THE JOHANNINE EPISTLES AND THE QUESTION OF EARLY CATHOLICISM

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A good deal of scholarly conversation continues to be stimulated by the deceptively slight letters of John,1 as well as by the vexed question of the presence or absence of 'early Catholic' elements in the later documents of the canon.2 Sparse, however, is the secondary literature that conjoins the two subjects, Frühkatholizismus and the Johannine epistles, and to my knowledge a systematic consideration of their conjunction does not exist. The objectives of this essay are thus three-fold: to focus the question of early Catholicism in the Johannine letters,3 to draw some preliminary conclusions, and to suggest some directions along which the conversation might continue.

1 Germane to the present discussion are J. Bogart, Orthodox and Heretical Perfectionism in the Johannine Community as Evident in the First Epistle of John (SBLDS 33; Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1977), and the masterly and provocative commentary by R. E. Brown, The Epistles of John (AB 30; Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1982).


3 Here I can only summarize my working hypotheses concerning the letters' authorship, relation to the Fourth Gospel, and time of composition. (1) All three epistles were written by one person (referred to, interchangeably, as "the writer," "the author," and "the presbyter"; cf. 2 Jn. 1; 3 Jn. 1) who was neither the Fourth Evangelist, the Beloved Disciple, nor the putative redactor of the Fourth Gospel. (2) The author and the communities to which he writes are in historical and traditional continuity with the community behind our Gospel of John. (3) The epistles were written ca. 100-110 C.E., after the composition of the Gospel, quite possibly but not necessarily in the chronological sequence in which they have been canonically preserved.
I. Are the Johannine Epistles 'Early Catholic' Documents?

One outgrowth of scholarly discourse on the topic of Frühkatholizismus has been the identification of certain characteristics, arguably evident in Christian literature antedating the emergence of the 'Great Church' (ca. 200 C.E.), which indicate tendencies in the direction of Catholicism. Those to which reference is usually made include the following: (1) a concern for the sources, transmission, and interpretation of tradition; (2) an interest in collecting apostolic literature; (3) a distinction between laity and clergy; (4) an ecclesial organization that is fundamentally hierarchical rather than charismatic; (5) the development of a monarchical episcopate; (6) an emerging principle of transmitted authority or apostolic succession; (7) the conception of faith in terms that are static and objective, rather than dynamic and subjective, resulting in an objectified proclamation and a strict rule of faith; (8) an emphasis upon sound doctrine, or 'orthodoxy', as opposed to false teaching, or 'heresy'; (9) a moralization of faith, tending toward legalism; (10) a concern for ecclesiastical consolidation and unity; (11) a trend toward 'sacramentalism', entailing an image of the church as the purveyor of salvation; and (12) the waning of apocalyptic eschatology in general, and of the expectation of the parousia in particular.

For the moment let us assume that these twelve criteria are sound and that, when a preponderance of such characteristics can be identified in an early Christian document, that literature may be justifiably regarded as 'early Catholic'. Operating on these assumptions, let us now test for the presence of each of these elements in the Johannine epistles. To expedite our analysis, these criteria may be appropriately grouped under four main headings: the issue of authority (embracing traits 1 through 6, listed above), the understanding of faith (traits 7 through 9), the image of the church (10 through 11), and the question of eschatology (12).