

A NOTE ON 'THE JEWS' OF ST JOHN'S GOSPEL¹

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RECENT studies (cf. in particular *The Destination and Purpose of St John's Gospel*, by J. A. T. Robinson, in *New Testament Studies*, 6, 1960, 117-113) have radically questioned certain common assumptions about the fourth gospel. It is too often taken for granted that the evangelist is addressing his message to gentile Christians, and that he considers the Jewish nation—the *Judaei*—as lost to God, and as rejected by him because they have rejected Christ. But it is surely significant that in his gospel, alone among the books of the new testament, the word 'gentiles' never occurs. The dramatic narrative centres almost exclusively on what the author regards as the crisis of Judaism.

Let us start with the two texts, xii, 20—'Now there were certain *Hellenes* (Greeks) among those coming up to worship at the feast'—and vii, 35—'The *Judaei* (Jews) therefore said to one another, Where is he going to go to, that we shall not find him? Is he going to go to the Dispersion of the *Hellenes* (Greeks), and to teach the *Hellenes*?' Commentators have always felt that the most satisfactory meaning of the *Hellenes* in both texts is the Jews of the *diaspora*, Jews, that is, living in the Greek-speaking world (and speaking Greek themselves) outside Palestine. St Paul, from Tarsus, would have been such a Hellene. But if this is so, it is a usage that is peculiar to this book of the new testament. In Acts vi, 1 and ix, 29 these Jews of the *diaspora* are called *Hellenists*, and in Acts xxi, 27, as generally in St Paul's epistles, 'Hellenes' undoubtedly means gentile Greeks.

If then we stick to the view that in the passages quoted from St John 'Hellenes' means Greek-speaking Jews, it would seem to follow that it is a usage proper and peculiar to a Palestinian context, one indeed that in the wider context of the new testament as a whole is liable to be misunderstood. Now perhaps this narrow Palestinian context of the fourth gospel, deduced from its peculiar use of the word *Hellenes*, might also affect the meaning in this gospel of the word *Judaei*. In iii, 22 reference is made to 'the

¹ From a paper read at the Spode House Conference of Catholics and Jews, June 1960.

Judaeon land' a rather cumbersome way of saying Judaea—and a few words later to a *Judaeus*, which it would seem, in the context is better translated 'Judaeon' than 'Jew'. The same is true of vii, 1, where 'he would not walk in Judaea, because the *Judaeans* were seeking to kill him' seems to be the obvious meaning. Now it is of course only in the narrow context of Palestine that the word *Judaei* could be used to designate the inhabitants of Judaea as distinct from other Jews; but in that context such a usage is perfectly natural—indeed there was no other usage available.

It would seem, then, that relations between Jews and gentiles at large simply did not come within the author's purview—that he lacked the very terminology with which to deal with it. So the question asked in vii, 35 is an instance of Johannine irony. The reader to whom the gospel is directed—who is precisely a Hellene, that is a Greek-speaking (Christian) Jew—knows that Jesus certainly is going to go to the dispersion and teach the Hellenes; that he is doing so by means of this very gospel. The purpose of the gospel would then be, according to this line of thought, to prevent the tragedy of rejection that had happened in Judaea and alienated the *Judaei* from Christ, being repeated among the Jews of the *diaspora*. It speaks of the work of Jesus as being 'to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad' (xi, 52), which again is an expression that only takes on full meaning in a Judaic, Palestinian context. Jesus is the fulfilment of Jewish religion rightly understood, not antagonistic to it (vid. e.g. iv, 21-3).

Might not this thesis, developed by Robinson in the work cited and by van Unnik in a paper read to the Congress on the Gospels at Oxford in 1957, account satisfactorily for the inescapable impression we receive from the fourth gospel that in it 'we are reading the most Hebraic book in the new testament, except perhaps the Apocalypse'? (Lightfoot.)

The thesis does indeed have to face substantial difficulties; thus there are several references to 'the feast of the *Judaei*' (ii, 13; v, 1; vi, 4); customs of the *Judaei* are explained (ii, 6; xix, 40); the term 'Messias' is translated (iv, 25), as also the name 'Siloe' (ix, 7). This would seem to suggest that the writer is addressing a non-Jewish, gentile audience. But Robinson answers that in every case but one (vi, 4) the phrase 'feast of the *Judaei*' explains why Jesus has to go up to *Judaea*, from Galilee; that explanations of the

language and customs of Aramaic-speaking Palestinian Jews are not superfluous for the Greek-speaking Jews of the *diaspora*; for example the use of water-pots for purification ceremonies (ii, 6) was a distinctively Palestinian custom; and that many of these details had to be mentioned to point the sign and its interpretation which the evangelist was concerned to put across. As for xix, 40, one might add to Robinson's considerations the point that the burial customs there described must have seemed specifically Judæan at least to the Qumrân community, for they appear to have buried their dead without any garment at all.

In our personal view these studies should have considerable repercussions in the whole field of literary criticism of the fourth gospel, which in the light of them needs careful but serious reconsideration. However this may be, and it is for scholars to make their own considered judgments, it is clear that these ideas have an immediate bearing on the Jewish-Christian dialogue. Expressions from the fourth gospel, taken uncritically at their face value as being harshly 'anti-Jewish', have often proved to be a serious difficulty in discussions between Christians and Jews. But in the light of the evidence we have outlined, many 'theological' statements about the rejection of the Jews by God, based on Johannine texts, appear to say the least to be rather facile. The genuine attitude of the evangelist seems to be much more humane, and much more appropriate to Christians today; one of urgent appeal to Israel to find in Jesus a higher level of its own life, the fulfilment in fact of its true vocation.



THE HOLY NAME

A.K.R.

'See, the name of the Lord is coming from afar and its brightness fills the world.'

WE begin the new liturgical year looking forward to the coming of one whose name is hidden from us, but gradually revealed in the course of Advent. This name 'comes from afar', it comes indeed from the heart of God, from the mind of the Father, because it is the name of his Word, his only-begotten and well-beloved Son. But as yet it is to us a deep