

October 28, 2007

Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

For a long time it was supposed that John's Gospel reflected the world of Hellenistic religious speculation more than (or perhaps instead of) the inherited biblical atmosphere of Palestine. If they were familiar with the rabbinical sources and the Jewish apocalyptic material just prior to the New Testament, readers of Matthew, Mark, and Luke found themselves in familiar territory.

In John, however, they were not at home. They were obliged to deal with apparently philosophical words like *Logos* and what appeared to be esoteric contrasts such as light/darkness and spirit/flesh, all of them without parallel in the Synoptic Gospels. These images reminded biblical scholars of Gnosticism, so they suspected that this latter may have been John's background.

In John, moreover, they found no simple moral instructions (like the Sermon on the Mount), no parables with a moral intent (like that of the sown seed), and no polemics about the Torah. In short, John seemed to represent a social, religious, and cultural background significantly different from that of the Holy Land in the first century. This difference was taken for granted among scholars during the first half of the 20th century.

Since the end of World War II, nonetheless, the thesis respecting such a difference has been increasingly more difficult to sustain. There appear to be three reasons for this.

First, we now know a great deal more about Gnosticism. Near the end of 1945 an entire Gnostic library was discovered at the southern Egyptian city of Chenoboskion, or Nag Hammadi, so our knowledge of Gnosticism is no longer dominantly dependent on secondary sources like St. Irenaeus and its other patristic opponents.

A critical comparison of John and these newly discovered Gnostic documents shows that they are worlds apart. Clearly, now, there is not the slightest chance that John was a Gnostic of any stripe. Indeed, we may say that John was more nearly anti-Gnostic, in the sense that he opposed the philosophical and religious impulses that Gnosticism eventually embodied. His polemical intent, moreover, would amply account for the linguistic affinities that John shares with Gnosticism.

Second, we also know a great deal more about the religious atmosphere of first century Palestine. Less than two years after the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library in 1945, the first of the Dead Sea Scrolls were found at Qumran. The uncovering and deciphering of these documents spawned the gradual realization that many of those supposed Hellenistic elements in John--such as the contrasts

of light/darkness and true/false--were common in the religious atmosphere of Palestine during the New Testament period. Familiar with the Qumran literature, the reader of John now finds himself right at home.

Third, there has been a growing appreciation of John's affinities to the later works of Israel's Wisdom tradition, specifically the books of Wisdom (of Solomon) and Sirach (Ecclesiasticus). Because they were not included in the biblical canon reflected in the Masoretic text, many scholars rather neglected the study of these two books. Until recently we had them only in translation, chiefly the Septuagint Greek. Since the discovery of three fragments of Sirach among the Dead Sea Scrolls, however, and a longer one at Masada, it is now clear that this work was widely known in Hebrew in Palestine during the time of the New Testament.

A comparison of Sirach and John demonstrates their common reflective, sapiential approach to biblical history. This is true also for the Book of Wisdom. Although this latter may originally have been written in Greek, it nonetheless reflects the same Jewish liturgical traditions (especially the Passover *Haggadah* and the *Unetanneh Tokef* prayer) familiar to students of John.

Moreover, I submit that John's similarities to Sirach and Wisdom indicate the proper context in which to understand the Fourth Gospel. Like Sirach and Wisdom, John is espousing the inherited Wisdom of the Torah and the prophets *against* the Hellenistic wisdom of his day. Like these two sapiential books preserved in the Greek canon of the Old Testament, John's Gospel is a theological meditation on the salvific history of the Bible, including Creation, the patriarchs, Moses and the Exodus, and the prophets. John develops this meditation through Christology, ecclesiology, and the sacraments. In doing so, he is the Christian heir to Israel's later Wisdom literature and an excellent guide for the study of that tradition.

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