“THE ORTHODOX GOSPEL”: THE RECEPTION OF JOHN IN THE GREAT CHURCH PRIOR TO IRENAEUS

Charles E. Hill
Reformed Theological Seminary

1. Introduction: The Myth of Orthodox Johannophobia

In some areas of Johannine studies it has not been unusual to see the word “Johannine” in company with words like “Gnostic,” “Valentinian,” or “heterodox.” The relationship of the Fourth Gospel itself, or some of its presumed sources, to emergent Gnosticism is a theme which has inspired a number of different approaches. But where there has been more of a consensus is in the idea of Gnostic or heterodox reception of John in the second century. One scholar says, “the gnostics adopted it as their special gospel.”1 Another speaks of the “omnipresence” of John among the Valentinians,2 and another says it is well known that in the second century John “was much the preserve of heretics.”3

Being the Gnostics’ “special gospel” would naturally mean that John would encounter difficulties among the orthodox.4 Scholars have often commented on “The nearly complete silence of the record during the crucial decades of the early second century,”5 with regard to John and the orthodox. The reason for this silence is thought to go beyond the obvious differences with the synoptic accounts. As Raymond Brown wrote, “The Great Church…was at first wary of the Fourth Gospel because it had given rise to error and was being used to support error.”6 T.E. Pollard says, “second-century writers hesitated to use

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1 Charlesworth 1995, 382.
3 Trevett 1992, 197.
4 On the use of terms like “orthodox” and “catholic” in preference to forms prefixed by “proto-,” see Hill 2004, 3–10.
5 Culpepper 1994, 131.
6 Brown 1979, 146–147.
St John’s Gospel because gnostic use of it made them either suspicious of its orthodoxy or afraid that to use it might give the impression that they were allying themselves with Gnosticism.” Not only this, but the Fourth Gospel is believed to have engendered open hostility among some orthodox writers, the chief (and virtually the only) examples of which are Gaius of Rome, writing in the early third century, and a nebulous group dubbed “the Alogi” by Epiphanius of Salamis. According to James H. Charlesworth, “Many pre-Nicene critics did not consider it reliable and authentic; it was tainted by the interpretations found in Heracleon’s ‘Ὑποµνήµατα [sic]. Other Valentinians and numerous gnostics almost caused the GosJn to be cast into the rubbish heaps of condemned literature.”

In this view, we owe John’s rescue from the rubbish heaps largely to the efforts of one man, Irenaeus of Lyons, who is said to have rehabilitated it and set it alongside three other gospels as “apostolic” witnesses to the truth.9

The foundation for this paradigmatic approach to the early reception of John is the 1934 landmark study of Walter Bauer, *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum,*10 the thesis of which was that what the church would later call heresy was the primitive and dominant form of Christianity in many places and for a long time, until the Roman ecclesiastical hierarchy could carry through its program of imperial expansion. Until its translation into English in 1971, Bauer’s book did not receive nearly the attention among English-speaking scholars that it was to receive after that watershed publishing event. But one aspect of his study managed to slip through the language barrier early on, namely, his views on the reception of John’s Gospel. A copy of *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei* made its way into the hands of a young Cambridge student named Joseph N. Sanders, whose prize-winning student essay of 1939 was published in 1943 as *The Fourth Gospel in the Early Church.* This modest monograph of 87 pages came to have a huge influence in English-language, Johannine scholarship. Embraced by C.K. Barrett, Raymond Brown and a host of other scholars, and enhanced by a 1966 Harvard Th.D. thesis by Melvyn Hillmer, what I have affectionately called the Orthodox Johnannophobia Paradigm,

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9 E.g., Sanders 1943, 66; Culpepper 1994, 123.
10 Bauer 1934.