

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

*INTERNAL EVIDENCE FOR THE AUTHENTICITY
AND GENUINENESS OF ST. JOHN'S GOSPEL.*

II.

HAVING thus established the fact that the writer was neither a Gentile nor a Hellenist, but a Hebrew of the Hebrews, we will proceed to inquire further whether he evinces an acquaintance with the manners and feelings, and also with the geography and history (more especially the contemporary history) of Palestine, which so far as our knowledge goes (and in dealing with such questions we must not advance one step beyond our knowledge) would be morally impossible with even a Hebrew Christian at the supposed date, long after the political existence of the nation had been obliterated, and when the disorganization of Jewish society was complete.

As I am obliged to compress my remarks within the space of a single lecture, I cannot place the evidence fully before you; but my hope is, that I may indicate the lines of investigation which will enable you to answer it more completely for yourselves. I will only say, that we obtain from the Fourth Gospel details at once fuller and more minute on all these points than from the other three. Whether we turn to the Messianic hopes of the chosen people, with all the attendant circumstances with which imagination had invested this expected event, or to the mutual relations of Samaritans, Jews, Galilæans, Romans, and the respective feelings, prejudices, beliefs, customs of each, or to the topography as well of the city and the temple as of the rural districts—the Lake of Gennesaret, and the cornfields and

mountain ridges of Shechem—or to the contemporary history of the Jewish hierarchy and the Herodian sovereignty, we are alike struck at every turn with subtle and unsuspected traces, betokening the familiarity with which the writer moves amidst the ever-shifting scenes of his wonderful narrative.

This minuteness of detail in the Fourth Evangelist is very commonly overlooked, because our gaze is arrested by still more important and unique features in this Gospel. The striking character of our Lord's discourses as recorded in St. John—their length and sequence, their simplicity of language, their fulness and depth of meaning—dazzles the eye of the critic and blinds him to the historical aspects of the narrative. Only concentrating our view on these latter shall we realize the truth that the evangelist is not floating in the clouds of airy theological speculations, that though with his eye he peers into the mysteries of the unseen, his foot is planted on the solid ground of external fact; that, in short, the incidents are not invented as a framework for the doctrine, but that the doctrine arises naturally out of, and derives its meaning from, the incidents.

One example will serve at once to illustrate the double characteristic of this Gospel, the accurate historical narrative of facts which forms the basis of the Gospel, and the theological teaching which is built as a superstructure upon this foundation, and which the evangelist keeps distinctly and persistently in view in his selection and arrangement of the facts, and also to introduce the investigation which I purpose instituting.

The narrative and the discourses alike are thoroughly saturated with the Messianic ideas of the time. The Christ, as expected by the Jews, is the one central figure round which all the facts are grouped, the one main topic on which all the conversations hinge. This is the more remarkable, because the leading conception in the writer's

own mind is not the Messiah, but the Word, the Logos,—not the deliverance of Israel, but the manifestation of God in the flesh. This main purpose is flung out at the opening of the Gospel, and it is kept steadily in view in the selection of materials throughout the work. But it does not once enter into the mind of the Jews, who are wholly absorbed in the Messianic idea. Nay, the word Logos does not once occur even on our Lord's own lips, though the obvious motive of His teaching is to enforce this higher aspect of His person, to which they were strangers. And I cannot but think that this distinct separation is a remarkable testimony to the credibility of the writer, who, however strongly impressed with his mission as the teacher of a great theological conception, nevertheless keeps it free from his narrative of facts; though obviously there would be a very strong temptation to introduce it, a temptation which to a mere forger would be irresistible.

The Messianic idea, for instance, is turned about on all sides, and presented in every aspect. On this point we learn very much more of contemporary Jewish opinion from the Fourth Gospel than from the other three. At the commencement and at the close of the narrative—in the preaching of the Baptist and in the incidents of the passion—it is equally prominent. In Galilee (i. 41, 46, 49; vi. 15, 23, 30 *sq.*), in Samaria (iv. 25, 29, 42), in Judæa (v. 39, 45 *sq.*; vii. 26 *sq.*, 40–43; viii. 30 *sq.*; x. 24), it is the one standard theme of conversation. Among friends, among foes, among neutrals alike it is mooted and discussed. The person and character of Jesus are tried by this standard. He is accepted or He is rejected, as He fulfils or contradicts the received ideal of the Messiah.

The accessories also of the Messiah's coming, as conceived by the Jews, are brought out with a completeness beyond the other gospels. I will only ask you, as an illustration of this, to consider the discourse on the manna in the sixth

chapter. The key to the meaning of the conversation is the fact that the Jews expected a miracle similar to the gift of manna in the wilderness, as an accompaniment of the appearance of the great deliverer. This expectation throws a flood of light on the whole discourse. But the fact is not communicated in the passage itself. There is only a bald, isolated statement, which apparently is suggested by nothing, and itself fails to suggest anything: "Our fathers did eat manna in the wilderness." Then comes an aposiopesis. The inference is unexpressed. The expectation, which explains all, is left to be inferred, because it would be mentally supplied by men brought up among the ideas of the time. We ourselves have to get it by the aid of criticism and research from rabbinical authorities. But, when we have grasped it, we can unlock the meaning of the whole chapter.

Connected with Messiah's coming are other conceptions on which it may be worth while to dwell for a moment. One of these is the appearance of a mysterious person called "*the prophet*." This expectation arose out of the announcement in Deuteronomy xviii. 15, "The Lord thy God will raise up unto thee a prophet from the midst of thee, like unto me." To this anticipation we have allusions in not less than four places in St. John (i. 21, 25; vi. 14; vii. 40), in all of which "*the prophet*" is mentioned, though in the three first the distinctness of the expectation is blurred in the English version by the rendering "*that prophet*." In all these passages the mention of "*the prophet*" without any explanation is most natural on the lips of contemporary Jews, whose minds were filled with the Messianic conceptions of the times; while such language is extremely unlikely to have been invented for them more than a century after the date of the supposed occurrences. But the point especially to be observed is, that the form which the conception takes is strictly Jewish, and not Christian.

Christian teachers identified the prophet foretold by Moses with our Lord Himself, and therefore with the Christ. This application of the prophecy is made directly in St. Peter's speech (Acts iii. 22), and inferentially in St. Stephen's (Acts vii. 37); and later Christian teachers followed in their steps. But these Jews in St. John's Gospel conceive "*the Christ*" and "*the prophet*" as two different persons. If He is not "*the Christ*," they adopt the alternative that He may be "*the prophet*" (i. 21, 25); if not the prophet, then the Christ (vii. 40). It is hardly conceivable to my mind that a Christian writer, living in or after the middle of the second century, calling on his imagination for facts, should have divested himself so absolutely of the Christian idea and fallen back on the Jewish.

But before I have done with "*the prophet*," there is yet one more point worthy of notice. After the miracle of feeding the five thousand, we are told that "those men who had seen the miracle that Jesus did said, This is of a truth *the prophet* that should come into the world" (vi. 14). The connexion is not obvious, and the writer has not explained himself. Here again the missing link is supplied by the Messianic conception of the age. The prophet foretold was to be like Moses himself. Hence it was inferred that there must be a parallel in the works of the two. Hence a repetition of the gift of the manna—the bread from heaven—might be expected. Was not this miracle then the very fulfilment of their expectation? Hence we read that on the day following (after several incidents have intervened, but with the miracle still fresh on their minds), they seek Him out, and still try to elicit a definite answer from Him: "What sign showest Thou then? Our fathers did eat manna in the desert." Thus a casual and indistinct reference in one part of the chapter is explained by an equally casual and indistinct reference in another, and light emerges from darkness.

From the Messianic ideas I turn to the Jewish sects and the Levitical hierarchy.

The Sadducees, with whom we are familiar in other gospels, are not once mentioned by the Fourth Evangelist. How are we to account for this fact? Have we here a discrepancy, or (if not a discrepancy) at least an incongruity? Is there in St. John's picture an entire omission of that group which occupies a prominent place on the canvas of the other evangelists, especially of St. Matthew?

The common connexion, when describing the adversaries of our Lord, is "the Pharisees and Sadducees" in the synoptic evangelists, "the chief priests and the Pharisees" in St. John. In the comparison of these phrases lies the solution. The high priests at this time belonged to the sect of the Sadducees. How this happened we do not know. It may be that their Roman rulers favoured this party, as being more lukewarm than the Pharisees in religious matters, and therefore less likely to give trouble to the civil powers. At all events, the fact appears distinctly from more than one notice in the narrative of the Acts (iv. 1, v. 17); and the same is stated in a passage of Josephus (*Ant.* xx. 9. 1). Thus a real coincidence arises from an apparent incongruity.

But Josephus elsewhere (*Ant.* xviii. 1. 4) makes another statement respecting the Pharisees, which throws great light on the narrative of the Fourth Evangelist. He tells us that the Sadducees were few in number, though of the highest rank; and that when they were in office, they were forced, even against their will, to listen to the Pharisees, because otherwise they would not be tolerated by the people. Now this is precisely the order of events in St. John. The Pharisees (with one single exception) always take the initiative; they are the active opponents of our Lord, and the chief priests step in to execute their will.

The single exception is remarkable. Once only we find

chief priests acting alone and acting promptly (xii. 10). They form a plot for putting Lazarus to death. This was essentially a Sadducees' question. It was necessary that a living witness to the great truth, which the high-priestly party denied, should be got rid of at all hazards. Hence they bestir themselves and throw off their usual apathy; just as, turning from the Gospels to the Acts of the Apostles, they have taken the place of the Pharisees as the foremost persecutors of the new faith, because the resurrection from the dead was the cardinal topic of the preaching of the apostles.

But there is one other notice of the Jewish historian with which the narrative of the Fourth Evangelist presents a striking but unsuspecting coincidence. We are somewhat startled with the outburst of rudeness which marks the chief of the party on one occasion (xi. 49). "One of them, Caiaphas, being high priest that year, said unto them, Ye know nothing at all, and ye do not reflect that it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish." As a comment on this, take the words of Josephus: "The behaviour of the Sadducees to one another is not a little rude, and their intercourse with their peers is brusque, as if addressing strangers" (*B.J.* ii. 8. 14).

These coincidences need little comment. I will only add that the Fourth Evangelist does not himself give us the key to the incidents, that the references have been gathered from three different parts of Josephus, that the statements in the evangelist are not embroideries on his narrative, but are woven into its very texture; and that nevertheless all these several notices dovetail together and create one harmonious whole, which bears the very impress of strict historical truth.

After reviewing these coincidences, it will appear strange that from the passage last quoted Baur derived what he

obviously considered to be one of his strongest arguments against the authenticity of the Gospel. Because the evangelist three times speaks of Caiaphas as "high priest that year" (xi. 49, 51; xviii. 13), he argues that the writer supposed the high priesthood to be an annual office, and therefore could not have been the Apostle John.

Now unless I have entirely misled you and myself, this is incredible. You cannot imagine that one who shows an acquaintance, not only with the language, but also with the customs, feelings, history, topography of the race, even in their minute details, should yet be ignorant of this most elementary fact of Jewish institutions. Whether the Gospel is authentic or whether it is not, such a supposition is equally incredible. If the writing is a forgery, the forger was certainly highly informed and extremely subtle; he must have ransacked divers histories for his facts; and yet here he is credited with a degree of ignorance which a casual glance at a few pages of his Old Testament or his Josephus would at once have served to dissipate. Suppose a parallel case. Imagine one, who writing (we will say) a historical work, shows a subtle appreciation of political feeling in England, and a minute acquaintance with English social institutions, and yet falls into the error of supposing that the premier is elected annually by vote of the people, or that the lord-mayoralty is a hereditary office tenable for life. If therefore this supposition is simply impossible, we must explain the expression, "high priest that year," in some other way. And the explanation seems to be this. The most important duty of the high priest was an annual function, the sacrifice and intercession for the people on the great day of atonement. "Once every year," says the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews (ix. 7), "the high priest alone entereth into the second tabernacle (the inner sanctuary), not without blood, which he offereth for himself and for the errors of the people." The year of which the

evangelist speaks was the year of all years ; the acceptable year of the Lord, as it is elsewhere called ; the year in which the great sacrifice, the one atonement, was made, the atonement which annulled once and for ever the annual repetitions. It so happened that it was the duty of Caiaphas, as high priest, to enter the holy of holies, and offer the atonement for *that* year. The evangelist sees, if we may use the phrase without irreverence, a dramatic propriety in the fact that he of all men should make this declaration. By a Divine irony he is made unconsciously to declare the truth, proclaiming Jesus to be the great atoning sacrifice, and himself to be instrumental in offering the victim. This irony of circumstances is illustrated in the case of Pilate, as in the case of Caiaphas. The latter, the representative of the Jewish hierarchy, pronounces Jesus the great atoning sacrifice ; the former, the representative of the civil power, pronounces Him as the sovereign of the race, " Behold your King ! " The malignity of Caiaphas and the sneer of Pilate alike bear witness to a higher truth than they themselves consciously apprehend.

From the sects and the hierarchy we may turn to the city and the temple. Here too we should do well to bear in mind how largely we owe the distinctive features of the topography and architecture with which we are familiar to the Fourth Gospel. Within the sacred precincts themselves the Porch of Solomon, within the Holy City the pools of Bethsaida and Siloam, are brought before our eyes by this evangelist alone. And when we pass outside of the walls, he is still our guide. From him we trace the steps of the Lord and His disciples on that fatal night crossing the brook Kedron into the garden ; it is he who, relating the last triumphal entry into Jerusalem, specifies "*the* branches of the palm trees " (the other evangelists use general expressions, " boughs of the trees," or the like)—"*the* palm trees " on which he had so often gazed, of which

the sight was still so fresh in his memory, which clothed the eastern slopes of Olivet, and gave its name to the village of Bethany, "the house of dates." How simple and natural the definite articles are on the lips of an eye-witness I need not say. How awkward they sound to later ears, and how little likely to have been used by a later writer, unfamiliar with the scene itself, we may infer from the fact that in our own version they are suppressed, and the evangelist is made to say, "they took branches of palm trees."

Moreover the familiarity of the Fourth Evangelist, not only with the site and the buildings of the temple, but also with the history, appears in a striking way from a casual allusion. After the description of the cleansing of the temple by our Lord,—a description which though brief is given with singular vividness of detail—the Jews ask for some sign, as the credential which might justify this assumption of authority and right of chastisement. His answer is, "Pull down this temple, and in three days I will build it up." Their astonishment is expressed in their reply, "This temple has been forty-six years in building, and wilt Thou raise it again in three days?" (ii. 19, 20.)

Now I think it will be allowed that this mention of time is quite undesigned. It has no appearance of artifice, it occurs naturally in the course of conversation, and it is altogether free from suspicion, as having been introduced to give a historical colouring to a work of fiction. If so, let us examine its historical bearing.

For this purpose it is necessary to follow two distinct lines of chronological research. We have to investigate the history of the building of the Herodian temple, and we have to ascertain the dates of our Lord's life.

Now by comparison of several passages in Josephus, and by the exercise of historical criticism upon them, we arrive at the conclusion that Herod commenced his temple about A.U.C. 735, *i.e.* B.C. 18. It took many years in building, and

was not finally completed until A.U.C. 817, *i.e.* A.D. 64. Thus the works were going on during the whole of the period comprised in the New Testament history. If we add forty-six years to the date of its commencement (A.U.C. 735) we are brought down to A.U.C. 781 or 782, *i.e.* A.D. 28 or 29.

The chronology of Herod's temple involves one considerable effort of historical criticism. The chronology of our Lord's life requires another. Into this question however I need not enter in detail. It is sufficient to remind you that the common date of the Christian era is now generally allowed to be a little wide of the mark, and that our Lord's birth actually took place three or four years before this era. The point to be observed here is, that St. Luke places the baptism of our Lord in or about the fifteenth year of Tiberius, which comprised the interval between the autumn of 781 and the autumn of 782. Now the occurrence related by St. John took place, as we may infer from his narrative, in the first passover after the baptism; that is, according to St. Luke's chronology probably at the passover of 782.

Thus we are brought to the same date by following two lines of chronology; and we arrive at the fact that forty-six years there or thereabouts had actually elapsed since the commencement of Herod's building to this point in our Lord's ministry. I am anxious not to speak with too great precision, because the facts do not allow it. The exact number might have been forty-five or forty-seven years, for fragments of years may be reckoned in or not in our calculation, and the data are not sufficiently exact to determine the date to a nicety. But, after all allowance made for this margin of uncertainty, the coincidence is sufficiently striking.

And now let us suppose the Gospel to have been written in the middle of the second century, and ask ourselves what strong improbabilities this hypothesis involves.

The writer must first have made himself acquainted with

a number of facts connected with the temple of Herod. He must not only have known that the temple was commenced in a particular year, but also that it was still incomplete at the time of our Lord's ministry. So far as we know, he could only have got these facts from Josephus. Even Josephus however does not state the actual date of the commencement of the temple. It requires some patient research to arrive at this date by a comparison of several passages. We have therefore to suppose, first, that the forger of the Fourth Gospel went through an elaborate critical investigation for the sake of ascertaining the date. But, secondly, he must have made himself acquainted with the chronology of the gospel history. At all events, he must have ascertained the date of the commencement of our Lord's ministry. The most favourable supposition is, that he had before him the Gospel of St. Luke, though he nowhere else betrays the slightest acquaintance with this gospel. Here he would find the date which he wanted, reckoned by the years of the Roman emperors. Thirdly, after arriving at these two results by separate processes, he must combine them; thus connecting the chronology of the Jewish kings with the chronology of the Roman emperors, the chronology of the temple erections with the chronology of our Lord's life.

When he has taken all these pains, and worked up the subject so elaborately, he drops in the notice which has given him so much trouble in an incidental and inobtrusive way. It has no direct bearing on his history; it does not subserve the purpose of his theology. It leads to nothing, proves nothing. Certainly the art of concealing art was never exercised in a more masterly way than here. And yet this was an age which perpetrated the most crude and bungling forgeries, and is denounced by modern criticism for its utter incapacity of criticism.

(To be concluded.)
