

Orthodoxy and Heresy in John 10:1-21 and 15:1-17

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The author, a graduate of London and McMaster Universities, who is now Assistant Professor of Religious Studies in the Memorial University of Newfoundland, examines an aspect of Johannine theology which has acquired special importance in the light of modern study. Instead of generalizing on the Fourth Gospel as a whole, he pays specific attention to the parables of the good shepherd and the true vine.

INTRODUCTION

IT was, of course, Walter Bauer who criticized the traditional view of orthodoxy and heresy in his important book *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum*.¹ He suggested that the terms "orthodoxy" and "heresy" are retrojections into the first two centuries of Christianity of categories inapplicable to a situation of considerable fluidity and confusion. What later was called "heresy" was in fact the earliest form of Christianity in many areas.

Bauer himself did not apply his thesis to the New Testament itself. It was Bultmann who saw the full impact of Bauer's asseverations lying within the New Testament—" . . . the canon reflects a multiplicity of conceptions of Christian faith or its content. Hence, its inner unity becomes a question."² Käsemann has pursued this insight relentlessly³ especially with regard to the Johannine Literature. First in "Ketzer und Zeuge. Zum johanneischen Verfasserproblem"⁴ and more recently in *Jesu letzter Wille nach Johannes 17*⁵ Käsemann has sought to show that the author of John is himself a heretic. Although Käsemann has gained little support for these views, nevertheless he does pose a vital question: Do we in the epistles and the Gospel have a "dogmatic controversy" taking place?

¹ Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1934. Second edition with the addition of two appendices by Georg Strecker, 1964; E.T.: *Orthodoxy and Heresy in earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971; London: S.C.M., 1972).

² E. T. *Theology of the New Testament* (London: S.C.M., 1955), II, p. 141.

³ See esp. his "Begründet der neutestamentliche Kanon die Einheit der Kirche?" *EvTheol* 11 (1951/2) 13-21; E.T. "The Canon of the New Testament and the Unity of the Church", *Essays on New Testament Themes* (London: S.C.M., 1964), pp. 95-107.

⁴ *ZTK NS* 48 (1951) 292-311.

⁵ Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1966; E.T.: *The Testament of Jesus* (London: S.C.M., 1968).

If so, what is the exact nature of that controversy and how does it illuminate our knowledge of early Christianity? Is the "spiritual Gospel" really removed from the concerns and tensions of the age, or can we discover in it a passionate and polemical intent? I believe we can. I agree with Käsemann that only in Paul do we find the "same passionate discussion". I believe that the author of the Fourth Gospel was very much concerned about the problem of heresy which was besetting the Church in his time. I propose to test this hypothesis in a very limited way by examining John 10: 1-1-21 and 15: 1-17.

JOHN 10: 1-21

The transition from chapter 9 to chapter 10 has disturbed some commentators who attempt to improve the sequence by rearranging the text. Such rearrangements are unconvincing.⁶ However, it is true that the thought in these verses "does not move along straight lines."⁷

Vss. 1-6: It is certainly not impossible that John's use of ἀναβαίνων here has a double meaning: it not only refers to the thief and bandit gaining access to the sheep by surreptitious means, but also those "who would ascend to heaven by some other means than the cross".⁸ But in the first instance, who is referred to? The reference is not to one particular figure but to "every corrupter of the faithful or those who are called to the faith, to everyone who might be a temptation to them—always, that is, in a particular concrete situation".⁹ Such pretenders will be unable to deceive Christ's elect sheep (v. 5). But since the shepherd calls his ἱδιοί, it follows that there are sheep in the fold which are not his and which do not respond to his voice. Who are the ἱδιοί? And with what group are the sum of the sheep in the fold to be identified? Barrett¹⁰ sees the fold as that of Judaism and supports the argument by reference to v. 16 (ἄλλα πρόβατα ἔχω ἃ οὐκ ἔστιν ἐκ τῆς αὐλῆς ταύτης). Others have identified the flock as the Christian community, the Church, a position which Bultmann strongly criticizes.¹¹ Bultmann's own interpretation is, however, coloured by his supposition of the Redeemer myth which he sees as the key to interpretation here.

⁶ C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (London: S.P.C.K., 1955), p. 305: "... the shepherd discourse follows naturally upon 9: 41 and is presupposed by 10: 26-29"; See also R. E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (The Anchor Bible, Garden City, New York: Doubleday, vol. I, 1966, vol. II, 1971), pp. 388-90.

⁷ Barrett, *John*, p. 305.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ R. Bultmann, *Das Evangelium des Johannes*, E.T.: *The Gospel of John* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971), pp. 371f., n. 3.

¹⁰ Barrett, *John*, p. 306.

¹¹ Bultmann, *John*, p. 374f.

What is the Evangelist's intention? With which set of characters are the readers of the Gospel to identify, if any? If we focus attention on our particular concern, the problem of orthodoxy and heresy in the early Church, and note that false teachers and heresies are certainly a problem in I John, we may well find that this illuminates the interpretation of this particular passage.

The shepherd is to be identified with Jesus (v. 11) and, following Bultmann, the bandits and robbers with false teachers. The flock is the Christian community (against Bultmann). How then are we to understand the sense of ἰδιοί? Who are the other sheep in the fold who do not recognize the shepherd's voice? Evidently they do not know the voice of the shepherd and are thus all the more susceptible to the bandit and thief. Thus, they are those in the community who are susceptible to false teachers. But what of v. 16? In v. 3 there is a distinction between sheep within the same fold; now sheep of other folds are mentioned. If the fold of v. 3 is the Christian community, it follows that the other folds of v. 16 refer to other non-Christian communities. This interpretation fits in exactly with what we know of the background of the Gospel: the Evangelist was at home in a variety of spiritual currents and acquainted with other religions (cf. Dodd's *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*).

Vss. 7-10: Many commentators have found considerable difficulty with πάντες ὅσοι ἦλθον πρὸ ἐμοῦ κλέπτει εἰσὶν καὶ λησταί (10: 8). Does this verse refer to the Old Testament prophets?—or the Pharisees (and priests) of Jesus' time? This seems most unlikely. On the basis of our interpretation above our conclusion is that it refers to all pretended revealers and saviours (so also Bultmann). The verse is in fact a condemnation of the religions of the age, inasmuch as they appeal to supposed revealers of earlier ages.¹²

There is a shift here from the shepherd of the previous pericope to the θύρα. There is also an ambiguity: v.7 seems to mean "I am the door to the sheep", i.e., the shepherd approaches the sheep through Jesus. V. 9 seems to mean "I am the door through which the sheep enter the fold", i.e., Jesus is the door not for the shepherd but for the sheep.¹³ But too much has been made of the ambiguity. It seems unnecessary to think of composite sources underlying this section. "The only unity of the discourse is Christological, Jesus draws to himself every epithet which the picture of sheep and shepherd suggests".¹⁴ This is surely precisely the point: the only protection the sheep have from pretenders breaking into the fold is to know the shepherd and his function. Jesus is the only means of entry

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 376.

¹³ In this connection see the interesting article of E. F. F. Bishop, "The Door of the Sheep in John 10: 7-9," *ExpT* 71 (1959-60) 307-309.

¹⁴ Barrett, *John*, p. 308.

into the messianic community. All pretenders or unauthorized persons can only bring death (v. 10).

Vss. 11-16: Jesus is the good shepherd and is even willing to die to protect his sheep (v. 11). It is quite common¹⁵ to see v. 12 as an attack on the Pharisees; they are the *μισθωτός* who betrays the flock. But our interpretation sees the flock as the Church. Who then are the *μισθωτοί*? They are those entrusted with the care of the flock who, when danger threatens, flee. They are those leaders of the Church who allow the sheep to be scattered.

This indicates that John reflects a situation in which the care and unity of the Church is threatened. This same symbolism is found in Acts 20: 29 f. Paul is speaking here of the Ephesian Church, and if the Gospel of John does originate in Ephesus, then the parallels are all the more striking.

Jesus is the good shepherd because he knows his sheep (v. 14), a mutual knowledge analogous to that of Father and Son (v. 15).

On v. 16 see above. The unity of the flock is only possible through Jesus.

There seems to be a telic force behind v. 17, i.e., "I lay down my life in order to take it up again". Although it is possible that it means "with a view to taking it up again" this is doubtful. In Johannine thought "the passion, death, resurrection and ascension constitute the one indissoluble salvific action of return to the Father."¹⁶

V. 18 refers to the divine command, a theme taken up frequently in the following chapters:

The characteristic ("new") commandment of Jesus is that his disciples should love one another (13: 34; 15: 12, 17). If they keep his commandments they abide in his love and show their love for him (14: 15, 21; 15: 10, 14). Similarly, the love of the Father for the son is bound up with the son's voluntary acceptance of suffering in the work of salvation. The word *ἐντολή* therefore sums up the Christian doctrine of salvation from its origin in the eternal love of God, manifested in Jesus, to the mutual love of Christians in the Church. Jesus himself found complete freedom of action in obedience (v. 18a); so will the disciples.¹⁷

Vss. 19-21: Jesus' words produce a division among the Jews.

JOHN 15: 1-17

This is a unit which divides into two parts: vss. 1-6 and 7-17.¹⁸ The background of this whole unit is controverted. Bultmann and Bauer see the predominant influence here as Gnostic and Mandaeen. Others see it as Jewish. If the background is Judaism and the Old

¹⁵ So, e.g., Brown, *John*, p. 395.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 399.

¹⁷ Barrett, *John*, p. 313.

¹⁸ See the literary analysis of Brown, *John*, pp. 665-668.

Testament, John radically transforms the sense in that the vine no longer represents Israel: it is a Christological definition applied to Jesus. Moreover, a comparison with similar sayings in the Synoptics (Mk. 12: 1-9; Mt. 21: 33-41; 20: 1-16; 21: 28-32; Luke 20: 9-16) reveals that in the Johannine redaction it no longer refers to the eschatological crisis of the ministry of Jesus but to the continuous life of the Church.¹⁹

An important point of discussion here is whether the vine has a (secondary) eucharistic significance. Bultmann, of course, totally rejects such a suggestion.²⁰ However, although the eucharistic institution is lacking in John, it was undoubtedly familiar to the readers of the Gospel as it was part of an early faith formula (I Cor. 11: 23-26). Furthermore, the cup designated as "the fruit of the vine" was also familiar to them (Mk. 14: 25; Mt. 26: 29; cf. Didache 9: 2). The theology of the eucharist in the early Church (I Cor. 10: 16-17) and that of the vine in John both stress intimate union with Jesus. It seems therefore plausible to assume that this passage in John would evoke eucharistic thoughts from the readership.

This inference is given more weight by the remarkable parallels of John 15: 1-17 with the eucharistic section in John 6: 51-58. (Cf. 15: 5 b with 6: 56; 15: 5 c with 6: 57; 15: 13 with 6: 51 c; 15: 1 with 6: 51 a.)²¹

The emphasis in v. 1 falls on Jesus as the "real" or "true" vine; only through him is life to be found. It has been suggested that here the author intends a polemic against Judaism, but this seems unlikely.

There is abundant evidence that John was well aware of the historical fact of the rejection of Jesus by Judaism (see especially 12: 36b-50). But this rejection he has already set forth, and here, as regularly in the last discourses, his major interest is in the life of the Church, in the question of who are and who are not disciples of Jesus.²²

In v. 2 we are posed with the question: Who are the branches who do not bear fruit? Brown suggests that the author may have been thinking of the "anti-Christ" of I John 2: 18-19.²³ Certainly Christian apostates are intended, as shown by ἐν ἑμοί.

The reference to the cleansing of the disciples in v. 3 recalls 13: 10 and the footwashing scene. In the present context however, it is Jesus' word which cleanses. Bultmann insists that in both cases the meaning is that the Christian is not cleansed by sacramental means

¹⁹ Barrett, *John*, p. 393.

²⁰ Bultmann, *John*, p. 530.

²¹ See Brown, *John*, p. 673.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 674.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 676.

or church institutions but the Revealer's word alone. But there is no reason to think of one verse contradicting the other.²⁴

Vss. 4-5 accent the theme of the unity of Christ with the faithful. If they remain in Jesus through faith he will remain in them through love and fruitfulness.

V. 6 begins: ἔάν μή τις μένη ἐν ἐμοί ἐβλήθη ἔξω ὡς τὸ κλῆμα καὶ ἐξηράνθη. The vital question is: What is the force of ἐβλήθη? Often it is taken as referring to eschatological punishment, but this is most un-Johannine. Ἐκβάλλω usually carries the connotation of "banishment from a family or society" (Moulton and Milligan). In John 9: 34 f. it seems to have the double sense of "to expel from the synagogue and to expel from the audience room" (Bauer); cf. I John 2: 19. Therefore it is very possible that here it refers to expulsion from the Christian community. The unfaithful or apostate Christian suffers the fate of the unfruitful branch in that he is separated completely from it.

Vss. 7-17: This sub-unit begins by stressing that indwelling involves harmony with Jesus' revelation and obedience to his commands (v. 7) which coheres with God's plan (v. 8). Vss. 7-10 reiterate the theme of indwelling, keeping the commandments and abiding in love. Jesus' commandment is to love one another (v. 12). Jesus' laying down his life is not only an example of great love, it makes love peculiarly Christian (13-14). V. 15 makes a distinction: the disciples are not slaves but friends. They have been chosen to receive the revelation; in return they are to show love to one another (vss. 16-17).

CONCLUSION

It is not my intention in this short paper to draw out all the implications of this exegesis. However, it is apparent that if these conclusions be generally correct these passages display a passionate concern with the unity of the Church and conceive of a situation in which heretics must be expelled from the Christian community. What implications this has for Bauer's thesis cannot be discussed here. But it is evident that the Fourth Gospel is not as removed from the cares and tribulations within the Church as is often thought. Moreover, in view of the emphasis which is placed in these passages on Church unity, a reversal of Käsemann's thesis seems valid—John is rather a "Churchman and witness."

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²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 677.