

BOOK REVIEW

Charles E. Hill. *The Johannine Corpus in the Early Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). xiii + 531 pp. Hbk. US\$211.50. Pbk. US\$72.00.

This study represents the first installment of a planned three-part work on the rise of the Johannine corpus. The goal of this first part is to ‘lay foundations for a model of the origin and reception of the “Johannine corpus” in the Church’ (p. 2). Hill challenges the general consensus in New Testament studies that the Gospel of John was viewed with suspicion by the early Church because of its association with gnostic groups and was only accepted into the canon after Irenaeus convinced the early Church of the Gospel’s merit as a weapon against Gnosticism. Hill argues against this ‘orthodox Johannophobia’ theory by studying ‘the emergence of the “Johannine corpus” as Christian scripture in the nascent orthodox and heterodox communities of the second century’ (p. 2).

After a brief introduction, the first section, consisting of two chapters, introduces the ‘orthodox Johannophobia’ theory (or OJP), its development and its key proponents (chiefly Walter Bauer and J.N. Sanders, the theory’s originators; and well-known Johannine scholars such as Raymond Brown, Helmut Koester and F.F. Bruce who perpetuated it among scholars liberal to conservative) and its few challengers (chiefly F.-M. Braun, the first dissenter, and Martin Hengel, Wolfgang Rühl and Titus Nagel.)

There are three empirical bases claimed for the OJP. First, the OJP suggests that orthodox readers in the second century approached the Fourth Gospel with a sense of fear and suspicion as shown by the evidence of a figure named Gaius and a group called the Alogi, who demonstrated animosity to the Gospel. Secondly, OJP proponents argue that there is silence regarding John’s Gospel in the early orthodox sources, which further supports their suspicions. Thirdly, the OJP contends that the first groups to receive the Fourth Gospel were gnostic and

there is an abundance of evidence in gnostic texts that the Fourth Gospel was a special Gospel and possibly formative in the evolution of gnostic thought. The later reception of the Fourth Gospel came only in the last two or three decades of the second century after the orthodox Church ‘either “recovered” or “snatched away” a Gospel which had never before had any secure home among them’ (p. 65). Hill criticizes the methodology for identifying literary dependence used by advocates of the OJP and instead suggests an approach that honors the ancient writers’ techniques of citation while it considers the reception of the entire Johannine corpus as a means of assessing the view of the Gospel.

In the second section, Hill dismantles each of these three empirical bases by first analyzing the orthodox writers between c. 170–200, specifically orthodox sources just prior to Irenaeus and then Irenaeus’s own writings. Hill assesses whether any of these sources suggest any suspicion or fear concerning perceived gnostic associations with the Fourth Gospel and instead finds a positive reception of the Johannine corpus as a whole, treatment of the Fourth Gospel on a par with the Synoptics in terms of authority, and frequent attribution of the entire corpus to John the son of Zebedee. In the next chapter Hill demonstrates that the evidence for a group of orthodox adversaries to the Fourth Gospel connected with a man named Gaius and the name ‘Alogi’ is inconclusive and highly creative in the logical leaps necessary to maintain it.

Chapter Five contains a similar dismantling of the third basis for the OJP: the close affinity between the Fourth Gospel and Gnosticism. Contra Sanders and Koester, Hill’s meticulous analysis of the Valentinian sources, the sources at Nag Hammadi (gnostic and otherwise) and other gnostic sources conclusively shows that, when used, the Fourth Gospel was either not prioritized in usage over the other Synoptic Gospels (and thereby not ‘special’) or was used critically and even adversarially, as gnostic writers distorted the Johannine corpus to their own ends. Hill points out that such usage would not cause fear or suspicion in the early orthodox Church, but rather disgust (which is consistent with the writings of the Church such as those of Irenaeus.) Hill suggests that it was not the orthodox Church that had Johannophobia, but instead the Gnostics themselves (p. 293)!

In his final arguments against the OJP, Hill removes the last basis for it: the perceived silence of the early orthodox sources regarding the Fourth Gospel. First, Hill correctly points out that arguing suspicion or

opposition to the Gospel based on silence is logically suspect. One cannot coherently prove anything based on the absence of evidence, but only on its presence. Moving from c. 170 backwards to the start of the second century, Hill produces two chapters of positive evidence of the knowledge and appreciation of the entire Johannine corpus among early orthodox sources. Hill demonstrates that the earliest reception of the Fourth Gospel was not among gnostics, but rather the orthodox Church early on knew and used the Johannine corpus in ways similar to the use of the Synoptics.

Having carefully taken apart the OJP, in the final section of this study Hill addresses the evidence for a Johannine corpus, both the literary usage of the conceptual corpus and even the possibility of an edition of the corpus available in the second century. Using the evidence collected throughout the rest of the study, Hill argues his point based on the common use of the corpus, the intertextual use of the corpus, and manuscript evidence, which seems to support a physical manifestation of the corpus. Hill concludes by stating the necessity for a new formulation concerning the entire Johannine corpus, its authorial question, the Johannine community, and the Gospel's Christology. One can only assume that Hill will attempt to tackle these issues in his forthcoming works.

Hill's combination of wide research and analytical depth make his argument quite comprehensive and convincing. Despite the vast quantity and varying complications of his sources, Hill's work is surprisingly accessible. He superbly addresses the detailed inquiry necessary for his argumentation, but rarely does the reader feel lost within the details as Hill constantly returns to his overarching argument.

Two weaknesses in Hill's work should be noted. First, some of his evidence from specific texts is a bit tenuous, occasionally based on one or two words or ideas that may have an echo in the Fourth Gospel. One example of this is the argument Hill presents concerning the reception of the Johannine corpus in Rome in the early Church. Some of his findings taken individually might be questionable (e.g. the epistle of Vienne and Lyons and its probable use of John based on a few similar words and ideas, to argue concerning the possible response of the Roman bishop Eleutherus, a response for which we have no record, pp. 83-87). This weakness can be overlooked to a certain degree because Hill consistently acknowledges any indefiniteness or inaccessibility and makes up for it by his preponderance of solid examples.

A second possible weakness is his assessment of methodology. Hill questions the necessity of word-for-word quotation and citation that past scholars like Bauer and Sanders have required. Discussing this practice regarding Ignatius specifically, Hill suggests, ‘we may find, under these circumstances, that there has been a tendency to impose anachronistic and circumstantially unrealistic standards on Ignatius in the attempt to adjudge the question of “literary dependence” on, or even knowledge of, NT materials’ (p. 427). Hill only vaguely acknowledges that the ‘anachronistic and circumstantially unrealistic standards’ to which he objects have caused much discussion in other areas of biblical scholarship (e.g. the use of the Old Testament in the New Testament). He appears unaware of an entire methodological discussion that could further bolster his argument. Hill’s approach also appears to be indebted to advances in literary criticism that are unacknowledged. His use of intertextuality, his careful contextualization of passages, and his attention to forms of discourse (e.g. identifying differences in genre as a reason for different authorial uses of Scripture quotation) are all methodological advances influenced by the rise of a literary approach.

These issues aside, Hill’s book has definite implications not only for his specific field, but also for the study of the New Testament as a whole because of its possible impact on reconstructions of the Johannine history. Such a study could impact discussion on the authenticity of John and its closeness to the Synoptics, which in the past has dismissed John due to its gnostic tendencies. Hill points out the potential impact of his study to support the view that the Johannine corpus is a unit. New Testament scholars will find this book a helpful resource for assessing the canon question as it regards the Johannine corpus, but this work would not be limited to biblical scholars. This book has potential to advance scholarship in historical theology and, through historical theology, systematic theology. Historical theologians may find Hill’s arguments concerning the development of certain early Church doctrines helpful, especially his discussion of Christology in the works of early Church fathers and his argument against docetism within the Johannine corpus.

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