Who Wrote the Gospels, and How Do We Know?

By Martin Pickup

None of the four NT Gospels identifies the name of its author. But throughout the centuries these four documents have traditionally been known as the Gospel of Matthew, the Gospel of Mark, the Gospel of Luke, and the Gospel of John. These designations of authorship were virtually undisputed in the early centuries. The earliest Christians understood that the four *evangelists* (gospel authors) were the apostle Matthew; John Mark, an assistant of the apostle Peter and the apostle Paul; Luke, an assistant of Paul; and the apostle John. But this raises several important questions: How did the early Christians know this? Are these traditional views of authorship accurate?—and how can we be sure?

What makes these questions of such great importance is the fact that many modern scholars tend to dismiss these traditional identifications of the four evangelists in order to minimize the historical reliability of the information the Gospels contain. Rather than seeing the Gospels as records of Jesus' earliest disciples and known eyewitnesses, critical scholars instead want to relegate the information in the Gospels to the category of legendary stories of unknown provenance. They say that the Gospels merely record tales that circulated unchecked among early Christian communities because the persons who had actually been with Jesus were no longer available to correct any misinformation. Rejecting the veracity of the early Church's claims about the identities of the evangelists, modern critics treat the four Gospels as anonymous documents that, along with the information they contain, were the product of early Christian communities rather than known individuals. Much of the information in the Gospels is therefore considered historically unreliable.

Were the Gospels Written Anonymously?

One often hears the claim today that the four Gospels are anonymous documents. Strictly speaking, that statement is true *if* one means that in none of these documents is the author's name stated in the text. But though the Gospels may be formally anonymous, it is misleading to say that the evangelists wrote these documents anonymously. The evangelists' identities were not hidden from the original readers of their Gospels, nor did the evangelists seek anonymity. The fact that the author of Luke–Acts dedicates his two-volume work to a specific individual to whom he gives personal instruction—"it seemed fitting for me … to write out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught" (Luke 1:3-4)—logically suggests that the dedicatee was well aware of who the author was. In the text of Acts, the author employs a first-person plural pronoun whenever he wants to imply his presence among Paul's missionary company—e.g., "*we* sought to go into Macedonia," or "[they] were waiting for *us* at Troas" (Acts 16:10; 20:5).[1] These kinds of statements imply that the author's identity was surely known to the document's original readers without him having to explicitly include his name in the text.

The Gospel of John likewise indicates that its original readership knew who the author was. In the Gospel's prologue the author speaks in the first-person, saying, "*We saw* His glory" (1:14), with the obvious expectation that his readers already understand who the "we" are. Similarly, at the Gospel's conclusion the evangelist writes, "And there are also many other things which Jesus did, which if they were written in detail, *I suppose* that even the world itself would

[1]The "we" sections are Acts 16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18; 27:1 – 28:16. A comparison with the information in Paul's epistles (Phile 24; Col 4:14) shows that Luke the physician was one of Paul's company, a fact that squares with the external evidence (discussed below) that Luke was the author of Luke-Acts.

not contain the books that would be written" (21:25).[2] Using third-person language throughout the last section of the document, the author speaks of himself as "the disciple whom Jesus loved," as the one who "had leaned back on His bosom" during the Last Supper, and as the one "who is testifying to these things and wrote these things" (13:23; 21:20, 24). Self-designations like these are best understood not as an author's attempt to protect his anonymity, but simply as a means of referring to himself with a measure of subtlety. In point of fact, the oblique way in which the fourth evangelist speaks of himself is a sign that he knew that his audience would be aware of his identity, and—rather than highlighting himself personally—he sought to highlight only his credentials as a reliable eyewitness.

These observations about the Gospels of Luke and John suggest that, for the other two Gospels as well, it was humility rather than a desire for anonymity that kept their authors from inserting their names into the text. The reason why all four evangelists could refrain from making overt references to themselves in their Gospels was because they knew that their readerships already would be cognizant of their identities. This conclusion is confirmed by the uniform understanding of the evangelists' identities by the Church of the early centuries, a point that I will demonstrate momentarily.

But first I need to address this question: How would a Gospel's initial recipients have been able to know who the author was if he didn't name himself in the body of the work? The logical answer is that the author's identity circulated in some way with the document itself as it was copied and published among the early Christian congregations. His identity could have been

[2] Some scholars believe that this statement in 21:25 (and the previous verse as well) may not come from the author himself but from another party, perhaps an amanuensis to whom the author dictated his work or someone who put the Gospel in its final form. (See the discussion of this matter later in this article.) Even if this is true, the use of the first-person implies that the original readers are expected to know who the amanuensis or redactor is, and if they know him, they surely are expected to know the identity of "the disciple who is testifying to these things and wrote these things."

circulated by word of mouth or, as is more likely, the evangelist's name was written somewhere on the copies of the document itself. It was normal for ancient literary works to be given a title containing the name of the author, or sometimes the author's name was written on the outside of the scroll. In the case of the four Gospels, the author's name may have been written on each of the autographs and then included on subsequent copies as they were distributed.

The textual and patristic evidence pertaining to the Gospels suggests that this is exactly what happened. The earliest extant copies of the Gospels—manuscripts going back to the second century—include titles like "The Gospel according to Matthew," "according to Mark," etc., and the names of no other persons than these are ever associated with the four Gospels.[3] Moreover, when we look at the writings of the Church Fathers (post-apostolic Christians of the 2nd – 5th centuries), we find no disputes about the authorship of the four Gospels. Let me now set forth some of this patristic evidence.

Patristic Testimony about the Four Evangelists

Irenaeus, an overseer of the church at Lyons who wrote about AD 180, illustrates the well-established understanding of Christians in the second century:

> Now Matthew published also a book of the Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul were preaching the Gospel in Rome and founding the Church. After their departure, Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, he too handed down to us in writing the things preached by Peter. Luke also, the follower of Paul, put down in a book the Gospel

[3] This does not mean that the original titles would have had this exact form. The use of these specific titles became more or less standardized in the second century. The phraseology "Gospel according to …" (*euangelion kata …*) would appear to have been necessary as more than one Gospel of Jesus' life began to appear on the scene. But though these current titles were probably not original, a title of some kind giving the author's name was probably included in all copies from the autograph on. There is no basis for the view among scholars that the four Gospels first circulated anonymously, and that the traditional authorship names were not attached to them until the mid-second century.

> preached by that one. Afterwards John, the disciple of the Lord who also leaned upon his breast, he too published a Gospel while residing in Ephesus in Asia.[4]

We can see from the above excerpt that Irenaeus affirmed the four evangelists to be Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. But more than just showing a knowledge of the evangelists' identities, Irenaeus displays a knowledge of other details about the composition of these documents. He associates Peter with the Gospel of Mark, claiming that Peter was the eyewitness who provided Mark with most of his information. He reports that John was in Ephesus at the time he wrote his Gospel and distributed it. Such details give us confidence that this early Christian writer is speaking knowledgeably when he reports on the authorships of the four Gospels. Furthermore, Irenaeus was in a position to know, since he was a student of Polycarp, a man who himself had been a student of John the apostle. In other words, Irenaeus was only one step removed from the apostolic generation. This fact gives tremendous weight to his testimony regarding the identities of the four evangelists.

Irenaeus' understanding of who the evangelists were is echoed by a host of early Christian writers, such as Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Eusebius, Jerome, and many others. Of all the many Church Fathers who speak about the four Gospels, perhaps the earliest and most significant voice of all is that of Papias, an overseer of the church at Hierapolis, who probably wrote about AD 110.[5] A few excerpts of this man's writings survive today because they were

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[4] *Adv. Haer*. III.1.1-2.

[5] Papias wrote five volumes entitled *Exposition of the Logia of the Lord*. His work could be dated to either c. AD 110 or AD 130 depending on (a) whether one accepts the accuracy of a fifth-century writer, Philip of Side, who indicated that Papias lived until the reign of Hadrian (AD 117-138); and (b) whether one understands the historical evidence to indicate that Papias was one generation or two generations removed from the apostles. The earlier date seems preferable based on Irenaeus' statement that Papias was a student of John and a contemporary of Polycarp, as well as Eusebius' statement that Papias was a contemporary of the daughters of Philip the evangelist (Acts 21:8-9).

preserved by the fourth-century historian Eusebius. In his youth Papias was taught by John and later by some of the disciples of the apostles—so he was in an ideal position to know the truth about the composition of the Gospels.[6] In the excerpts that we have, Papias not only seems to indicate a knowledge of the fourth Gospel, but he explicitly speaks of the apostle Matthew as the author of the first of the Gospels. Papias contrasts the style of the Gospel of Matthew with that of the Gospel written by John Mark. He reports that Mark obtained most of his information from the apostle Peter himself, writing down what Peter told him accurately and completely.[7] According to Papias, the reason why Mark's Gospel does not present its material with the kind of ordered arrangement that one sees in Matthew's Gospel is because Mark's concern was merely to record what Peter said in the manner in which he gave it: "Consequently Mark did nothing wrong when he wrote down some individual items just as he [Peter] related them from memory. For he made it his one concern not to omit anything he had heard or to falsify anything."[8]

The evidence from the Church Fathers is clear. Extant Christian writings from the second century onward are explicit about the fact that the authors of the four Gospels were Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. How can this uniform and undisputed tradition of authorship be explained? The most logical explanation is, as we said before, that the names of the four

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[6] There is a question whether Papias received instruction from John personally or whether he only received instruction from disciples of the apostles. Irenaeus claimed that Papias was a hearer of John. But Eusebius understood Papias' own writings to indicate that he never personally had contact with any of the apostles. Irenaeus' understanding of the matter seems more likely to be correct, given his closer proximity to the time of Papias and also because Papias' statement about learning from the disciples of the apostles would not negate the possibility that, in his younger days, he had heard John personally just as Irenaeus said.

[7] Papias says that Mark was Peter's *hermeneutēs*, a term that could mean "interpreter," but here perhaps more likely means "translator." Papias' point would be that Mark translated Peter's Aramaic discourses about Jesus into Greek. If so, then what we have in the Gospel of Mark is largely a translated transcription of the words of Peter himself. See R. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006) 12-38. Even if Mark's contribution was not quite as passive as the idea of "translator" might suggest, Papias is emphatic about Mark providing an accurate and complete record of what Peter testified about the deeds and actions of Jesus.

[8] This early tradition about the connection of the apostle Peter with Mark's Gospel is very plausible. There are several features within the text of Mark's Gospel that fit in well with the idea that Mark was primarily recording Peter's eyewitness testimony (see R. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* 155-182).

evangelists circulated with the initial copies of these Gospels as they were distributed. In fact, this is really the only possible explanation.

Someone might wonder if the early Church's attributions of authorship could simply have been deductions that were drawn from information within the text of the Gospels themselves. When this possibility is examined, however, it becomes clear that this is not what happened. It could be that a reader of Luke–Acts might discern from the "we" sections of Acts that Luke the physician, one of Paul's traveling companions, might be the document's author. And a reader of the fourth Gospel who knew that only the twelve apostles joined Jesus at the Last Supper might deduce that the unnamed disciple "who is testifying to these things and wrote these things" was perhaps the apostle John. But in neither of these cases is there enough information within the text to account for *the certainty* about authorship that we see in the early Church. Then when we consider the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, we find that there is absolutely nothing in either of them that could explain why the names of these particular individuals were associated with them. Though the Gospel of Matthew recounts Matthew's call to discipleship, it does not focus exclusively on his call or ever give him prominence in the text. He is not portrayed as one of the major apostles, and so there is no reason why anyone, simply from reading the text itself, would ever think of Matthew as the author of this Gospel. This is even more obviously the case with the Gospel of Mark. Not only was John Mark not one of the apostles, but he is never expressly mentioned in the document at all. It is clear therefore that, while nothing in any of the Gospels conflicts with the traditional attributions of authorship, neither is there anything within the text of the Gospels that could have generated these attributions.

The early Church's uniform and undisputed understanding of the identities of the four evangelists can only be explained in one way: the names of the evangelists circulated with the

Gospels from the outset of their publication.[9] Every congregation receiving a copy of a Gospel knew who its author was as they began to read it.

Modern Dismissal of the Testimony of the Church Fathers

Modern scholarship tends to dismiss the above facts and cling to the view that the authorship designations of the four Gospels are unreliable traditions that should be ignored. It is claimed that knowledge of the evangelists' actual identities, if ever publicized in the early Church, was quickly lost. But if this was the case, why would documents whose authorships were unknown receive such wide circulation as they obviously did? The only explanation that modern critics can give is that the association of these documents with important Christian names like Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John occurred early enough, and became firmly entrenched enough, to prompt these documents' broad distribution. But if these ascriptions of authorship are *not* correct, what would have prompted four such glaring mistakes to be made in the first place?—and how could such mistakes be perpetuated so uniformly throughout the Christian communities?

Modern scholarship generally acknowledges that the similar material in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke (for this reason known as "the Synoptic Gospels") is to be explained by the fact that the authors of Matthew and Luke used Mark as one of their sources.[10] If this is

[9] The idea that these authorship designations that were attached to the Gospels from the beginning were *false*, so that the Gospels of the NT are actually pseudonymous, is not a viable possibility and few critics entertain the idea. While it is true that pseudonymous Gospels did appear in some segments of the Church from the 2nd – 5th centuries, pseudonymous authors as a rule chose to write under the guise of well-known people. It makes no sense for a forger to select a minor apostolic figure like Matthew, not to mention even more obscure individuals like Mark or Luke. Pseudonymous writings deceived people only because they were written after the actual persons involved were no longer around to point out the deception. But the names of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John had to have been attached to the four Gospels from the earliest point, a time when these men and their close associates would have been available to correct any false attribution of authorship if it had occurred.

[10] In order to explain the material that is common to Matthew and Luke but that is not found in Mark, scholars have theorized that Matthew and Luke both made use of another source, a hypothetical source of Jesus' sayings that scholars call "Q," from the German word *quelle* ("source"). There is no tangible evidence that such a source ever existed, but the theory does answer certain questions (while creating others). The theory that Matthew and Luke

so—and it would seem to be[11]—then we cannot think that the four Gospels arose and circulated in obscurity. On the contrary, they seem to have been readily and broadly available from a very early period. So if the traditional understandings of authorship are not correct, three glaring questions must be answered: (1) How could the identities of the real authors have dropped out of public knowledge so quickly? (2) What would have prompted the names of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John to be incorrectly assigned to these documents? (3) How did this supposed mistake endure so uniformly? Liberal critics have no answers to these questions.

Instead, critics focus attention upon other issues that they see as problematic for the traditional authorships. One issue surrounding the Gospel of Matthew is that the same second-century Church Fathers who designate the apostle Matthew as its author also indicate that this Gospel was originally composed in the Aramaic language. The problem here is that all of our earliest extant copies of Matthew are in Greek and not Aramaic, and the document appears to be an original Greek composition rather than a translation. Many critics claim, therefore, that if the early Church tradition was incorrect about this Gospel having been composed in Aramaic, then the tradition regarding Matthean authorship may have been incorrect too. But that conclusion does not follow; the two issues do not have to stand or fall together. An early Christian writer may have been mistaken about one point regarding a Gospel's composition, but still correct about another. It is even possible (and some would say it is likely) that Matthew *did* compose an

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made use of Mark and Q is called the Two-Source hypothesis. A minority of scholars try to explain the common material among the Synoptics by means of another theory, the Two-Gospel hypothesis. This theory says that Luke used Matthew as a source, and that Mark made use of both Matthew and Luke. The advantage of this theory is that it coincides with the early Church's testimony that Matthew's Gospel was the first Gospel to be written. But this theory comes well short of being able to explain all of the synoptic issues, and so most scholars today adopt the Two-Source hypothesis regarding Mark and Q.

[11] See Luke 1:1–4 where the author acknowledges his use of sources.

early form of his Gospel in Aramaic for the benefit of Jewish Christians in Palestine.[12] He may later have reformulated this document into the Greek Matthew that we have today.

Another question involves the Gospel of Matthew's apparent use of Mark as a source. It seems strange to think that the apostle Matthew, himself an eyewitness of Jesus, would rely upon the account of Mark, a man who was not an apostle, in the composition of his own Gospel. Many modern critics say that this argues against the possibility that the apostle Matthew was the author of the Gospel that traditionally bears his name. But the strangeness is mitigated to an extent if, as Papias and Irenaeus asserted, Mark's Gospel was largely a transcription of the oral testimony of the apostle Peter. Matthew may have thought it appropriate to give primacy to Peter's manner of recounting events, even some events that they both had witnessed.

Questions like these arise whenever one studies the Synoptic Gospels, and we probably will never be able to resolve all of our queries about the evangelists' methods of composition. But such questions cannot outweigh the abundance of evidence from the early Church Fathers about the authors of these documents. To a large extent, one's acceptance or rejection of the traditional authorship of the Gospels boils down to how much weight one chooses to give to the testimony of the early Church Fathers. Today's liberal scholars tend to dismiss the understanding of second and third-century Christians with a cavalier wave of the hand, feeling no need to explain *how*—if the early Church was indeed mistaken about the authorship of the Gospels—such a misunderstanding could have occurred without the matter ever being corrected or even questioned. Modern scholars tend to dismiss arbitrarily the reports of the early Church Fathers in a way that no historian of ancient secular literature would ever do when dealing with his

[12] Some Church Fathers spoke of an Aramaic Gospel that was used by the Ebionites and the Nazareans, two groups of Jewish Christians (Epiphanius, *Panarion* 30.13.1 – 30.22.4; Jerome, *Epist.* 20.5). Perhaps this document is to be identified in some way with an early Aramaic form of the Gospel of Matthew.

historical sources. One detects a large measure of hubris in the notion that modern readers of the Gospels—with virtually no new data beyond that of the early Church, and probably with far less data—can today expose "the error" regarding the authorship of the Gospels that completely escaped the attention of the early Christians who lived no more than a generation or two from the time of the Gospels' composition. This is not to deny, of course, that the information of the Church Fathers needs to be read critically. But the extremes of undue credulity and undue skepticism both need to be avoided.

Special Questions about the Gospel of John

The Gospel of John has particularly come under attack by modern critics who want to cast doubt upon the traditional authorship of the four Gospels and undermine their value as historical records.. Even though the fourth Gospel presents itself as the eyewitness testimony of the disciple who was Jesus' closest personal friend, written at the end of this disciple's long life of service, and even though the early Church uniformly understood this Gospel to be written by the apostle John, modern scholars question the idea that the document was composed by him. Many suggest that this Gospel may have been written by another early Christian who was also named John and that the early Church confused the two individuals. Some critics go further and claim that the early Church's understanding of the identity of the fourth evangelist is so dubious as to be completely unreliable, and they deny the historicity of nearly all of the information this Gospel contains. Let me address the major reasons why these critical scholars view the authorship and historicity of the fourth Gospel as suspect.

Another Disciple Named John?

The theory that this Gospel was written not by the apostle John, but by another disciple who also bore the name John, rests upon the following excerpt from the writings of Papias, an early second-century overseer of the church at Hierapolis. Papias wrote,

> If, then, anyone should come, having personally followed the elders, I would question him concerning the words of the elders, what Andrew or what Peter said, or what Philip, or what Thomas or James, or what John or Matthew or any one of the disciples of the Lord said, and the things which Aristion and John the elder, disciples of the Lord, say. (*H.E.* III.39.2)

Eusebius, the fourth-century historian who preserved portions of Papias' writings, understood the above quotation to indicate that there was a second disciple of Jesus by the name of John, and that this second individual was the person whom Papias calls "John the elder." Many scholars today understand Papias' words in the same way, yet they go further than Eusebius and say that this other John may have been the author of the fourth Gospel rather than the apostle.

Even if this theory is true, it would still mean that the fourth Gospel was composed by one of the original disciples of Jesus, just not by an apostle. An individual like this would still be an excellent witness of the deeds of Jesus. Yet many liberal critics, once convinced that the early Church mistakenly attributed the fourth Gospel to John the apostle, take this as license to dismiss the historical value of the document and its claim to recount eyewitness testimony. Pointing to the differences between the information contained in the Gospel of John and the information in the Synoptic Gospels,[13] they assert that the only reason why the Church thought this document's claims were to be taken seriously is because it was misidentified as an apostolic document.

[13] The differences between the information in the Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John should not be exaggerated. The Synoptic Gospels focus upon events during Jesus' Galilean ministry, whereas John focuses upon

The basis for this idea that the early Church misidentified the author of the fourth Gospel is the interpretation that Eusebius gave to Papias' words. It needs to be recognized, however, that while Eusebius did understand Papias to be referring to a second disciple of Jesus named John, Eusebius himself never suggested that this other John wrote the fourth Gospel.[14] Eusebius elsewhere makes it clear that the apostle John was the fourth Gospel's author (*H.E.* III.24.5-15). It is also quite possible that Eusebius was wrong in his interpretation of Papias' statement. When Papias speaks of "John the elder," he may simply be referring for a second time to the apostle John whom he had mentioned previously in the passage along with several other of the apostles, all of whom he designated "elders."[15] The term "elder" (*presbyteros*)—in the sense of an older, authoritative leader—was often applied to the apostles of Christ (cf. 1 Pet. 5:1), and the apostle John identifies himself as "the elder" in two of his epistles (2 John 1; 3 John 1).[16] So Papias' reference to "John the elder" may simply be his way of designating the apostle John whom he had just mentioned, but who—unlike the other apostles—was still alive at the period of time Papias is recalling (probably sometime in the latter part of the first century). Not only is this interpretation of Papias' statement possible, it seems to be the most probable way of

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events that occurred when Jesus came to Jerusalem for the various feasts. Also, if one of the purposes of the fourth evangelist is to recount information he had witnessed but that most of the other apostles had not, or to even supplement the information available in the Synoptic Gospels, then the differences between John and Synoptic Gospels are very understandable. Despite what some critics allege, harmonization of the four Gospels is not a herculean task, and there is certainly no grounds for the extreme view of discounting the information in the Gospel of John as literary fiction.

[14] Eusebius did believe, though, that this other John may have written the book of Revelation.

[15] Some interpreters of Papias have understood him to mean by "elders" not the apostles, whom he subsequently lists, but the initial disciples of these apostles (e.g., R. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* 15-21). But this seems to force an unnatural meaning upon the text.

[16] Some scholars, however, allege that the NT epistles of John were also written by this other John rather than by the apostle John.

understanding him. It certainly is how Irenaeus, the second-century overseer of the church at Lyons, understood Papias' words, and Irenaeus was only a generation removed from the man.[17]

Yet even if this understanding of Papias' words is not correct and Papias *was* referring to a second individual named John, there still is no reason to think that this other individual, rather than John the apostle, was the author of the fourth Gospel. As we showed earlier, the evidence indicates that the authorship of this Gospel was known to its original readers from the outset, and its association with the apostle John is undisputed in the writings of the Church Fathers.[18] It strains credulity to think that, if a mistaken attribution of authorship had arisen, it could go completely unnoticed and uncorrected.

Irenaeus wrote in the late second-century, "John, the disciple of the Lord who also leaned upon his breast, he too published a Gospel while residing in Ephesus in Asia." Irenaeus repeatedly speaks of this John as one of the "apostles," so there can be no doubt about whom he means.[19] What makes Irenaeus' report so weighty is the fact that he was a student of Polycarp, a Christian who himself had been a disciple of the apostle John. Speaking of his time spent with Poplycarp, Irenaeus wrote the following:

> I remember the events of those days more clearly than those which have happened recently … so I can speak [of] … how [Polycarp] reported his converse with John and with the others who had seen the Lord, how he

[17] See *Adv. Haer*. 5.33.4

[18] The only exception could be the so-called *alogoi*, a small heretical group (c. AD 170) who objected to the teaching in the Gospel of John about Jesus being the *Logos* ("Word"). One of their number claimed that John was written by Cerinthus, a Gnostic. The claim is outlandish, and no weight has ever been given to it.

[19] *Adv. Haer*. I.9.2-3; III.3.4; III.21.3, etc. In addition to the statements of Irenaeus, the testimony of several other early Church Fathers is significant. Justin Martyr refers to the Gospels as "the memoirs of the apostles" (*Dial*. 107 – 117) and the Gospels of Matthew and John as "composed by the apostles" (*2 Apol*. 11.2-3). It is also clear that Clement of Alexandria (*Hyp*., *H. E.* 6.14.7) and Tertullian (*C. Marc*. 4.2) classified the fourth Gospel as the work of the apostle John.

> remembered their words, and what were the things concerning the Lord which he had heard from them, including his miracles and his teaching, and how Polycarp had received them from the eyewitnesses of the word of life.

In light of Irenaeus' intimate association with a student of the apostle John himself, there is every reason to trust his identification of the apostle John as the author of the fourth Gospel. Modern critics who want to reject Irenaeus' testimony are unable to explain how he could have made such an egregious blunder, not to mention how this alleged blunder managed to thoroughly pervade even those segments of the Church outside of his own circle.

A Final Redactor of John's Gospel?

There are some statements toward the end of the Gospel of John that can be understood as *additions* to the text—that is, as comments written not by the author himself, but by another party. For example, in John 21:24-25 we read the following:

> [24] This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and wrote these things, and we know that his testimony is true. [25] And there are also many other things which Jesus did, which if they were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books that would be written.

These words could be a textual insertion that was added by an amanuensis (i.e., a scribe to whom the author dictated his work).[20] This amanuensis perhaps represented a group of disciples who wanted to affirm the trustworthiness of the beloved disciple's testimony. The statement in John 19:35—"He who has seen has testified, and his testimony is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you also may believe"—has also been understood as a similar kind of textual insertion. Some scholars suggest that the entirety of chapter 21 is an addendum to the Gospel of

[20] Some scholars believe that only v. 24 was added by an amanuensis.

John that was composed, not by the evangelist himself, but by the compiler of the evangelist's material after he died.

On the basis of the above considerations, many scholars then take a much bigger step. They say that even if a significant portion of the Gospel of John had been based upon some original eyewitness testimony, it subsequently underwent redaction by an amanuensis or an editor to such an extent that the latter individual must be regarded as the Gospel's real author. This unknown individual, using oral traditions at his disposal and embellishing them with his own thinking, produced a document that cannot be regarded as a reliable history of Jesus.

Such an extreme position runs far past the evidence of the text. It is true that ancient authors commonly dictated their writings, and Biblical authors were no exception.[21] So there is nothing inherently problematic with the idea that the fourth evangelist used an amanuensis when producing his Gospel. Sometimes an amanuensis was even allowed the freedom to insert his own comments into a document (cf. Rom. 16:22), and it is possible that such could be the case with some of the statements in the latter part of the Gospel of John. Nevertheless, even if some material in the Gospel of John was added by an amanuensis, the text itself suggests that only a very small portion may fall into this category—viz., a few statements toward the end of the Gospel, and perhaps the addendum of John 21. But there is no warrant for the extreme assertion that the bulk of the Gospel was composed by someone other than the eyewitness who is referred to throughout the document.

It is even possible that modern readers are wrong in (at least some of) the occasions where they attribute third-person comments in the Gospel to someone other than the evangelist. Speaking about oneself in the third-person is a rhetorical technique that allows a witness to

[21] In addition to the express statements found in Rom. 16:22 and (possibly) 1 Pet. 5:12, note also Paul's comments about his personal subscription at the end of his letters (Gal. 6:11; Col. 4:18; 2 Thess. 3:17), a fact which necessarily implies the use of an amanuensis.

emphasize the veracity of his own testimony. For example, it makes much more sense to think that the statement in John 19:35 was made by the evangelist himself, rather than by an amanuensis or editor. It would carry little weight for someone else to affirm that an eyewitness "knows that he is telling the truth," but it makes complete sense for the eyewitness himself to make such an affirmation. In light of this, it may even be that the words of John 21:24-25 (mentioned above) are also the evangelist's own comment rather than those of another party.

Whatever one concludes about this point, the statement in John 21:24 is clearly a statement about authorship, and it affirms that "the disciple who is testifying to these things and wrote these things" is the beloved disciple of the previous verses who reclined beside Jesus at the Last Supper.[22] This naturally points to the apostle John, particularly since the Synoptic Gospels indicate that the twelve apostles were the only disciples who joined Jesus at the Last Supper. If, therefore, the fourth Gospel's own statements are taken seriously, there is no reason to doubt that virtually all of this Gospel comes from the apostle John himself and that it constitutes his personal testimony concerning the deeds and teachings of Jesus.

Would John Call Himself "the Beloved Disciple"?

Many critics argue, however, that the apostle John could not be the author of the fourth Gospel because no Christian author would be so bold as to call himself "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (John 19:26; 20:2; 21:7, 20). It must be, the argument goes, that someone else assigned this special epithet to John, so therefore someone else must be the author of this Gospel. Other

[22] It is common for liberal scholars to argue that the phrase in John 21:24 ("who … wrote [*graphō*] these things"] may (a) refer only to causing or motivating something to be written, rather than actually authoring a document, or (b) only be talking about authoring the incident just related in ch. 21. Both positions are high unlikely. Though the Greek word *graphō*, like the English word "write," was flexible enough in meaning to be used to refer to the act of producing a document by means of dictation rather than by penning it with one's own hand, the word was not so broad as to include the kind of redaction that liberal scholars envision with the Gospel of John (see R. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* 359-62). Also, when John 21:24 is compared with the following verse (v. 25), as well as with 20:31 and 13:23, it is evident that the text is talking about the beloved disciple writing the Gospel as a whole rather than just the material in ch. 21.

modern scholars have gone so far as to say that the beloved disciple may not be a real person at all, but only an idealized figure who is inserted into the story to symbolize true discipleship.

The extremism of the latter view is totally uncalled for, since it blithely ignores the Gospel's emphasis upon eyewitness testimony and historical facts (19:35; 20:30-31), as well as the plain meaning of what is said in 21:24 about the beloved disciple being the author of the Gospel. The beloved disciple is clearly no literary fiction. Yet the entire line of reasoning in the above paragraph falters in its basic premise: it assumes that the phrase "the disciple whom Jesus loved" is an aggrandizing description intended to elevate this disciple above all other Christians. It is much more likely, however, that the description simply expresses the closeness of the bond between this disciple and Jesus, a closeness that caused Jesus to entrust his mother into this disciple's care and to think of him as if he were his own fleshly brother (as John 19:25-27 shows). It is because this disciple and Jesus had such a close and personal relationship that the disciple can now offer the most reliable testimony about Jesus. What modern readers of the Gospels need to understand is that ancient historiographies put a premium on the testimony of eyewitnesses who were *insiders*, and that is certainly what the apostle John was.[23] By emphasizing the closeness of his personal relationship with Jesus, the apostle is indicating to his readers how trustworthy his information is. He is someone who was privy to information regarding Jesus that even some of the other apostles did not personally witness. That is the kind of information that the fourth Gospel includes.

Furthermore, if the expression "the disciple whom Jesus loved" was intended to aggrandize anyone, it aggrandizes Jesus for loving this former "son of thunder" (Mark 3:17) in spite of his sinfulness. As such, it reminds one of similar statements made by the apostle Paul

[23] For example, the personal involvement of Josephus in the Jewish war with Rome is what, according to his own affirmation, qualifies him to give a reliable account of those events (*C. Ap.* 1.55).

(e.g., Gal. 2:20; 1 Tim. 1:15-16). When seen in this light, the idea that the apostle John would employ this kind of self-designation becomes a very understandable and very touching rhetorical device. There is certainly no warrant for using it to deny the abundance of external evidence identifying the apostle John as the Gospel's author.

Two additional points should also be noted. First, if "the beloved disciple" is not John the apostle, it becomes very difficult to explain why it is that this Gospel, while mentioning by name other apostles of Jesus, fails to mention by name so prominent an apostle as John (as well as his apostolic brother James), save for the oblique reference to "the sons of Zebedee" in the Gospel's appendix (21:2). Secondly, among the four Gospels it is striking that John the Baptist is identified simply as "John" only in the fourth Gospel; the Synoptic Gospels refer to him as "John the Baptist" in order to distinguish him from the other prominent John connected with the life of Jesus, viz., the apostle John. The fourth Gospel's way of designating John the Baptist makes sense, however, if the author was himself John the apostle, for he was the one person who could call the Baptist simply "John" without risk of confusing his readers about who was intended. This observation argues against the idea that the fourth Gospel was authored by a non-apostolic disciple of Jesus who also bore the name John.

Conclusion

The evidence for the authorship of the NT Gospels is clear and decisive. It leads one to the following conclusions. Two of the four Gospels, Matthew and John, were written by actual apostles of Jesus—men who themselves were eyewitnesses of Jesus throughout his entire ministry. Another Gospel, Mark, is largely a record of the testimony of the apostle Peter himself. The Gospel of Luke is a carefully researched presentation of the testimony of the apostles and other eyewitnesses. The bottom line is this: when we read these four documents we can be

confident that we are reading a record of the testimony of people who knew the historical facts about Jesus of Nazareth. The four Gospels were written by persons who were in the best possible position to pass down accurate and reliable information about Jesus, his teachings, and his miracles.