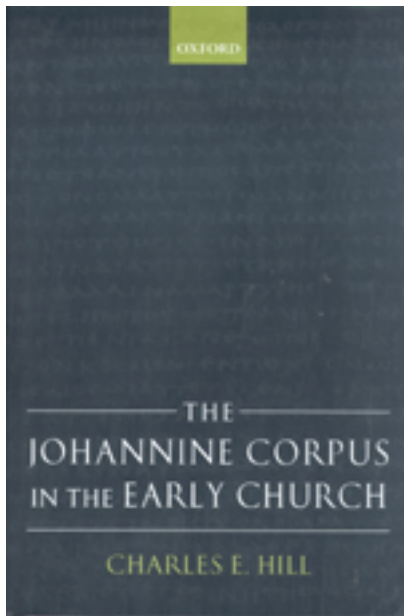


RBL 01/2005



**Hill, Charles E.**

***The Johannine Corpus in the Early Church***

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. Pp. xiii + 531.  
Hardcover. \$150.00. ISBN 0199264589.

Kyle Keefer  
Eckerd College  
St. Petersburg, FL 33711

One current emphasis in New Testament scholarship is a renewed interest in biblical interpretation in the early church. Charles E. Hill's *The Johannine Corpus in the Early Church* contributes to this arena by looking at references to Johannine literature in the second century. Hill's driving question is, To what extent did second-century Christian writers use the Fourth Gospel, and what was their attitude toward it? The formulation is mine, but it captures the sense of this meticulously researched monograph.

As an introduction, Hill surveys a broad spectrum of Johannine scholars and finds that the majority of them (the primary exception is Martin Hengel) adhere to an "orthodox Johannophobia paradigm (OJP)" This paradigm includes three theses: (1) that by the end of the second century, orthodox writers were wary of dangerous tendencies in John, (2) that gnostics in particular latched onto John, and (3) that writers before Irenaeus were virtually silent regarding John. According to this paradigm, Irenaeus helped wrench the Gospel back into the orthodox fold through a strong defense of it in *Against Heresies*. Hill's book systematically attacks each of these components of the paradigm by painstakingly combing through all available sources. He concludes that the OJP is wholly foundationless: "The long-prevalent understanding of the rise of the Johannine corpus in the Church must be abandoned and replaced with something more historically accurate"

(475). This “something” is that, throughout the second century, the Gospel of John held a prominent place within orthodox Christianity and was only marginally useful to Gnosticism. Hill’s book does not seek to nuance current scholarship; he wants to overthrow it.

The book addresses the three legs of the OJP, and I will describe and evaluate Hill’s treatment of each of these. In order to dismantle the notion that the Gospel needed “saving” from the clutches of heterodoxy at the time of Irenaeus, Hill begins with incontrovertible references to John in the late second century (170–200). Using a pattern that the entire book follows, Hill explores almost every possible writer and text; in this section, that would be Theophilus, Athenagoras, the *Epistle of Vienne and Lyons*, Irenaeus, Hegesippus, the *Sibyllines*, Polycrates, Victor of Rome, Clement of Alexandria, the Muratorian Fragment, Apollonius of Ephesus, Tertullian, *Perpetua and Felicitas*, Gaius’s *Dialogue with Proclus*, and a host of biblical manuscripts. I will not recite such catalogs for the other sections of the book, but the voluminous sources are impressive throughout. He also includes an interesting section on Christian art works (with photos) that illustrate particular Johannine scenes, such as the raising of Lazarus and the Samaritan woman.

This argument is the strongest of the book, and after examining it one wonders why this first leg of the OJP ever was formulated. Irenaeus is the main figure here, and he serves to demonstrate Hill’s insights. Irenaeus, of course, placed John alongside the Synoptics in the fourfold canon in the famous passage of *Against Heresies* 3.9.1. This passage led von Campenhausen, among others, to say that Irenaeus was the first proponent of the four-Gospel canon and led other scholars to assert that Irenaeus aimed to defend the Gospel against heretics. In contradiction to the idea that Irenaeus is mounting a defense, Hill writes, “Looking at his use of this Gospel as a whole, however, we fail to see the signs of this [defense]. Irenaeus does not defend the Fourth Gospel, he merely uses it. He uses this Gospel unselfconsciously and authoritatively” (98). The commonsensical explanation (which applies to many other writers of the late second century) of the relationship between John and the church is that Irenaeus feels at ease about using John because his audience feels the same way. His lack of concern in differentiating John from the Synoptics also argues in favor of the preexistent familiarity with John that Irenaeus’s audience must have had. Hill does not skirt the difficult issues of Valentinian exegesis of John in *Against Heresies*, but he handles such issues convincingly under the broader thesis of orthodox acceptance of all the Johannine writings.

The second section of the book (following an excursus on Gaius), while just as forceful as the first, is slightly less convincing. Hill explores whether gnostics (especially Valentinians) demonstrate a clear affinity for John over and above other New Testament

writings and whether that affinity was one of devotion or antagonism. Two emphases govern this section. First, Hill wants to demonstrate that many gnostics appropriated John not out of admiration but out of opprobrium. Second, he shows that gnostic use of John did not hinder orthodox use.

The second of these points is well taken and needs little elaboration. The first is harder to argue. Not all the texts that Hill cites necessarily support his argument. With regard to *Gospel of Truth*, for instance, Hill claims that it engages in “interpretive distortion” of John (267). But this, to some extent, begs the question. Throughout this section Hill consistently argues for a well-defined incarnational Christology for John (based primarily on 1:14), and therefore, any interpretation that leans toward docetism must be controverting the purposes of the Gospel. By having a clear preconceived notion of the correct interpretation of John (and by wanting to divide exegesis from eisegesis), Hill stacks the deck in favor of orthodoxy and cannot fully engage gnostic exegesis on its own terms.

The third section of the book mines sources between 100 and 170. Again leaving no stone unturned, Hill finds multiple examples of the use of John in writers such as Justin and Ignatius. In aggregate, this section certainly demonstrates that the OJP has overlooked some convincing evidence. His argument about Justin is particularly well reasoned. Some others (like his treatment of Aristides) rest on vocabulary patterns that are shakier. Hill makes a complex argument for the reliability of Papias—too long to summarize here but bound to provoke discussion.

Evaluating a work such as Hill’s poses difficulties. On the one hand, the voluminous marshaling of evidence and the cogency of the argument is impressive. Few of his points do not stand up to scrutiny, and Hill usually supports them well. On the other hand, I wonder whether Hill places more weight upon the OJP than it deserves. Many times he states that a particular point is “hard to overstate” or “hard to overestimate” (see 55, 96, 373, 469). As he repeats the difficulty of overstatement, it becomes quite easy to overstate, and Hill tends toward exaggeration (the name Johannophobia illustrates the point). I simply doubt whether the OJP matters that much to most studies of John. Even though Hill rightly points to existence of such a paradigm among scholars, it is harder to see how this paradigm actually affects their reading of the text itself (Käsemann might be an exception). I do not think that the major commentaries of Schnackenburg, O’Day, Barrett, or Carson, to name a few, would be substantially different if they granted most or all of Hill’s points.

Finally, I wish Hill had stated with greater clarity what is at stake. For Hill, and he makes this point obliquely, the argument against the OJP redirects attention to the

trustworthiness of the Johannine tradition and of the church itself. He implies that if the OJP is right, this questions the legitimacy of the Johannine corpus to faithfully record Christian doctrine and opens the door for the church “to be ever welcoming of theological diversity” (62). The appearance of “corpus” in the title also signifies that Hill possibly wants to claim Johannine authorship for all these books. (At least I think that is the claim; as I stated, he is a bit coy on this issue.) In other words, this historical research supports certain religious claims, but Hill does not make the relationship between history and religion very clear.

Hill’s book, therefore, sheds some light on Johannine origins, but only in the narrowest sense of connecting the book to apostolic times and a broad readership. It does not concern itself much with the actual interpretation of the Gospel, however, and without even a reference to Martyn, Meeks, or Rensberger, this book limits its value among other Johannine studies. It has much greater value as a conversation partner among scholarly works devoted to second-century Christianity.