CHAPTER SIX

BACKGROUND AND CHRISTOLOGY OF JOHN'S GOSPEL: SELECTED MOTIFS

The Background

The value of the Fourth Gospel rests ultimately in its recognition by Christians from the earliest time as a prophetic revelation, an inspired account of Jesus’ acts and teachings. But it may be clarified and further defined by some attention to several historical and literary questions. Who is the Evangelist? Did he (1) compose the Gospel de novo, (2) collect and arrange preformed materials or, taking a middle way, (3) combine traditions and personal experiences to serve his own themes and purposes? Did he intend to mediate traditions of our Lord's earthly ministry or to use that ministry only as a frame to enclose teachings of the exalted Christ through the Spirit?

Who is John?

From the second-century church come two witnesses of primary importance for identifying the Evangelist, the title of the Gospel and the testimony of Irenaeus. The title, 'Gospel according to John' (εὐαγγέλιον κατὰ Ἰωάννην), is probably to be dated no later than the first decade of the second century¹ and thus within the normal lifetime of many who were present at its publication. Indeed, our earliest manuscript so titled, Papyrus Bodmer II (p66), may possibly date from before AD 150.²

But which John does the title refer to? Irenaeus of Lyons (c. AD 130–200) provides the first clear information, identifying the author as 'John, the disciple of the Lord, who also leaned upon his breast'

¹ In the Gospel title εὐαγγέλιον is a collective, the 'good news' as it is manifested in a particular document. This usage, applied to a written document, fades out after the mid-second century. Cf. B. Reicke, The Roots of the Synoptic Gospels, Philadelphia 1986, 150–155; M. Hengel, Studies in the Gospel of Mark, London 1985, 81–84: The titles 'can be traced back to the time of the origin of the four Gospels...' (84).
(Jn 13:23 ff.). Elsewhere he calls John an ‘apostle,’ that is, one of the Twelve. In another treatise he discloses that as a youth he was instructed by Polycarp (c. AD 69–155), a bishop of Smyrna who had earlier known ‘apostles in Asia,’ including ‘John the disciple of the Lord.’ Therefore, while Irenaeus wrote from Gaul about AD 180, his testimony on this matter is in all likelihood rooted in information he received in Asia Minor before the middle of the second century from one who had known John in Ephesus. Since Irenaeus does not actually name Polycarp as the source of his views in this matter, his witness is not conclusive. But it is, as C. H. Dodd put it, ‘formidable’ and cannot be lightly set aside even if (like Paul’s writings) the Gospel was also embraced by certain heretical groups and its Johannine origin sometimes denied.

The classic statement for Johannine authorship from evidence internal to the Gospel was that of B. F. Westcott who, in concentric circles, identified the author with increasing specificity as (1) a Jew (2) of Palestine, (3) an eyewitness, (4) an apostle, (5) the Apostle John. The clearest internal evidence is Jn 21:24:

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3 Irenaeus, Against Heresies, 3, 1, 1; 1, 9, 2.
5 Irenaeus, Against Heresies 3, 3, 4, where, in relating Polycarp’s story about John at Ephesus, the first person plural (ὁ φίλους) is used, indicating that Polycarp was present at the occasion. Cf. Irenée de Lyon, Contre les heresies. Livre III (SC 210, 211), 2 vols., ed. A. Rousseau and L. Doutreleau, Paris 1974, I, 240; II, 43.
9 As direct attestations for this Westcott (note 8, I, lxi–lxiv) adduced the following texts: ‘We beheld (εἶδομα) his glory’ (Jn 1:14) emphasizes a specific historical reference of an eyewitness to Christ’s ministry. ‘He who has seen has borne witness’ (19:35) is the Evangelist’s reference to his own eye-witness status while the