Baldensperger's Theory of the Origin of the Fourth Gospel.

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WHILE the work in which Baldensperger promulgates his theory is entitled *The Prologue of the Fourth Gospel*,[1] it contains a discussion of the historical situation supposed to be revealed by the whole Gospel. Baldensperger begins by declaring that thus far criticism has penetrated but little beneath the surface of the prologue. Exegetes have too often read their own thoughts into the text under the pretence that the ideal content in this Gospel is the chief thing. The Fourth Gospel is neither a dogmatic treatise nor a history, but is a polemic-apologetic work.

Taking the prologue as a whole, it presents a double difficulty; namely, that of discovering, first, the exact original significance of the affirmations relative to the Logos and his activities, and, second, the purpose of the interwoven passages concerning John the Baptizer, and their relation to the entire context. With reference to the first difficulty, Baldensperger holds that down to v.[14] the prologue relates alone to the *Logos asarkos;* with reference to the second, that the John passages are at once a polemic against a party which, by setting John the Baptizer up as a rival of Jesus for Messianic reverence, was interfering with the congregation of which the author of the Fourth Gospel was the head, and a defence of the superior Messianic claims of Jesus. He attempts to displace the formal parallelism of the prologue and to establish a material one which consists in a minute contrast between Jesus and the Baptizer, the result of which is to exhibit Jesus as preëxistent, and hence prior to John, and as in every way John's superior, both previous and subsequent to the

[1] *Der Prolog des vierten Evangeliums; sein polemisch-apologetischer Zweck.* Von W. Baldensperger, Professor an der Universität Giessen. Freiburg i. B. J. C. B. Mohr, 1898.

incarnation. John himself is drawn upon as a chief witness to these things.

Passing to the body of the Gospel, Baldensperger affirms that its chief purpose is the same as that of the prologue; namely, to exalt Jesus, and to remand John to his true place of inferiority. Even John's work of baptizing is but incidentally mentioned; the chief thing is his relation of witness to Jesus. The very piling up of the expressions in v.[20] cannot be explained except on the theory that there were those who asserted what the Baptizer is here made to deny. Again, the evangelist is not content with the Synoptic contrast between Spirit and water baptism, but brings forward the significance of the blood of Jesus. The narrative concerning the turning of the water into wine is significant also, since wine is only another name for blood, as is seen in the Lord's Supper. The shedding of the blood of Jesus puts an end to all the washings and baptisms of the sect of John the Baptizer. The evangelist even goes so far as to minify the significance of water baptism for the origin of Christianity. The manner in which the baptism of Jesus is described in the Fourth Gospel is significant also — the Baptizer did not even know what he was doing, or rather whom he was baptizing, when he baptized Jesus. Then the evangelist makes the Spirit to abide upon Jesus and to be a mark of distinction among Christians as compared with others; *e.g.* John 3^{3}, "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven." The words (3^{13}), "No man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of Man," have reference to such as believe that some other than Jesus ascended into heaven, and this other was the Baptizer, since he was taken for Elijah. The evangelist does not mention the embassy from the Baptizer to Jesus, since the chief witness for Jesus must not be allowed to doubt his Messiahship. The evangelist also (3^{31}) contrasts John, as of the earth earthy, with Jesus, who comes from heaven, and is therefore above all. Other evidences of this polemic-apologetic purpose in the body of the Gospel are found in $5^{31\,f.}$ $10^{40\,f.}$. That other large portions of the Gospel, such as the miracles, the disputes with the Jews, the conversation with the Samaritan woman, the farewell address, and the history of the passion, seem not directly to bear upon the chief purpose, is accounted for by the admission that there were other subordinate purposes in the mind of the evangelist. Besides, the followers of the Baptizer returned gradually to the Synagogue, and hence even the recognizable anti-Jewish tendency of the Gospel indicates a measure of opposition to the

Johannites. Finally, attention is called to the fact that even 20^{31} contains a hint (namely, the emphatic ὅτι Ἰησοῦς ἐστίν) that Jesus, and not some other, is the Christ.

Proceeding with his argument, Baldensperger finds unmistakable evidences of a party of John's followers outside these limits of the Gospel itself. Among the most important is the passage, Acts 18^{24}–19^{7}, which he thinks can be interpreted without the aid of the redactor and the interpolator. The difficulty with 18^{25}, that Apollos, who knew only the baptism of John, taught accurately (ἀκριβῶς) the things concerning Jesus, he obviates by the supposition that by this time the Christians employed ὁ Ἰησοῦς and ὁ Χριστός interchangeably for the Messiah; and that, consequently, τὰ περὶ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ does not here refer to Jesus as a personality, but as the Messiah. Baldensperger supposes that Apollos, after receiving instruction from Priscilla and Aquila, preached no longer in Ephesus; but that his conversion was his motive for leaving his previous field of labor and going to Corinth. Paul was not unacquainted with the Johannites, as has been supposed; and being, like Apollos, a zealous Messianist, the converts of Apollos attended his ministry, and thus he did for them just what Priscilla and Aquila had done for Apollos. All this shows that the Messianism preached by the Baptizer had spread to Alexandria and Asia Minor, and perhaps to other populous commercial and educational centres.

This he supports by the claim that in the earlier years of the second half of the first century there was no great conflict of interests between the disciples of John and those of Jesus. All were alike recruited from those who were ardent Messianists. Both Paul and Apollos created sentiment in favor of the kingdom of God, the things of Jesus. As compared with other Jews they felt themselves brothers. The later bitterness of the Johannites toward the followers of Jesus arose from the fact that so many of the former joined the ranks of the latter. The patristic notices to the effect that the origin of the Fourth Gospel is due to the initiative, not alone of its author, but of others, are to be credited. This shows that they thought such a Gospel ought to be published; and the ground for this is to be seen, not in any differences between the synoptists and the Fourth Gospel, but in the evident disturbances within the Church betrayed by the Johannine epistles. The Gospel itself bears witness to these same disturbances, since 21^{24} does not lay the emphasis upon the authorship but upon the truthfulness of the contents of the Gospel. Besides, the evangelist emphasizes peace, love, and faithfulness in Christian

profession. Hence the author of the Gospel, needing the support of the name of John the Apostle, appealed to him for the correctness of his utterances. Besides these hints of a sect of John's followers Baldensperger finds others in the post-apostolic literature, chiefly Justin Martyr. So that he thinks that he has proved the demand for a Gospel whose purpose should be to conduct a polemic against the Johannites and an apologetic in favor of Jesus.

This is a very general, and in many respects inadequate, summary of an argument which is really ingenious and strong. In the attempt to estimate the validity of the conclusions reached the descent into particulars will be to some extent necessary.

It must be said that Baldensperger is not altogether original in holding these views of the Fourth Gospel. Godet,[2] in particular, brings out many of the same positions, though with much less fulness, and with far different implications from those of Baldensperger. For example, Baldensperger holds that John's doctrine of the redeeming death of Christ is so much emphasized because the Jews, to whom by this time the Johannites had practically gone over, declared that the Christ should abide for ever. Hence it was necessary to represent the death of Jesus as the greatest sign of God's love, as the noblest fact of his earthly history, and as freely submitted to by our Lord. Again, he maintains that the real ground for bringing forward the doctrine that Jesus was the eternal Logos, the only and true Son of God, was to meet the fact that the Synoptists' doctrine of the supernatural conception no longer answered the purpose. So also the doctrine that, except one eat the flesh and drink the blood of Christ, he can have no life in him, was intended to oppose the ascetic tendency among the Johannites which made flesh so abhorrent to them.

Many of the peculiarities of the Gospel are introduced to oppose the Johannites; *e.g.* the well of Jacob and the pools of Bethesda and Siloam are introduced because the disciples of John, with their water theology, prized certain springs and bodies of water to which they ascribed virtue. But Jesus was greater than all these natural waters. Also the use of the name Jesus in the Fourth Gospel is accounted for on the ground that the contest was really one between Jesus and John, each of whom was regarded as the Christ by his followers.

It may not be justifiable to have regard to consequences when we

[2] *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, translated from the third French edition by Timothy Dwight. New York, Funk & Wagnalls, 1886, vol. I. p. 214 and p. 256.

are estimating a question of fact; and yet, when the implications of an argument cannot be brought into harmony with other well-known facts, it is certainly proper to question the argument from which these implications arise. Such is the case here. Paul had essentially the same conceptions of the person of Christ which the Fourth Gospel gives us, as also of the place of the blood of Christ and the Holy Spirit in theology, yet even Baldensperger does not claim that Paul put his theology as he did in order to combat the sect of the Johannites.

In his *Vorwort* Baldensperger says that any one who will really shake the results reached in his book must exterminate the very roots of his investigation which reach back into the prologue, and propound a better interpretation of its entire eighteen verses. But to shake his results it is not necessary to give a better interpretation, but only to exterminate his roots.

Baldensperger's contention that the first thirteen verses refer to the *Logos asarkos* need not be considered. Attention need be called only to the main thesis of his work; namely, that the Fourth Gospel is a polemic-apologetic composed because the followers of John the Baptizer were making inroads upon the author's Christian congregation.

Baldensperger says that v.[1] and v.[6] of the prologue furnish three contrasts between the Logos and John.

1. The ἦν of v.[1] is in contrast with the ἐγένετο of v.[6], the former suited to the Logos who was in the beginning, the latter to John who appeared in time. Accordingly, the Logos is called θεός, while John is called ἄνθρωπος.

The most that can be admitted with reference to this first contrast is that it is not an impossible construction of the words. The significance of the verbs in these verses, especially in v.[6], is not absolutely determinable, and ἐγένετο may be taken as meaning essentially the same as ἦν. Probably ἄνθρωπος lends itself more easily to Baldensperger's interpretation than ἀνήρ, but in 3[1] we have ἦν δὲ ἄνθρωπος, spoken of Nicodemus, which could not have been, if the Fourth Gospel uses ἦν to signify the eternal existence, and ἄνθρωπος and ἐγένετο to mark the creature as distinguished from the Creator.

2. John was παρά θεοῦ, while the Logos was πρὸς τὸν θεόν. From this he concludes that, contrary to all other instances, John's being sent from God is not designed to mark a high distinction. He anticipates the objection that Christ is often said in the Fourth Gospel to be sent by God, and says that this language was employed concerning Christ as an argument against the Jews, but that when

compared with πρὸς τὸν θεόν it indicates an inferiority. But if the polemic against the disciples is so decisive of the form and contents of the Gospel, and if παρά and πρός are purposefully contrasted, it is improbable that as acute a debater as Baldensperger thinks the author of the Fourth Gospel to be would have so far forgotten himself as to speak of Christ even once, much less with frequency, in the same terms he had used of John; especially since, if the language noted a superiority of Jesus to John, it, or some modification of it, could surely have been employed to indicate to an ordinary Jew the lofty nature of Jesus.

3. The Logos is called God, while this ἄνθρωπος is called John; that is, one to whom or in whom God shows his grace and kindness. Baldensperger thinks the formula ὄνομα αὐτῷ shows that the name John had a profound significance for the evangelist. But if this reasoning be correct, then the evangelist must have had in mind the hidden significance of the name Nicodemus, for he uses the same formula in connection with that worthy. In fact, it is difficult to think of the evangelist as playing thus upon words. The name of the Logos is not θεός, but the Logos *is* θεός. Had the evangelist wished to contrast Ἰωάνης and θεός, he would have omitted the formula ὄνομα αὐτῷ before Ἰωάνης, and he would have said the Λόγος is God, and the ἄνθρωπος is John.

In general, it may be said of all these alleged contrasts that, if they had been intended as such for argument's sake, they would have been made much more evident than they can be made even by the skill of a Baldensperger. On the other hand, if we omit the specific contrasts, forsake the idea of a polemic-apologetic, and think of the evangelist as simply portraying what he believed to be facts as a means of getting started in his history, we can readily understand that there was in his mind the antithesis between the Λόγος and every ἄνθρωπος.

It is time to pass on to v.[8], which Baldensperger thinks must banish every doubt of the evangelist's purpose to contrast the Baptizer with the Logos. He says the evangelist could not have written οὐκ ἦν ἐκεῖνος τὸ φῶς, ἀλλ' ἵνα μαρτυρήσῃ περί τοῦ φωτός, except to contest a contrary assertion.

One might acknowledge the truth of this opinion without admitting the thesis that the chief end of the prologue and Gospel is to combat the disciples of John. In a time like that in which the Fourth Gospel must have arisen it might have been highly desirable as a mere matter of correct information to note that John was not himself the Light, but that his function was to bear witness to the Light.

The most serious objection to *this* understanding of the verse is that the words ἵνα μαρτυρήσῃ περὶ τοῦ φωτός are an exact repetition of a part of v.[7]. That they should be repeated may be indicative of an intention to emphasize them. It is possible that the presence of these words in the two consecutive verses is due to a mistake of a copyist. If this suggestion has any value, it robs Baldensperger's construction of the verse of its chief significance.

Another thought may or may not have value in this connection. It is that v.[8] is not to be taken as the utterance of the evangelist but as an indirect quotation from the Baptizer giving the substance of his own conception of himself and of his mission. To this there appear to be no insuperable objections, and v.[9] might be included under the same view. If this is allowable, Baldensperger's inference would be weakened, if not rendered impossible.

But, entirely apart from these suggestions, the verse does not have the polemic character Baldensperger attaches to it. In any event the verse brings out only a little more forcibly than v.[7] the fact of John's function of witnessing to Christ. And it is a mistake in Baldensperger to see in this function a belittlement of the Baptizer, for the Fourth Gospel, which is so full of the idea of witnessing, makes Jesus declare that both his works and the Father bear witness concerning him. These are not belittled thereby, even in comparison with Christ himself.

It is not necessary to hold that this verse is a sort of echo of Luke 3^{15}; but it seems evident that the evangelist is here trying in his way to say what the Synoptists say in their way, when they make John the preparer of the way of the Lord. When the Fourth Gospel makes John the witnesser to Jesus, the emphasis is not on that fact but on the purpose of his testimony, namely, that all might believe through him.

Nor is there anything in the language employed to indicate that in vv.[7, 8] the testimony was to result in making men believers specifically in Jesus as the eternal Word. This may have been included in the evangelist's thought; but the great point was that through John's testimony men were to be led to believe. The verb is without any object or dependent clause, as so often in Acts, and in the epistles of Paul. It is used in the same way in at least two other places in this Gospel ($6^{64\,(twice)}$ and 11^{15}). Indeed, the Fourth Gospel brings out much more clearly than the Synoptists this preparatory work of John, furnishing the only instances of disciples of John who became disciples of Jesus, while in the Synoptists it seems almost as though the

work of Jesus were actually in no wise influenced by the work of John. The witnessing of John is not introduced in order to bring out the contrast between the witnesser and the one to whom he witnesses, nor to prove that the Logos was θεός, but to connect the work of John with the work of Jesus — to state what the writer understood to be the facts.

Baldensperger claims that the negatives of the prologue cannot be understood except as polemics against a position which it opposes, and that the negative in v.[8] is one of the most decisive evidences for his contention. But if it be construed as an indirect quotation from John, it has none of the force which Baldensperger gives it. However, even if the words be taken as those of the evangelist, they need not bear a strongly polemic significance; for negatives are employed for purposes of exact definition and limitation as well as to note antagonisms. And so they are employed in the Fourth Gospel, the peculiarity of which, in comparison with the Synoptists, is, not so much a different content as a stronger emphasis on certain contents common to it and them. This is to be accounted for, not on the ground of any immediate controversy, but by the fact that time had developed many controversies and misunderstandings which made sharper definition and discrimination necessary. Hence, if the words, "He was not the Light," are the words of the evangelist, they are designed to define more exactly the person who was the Light by declaring that John was not the Light. This presupposes that some had thought John was the Light, but not necessarily that the evangelist was conducting a lengthy polemic against them.

Turning to the body of the Gospel, it becomes constantly more evident that Baldensperger's thesis is untrue, namely, that "the Fourth Gospel is, from beginning to end, a well-considered system for the glorification of Christ, in which the Baptizer is belittled." The antithesis between Jesus and John is, according to Baldensperger's own admission, less marked in the body of the Gospel than in the prologue and the early chapters. Baldensperger is obliged to resort to more far-fetched exegesis in the body of the Gospel than in the prologue to make out his case. When a controversy has reached the acute stage which the theory in question supposes, the antagonists do not employ arguments which are so obscure that they require the aid of Baldensperger's powerful microscope to discover some faint sign of their presence. Under such circumstances men do not veil their meaning. But in the Fourth Gospel,

especially the larger part of it, a labored exegesis is demanded in order to elicit any evidence for the alleged controversy.

Besides, Baldensperger is obliged, in order to make out his case, to represent the author of the Fourth Gospel as a shrewd and not altogether conscientious partisan of Jesus. Because the general public attributed Messiahship to him who baptized, the evangelist was obliged to help himself out of the difficulty that John did really baptize by a systematic "*depotenzirung*" of the baptism of John. This is but one of several instances in which the evangelist is represented as perverting the facts to suit his supposed purposes. In fact, the systematic twisting and squirming attributed to the evangelist is visible only on Baldensperger's interpretation, which the exigencies of his thesis demand. *E.g.* there is no evidence that the work of baptizing was regarded as Messianic by the public except in such a passage as John 1^{25}. But this indicates that they not only expected the Messiah to baptize when he should appear, but also Elijah and "that prophet." So that both in v.^{25} and in v.^{21} John is placed in contrast with the expected Messiah, and Elijah, and the prophet. He denies, not alone that he is the Messiah, but also that he is either one of the others.

Another instance of false construction is found in his interpretation of 13^{1-11}. This he makes to mean that the followers of Christ were washed by the blood of his cross, and therefore did not need the washing of water. The evangelist gives an altogether different significance to the scene. There is no evidence that when Jesus said "Ye are clean" he referred to the cleansing through his blood. On the other hand the natural explanation would be offered by 15^{3}, "Ye are clean through the word that I have spoken unto you," not through the blood that I shall shed.

In general, Baldensperger's interpretations of passages which he thinks significant for his purpose are exceedingly fanciful. He thinks the whole of ch. 2 falls under the view-point of cleansing, and thus explains why Jesus is represented as cleansing the temple at the beginning rather than at the close of his ministry. He says it is not impossible that when Jesus said to Peter, ὁ υἱὸς Ἰωνᾶ, it was an allusion to Peter's former relations with John. Again, in order to correct the impression given by the Synoptists that John preceded Jesus in baptizing, the author represents them as at work at the same time ($3^{22.23}$). Baldensperger does not seem to see the force of the fact that ch. 1 presupposes John's earlier work in this direction, that even 3^{23} implies the same thing, and that in 4^{1} we are informed that Jesus did not baptize at all.

In fact, Baldensperger fits the evangelist out with an astounding knowledge of language and skill in its use; a remarkably clear apprehension of what he wishes to accomplish and of the dangers of the narrow channel through which he must pass to his desired haven; and a dexterity in dialectics, polemics, and apologetic incompatible alike with the ability and the honesty of any known personality of the early Church who might have written the Fourth Gospel.

Baldensperger's interpretation makes the evangelist use as chief arguments against the disciples of John a number of allegations which have no visible support except in the word of the evangelist himself; *e.g.* that John the Baptizer bore witness to the eternal existence and creative activity of the unincarnate Word; and that Law and Gospel came alike from the pleroma, or the Logos. This makes the evangelist's position extremely weak; for while his opponents would presumably have accepted the testimony of the Baptizer, they would be certain to question whether he had ever given such testimony. And, as Baldensperger supposes these Johannites to have been well acquainted with the Synoptists' references to their master, it is plain that not finding there the testimony alleged to have been given, they could with good reason ask why they had never heard of this before. If the evangelist was as shrewd as Baldensperger takes him to be, he would not have allowed his own assertions with reference to John's testimony to stand unsupported. On the other hand, if we suppose no immediate or sharp controversy, the evangelist could rightly expect his assertions to be received as true, particularly if they are interpreted as mainly in accordance with the Synoptists.

It is not necessary to take up at length the evidence Baldensperger gives us from beyond the Gospel of the existence of an aggressive Johannite party in the time of the writing of the Fourth Gospel. He makes much of Acts 18^{24}–19^{7}. But even if we were to allow that he has obviated the difficulties in the text, still the events there narrated are so much earlier than the presumed date of the Fourth Gospel as to shed no light on the existence of a later party of John's followers. Besides, even if they existed in considerable numbers in the first century but were all as easily converted as the story in Acts leads us to believe, they would not make trouble enough to warrant the writing of the Fourth Gospel. Baldensperger relies much on the evidence the Johannine epistles afford us of the aggressions of such a party, but he gives us no proofs that the opponents of the author of the Johannine literature were Johannites. This is merely assumed. In fact, Baldensperger admits that the references are vague outside of

the Fourth Gospel, and that he is obliged to divine the significance of certain hints given in patristic and other extra-Gospel literature. One more remark on this point: if the Gospel and epistles are all monuments of this controversy, it is strange that no mention is made of John the Baptizer in the epistles. On the supposition that the Fourth Gospel is what Baldensperger thinks, we cannot find the traces of the enemy that we should naturally expect. A party of John's followers, strong enough and sufficiently aggressive and widely diffused, to demand the writing of the Fourth Gospel and the three Johannine epistles, would have been remembered by later writers with such horror as to have received some clear mention in the literature they have left us, particularly as some of them lived so near the time when the Johannites are supposed to have been so troublesome. It is incredible that those writers in giving us the alleged motives which prompted the writing of the Fourth Gospel should not have preserved some clear reminiscence of such a party of Johannites as Baldensperger supposes.

But Baldensperger's theory proves too much. He claims that, with but insignificant exceptions, the Johannites coöperated with the Christians during the earlier period. But, as a matter of fact, were we to employ Baldensperger's methods, we could make the Synoptists as truly a polemic against the Johannites as the Fourth Gospel. *E.g.* Matt. 3^{1-17}, with its parallels, is a clear attempt to exalt John the Baptizer for the purpose of making more valuable his testimony to the still greater exaltation of Jesus and of placing Jesus in every way above John, and especially of preventing the conclusion that because Jesus was baptized by John, John was in any way the superior of Jesus.

Again, Matt. 11^{11} (Luke 7^{28}) makes Jesus at once magnify John in comparison with other prophets, and belittle him in comparison with the Christians.

Matthew 14^{12} takes pains to say that the disciples of John reported the death of their master to Jesus, thereby recognizing that they were dependent upon him.

Mark 6^{1-16} is designed to show that all the wonderful works done by a celebrated prophet, whose identity was unknown to some, were not performed by any supposed resurrected John, but by Jesus.

We find further that the Synoptists in common with our evangelist report no miracles of John, and that they unite with the Fourth Gospel in speaking of John as a voice.

Were this clew followed out with the use of Baldensperger's critical apparatus, we could prove that the Synoptists as well as the Fourth

Gospel were written to combat the party of John the Baptizer. The same could be done with Paul's letter to the Romans, and the Epistle to the Hebrews, and perhaps with other New Testament literature.

In conclusion, it is admitted that there was, during the first century, a party of Johannites, of whom, however, we know but little; and it is possible that the writer of the Johannine literature may have had them in mind to some extent as he wrote; but it seems clear that our evangelist, like the other writers of the New Testament, had before him, as he wrote, some other main purpose than merely to carry on a polemic against the followers of John and a defence of the claims of Jesus rather than John to the dignity of the Messiahship. The evangelist wrote, not chiefly to prove that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God, but that believing, his readers might have life through his name.