

## II. LITERARY KEYS TO THE FOURTH GOSPEL

### **The Author's Testimony to Himself**

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THE authorship of the Gospel of John has been a subject of warm debate for almost two centuries. Edward Evanson, in his work entitled *The Dissonance of the Four Generally Received Evangelists and the Evidence of Their Respective Authority Examined*, published in 1792, questioned the traditional view that it was written by John, the son of Zebedee. His position was repudiated by contemporary scholars, but in 1820 Bretschneider's *Probabilia de Evangelii et Epistolarum Joannis Apostoli Indole et Origine* renewed the discussion. Bretschneider contended that John was written by some unknown Gnostic in the middle of the second century. From his time the subject, has been a source of endless argument, which has not yet terminated in a conclusion acceptable to all concerned.

Numerous hypotheses have been advanced to account for the origin of this Gospel. Some critics have ascribed it to "John the elder," a presbyter of Ephesus, mentioned in Eusebius' famous quotation from Papias, a writer of the early second century:

"And if anyone chanced to come who had actually been a follower of the elders, I would inquire as to the discourses of the elders, what Andrew or what Peter said, or what Philip, or what Thomas or James, or what John or Matthew or any other of the Lord's disciples of the Lord, say. For I suppose that things out of books did not profit me so much as the utterance of voice which liveth and abideth.

"Here it is worthwhile noting that twice in his enumera-

tion he mentions the name John: the former of these Johns he puts in the same list with Peter and James and Matthew and the other apostles, clearly indicating the evangelist; but the latter he places with others, in a separate clause, outside the number of the apostles, placing Aristion before him; and he clearly calls him 'elder.' So that he hereby proves their statement to be true who have said that two persons in Asia have borne the same name, and that there were two tombs at Ephesus, each of which is said to this day still to be John's."<sup>1</sup>

Following the deductions of Eusebius stated in the second paragraph, it has been assumed that there were two Johns, the son of Zebedee and the elder of Ephesus, and that the latter wrote the Gospel.

In 1943 J. M. Sanders propounded the thesis that the Fourth Gospel originated in Alexandria, and that it was later imported into Asia, where its origin was credited to John the Presbyter.<sup>2</sup> It had originally been used by the Gnostics, who ascribed it to a man named "John." In Asia this writer was identified with the Presbyter, who, in turn, was considered by many to have been the apostle. Irenaeus who lived in Ephesus adopted the latter view, from which the traditional authorship was derived. In a later essay published in *New Testament Studies* Sanders suggested that the beloved disciple was Lazarus of Bethany who wrote the Gospel, and that afterward it was edited and published by John the Presbyter in Ephesus.<sup>3</sup> Still later, he drew a distinction between Lazarus and the unnamed disciple mentioned in John 20:2 because of the difference in the verbs descriptive of them: *agapao* used of Lazarus; *phileo*, of the unnamed disciple. Sanders then advanced the "admittedly highly speculative" idea that the disciple whom Jesus loved (*egapa*) was Lazarus, and that the other disciple, whom Jesus loved (*ephilei*) was John Mark, the son of Mary, who later settled in Ephesus, and was known as "The Elder." He defended his position on the ground that there could have been two Marks in Jerusalem at the same time.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiac III*, 39. Translation of B. J. Kidd in J. Stevenson, ed., *A New Eusebius*, p. 50.

<sup>2</sup> J. N. Sanders, *The Fourth Gospel in the Early Church*, pp. 43-46.

<sup>3</sup> Sanders, "Those Whom Jesus Loved," *New Testament Studies*, I, 29-41.

<sup>4</sup> Sanders, "Who Was the Disciple Whom Jesus Loved?" *Studies in the Fourth Gospel*, F. L. Cross, pp. 72-82.

The theory that Lazarus wrote the Gospel had been proposed in 1949 by Floyd Filson. He observed that the first readers of the Gospel would not have any external evidence to identify the author, and that they would necessarily be dependent on the content for clues. Since the narrative plainly declares that Jesus loved Lazarus (11:5), the subsequent references to "the disciple whom Jesus loved" must refer back to him. His residence at Bethany, only two miles from Jerusalem, would explain his familiarity with the city and the fact that the action of the Gospel centers there. Because he had been raised from the dead he would have a peculiar interest in the topic of eternal life, which is dominant in this book, and he would logically deduce from the empty tomb that Jesus had risen.<sup>5</sup>

Even more recently Pierson Parker, in two articles published in the *Journal of Biblical Literature*, denied that John the son of Zebedee could have written the Gospel, and proffered the astonishing hypothesis, apparently independently of Sanders, that its author was John Mark, and that the son of Zebedee wrote the Second Gospel.<sup>6</sup> Other critics have suggested that the writer was an unknown mystic of the second century, or John the priest mentioned in Acts 4:6, or possibly some assistant of the apostle.

Despite the multiplication of complex hypotheses, there has been an increasing tendency to return to the traditional view. H. P. V. Nunn, after a vigorous defense of the traditional authorship in his work, *The Son of Zebedee and the Fourth Gospel*, has pursued the same argument in later articles.<sup>7</sup> Several contemporary American scholars like E. F. Harrison<sup>8</sup>, William Hendriksen<sup>9</sup>, and A. J. MacLeod<sup>10</sup> also

<sup>5</sup> Floyd V. Filson, "Who Was the Beloved Disciple?" *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 68:83-88, 1949.

<sup>6</sup> Pierson Parker, "John and John Mark," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 79:97-100, 1960; "John Son of Zebedee and the Fourth Gospel."

<sup>7</sup> H. P. V. Nunn, *The Son of Zebedee and the Fourth Gospel*; "The Bearing of the 21st Chapter of the Fourth Gospel on Its Authorship," *Church Quarterly Review*, 115 :79-95, 1932; "Considerations on Some Recent Criticism of the Fourth Gospel," *Evangelical Quarterly*, 15:169-78, 1943; "The Fourth Gospel in the Early Church, *ibid.*, 16:173-91, 1944.

<sup>8</sup> E. F. Harrison, "The Gospel of John," *Wycliffe Bible Commentary* pp. 1071-72.

<sup>9</sup> William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: John*, pp. 3-31.

<sup>10</sup> A. J. MacLeod, "The Gospel According to John," *The New Bible Commentary*, p. 865.

maintain this position.

The purpose of this lecture, however, is not to reopen a controversy nor to argue a case. The writer is personally convinced that the author of the Gospel was John, the son of Zebedee, aided perhaps by a scribe. The main objective is not to debate the identity of the author, but to show how his personality is projected into his writing, and to estimate the effect produced by that projection.

The evidence may be classified under specific allusions and indirect effect. Specific allusions comprise the references to the "other disciple" or the "beloved disciple" who is finally identified with the writer (21:24). The indirect reflections include the use of the first person plural verb, which occurs at least once (1:14), the implications of personal knowledge, disclosed by the small details which only an eyewitness would notice, the personal and doctrinal interests that reveal unconsciously the writer's predilections, the explanations and footnotes inserted for the benefit of the reader, and the vocabulary which is peculiar to the author's framework of thought. From these bits of information one may reconstruct a picture of the personality through which this Gospel was given to men.

The specific allusions to the author are stated in the third person, and are confined to the last section of the Gospel which deals with the Passion of Christ. The first of these occurs in the account of the last supper: "There was at the table reclining in Jesus' bosom one of his disciples, whom Jesus loved (Gr. *on egapa ho Jesus*). Simon Peter therefore beckoneth to him, and saith unto him, Tell us who it is of whom he speaketh. He leaning back, as he was, on Jesus' breast saith unto him, Lord, who is it?" (13:23-25). The unnamed disciple unmistakably belonged to the inner circle of Jesus' followers, and was even closer to Him than Simon Peter, the acknowledged leader of the group. Assuredly he was acquainted with the other eleven, and knew well their mental and spiritual traits. Furthermore, when Jesus answered the request which he relayed from Peter, he must have realized instantly from the following action that Judas was the prospective traitor. There is, however, no intimation that he in turn told Peter. In the tension and confusion of

the moment when Jesus gave His command, "What thou doest, do quickly," Judas withdrew before further action could be taken, and perhaps Peter never learned even by the sign who the traitor was. Jesus' answer may have been spoken only for the ears of His questioner, and not for the whole company. If so, the "beloved disciple" would have been the only one who left the feast with a sure knowledge of the traitor's identity. Perhaps he thought it would be unwise to divulge this information to the remaining ten disciples, lest he should precipitate a disturbance among them when Jesus was about to begin an important discourse.

A second reference to an unnamed disciple appears in the story of the trial of Jesus before the high priest. "And Simon Peter followed Jesus, and so did another disciple. Now that disciple was known unto the high priest, and entered in with Jesus into the court of the high priest; but Peter was standing at the door without. So the other disciple who was known unto the high priest, went out and spake unto her that kept the door, and brought in Peter" (18:15-16).

It is conceivable that "the disciple whom Jesus loved" and this "other disciple" might be two separate individuals, but that conclusion seems unlikely. Why should the writer inject two unknowns into his story? Both at the last supper and at the high priest's court the unnamed disciple was a close companion of Peter, and in the second instance he was interested enough in Peter to intercede with the portress that he might be admitted. The constant association of these two disciples confirms the conviction that on all occasions the same person is involved.

The status of this person was unusual. He was able to obtain free admittance to the court of the high priest, and was sufficiently influential to obtain entrance for Peter also. Evidently he had access to the upper echelon of Judaism, possibly through acquaintance with Joseph of Arimathea or Nicodemus, whom he seems to have known personally.

A few hours later he was standing at the cross in company with the women who had remained to witness the final scene of the tragedy. "But there were standing by the cross his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus therefore saw his mother, and

the disciple standing by whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, Woman, behold thy son! Then saith he to the disciple, Behold thy mother! And from that hour the disciple took her unto his own home" (19:25-27). A comparison of the lists of these women given by Matthew (27:55) and Mark (15:40-41) indicates that the sister of Jesus' mother was Salome, wife of Zebedee, and the mother of his sons. If this equation is correct, the presence of John the son of Zebedee would be naturally explained, for he was related to Jesus' family. If he were the sole male relative present, he would be the logical person to assume the care of Mary, whose distress at that time would be overpowering. He would also presumably be acquainted with Jesus' background and associates, so that his understanding of Jesus' person and work would be more acute than that of the other disciples.

The account of the crucifixion stresses the reaction of this "witness" to the blood and water that flowed from Jesus' pierced side (John 19:34-35). According to a note in the postscript, the beloved disciple is "the disciple that beareth witness of these things, and wrote these things" (21:24). If the phrase "bear witness" is taken in a technical sense, the various allusions to the unnamed disciple and the beloved disciple must refer to the same person. If the question be raised how this disciple could take Mary to his own home (19:27) and also witness the piercing of Jesus' side, it is not impossible that he could have escorted Jesus' mother back to a dwelling in the city, and then have returned to the scene of Calvary in ample time to see His death.

The record of the resurrection couples him again with Simon Peter. They must have been staying together in the same place, since Mary Magdalene appealed to them in her haste when she found the tomb empty. Both he and Peter ran to investigate the sepulcher, and the "other disciple . . . saw and believed" (20:8). This belief was the motivation for his record, for it compelled him to interpret the person whose life concluded so tragically and yet so victoriously. His interpretation, according to his own words, was intended to lead his readers into the same faith.

This mysterious person participated in the miraculous draught of fishes which Jesus gave to the disciples on the

Lake of Galilee, appearing once again as the special companion of Simon Peter, both as his advisor (21:7) and as the object of his curiosity (21:20).

One wonders why the foregoing allusions to the author should be grouped in the record of the last week of Jesus' life. If he accompanied Jesus through the ministry which his book describes, why should there not be more frequent references to his presence? If he did not belong to the apostolic band, as Mark and Luke did not, why should he not remain as anonymous as they? Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that he did not come to the kind of faith that this Gospel portrays until the events of the Passion compelled him to rethink the whole career of Jesus in terms of its conclusion. He was recording not solely the substance of early preaching, as the Synoptics did, but rather the career of Jesus as his own experience interpreted it for him and for his followers. It may be granted that John's Gospel is historical and that its record is reliable. It is also true that it views Jesus through the long telescope of an extended spiritual experience, beginning with His emergence as a preacher after the baptism by John, and continuing, until the moment when the Gospel was peened. The author thinks of himself as one whom Jesus loved, not because he was a special favorite above the others, but because he was the recipient of divine grace through Christ. His sentiment is akin to that of Paul, who said, "And last of all, as to the child untimely born, he appeared to me also" (1 Cor. 15:8).

This consciousness of the reality of divine love is not only implied in the use of the phrase, "the disciple whom Jesus loved," but is also stated directly in the one passage where the first personal pronoun epitomizes Christian experience. "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us (and we beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father), full of grace and truth. . . . For of his fulness we all received, and grace for grace" (John 1:14, 16). The "we" may be taken as general or editorial, but it seems to indicate a deep sense of personal participation. In declaring the effect of the revelation of God in Christ the author cannot suppress his own feelings, but is constrained to include himself in the witness to the manifestation of God's glory and in the ac-

knowledge of grace. It is quite likely that the phrase, "we beheld his glory" (1:14), is a recollection of the transfiguration, which is narrated in detail by the Synoptics (Matt. 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36). If so, it indicates that the entire Gospel is written in the afterglow of the author's total earthly experience of Jesus, and that the memories of the days in Judea, and Galilee were blended with his inward understanding that came after the resurrection (John 2:22; 20:9).

Many other features of this Gospel reveal the touch of its author. He observes that the first disciples interviewed Jesus "about the tenth hour" (1:39); that there were six waterpots of stone at the wedding feast of Cana (2:6); that the woman at the well "left her waterpot, and went away into the city" (4:28); that at the feeding of the five thousand "there was much grass in the place" (6:10); and he records numerous small details of time and place that would be important only to an eyewitness. These incidental items have no theological significance, but they confirm the feeling that the content of this Gospel is original and vital. The author is recalling the impressions that he received at the time when the events occurred, and is making them a part of the picture which he paints.

The author was keenly interested in personality and in its spiritual development. Eight of the apostles, Andrew, Peter, Philip, Nathanael, Thomas, Judas Lebbaeus, and Judas Iscariot, are definitely named, and "the sons of Zebedee" are mentioned in the last scene at the Lake of Galilee. Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, Lazarus of Bethany, and Malchus, the servant of the high priest seem to have been personal acquaintances; others, like the nobleman of Cana, the woman of Samaria, the paralytic at the pool of Bethesda, and the man born blind are not identified by name, but the characterizations of them, though given in a few words, are deft and original.

With few exceptions, each one becomes the example of some spiritual principle or of some reaction to the person of Christ that fits into, the major purpose and plot of the Gospel. Philip, for instance, illustrates the progress of faith in an essentially materialistic mind. After his initial contact with

Jesus he became a convinced follower, and suggested to the skeptical Nathanael that he should judge Jesus by pragmatic observation: "Come and see" (1:43-46). When Jesus tested him by asking where they might obtain bread for an enormous crowd, Philip quickly calculated what the necessary supply would cost, and despaired of being able to make the purchase (6 :5-7). At the conclusion of Jesus' ministry Philip's spiritual longing was phrased in terms of physical sight: "Lord, show us the Father, and it sufficeth us" (14:8). Though he was naturally a pragmatist, he felt a deep longing for spiritual truth, and sought it earnestly.

The description of these reactions of Philip shows that the author had a sense of relevance. In his selection of episodes for his record he was careful to present those developments of character that would illustrate his theme of belief. Furthermore, the types of persons described revealed the catholicity of his interests. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea were aristocrats; the disciples were fishermen and business men; the woman of Samaria was an outcast; the blind man was a beggar. He shared Jesus' concern for them, and saw them through His eyes.

The vocabulary of the author is distinctive, pointing to one who had distilled the truth of Christ into concepts embodied in a limited but pregnant vocabulary. "Father" (Jesus' favorite title for God), "know" (a translation of two words, *ginosko* and *oida*), "world," "love" (translation of two words, *agapao* and *phileo*), "witness," "life," "judge," "send" (translation of two words, *apostello* and *pempo*), "works," "light," "truth" or "true" (translation of two words, *alethes* and *alethinous*), "sign," "hour," "receive," and others contain the essence of the writer's theology. His concepts are both simple and profound. Not one of them is inherently abstruse; each is drawn from ordinary conversation and its meaning is commonly known. They have, however, been endowed with new connotations by their relation to the teaching concerning Christ. One may say that the Word has penetrated the words, and has made them glow with a new life. The spiritual illumination of this author has shaped his vocabulary so that it has acquired a depth exceeding the ordinary connotation of its terms.

To a certain extent each of the Gospels reflects the personality of its author, but in none of them is there a more distinctive individuality manifested than in John. Not only can the vocabulary be recognized in the reading of a verse or two, but the entire Gospel bears the stamp of a different mind and of a fuller maturity. The writer has created a fresh presentation of the person of Christ, illustrated by episodes not ordinarily used in the preaching tradition, and specially relevant to the establishment and growth of Christian faith. He has revealed the growth of his own belief, and in his later years has organized his thinking so that he can give a true evaluation of the person of Christ. His quotation of Jesus' words, "the Holy Spirit . . . shall teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said unto you" (14:26), describes his own experience and method, for both are the product of the Spirit's inspiration. No unaided human intellect ever put together the paradoxical combination of simplicity and profundity, of divine revelation and of human experience, that can be found in this Gospel. Although the writer does not name himself, the evidence of the book compels the conclusion that he was a disciple of Jesus from the beginning, an eyewitness of the events that he describes, and a leader in the church to which he bequeathed his testimony. Historical criticism has to this day presented no likelier candidate for this honor than John, the son of Zebedee.

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