

17 The Fourth Gospel

The Fourth Gospel is the work commonly called *The Gospel of (or According to) John* (and sometimes simply *John*). It differs greatly from the three Synoptic Gospels in many ways.

As can be seen when we examine Kipling's Six for the Fourth Gospel, these differences are easily explained. The Gospel was written at a (relatively) late date and at a geographical distance from the Synoptics. There was no need to include the material which was included in the Synoptics as it was already available (as an example, the Fourth Gospel does not contain the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper), and the author of the Gospel chose instead to focus on a number of themes which are only fully explored in this Gospel (the classic example is the Eucharistic discourses).

There are a number of interesting theories and discussions about the Fourth Gospel, particularly pertaining to the authorship and the purpose of the Gospel. It is, of course, important to note that these theories are neither official nor unofficial teachings of the Catholic Church. The *traditional* and most popular hypothesis (especially among conservative Christians) has been that the Gospel was written by Saint John the Apostle, the brother of Saint James the Apostle.

Strictly-speaking an anonymous Gospel

The author of the Fourth Gospel (or, indeed, any of the Gospels) is never identified by name. However, we do learn in John 21:24 that the character identified as “the Beloved Disciple” in the narrative is claimed as the author. The identification of the Gospel's author depends on two things; firstly that the claim that “the Beloved Disciple” is the author is true (even if only in a sense of corporate authorship) and that this Disciple is John is accurate. A number of theories concerning authorship have sprung up from various opinions regarding this.

Authorship by Saint John

The traditional and most widely-held view is that the Gospel was authored by John (note that this may be in the sense of corporate authorship, rather than the modern notion of personal authorship). This is based on the recollections of Irenaeus of Lyons, who recalled that (when he was a child) Polycarp (who was his master and a disciple of John) said John wrote the Gospel at Ephesus around the year 90 AD. Thus, under this theory, John is the Beloved Disciple and is present at the crucifixion, occupies a central position in many of the important narratives concerning Jesus and is the one into whose care the Virgin Mary is given at the crucifixion.

This theory is the traditional one and also the one which many Christian prayers and devotions subscribe to (the tradition that Mary was Assumed at Ephesus, for example, is based on John being the Beloved Disciple as John was based at Ephesus for many years).

The fact that this article uses the phrase “Fourth Gospel” and not “The Gospel of John” is not intended to imply a rejection or denigration of the traditional theory. It is merely intended to indicate that the traditional theory is one of many, albeit one which has the weight of traditional and devotion behind it, and fewer problems than many other theories.

Date

Most scholars agree on a range of c. 90–100 for when the gospel was written, though dates as early as the 60s or as late as the 140s have been advanced by a small number of scholars. Justin Martyr quoted from the gospel of John, which would also support that the Gospel was in existence by at least the middle of the second century, and the Rylands Library Papyrus P52, which records a fragment of this gospel, is usually dated between 125 and 160 CE.

The traditional view is supported by reference to the statement of Clement of Alexandria that John wrote to supplement the accounts found in the other gospels (Eusibius, Ecclesiastical History, 6.14.7). This would place the writing of John's gospel sufficiently after the writing of the synoptics.

Conservative scholars consider internal evidences, such as the lack of the mention of the destruction of the temple and a number of passages that they consider characteristic of an eye-witness (John 13:23ff, 18:10, 18:15, 19:26–27, 19:34, 20:8, 20:24–29), sufficient evidence that the gospel was composed before 100 and perhaps as early as 50–70. Barrett suggests an earliest date of 90, based on familiarity with Mark's gospel, and the late date of a synagogue expulsion of Christians (which is a theme in John). Morris suggests 70, given Qumran parallels and John's turns of phrase, such as "his disciples" vs. "the disciples". John A.T. Robinson proposes an initial edition by 50–55 and then a final edition by 65 due to narrative similarities with Paul.

There are critical scholars who are of the opinion that John was composed in stages (probably two or three), beginning at an unknown time (50–70?) and culminating in a final text around 95–100. This date is assumed in large part because John 21, the so-called "appendix" to John, is largely concerned with explaining the death of the "beloved disciple", supposedly the leader of the Johannine community that would have produced the text. If this leader had been a follower of Jesus, or a disciple of one of Jesus' followers, then a death around 90–100 is reasonable.

Disputed Authorship

The authorship has been disputed since at least the second century, with mainstream Christianity traditionally holding that the author was John the Apostle, son of Zebedee. Several other authors have historically been suggested, including Papias, John the Presbyter and Cerinthus, though many apologetic Christian scholars still hold to the conservative view that ascribes authorship to John the Apostle. Most modern experts conclude the author to be an unknown non-eyewitness.

The text itself is unclear about the issue. John 21:20–25 contains information that could be construed as autobiographical. Conservative scholars generally assume that first person "I" in verse 25, the disciple in verse 24 and the disciple whom Jesus loved (also known as the Beloved Disciple in verse 20) are the same person; they further identify all three descriptors with the Apostle John through a combination of external and internal evidence. Critics point out that the abrupt shift from third person to first person in vss. 24–25 indicates that the author of the epilogue, who is supposed a third-party editor, claims the preceding narrative is based on the Beloved Disciple's testimony, while he himself is not the Beloved Disciple.

Ancient testimony is similarly conflicted. Attestation of Johannine authorship can be found as early as Irenaeus. Eusebius wrote that Irenaeus received his information from Polycarp, who is said to have received it from the Apostles directly. Charles E. Hill argues that there is a solid early orthodox tradition of authorship: the tradition that an apostle of Jesus wrote the Gospel and can be attested to as early as the first two decades of the second century, and there are many Church Fathers in the remainder of the second century that ascribe the text to John the Apostle. Martin Hengel and Jorge Frey similarly argue for John the Presbyter as the author of the text. Hill goes on to propose that Ignatius, Polycarp, Papias' elders, and Hierapolis' Exegesis of the Lord's Oracles possibly all quote from the Gospel of John.

Epiphanius, however, takes note of an Early Christian sect, the Alogi, who believed the Gospel was actually written by one Cerinthus, a second-century Gnostic. Corroborating this evidence is a quotation by Eusebius of Caesarea (History of the Church 7.25.2) in which Dionysius of Alexandria (mid-third century) claims that the Apocalypse of John (known commonly as the Book of Revelation), but not the Gospel of John, was believed by some before him (7.25.1) to also have been written by Cerinthus. This discussion of the Alogi represents the only instance in which both the Book of Revelation and the Gospel of John were specifically attributed to Cerinthus. Hill asserts that, at that time, the Gospel of John was never attributed to Cerinthus by the established orthodoxy; that Eusebius was only stating a theory that he had heard; and that Eusebius himself believed the Gospel to have been written by the Apostle John.

Starting in the 19th century, critical scholarship has further questioned the apostle John's authorship, arguing that the work was written decades after the events it describes. The critical scholarship argues that there are differences in the composition of the Greek within the Gospel, such as breaks and inconsistencies in sequence, repetitions in the discourse, as well as passages that clearly do not belong to their context, and these suggest redaction.

Raymond E. Brown, a biblical scholar who specialized in studying the Johannine community, summarizes a prevalent theory regarding the development of this gospel. He identifies three layers of text in the Fourth Gospel (a situation that is paralleled by the synoptic gospels): 1) an initial version Brown considers based on personal experience of Jesus; 2) a structured literary creation by the evangelist which draws upon additional sources; and 3) the edited version that readers know today (Brown 1979).

Among scholars, Ephesus in Asia Minor is a popular suggestion for the gospel's origin.

Authorship by Lazarus

This theory is a modern notion, and does not have a great deal of support in the academic community. It is based on the theory that Lazarus is the Beloved Disciple – which finds some minor support in John 11:3 when Lazarus' sisters call their brother “the one whom you [Jesus] love”. Beyond this, there is limited support for such a notion. In order for this theory to hold water it would be necessary for Lazarus to be present at many key events (the Last Supper, the crucifixion, shortly after the resurrection etc.) and no other Gospel records him being there. This does not necessarily mean that he was *not* there, but it certainly raises a number of questions.

One of the major weakness of this argument (over and above the fact that this is a very modern theory supported by few theologians!) is that the English word “love” is a very simplistic word which is used to translate many different words in Greek (which is the language in which the Gospels were written). These words all mean “love; but refer to specific *types* of love.

The word normally used in the phrase “the disciple whom Jesus loved” is *agapao* which “usually [refers to] the active love of God for His Son and His people, and the active love His people are to have for God, each other and even enemies” (*Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*). The word used in John 11:3 is *phileo* which denotes a “lesser” or more human sort of love. Christians are called to have divine love, but too often simply have human love. This is most clearly indicated in the Peter-Jesus “feed my sheep” dialog at the end of the Fourth Gospel. Jesus clearly loves Lazarus, but not necessarily with the same sort of love as He loves the Beloved Disciple (even the crowd recognize this, as they use the word *phileo* in John 11:36).

As can be seen, this could be considered a serious problem – although proponents of this theory generally ignore this.

Authorship by Mary Magdalene

This is another very modern theory which has often has feminist and poorly-researched exceptionally sensationalist claims “bolted onto” it. The simple theory that Mary Magdalene was the author of the Fourth Gospel is one which has some merit (although there are a *great* many problems with it) but associated theories – feminist and anti-Christian, New Age and Gnostic in the main – have absolutely no merit to them. Unfortunately, it is often hard to find academics who are prepared to discuss the notion of a Magdalene authorship without bringing in such ludicrous notions.

One of the strongest supporters of this theory has been Ramon K. Jusino, M.A. (http://ramon_k_jusino.tripod.com/magdalene.html) and it is the theory in his article which is addressed here. His theory has a great number of problems associated with it – not least of which is the simple fact that his initial assumption (that the Church and organized Christianity have given women “the short end of the stick”) is wrong. While he correctly points out that women were the original witnesses

to Christ's resurrection, his statements that the male leadership chose to suppress this and was embarrassed by it is simply false (the mere fact that we know from the canonical Gospels that women were the first to see the risen Christ shows that the early Church couldn't have been *that* embarrassed about it, or they would have cut it from the Gospels!) His entire theory proceeds from this erroneous position.

There are additional problems with this theory – the Beloved Disciple is exclusively depicted as being *male* in the Gospel. The theory attempts to get around this by claiming that the Gospel was edited when the male leadership of the group which was founded by Mary Magdalene became embarrassed by a female founder. Unfortunately for the proponents of the theory, there is far more to the “engenderment” of the Beloved Disciple than merely the words “he” or “she”.

Mary the mother of Jesus is given into the care of the Beloved Disciple when Jesus is on the cross – this is a serious problem for the proponents of this theory, as women were NOT given into the care of other women. Additionally, the fact that the Gospel is written as an eyewitness account is against a female author – because a woman's testimony was worth far less than a man's in a Jewish court of the period.

An additional problem with this theory is the identification of Mary Magdalene as the somewhat composite figure which she is portrayed as in this theory. Although it is Church tradition and general understanding that Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany the sister of Lazarus and the woman caught in adultery are all the same woman, nowhere does Scripture explicitly state this. This is a tradition which is based on a single sermon of Pope Leo. This is a widely-attested and oft-believed tradition, but there is not a *shred* of explicit evidence in the Gospels to support it. Although the word *agapo* is used to refer to Jesus' love for the Beloved Disciple and Mary and Martha of Bethany, there is no certainty to suggest that Mary of Bethany is Mary Magdalene.

But by far and away the biggest problem with this theory is the reason its proponents *want* it to be true – it is a Gnostic romanticization which wants Jesus to be married to Mary Magdalene. It is part of “The DaVinci Code” rubbish and related crack-pot theories.

To confirm – there is not a single piece of Biblical or historical evidence to suggest that Jesus was married. An oft-given argument is that the Blessed Virgin Mary orders servants around at the wedding at Cana – and who (say those who support this theory) would do that but the mother of the groom? This is purely hypothetical, and is ultimately based on the romanticization that Jesus was “just a man” who needed a wife and that women “got the short end of the stick” in early Christianity. Both of these notions are ones which are not supported by the historical record OR the Bible itself. They are appealing notions for Gnostics and feminists to advance, but they don't have any actual support.

In short, the theory that Mary Magdalene is the author of the Fourth Gospel has a slight degree of merit – but there is no firm evidence for it at all. Additionally, there are many, many problems with it – not to mention the fact that its academic credentials (such as they are) are seriously damaged by the agenda of its proponents.

The Beloved Disciple as the reader

Another modern theory which has gained some currency is that the Beloved Disciple is not a specific person, but rather that he is intended to represent the reader. This theory states that the Gospel was written in order to engage the reader more with the text of the Gospel. There are a number of problems with this theory.

Firstly, such a literary style is not found elsewhere in the ancient world. While this is not an absolute statement that the Fourth Gospel was not written in this manner, it certainly raises questions.

Secondly, such a theory ignores and marginalizes the various and episodes where the Beloved Disciple actually *does* something in the narrative! The Beloved Disciple cares for Mary, the Beloved

Disciple gets to the tomb before Peter. While it could be argued (weakly, it must be said) that the reader is intended to be one who recognizes Jesus at the end of Gospel, the fact that the Beloved Disciple does things in the narrative is a major stumbling point for this theory.

Additionally, the Beloved Disciple is said to “see and believe” when he enters the tomb of Jesus – but the reader has not seen and believed. In fact, the end of the Gospel specifically says that the reader is being *told* this so that despite not seeing, people will believe (a point additionally made in the Gospel with the episode with Thomas).

Notes on the presence of the Beloved Disciple

It is certainly the case that we do not know for absolutely certain who the Beloved Disciple is (although the general consensus is John the Apostle, the son of Zebedee.) The question which must be asked is, if it is not John, who is it?

One of the most interesting “problems” is that the other three Gospels describe the various events where the Beloved Disciple is present – the Last Supper, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection. It is a simple fact that the other Gospels do NOT mention John as being present at the last two events – they mention the Holy Women at the Resurrection (although each Gospel gives a different – albeit non-exhaustive – list) and they make no mention of John at the tomb.

This is not an insurmountable problem – because an absence of evidence is not evidence of absence! It is, however, an interesting issue which means that no single theory is entirely without problems – although the traditional view is the one which is most widely held and, in many ways, has the least problems.

A refutation of the Gospel of Thomas

A very small number of academics have advanced the theory that the Gospel of John (with its explicit and obvious Christology and its somewhat “high” literary style) is, in fact, a refutation of the Gospel of Thomas – a Gnostic work which challenges Christian doctrines. There are major weaknesses to this theory – not least of which is that the generally accepted dates (of 1st century for John and 2nd century for Thomas) are out of order. The theory relies on the rejection of the normally accepted dates and the picking of new and different ones.

Generally speaking, this theory is part of the so-called “high vs. low Christology” debate – which is simply a front for secular and atheistic challenges to Christianity.