethical category are to him mutually exclusive. Now of course, it is not the historian, but the theologian, who pronounces this judgment. And yet in the hands of Mr. Scott it becomes a quasi-historical judgment, because in a certain sense it is affirmed that the contradiction had historic reality in the consciousness of the Evangelist, that it represented two different and antagonistic forces in his thought, explainable from two distinct sources. The one, the purely religious element, came from the impression made upon him by the historical Jesus; the other, the metaphysical element, he borrowed from the philosophy of Philo; the latter stood related to the former as the form to the substance; and the form in this case was not only inadequate to express the substance, but at bottom incommensurable with and injurious to it. He who is not an entire stranger in the theological world of the present day, will without difficulty diagnose this procedure as virtually a carrying back of the principle of Ritschlianism into the religious experience of John. There was first a time when the Evangelist had an entirely unmetaphysical spiritual consciousness; the Son of God and the Son of man, life and light and truth were to him purely religious and moral conceptions. Then he adopted the Logos-philosophy and subsumed these purely spiritual ideas under its metaphysical categories, and in result of this his theology is at war with the religious experience it seeks to express and convey. We do not hesitate to affirm that this is a construction suspended in the air. There is absolutely no evidence that to the mind of the Evangelist the religious and the metaphysical were ever separated for a moment, much less that he ever felt the latter in any way to be antagonistic to the former. The two are so closely wedded that their union must have been a much profounder process than the hypothesis of borrowing from Philo suggests.

This we believe to be true even of the explicit Logos-idea, and much more of the high Christology and soteriology in the body of the Gospel itself. The simple reason why the Evangelist felt no disharmony here is that he was not a Ritschlian, but had a very pronounced realistic sense of the process of salvation as belonging to the noumenal and not merely to the phenomenal sphere. And, altogether apart from the main issue of the authenticity of the discourses shall we not have to say, that the same consciousness of a metaphysical background of salvation, though not in so pronounced a form, is yet substantially present in the teaching of the earlier New Testament documents? Mr. Scott might have found more of it, and accordingly estimated the distance between the Synoptists and John more moderately, if he had not interpreted the Synoptical teaching of Jesus after so one-sided a Ritschlian fashion. He does, in our opinion, scant justice to the passage Matt. 11:27. And he tones down the Pauline Christology so as to make it appear essentially a lower, less metaphysical product than the Logos-Christology of the Fourth Gospel. Even in "the form of God" of Phil. 2 he seems to find nothing higher than in "the man from heaven" of 1 Cor. 15, which latter designation he connects (we think erroneously) with the preexistent Christ. The whole definition of the difference between the Pauline and Johannine Christologies is vitiated by this.

There is one more point we must briefly touch upon. Mr. Scott, just as little as other advocates of the same position, offers us any psychological explanation of the free handling of the Gospel-tradition, both as regards history and teaching, which he ascribes to the Evangelist. The writer of the Gospel not merely adapted and modified his material after the most unscrupulous fashion, but he also freely composed the discourses. Not to speak of the ethical complexion of this alleged procedure, is there not, from the advanced critical standpoint, a serious psychological problem here? Even if we assume that the writer had not been an eye-witness or disciple of Jesus, it seems difficult to believe, that he, who (as Zahn well puts it) makes all knowledge of the truth and all possession of eternal life absolutely dependent on veracity, who traces back all deception and treason to the devil, that he should have pronounced upon himself a judgment almost too fearful to repeat, by representing as acts and words of Jesus things of which he knew better than his critics that Jesus could never have spoken or performed them. And, of course, if the author claims to be an eye- and ear-witness as we are practically compelled to understand him, the problem becomes even more grave. It will not do to appeal to the Evangelist's own principle that the Spirit continues the teaching of Christ, so that later insight into the truth attributed to the illumination of the Spirit might be represented as originating from the Savior and accordingly carried back without serious detriment to the truth into the earthly life of Jesus. For the Evangelist with the utmost clearness distinguishes between the Jesus-teaching of the days of our Lord's humiliation and the Spirit-teaching of the post-resurrection period, and emphatically declares that the latter could not be anticipated because it was dependent on the completion of our Lord's career. By carrying back this large body of Spirit-teaching into the earthly life he would have acted contrary to his own principle and distinction. Here also the least that can be required of an interpreter is, that, in order to honor the Gospel's veracity, he shall recognize that the Evangelist was in his own mind sincerely and firmly convinced of the truthfulness of his record. To be sure, after that the problem would more urgently than ever appear to press for a solution, how such a conviction could exist in such a mind otherwise than as a result of the fact that Jesus had actually so lived and taught.