

CHAPTER EIGHT

*The Principal Images
of John's Gospel*

INTRODUCTION:
THE JOHANNINE QUESTION

Thus far, in our attempt to listen to Jesus and thereby to get to know him, we have limited ourselves for the most part to the witness of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), while only occasionally glancing at John. It is therefore time to turn our attention to the image of Jesus presented by the Fourth Evangelist, an image that in many respects seems quite different from that of the other Gospels.

Listening to the Synoptics, we have realized that the mystery of Jesus' oneness with the Father is ever present and determines everything, even though it remains hidden beneath his humanity. On one hand, it was perceived by his sharp-eyed opponents. On the other hand, the disciples, who experienced Jesus at prayer and were privileged to know him intimately from the inside, were beginning—step by step, at key moments with great immediacy, and despite all their mis-

understandings—to recognize this absolutely new reality. In John, Jesus' divinity appears unveiled. His disputes with the Jewish Temple authorities, taken together, could be said to anticipate his trial before the Sanhedrin, which John, unlike the Synoptics, does not mention specifically.

John's Gospel is different: Instead of parables, we hear extended discourses built around images, and the main theater of Jesus' activity shifts from Galilee to Jerusalem. These differences caused modern critical scholarship to deny the historicity of the text—with the exception of the Passion narrative and a few details—and to regard it as a later theological reconstruction. It was said to express a highly developed Christology, but not to constitute a reliable source for knowledge of the historical Jesus. The radically late datings of John's Gospel to which this view gave rise have had to be abandoned because papyri from Egypt dating back to the beginning of the second century have been discovered; this made it clear that the Gospel must have been written in the first century, if only during the closing years. Denial of the Gospel's historical character, however, continued unabated.

Interpretation of John's Gospel in the second half of the twentieth century was largely shaped by Rudolf Bultmann's commentary on John, the first edition of which appeared in 1941. Bultmann is convinced that the main influences on the Gospel of John are to be sought not in the Old Testament and the Judaism of the time, but in Gnosticism. This sentence typifies Bultmann's approach: "That is not to say that the idea of the incarnation of the redeemer has in some way penetrated Gnosticism from Christianity; it is itself originally Gnostic, and was taken over at a very early stage by Christian-

ity, and made fruitful for Christology" (*The Gospel of John*, p. 26). Here is another in the same vein: "Gnosticism is the only possible source of the idea of absolute Logos" (RGG, 3rd ed., III, p. 846).

The reader asks: How does Bultmann know that? Bultmann's answer is breathtaking: "Even if the reconstruction of this kind of thinking has to be carried out in the main from sources which are later than John, nevertheless its *greater age* remains firmly established" (*The Gospel of John*, p. 27). On this decisive point Bultmann is wrong. In his inaugural lecture as professor at Tübingen, published in expanded form as *The Son of God* in 1975 (English translation 1976), Martin Hengel characterized "the hypothetical Gnostic myth of the sending of the Son of God into the world" as a "pseudo-scientific development of a myth." He then went on to remark: "In reality there is no Gnostic redeemer myth in the sources which can be demonstrated chronologically to be pre-Christian" (p. 33). "Gnosticism itself is first visible as a spiritual movement at the end of the first century A.D. at the earliest, and only develops fully in the second century" (p. 34).

Johannine scholarship in the generation after Bultmann took a radically different direction; the results have been thoroughly explored and discussed in Martin Hengel's book *The Johannine Question* (1989). If we look back from the vantage point of current scholarship to Bultmann's interpretation of John, we see how little protection the highly scientific approach can offer against fundamental mistakes. But what does today's scholarship tell us?

It has definitively confirmed and elaborated something that even Bultmann basically already knew: The Fourth Gospel

rests on extraordinarily precise knowledge of times and places, and so can only have been produced by someone who had an excellent firsthand knowledge of Palestine at the time of Jesus. A further point that has become clear is that the Gospel thinks and argues entirely in terms of the Old Testament—of the Torah (Rudolf Pesch)—and that its whole way of arguing is deeply rooted in the Judaism of Jesus' time. The language of the Gospel, which Bultmann regarded as "Gnostic," actually bears unmistakable signs of the book's intimate association with this milieu. "The work was written in simple unliterary *koine* Greek, steeped in the language of Jewish piety. This Greek was also spoken by the upper classes in Jerusalem . . . [where] Scripture was read in Hebrew and Greek, and prayer and discussion went on in both languages" (Hengel, *The Johannine Question*, p. 113).

Hengel also points out that "in Herodian times a special Hellenized Jewish upper class with its own culture developed in Jerusalem" (*ibid.*, p. 114) and he accordingly locates the origin of the Gospel in the priestly aristocracy of Jerusalem (*ibid.*, pp. 124–35). We can perhaps regard a brief reference in John 18:15f as corroboration for this thesis. There it is recounted that after his arrest Jesus is brought to the high priests for interrogation and that in the meantime Simon Peter and "another disciple" follow Jesus in order to find out what is going to happen next. Regarding this "other disciple," it is then said that "as this disciple was known to the high priest, he entered the court of the high priest along with Jesus." His connections with the household of the high priest were such that he was able to secure Peter's entry, thereby engineering the situation that led to Peter's denial. The circle of the dis-

ciples, then, extended as far as the high-priestly aristocracy, in whose language the Gospel is largely written.

This brings, us, however, to two decisive questions that are ultimately at stake in the "Johannine" question: Who is the author of this Gospel? How reliable is it historically? Let us try to approach the first question. The Gospel itself makes a clear statement about it in the context of the Passion story. It is reported that one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a lance "and at once there came out blood and water" (Jn 19:34). These weighty words immediately follow: "He who saw it has borne witness—his testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth—that you also may believe" (Jn 19:35). The Gospel traces its origins to an eyewitness, and it is clear that this eyewitness is none other than the disciple who, as we have just been told, was standing under the Cross and was the disciple whom Jesus loved (cf. Jn 19:26). This disciple is once again named as the author of the Gospel in John 21:24. In addition, we meet this figure in John 13:23, 20:2–10, and 21:7 and probably in Jn 13:5, 40 and 18:15–16 as well.

These statements concerning the external origin of the Gospel take on a deeper dimension in the story of the washing of the feet, which points to its inward source. Here it is said that this disciple reclined at Jesus' side during the meal and that, when he asked who the betrayer was, he "leaned back on Jesus' breast" (Jn 13:25). These words are intended to parallel the end of the prologue of John's Gospel, where it is said apropos of Jesus: "No one has ever seen God; it is the only Son, who is nearest to the Father's heart, who has made him known" (Jn 1:18). Just as Jesus, the Son, knows about the mystery of the Father from resting in his heart, so too the

Evangelist has gained his intimate knowledge from his inward repose in Jesus' heart.

But who is this disciple? The Gospel never directly identifies him by name. In connection with the calling of Peter, as well as of other disciples, it points toward John, the son of Zebedee, but it never explicitly identifies the two figures. The intention is evidently to leave the matter shrouded in mystery. The Book of Revelation does, admittedly, specify John as its author (cf. Rev 1:1, 4), but despite the close connection between this book and the Gospel and Letters of John, it remains an open question whether the author is one and the same person.

The Lutheran exegete Ulrich Wilckens, in his extensive *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, has recently presented new arguments for the thesis that the "beloved disciple" should be thought of not as a historical figure, but as a symbol for a basic structure of the faith: "*Scriptura sola* is impossible without the personal witness of a Christian in the function and authority of the 'beloved disciple,' in whom office and spirit unite and support each other" (*Theologie*, I, 4, p. 158). However correct this may be as a structural claim, it remains insufficient. If the favorite disciple in the Gospel expressly assumes the function of a witness to the truth of the events he recounts, he is presenting himself as a living person. He intends to vouch for historical events as a witness and he thus claims for himself the status of a historical figure. Otherwise the statements we have examined, which are decisive for the intention and the quality of the entire Gospel, would be emptied of meaning.

