THE REALITY OF THE INVISIBLE

Some Remarks on St John XIV 8 and Greek Philosopnic Tradition

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The purpose of this paper is to suggest a background for John XIV 8ff. and some related passages in the Fourth Gospel which could help us to make somewhat more sense of them than on the surface they might appear to contain. Since this background will turn out to be a well-known doctrine of Greek philosophy, we shall have occasion in the course of our discussion to deal with certain aspects of that subject as well. Obviously in a field beset with so many dangers and difficulties some of our results will have to remain uncertain or at best problematical. At the end one thing, however, will hopefully appear to have been firmly established: that the questions with which the following will confront us have at least been well worth asking.

Introduction

First we might make some introductory remarks about the context of John XIV 8ff. Usually one considers as such the textual unit running from XIII 31- XIV 31 and commonly referred to as the first of Jesus' so-called Farewell Discourses, which as a whole occupy chapters XIII 31- XVII. At least for the first of these, to which for the present purpose we may as well limit ourselves, this designation seems particularly well chosen. For in it even at first sight all kinds of features appear which have more than once been demonstrated to be typical of the Farewell Discourse or Testament as known mainly from Jewish-hellenistic and early christian literature.1 Jesus

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1 Some useful studies on this subject include E. Stauffer, Die Theologie des Neuen Testaments, Stuttgart 1948, pp. 327-330 (Beilage VI "Abschiedsreden und Abschiedsszenen"); id., RAC I 29-35 s.v. Abschiedsreden; J. Munck, "Discours d'adieu dans
is portrayed as a teacher of wisdom, in fact as personified wisdom itself which after its disappearance, according to a much quoted saying,\(^2\) people will search for in vain. Indeed Jesus by addressing his pupils with the characteristic τεκνία (XIII 33\(^3\)) is announcing his departure in the near future. As inheritance to the circle of his friends\(^4\) he leaves behind a “new commandment”\(^5\) of which the main purport is mutual love (XIII 34\(^6\)). So far everything indeed seems to point to the literary form of a Farewell Discourse in which certain concepts of the Jewish-hellenistic wisdom tradition are reflected. At XIII 36, however, there appears to be something of a rupture. Before being able to add some more remarks on the newly introduced theme of the “new commandment”, Jesus is interrupted by one of his disciples who asks him where he will go. This interruption again leads to a kind of dialogue in which two other disciples take part.

\(^2\) In vs 33 Jesus refers explicitly to what in VII 33f. he had said to the Jews (cf. VIII 21). On the wisdom-affiliations of this saying see R. E. Brown, The Gospel according to John (I-XII), Garden City, New York 1966, p. 318. R. Bultmann, Das Evangelium des Johannes, Göttingen 1964\(^9\), pp. 232f. suggests some gnostic, particularly mandaic parallels. More interesting to compare is certainly Ev. Thom. 38, which, if Fitzmyer’s reconstruction is to be trusted, is also represented among the Oxyrhynchus Logoi (cf. J. A. Fitzmyer, Essays on the Semitic Background of the New Testament, Missoula, Montana 1974, pp. 410-412). This subject I intend to discuss on a future occasion.

\(^3\) As can easily be inferred from O.T.-books like Prov. and Sir. it was customary for teachers of wisdom to address their pupils as “sons” or “children”.

\(^4\) It is interesting to observe that in the Farewell Discourses Jesus designates his disciples not only as his “children”, but also as his “friends” (XV 13-15). That this latter expression has to be taken in the sense of the Greco-Roman idea of friendship is shown by the fact that it appears especially in connection with Jesus’ death (XV 13; cf. XIII 1 and, of course, X 11 and I John III 16). For to sacrifice one’s life for his friends was generally considered to be the highest possible demonstration of friendship. Cf. the collection of materials by G. Stählin, ThWNT IX, p. 151.

\(^5\) Cf. a characteristic passage like Test. Benj. X 4f., where Benjamin qualifies the divine commandments which he hands over to his sons as their “only inheritance”, which they have in their turn to transmit to their children εἰς κατάσχεσιν αιώνιον.

\(^6\) For some parallels see E. Stauffer, Theologie (cf. n. 1), p. 328.