



THE ACTS OF JOHN IN THE MINUTES OF THE SECOND COUNCIL OF NICAEA (787)

The Greek church during the 8th century became embarrassed at the naked worship of icons in the churches. Eventually the emperor Constantine V called a synod at Hieria in 754 to deal with the situation. This obediently passed canons condemning the worship of icons. But over the next few years a reaction took place, and after his death, a fresh synod was assembled in 787 at Nicaea to reverse the rulings of Hieria. This is considered as the Seventh Ecumenical Council, and is known as Nicaea II.

After [my post about the Second Council of Nicaea](#), a kind reader added a comment advising me that there is indeed a complete English translation of the *Acts* of the Second Council of Nicaea, made in 1850 by John Mendham, and downloadable from Google Books [here](#).^[1] The passage in which the Acts of John are discussed is on pp.269-276.

Unfortunately the minutes of Hieria are lost, so we must rely on the minutes of Nicaea 2 to get any idea of their process. It seems that the iconoclasts assembled a dossier of evidence as to the practice of the early church, and included material by anybody they could find, including Jews and heretics. This was a risky approach, and laid itself open to unscrupulous refutation.

In the fifth session of Nicaea 2, the delegates went through the evidence given at Hieria and debunked it, section by section. The method chosen was a crude one: if the document could be shown to be heretical in any respect, or its author had ever expressed a view different from that prevailing in Byzantium in 787 AD, then it could be ignored. In short the whole proceeding was an argument *ad hominem*.

The sessions were managed by the Patriarch Tarasius, acting for the empress Irene. Let's hear how the session proceeded with respect to the *Acts of John*.

Epiphanius Deacon and Legate of Thomas Bishop of Sardinia reads from the pretended "Itinerary of the Holy Apostles":

"The painter on the first day, having sketched him in outline, ceased : on the following day he filled up the picture with the colouring, and gave the image to the joyful Lycomedes, which having placed in his own bedchamber he set a crown upon it; which when John afterwards knew he said to him, 'My beloved son, what meaning have you in thus going from the bath to your bedchamber by yourself? Am not I to pray with you and the rest of your brethren; or would you shut us out?' Having said this in a sportive manner he entered with him into his bed-chamber, and he saw there the image of an old man crowned, and tapers and altars set before it, on which he addressed him thus—' Lycomedes, what have you to do with this image? Which of your gods is it that is painted here? I see you still live like a heathen !' And Lycomedes answered him—'He alone is my God who hath rescued me and my wife from death; but if after God we may call men who have done good to us gods, then thou art the god who is represented in that picture, whom therefore I crown, and love, and reverence,

as having been a good guide to me in the way.’ But John, never as yet having seen his own face, said to him, ‘My son, you are mocking me: am I so superior to my Lord in form? How can you make me believe that this picture is like to me?’ On which Lycomedes brought a mirror, and John having looked at himself in the mirror, and having steadfastly examined the image, said, ‘May the Lord Jesus Christ live : the image is like, but you have done amiss in making it.’”

Epiphanius went on to read from the same book where it begins, “At one time wishing to lay hold of Jesus.” And shortly after—

“They laid hands on a gross material body, but at other times when I felt Him, that which I touched was immaterial, incorporeal, and as though nothing at all was there. And when at any time being invited by some Pharisee He accepted the invitation, we went together with Him, and each of us received the appointed loaf from those who had invited us. And among the rest He also received one which, having blessed, He divided amongst us all, and from the very small portion which each received he was satisfied: our own loaves were in this way preserved entire, so that those who invited Him were much astonished. I oftentimes, when walking with Him, wished to see if any mark of His footsteps appeared; but, though I saw Him raise Himself up from the ground, yet never did I see any footsteps.

These things I now relate to you, my brethren, as it were for the sake of your encouragement in the faith; but of His great things, of His wonderful things, let deep silence be preserved, since they are unspeakable—such as could not be uttered, could not be heard. For before He was seized by the lawless Jews—they who had received their law from the lawless serpent—He assembled us together and said. ‘Before that I am delivered up to them let us sing a hymn to the Father, and so let us enter on that which is ordained.

When He had commanded us to make a circle round Him by holding each other’s hands, He Himself being in the midst. He said this, ‘Amen, obey me.’ He began to sing a hymn and to say, ‘Glory to thee, O Father,’ and we who were around Him answered the ‘Amen—glory to thee, O Word: glory to thee, O Grace: Amen—glory to thee, O Spirit: glory to thee, O Holy One: glory to thy glory: Amen—we praise thee, O Father; we give thanks to thee: the Light with whom darkness does not dwell (Amen), in which also we give thanks, saith I wish to be saved and I wish to save: Amen—I wish to be bound and I wish to loose: Amen—I wish to be wounded and I wish to wound: Amen—I wish to eat and I wish to be eaten: Amen—I wish to bear and I wish to be heard: Amen—I wish to be understood being altogether Mind: Amen—I wish to be washed and I wish to wash : Amen—grace leads the dance, I would play the late, dance ye all: Amen—I wish to be lamented, lament ye all: Amen.”

And after other things it is continued thus:

“In this manner the Lord having, my beloved, joined in the dance with us went out, and we as in a maze or in a dream fled some one way some another. But I, seeing Him suffering, could not endure to behold His passion, but fled to the Mount of Olives, weeping at that which had taken place. And when the command was given, ‘Raise up,’ He was suspended thereon about the sixth hour of the day, and darkness was over all the land.

But my Lord having stood up in the midst of the cave, and having shed light round about me, said, 'John, by that rabble beneath I am crucified at Jerusalem; I am wounded with spears and reeds; I am made to drink vinegar and gall; but it is I that speak to thee, and that which I speak hear thou. It was I that suggested to thee to ascend into this mountain, that thou mightest hear that which it becomes the scholar to learn from his teacher, a man from God.'

Having said this, He showed me a cross of light, fixed, and around the cross a great multitude not having one form, but on the cross was one form and a like similitude : above the cross I perceived the Lord, not having any form but only a voice—a voice, not that which was ordinary with Him, but one that was truly sweet and delightful, and indeed of God Himself, saying unto me, 'John, it was necessary that one of you should hear these words from me. I would have one to hear of that should come. The cross of light is for your sakes called by me at one time the *Word*, at another *Mind*, at another *Christ*, at another the *Door*, at another the *Way*, at another *Bread*, at another *Seed*, at another *Resurrection*, at another *Jesus*, at another the *Father*, at another the *Spirit*, at another *Life*, at another *Truth*, at another *Faith*, at another *Grace*.'"

Tarasius: "See how the whole of this writing contradicts the Gospel! "

The Holy Council: "Yes, my lord, it affirms the incarnation to be mere appearance."

Tarasius: "In the 'Itinerary' it is written that He neither eat nor drank, nor walked on the earth with His feet, just as the Phantasiasts teach; but in the Gospel it is written of Christ that He did both eat and drink, and that the Jews said concerning Him, 'Behold a gluttonous man and a winebibber' (Matt. xi. 19). Again—if, as they fable, He did not touch the earth with His feet, how is it written in the Gospel, 'Jesus being weary with His journey sat thus on the well?'" (John iv. 6.)

Constantine Bishop of Constantia: "And this, forsooth, is the book which confirmed that false conventicle."

Tarasius: "Really, the whole of it is quite ridiculous."

Theodore Bishop of Catana: "See the book which overthrew the beauty of the Catholic Church."

Euthymius Bishop of Sardis: "It became that conventicle of mischief to have its support from such a book."

Constantine Bishop of Constantia: "What blasphemy to assert that John the Apostle took refuge in a cave at the hour of the crucifixion, when the Gospel expressly declares that John 'went in with Him into the hall of Caiaphas' (John xviii. 15), and that 'he was standing by the cross of Christ with His holy Mother.'" (John xix. 25).

The Holy Council: 'Every heresy seems connected with that book.'

Tarasius: "Alas, alas! by what heretical books do they confirm their heresy."

Gregory Bishop of Neocaesarea: "This book is worthy of all pollution and disgrace; and yet from this we have their testimony against images in this

history of Lycomedes.”

John Legate of the East: “He introduces Lycomedes crowning the image of the Apostle just as the Heathens crown their idols.”

Basil Bishop of Ancyra: “God forbid that St. John the Divine should say anything contrary to the Gospel.”

Tarasius: “Are the sentiments which have been read to you those of the Gospel?”

The Holy Council: “God forbid ! We receive neither that which precedes, nor that which follows, about Lycomedes.”

Tarasius: “He who receives that which comes last must admit that which goes before, just as did that false Conventicle.”

The Holy Council: “Anathema be to it from the beginning to the end.”

John Legate of the East: “Behold, most blessed fathers, it has been clearly proved that the patrons of this Christianity-detracting heresy are partakers with Nebuchadnezzar and the Samaritans, with Jews and Pagans; and, not only so, but furthermore with the atheistic and accursed Manichaeans, a testimony from whom they have here brought forward; for these things are spoken by those who maintain the incarnate dispensation of God the Word to be mere appearance; but anathema be to them and to their writings.”

The Holy Council said: “Let them be anathema.”

Petronas the Patrician said to Tarasius: “My lord, if it is your pleasure, let us ask the Bishops of Ammorium and Neocaesarea, were the books themselves read at that false Conventicle?”

Gregory Bishop of Neocaesarea and Theodosius Bishop of Ammorium answered: “No, by the Lord, no book was brought forward there, but by false extracts they deceived us.”

Tarasius: “Following their own private views, they brought forward whatever suited their purpose.”

Petronas: “And, moreover, they did everything with the imperial suffrage.”

Gregory Bishop of Neocaesarea: “I have often said it, and I repeat it again, that no book or writing of the fathers appeared in our Assembly: nought but false extracts were brought forward; and so this same story about Lycomedes defiled our ears.”

John Legate of the East: “If it seem good to this Holy and Oecumenic Council, let there be an injunction restraining all henceforth from making any copy of this cursed book.”

The Holy Council said: “Let it be no more transcribed. Nor is this all—we furthermore decree that the present copy shall be committed to the flames.”

Peter the Reader cites St. Amphilocheus “On the False Inscriptions of the Heretics,” which begins:—

“We account it right to expose in its true colours all their impiety and to

publish abroad their deceit, especially as they put forward certain books having the superscriptions of the Apostles, by which they deceive the more simple." And, shortly after, he continues—"But we will prove that these books, which the Apostates from our Church bring forward, are not the work of the Apostles, but the writings of Devils." And, after other matters, he continues—"These things the Apostle John would not have said, having written in the Gospel that the Lord said from the cross, 'Behold thy Son' (John six. 26, 27): so that from that hour the holy John took Mary to his own house. How, then, could he say that he was not present? But this is not to be wondered at; 'for, as the Lord is truth, so is the devil a liar; for he is a liar and the father of it, and when he speaketh of a lie he speaketh of his own' (John viii. 24). Thus far concerning their falsities."

Tarasius: "Our Father Amphilochius is great, and we shall attend to his words concerning this pretended "Itinerary," and, therefore, need not be swayed by its title.

Basil Bishop of Ancyra: "Nothing can be more opposed to the Gospel than is this impious compilation. Very fitting was it that such a book should hold opinions contrary to holy images."

"Tarasius: "The father clearly exposes over the disgraceful and vain prating of this volume."

The Holy Council: "He does, indeed, my lord."

Nicephorus Bishop of Dyrrachium: "My lord, this ought to have been read for the full satisfaction of all; but not the other, for it contaminates our ears."

The Holy Council: "Yet, by way of warning, it was not amiss that even this should be read."

Tarasius: "They who were so garrulous against holy images have brought Eusebius forward in their favour in a letter which he wrote to Constantia the wife of Licinius. Now, let us see what were the sentiments of this Eusebius."...

And on they go, to revile Eusebius of Caesarea himself, labelling him an Arian in order to disregard his testimony to the practice of the church in the 4th century. The translator comments freely in the footnotes on the terrible logic involved.

It is amusing to see the passage where Nicephorus, in his eagerness to comply, rushes ahead of what Tarasius wants done, and is mildly reproved. Servility must often meet with such snubs.

It's very interesting, at any rate, to see the official record of events.

1. ^[1]John Mendham (tr), *The Seventh General Council: the second of Nicaea, held A.D. 787, in which the worship of images was established: with copious notes from the "Caroline books" compiled by order of Charlemagne for its confutation*, London, 1850.↩