

*The Johannine Corpus in the Early Church.* By Charles E. Hill. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, xiii + 531 pp., \$150.00.

In this seminal work, the author takes aim at what he calls the “orthodox Johannophobia paradigm,” that is, the notion that John’s Gospel was avoided by orthodox second-century Christians owing to its popularity among heterodox groups such as the Gnostics. According to this thesis, it was not until Irenaeus used the Fourth Gospel to refute the heretics that John’s status in the canon was assured.

As Hill persuasively shows, however, this paradigm, although widely held, lacks adequate support in the available sources. Hill’s analysis of primary sources, both heterodox and orthodox, makes clear that (1) the extent of the use of John’s Gospel among the orthodox has been underestimated; and (2) its reception among the Gnostics has been misunderstood. Hence the “orthodox Johannophobia paradigm” lacks historical credibility and is largely a scholarly myth.

In Part I, Hill chronicles the history of the “Johannophobia paradigm,” dividing it into three phases: (1) “foundations”: Bauer to Braun (1934–59); (2) “heyday”: Schnackenburg to Koester (1959–90); and (3) “uneasy supremacy”: Hengel to Nagel (1989–2000). The current consensus owes much to the theses of Walter Bauer as set forth in his hugely influential work *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Early Christianity* (1934; ET 1971).

The first period, from 1934 to 1959, witnessed the laying of the groundwork for the “Johannophobia paradigm” by some very influential scholars. Walter Bauer held that in the second century AD heresy and orthodoxy were still fluid and that “the heretics considerably outnumbered the orthodox” (Bauer, ET, p. 194, cited in Hill, p. 13). Bauer claimed that none of the Apostolic Fathers relied on the authority of John’s Gospel while the Gnostics, the Marcionites, and the Montanists loved it. Hence, caution characterized the mood in Rome, manifesting itself through silence or even explicit rejection.

The chief architect of the current paradigm is identified as J. N. Sanders, author of *The Fourth Gospel in the Early Church* (Cambridge: University Press, 1943). Sanders was influenced by Bauer and held to an Alexandrian origin of the Gospel (though he later suggested Syria as more likely). According to Sanders, the Gospel was at first popular among the Gnostics, and it was only Irenaeus who helped the orthodox overcome their prejudice against it. The noted commentator C. K. Barrett (1955, 1978) was influenced by Sanders and adopted his main thesis. The only dissenting voice in the 1950s was the French scholar F.-M. Braun (1959).

Hill dates the heyday of the “Johannophobia paradigm” from 1959 to 1990. During this period, T. E. Pollard’s important monograph *Johannine Christology and the Early Church* (SNTSMS 13; London: Cambridge University Press, 1970) essentially concurred with Sanders, as did Raymond Brown in his magisterial Anchor Bible commentaries (1966, 1970) and D. Moody Smith in *Johannine Christianity* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1984). Not only did the “Johannophobia paradigm” relate to the Gospel’s *use by* Gnostics, but rather, as Hill points out, “[f]rom Sanders in the 1940s, to Barrett in the 1950s and 1970s, to Smith in the 1980s, the disparity in orthodox and heterodox use of John in the second century has been seen as requiring or supporting either a somewhat heretical or at least an obscure *origin* for this Gospel, away from the mainstream of the Church” (p. 35).

The third period, termed by Hill “uneasy supremacy,” spans the work of Martin Hengel and that of Titus Nagel (1989–2000). Hengel’s work *The Johannine Question* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1989; expanded German edition, 1993) signaled the potential for a

major disruption in the “Johannophobia paradigm.” Hengel’s copious treatment of the second-century evidence and his charge of neglect of this evidence by much of Johannine scholarship mark a turning point in scholarship on the subject, though Hengel himself did not draw out the full implications of his own research. Still, in 1994 R. Alan Culpepper could write of the “nearly complete absence of any explicit reference to the apostle or to the Gospel of John in the first half of the second century” (*John, the Son of Zebedee* [Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1994] p. 108). Culpepper proposed that Irenaeus was the first to refer explicitly to John’s Gospel (*John*, p. 116).

Yet, the little-known work by Titus Nagel, *Die Rezeption des Johannesevangeliums im 2. Jahrhundert* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2000), the most extensive recent treatment of the subject, challenges the assumption of widespread “Johannophobia” among the orthodox in the first half of the second century. Nagel notes that prior to Irenaeus John is rarely cited with literal precision or express identification of the source. He also observes that the Valentinians represent only one aspect of the Gnostic reception of John and that John was also the object of Gnostic rejection (*Rezeption*, p. 491).

Part II is devoted to a painstaking analysis of the use of the Johannine writings in the second century. Hill’s survey of “John among the Orthodox” (c. 170–200) shows that “Catholic writers of this period are using the Fourth Gospel with ease and regularity, in an authoritative manner, and often explicitly as scripture” (p. 167). The Gospel is impressively attested in several early NT papyri (already bound together with Luke in p<sup>75</sup>) and well represented among images painted in early Roman catacombs. There is no evidence that the Gospel was considered to be tainted with Gnosticism. Nor is there evidence of any consciousness that the orthodox were taking over a previously suspected or rejected Gospel. Also, Hill notes that the Gospel, the epistles, and the Apocalypse were used by writers in this period in virtually the same manner and attributed to the same author.

With regard to John and the Gnostics, Hill shows that J. N. Sanders’s view that John was “spoiling the Egyptians” by taking their Gnostic terminology and clothing the original *kerygma* with it (as is alleged in the case of John’s dualism or his “docetism”) is flatly contradicted by the available sources. “Despite decades of scholarly energy spent on the question, we are still far from being able to affirm that anything like such a gnostic myth existed when the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel was written, let alone that the author knew it, and let alone that he thought it important enough to require him to adapt it” (p. 286). According to Hill, the Gnostic’s appropriation of John “was adversarial or supersessionary” (p. 293) rather than accepting and incorporating the Gospel’s own Christology.

The climactic portion of Hill’s monograph is his discussion of “John among the Orthodox, 150–c. 170” and even prior to c. 150. Hill shows that as early as between c. 120 and 135 Papias (as quoted by Eusebius) identified the Fourth Gospel as an authoritative source for his and his contemporaries’ knowledge of Jesus alongside Matthew, Mark, and Luke (p. 385–96). Hill also demonstrates that John’s Gospel was likely known by Polycarp, Ignatius, and the Shepherd of Hermas. The first use of John’s Gospel is likely evidenced in 1 John (as well as possibly 2 and 3 John).

In his final chapter on the Johannine corpus Hill shows that John’s Gospel was “commonly considered not simply as one of four Gospels functioning with special authority in

the Church, but as one of a group of writings which emanated from a common, authoritative source” (p. 471). This may explain why both 2 and 3 John were preserved and included in the canon.

Hill concludes that both notions of “Gnostic Johannophilia” and “orthodox Johannophobia” are not borne out by the evidence and subject to urgent revision. One important implication of Hill’s “rehabilitation” of John’s Gospel is that its alleged non-use in the first half of the second century can no longer be legitimately used as argument against its apostolic authorship. There is no longer any need to argue that apostolic authorship was postulated as part of an effort to legitimate a Gospel tainted by its use by Gnostics. Rather, “[t]he surprisingly wide and authoritative use of the Fourth Gospel in particular, and of the Apocalypse and the First Epistle secondarily, and their habitual attribution to a common apostolic origin, point to a very early and seemingly instinctive recognition of authority which befits some authoritative source” (p. 475). Henceforth, “[a]ssessments of the ‘Johannine school’ and its history, and treatments of the rise of a New Testament canon, should recognize what looks like a mostly shared history of the use and reception of the books of the Johannine corpus in the second century” (p. 475).

Hill’s study is a powerful exemplar of the dismantling of an established paradigm and a tribute to the power of data gathered from primary research. It is, conversely, a potent reminder of the dangers of dogmatism and a warning against falling prey to sweeping theses that may have surface appeal but are not solidly based on a thorough assessment of the primary evidence. Hill’s monograph will have far-reaching implications on the future study of John’s Gospel, including its authorship and setting. It is a most welcome injection of historical data into a discussion that has increasingly drifted into a postmodern subjectivism that Don Carson has recently labeled the “balkanization” of Johannine studies.

Andreas J. Köstenberger  
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Wake Forest, NC