

THE CIRCUMSTANCES IN WHICH JOHN WROTE by William Barclay

We have seen that there are very real differences between the Fourth and the other three gospels; and we have seen that, whatever the reason, it was not lack of knowledge on John's part. We must now go on to ask, What was the aim with which John wrote? If we can discover this we will discover why he selected and treated his facts as he did.

The Fourth Gospel was written in Ephesus about the year A.D. 100. By that time two special features had emerged in the situation of the Christian church. First, Christianity had gone out into the Gentile world. By that time the Christian church was no longer predominantly Jewish; it was in fact overwhelmingly gentile. The vast majority of its members now came, not from a Jewish, but an Hellenistic background. That being so, Christianity had to be restated. It was not that the truth of Christianity had changed; but the terms and the categories in which it found expression had to be changed.

Take but one instance. A Greek might take up the Gospel according to St. Matthew. No sooner had he opened it than he was confronted with a long genealogy. Genealogies were familiar enough to the Jew but quite unintelligible to the Greek. He would read on. He would be confronted with a Jesus who was the Son of David, a king of whom the Greeks had never heard, and the symbol of a racial and nationalist ambition which was nothing to the Greek. He would be faced with the picture of Jesus as Messiah, a term of which the Greek had never heard. Must the Greek who wished to become a Christian be compelled to reorganize his whole thinking into Jewish categories? Must he learn a good deal about Jewish history and Jewish apocalyptic literature (which told about the coming of the Messiah) before he could become a Christian? As E. J. Goodspeed phrased it: "Was there no way in which he might be introduced directly to the values of Christian salvation without being for ever routed, we might even say, detoured, through Judaism?" The Greek was one of the world's great thinkers. Had he to abandon all his own great intellectual heritage in order to think entirely in Jewish terms and categories of thought?

John faced that problem fairly and squarely. And he found one of the greatest solutions which ever entered the mind of man. Later on, in the commentary, we shall deal much more fully with John's great solution. At the moment we touch on it briefly. The Greeks had two great conceptions.

(a) They had the conception of the Logos. In Greek logos (GSN3056) means two things--it means word and it means reason. The Jew was entirely familiar with the all-powerful word of God. "God said, Let there be light; and there was light" (Gen.1:3). The Greek was entirely familiar with the thought of reason. He looked at this world; he saw a magnificent and dependable order. Night and day came with unfailing regularity; the year kept its seasons in unvarying course; the stars and the planets moved in their unaltering path; nature had her unvarying laws. What produced this order? The Greek answered unhesitatingly, The Logos (GSN3056), the mind of God, is responsible for the majestic order of the world. He went on, What is it that gives man power to think, to reason and to know? Again he

answered unhesitatingly, The Logos (GSN3056), the mind of God, dwelling within a man makes him a thinking rational being.

John seized on this. It was in this way that he thought of Jesus. He said to the Greeks, "All your lives you have been fascinated by this great, guiding, controlling mind of God. The mind of God has come to earth in the man Jesus. Look at him and you see what the mind and thought of God are like." John had discovered a new category in which the Greek might think of Jesus, a category in which Jesus was presented as nothing less than God acting in the form of a man.

(b) They had the conception of two worlds. The Greek always conceived of two worlds. The one was the world in which we live. It was a wonderful world in its way but a world of shadows and copies and unrealities. The other was the real world, in which the great realities, of which our earthly things are only poor, pale copies, stand for ever. To the Greek the unseen world was the real one; the seen world was only shadowy unreality.

Plato systematized this way of thinking in his doctrine of forms or ideas. He held that in the unseen world there was the perfect pattern of everything, and the things of this world were shadowy copies of these eternal patterns. To put it simply, Plato held that somewhere there was a perfect pattern of a table of which all earthly tables are inadequate copies; somewhere there was the perfect pattern of the good and the beautiful of which all earthly goodness and earthly beauty are imperfect copies. And the great reality, the supreme idea, the pattern of all patterns and the form of all forms was God. The great problem was how to get into this world of reality, how to get out of our shadows into the eternal truths.

John declares that that is what Jesus enables us to do. He is reality come to earth. The Greek word for real in this sense is *alethinos* (GSN0228); it is very closely connected with the word *alethes* (GSN0227), which means true, and *aletheia* (GSN0225), which means "the truth." The King James and Revised Standard Versions translate *alethinos* (GSN0228) true; they would be far better to translate it "real." Jesus is the real light (Jn. 1:9); Jesus is the real bread (Jn. 6:32); Jesus is the real vine (Jn. 15:1); to Jesus belongs the real judgment (Jn. 8:16). Jesus alone has reality in our world of shadows and imperfections.

Something follows from that. Every action that Jesus did was, therefore, not only an act in time but a window which allows us to see into reality. That is what John means when he talks of Jesus' miracles as signs (*semeia* - GSN4592). The wonderful works of Jesus were not simply wonderful; they were windows opening onto the reality which is God. This explains why John tells the miracle stories in a quite different way from the other three gospel writers. There are two differences.

(a) In the Fourth Gospel we miss the note of compassion which is in the miracle stories of the others. In the others Jesus is moved with compassion for the leper (Mk.1:41); his sympathy goes out to Jairus (Mk.5:22); he is sorry for the father of the epileptic boy (Mk.9:14); when he raises to life the son of the widow of Nain, Luke says with an infinite

tenderness, "He gave him to his mother" (Lk.7:15). But in John the miracles are not so much deeds of compassion as deeds which demonstrate the glory of Christ. After the miracle at Cana of Galilee, John comments: "This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory" (Jn. 2:11). The raising of Lazarus happens "for the glory of God" (Jn. 11:4). The blind man's blindness existed to allow a demonstration of the glory of the works of God (Jn. 9:3). To John it was not that there was no love and compassion in the miracles; but in every one of them he saw the glory of the reality of God breaking into time and into human affairs.

(b) Often the miracles of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel are accompanied by a long discourse. The feeding of the five thousand is followed by the long discourse on the bread of life (Jn. 6); the healing of the blind man springs from the saying that Jesus is the light of the world (Jn. 9); the raising of Lazarus leads up to the saying that Jesus is the resurrection and the life (Jn. 11). To John the miracles were not simply single events in time; they were insights into what God is always doing and what Jesus always is; they were windows into the reality of God. Jesus did not merely once feed five thousand people; that was an illustration that he is for ever the real bread of life. Jesus did not merely once open the eyes of a blind man; he is for ever the light of the world. Jesus did not merely once raise Lazarus from the dead; he is for ever and for all men the resurrection and the life. To John a miracle was never an isolated act; it was always a window into the reality of what Jesus always was and always is and always did and always does.

It was with this in mind that that great scholar Clement of Alexandria (about A.D. 230) arrived at one of the most famous and true of all verdicts about the origin and aim of the Fourth Gospel. It was his view that the gospels containing the genealogies had been written first--that is, Luke and Matthew; that then Mark at the request of many who had heard Peter preach composed his gospel, which embodied the preaching material of Peter; and that then "last of all, John, perceiving that what had reference to the bodily things of Jesus' ministry had been sufficiently related, and encouraged by his friends, and inspired by the Holy Spirit, wrote a spiritual gospel" (quoted in Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History* 6 : 14). What Clement meant was that John was not so much interested in the mere facts as in the meaning of the facts, that it was not facts he was after but truth. John did not see the events of Jesus' life simply as events in time; he saw them as windows looking into eternity, and he pressed towards the spiritual meaning of the events and the words of Jesus' life in a way that the other three gospels did not attempt.

That is still one of the truest verdicts on the Fourth Gospel ever reached. John did write, not an historical, but a spiritual gospel.

So then, first of all, John presented Jesus as the mind of God in a person come to earth, and as the one person who possesses reality instead of shadows and able to lead men out of the shadows into the real world of which Plato and the great Greeks had dreamed. The Christianity which had once been clothed in Jewish categories had taken to itself the greatness of the thought of the Greeks.