THE PURPOSE OF ST. JOHN'S GOSPEL*

The subject of this evening's lecture will be familiar to everyone of you. One of the first questions asked in reading and explaining the Bible is always: what was the author aiming at? And the particular features of the Fourth Gospel as distinct from the Synoptics are so marked that the question cannot be suppressed: what led this writer—whoever he was—to draw this picture of our Lord so different from the others?

Perhaps everyone in this illustrious audience knows the answer, because no commentary on St. John and no Introduction to the New Testament is published without paying due attention to this point. I can enter into your feelings, if you said after reading the title in the program: “This theme has been discussed for so many generations that we are at a dead-lock.” You are right; this subject is well-worn. Of course there are still some greater or smaller differences left, but that is mainly due to differences in the background of the gospel as seen by various scholars.

It is therefore not without some hesitation—to put it mildly—that I have chosen the subject. While I was preparing this lecture I seemed to hear the voice of a British subject: “If somebody is going to speak, it is undoubtedly to shed new light on the subject; why else does he speak?” This heart-searching question could not easily be silenced by observing that the man who said it, Thomas Carlyle, 1 is long dead. In coming to this place of learning and this congress people have not gathered to hear a number of truisms, the repetition of text-book sentences, even if with the new look, or “old favorites”. Does the characteristic of a university-town in New Testament times not hold good in our days: “Now all the Athenians and the strangers sojourning there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing” ?2 But in tackling such an old subject and in trying

1 This saying is quoted in Dutch translation by I. van Dijk, “Vota Academica”, in: Verzamelde Werken, Groningen n.d., Deel II, p. 70 f., without exact reference.
2 Acts xvii 21.—According to E. Norden, Agnostos Theos, Leipzig 1913,
to give some new light the speaker runs the risk of the verdict: “the new things he said were not true and the true things were not new”. Who will dispute that this rule can often be applied to what is written on the N. T.? However, this is largely a subjective opinion and therefore: let me take the risk and try to bring forward something that is new without bowling too wide of the wicket.

About 50 years ago the outstanding historian of the ancient church Adolf Harnack said that the origin of St. John’s Gospel was the greatest riddle of the primitive church ¹ and other scholars of repute expressed the same opinion if with many variations during the decades that followed. ² Extremely great is the variety of opinion, as may be seen from Howard’s masterly survey in its latest revision by Barrett. ³ The attention has shifted from the person of the evangelist to the contents of the book. Gnostic forms of expression, Hellenistic influences, Palestinian background—each of these keywords signify important streams of interpretation. Great contributions, far beyond my praise, have been made in the last thirty years. Is it too bold to prophesy that in the coming years the big question will be: was John a disciple of the Qumran-Community? ⁴ A few months ago my colleague Quispel brought forward a number of interesting observations which again hinted in the direction of Jewish heterodoxy. ⁵ These burning issues I cannot discuss at the present moment; that would take us something more than three quarters of an hour. The scope of this lecture can be far more restricted, because John—so I call the author

p. 333 “vielleicht das ‘Gebildetste’, was überhaupt im N. T. steht”; E. Haenchen, Die Apostelgeschichte, Göttingen 1956, p. 460, makes some restrictions.

¹ A. von Harnack, Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte, Tübingen 1937, Bd. I, p. 308 (this fifth edition is identical with the fourth).


