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Author(s): Pierson Parker

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JOHN THE SON OF ZEBEDEE AND THE FOURTH GOSPEL

PIERSON PARKER

GENERAL THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

THE past decade has produced a spate of books in which it is held that John, the son of Zebedee, did after all write the Fourth Gospel. H. P. V. Nunn is almost angry in his defense of the traditional authorship.¹ A. H. N. Green-Armytage thinks that when we reject the traditional view it is less because of the evidence than because, with our modern outlook, we do not *want* the apostle to have written it.² H. A. Edwards thinks the "beloved" and the "other" disciple were different men, and that the former was son to Zebedee and author of the book.³ The magnificent *Bible de Jérusalem*, in its introduction to the Johannine literature, argues forcefully for the traditional position.⁴ B. P. W. Stather Hunt thinks the author was John the apostle, and that he wrote at Alexandria!⁵ A. J. B. Higgins is sure that the gospel is "in some way ultimately connected with John the apostle," though a follower of his may have done the actual writing.⁶ And J. A. T. Robinson, while not quite committing himself, seems to lean that way too; at least he cites with approval several who have ascribed the book to Zebedee's son.⁷

All this would be enough to make some NT professors, of a generation or two ago, feel that they had lived in vain. If there was one "assured result of biblical criticism" for such scholars of the 20's, 30's and 40's, it was that John, the son of Zebedee, had nothing at all to do with the writing of this gospel. The very phrase "Gospel of John" ceded place to "Fourth Gospel" in recognition of its nonapostolic origin.

Now it may be that our mentors in earlier decades undervalued this gospel's history. Or, perhaps, they related it too readily to pagan thought-forms and did not perceive its truly Palestinian slant. In the matter of authorship, however, I think their negative judgment was

¹ *The Authorship of the Fourth Gospel*.

² *John Who Saw*.

³ *The Disciple Who Wrote These Things*.

⁴ Paris: Cerf, 1956.

⁵ *Some Johannine Problems*. A similar idea was proposed by G. W. Broomfield, *John, Peter and the Fourth Gospel*.

⁶ *The Historicity of the Fourth Gospel*.

⁷ "The New Look on the Fourth Gospel," in *Studia Evangelica*, V. Reihe, Band 18 of *Texte und Untersuchungen* (1959), pp. 338-50; "The Destination and Purpose of St. John's Gospel," *NTSt*, 6 (1960), pp. 117-31; "The Destination and Purpose of the Johannine Epistles," *NTSt*, 7 (1960), pp. 56-64.

right. This gospel cannot possibly be the work of John the son of Zebedee, and cannot conceivably represent his point of view. Because of the plethora of literature on the other side, it may not be amiss to say, once again, why.

Against the son of Zebedee's authorship there have been four types of argument:

(a) That he died too soon to write anything — specifically, that he was martyred with his brother James (Acts 12 2). The evidence for his death at that time is, however, extremely slender. In fact it is ruled out by Paul's assertion (Gal 2 7–10) that John was an active missionary fourteen years, or seventeen years, after Paul's own conversion.

(b) That the Fourth Gospel was little used, outside Gnostic circles, until the time of Ireneus. It is, to be sure, passing strange that a gospel from one of the three chief apostles should be treated so gingerly as this one was, until 150 years after Jesus' death.

(c) That the fathers were by no means sure and unequivocal in ascribing this book to the son of Zebedee. While most of them thought it was by *somebody* named John, it was a very long time before any patristic writer declared, clearly and without reservation, that it was John the member of the Twelve and son of Zebedee.⁸

Strong as the last two points are, however, they are still debatable and perhaps they might be explained away. What cannot be explained away, it seems to me, is the picture of John the son of Zebedee which we find in the NT. The Synoptics and Acts and Paul paint a clear and consistent portrait of this man. His features do not match the fourth evangelist's at all.

1. *John the son of Zebedee was a Galilean.* In Galilee he heard and answered Jesus' call (Matt 4 21; Mark 1 19; Luke 5 10). He appears often in the stories of Jesus' Galilean ministry (Matt 10 2; 17 1; Mark 1 29; 3 17; 5 37; Luke 8 51). Then consider these passages:

Matt 27 55, 56. And many women were there beholding from afar, *which had followed Jesus from Galilee*, ministering unto him: among whom was Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joses and *the mother of the sons of Zebedee*

Mark 15 40, 41. And there were also women beholding from afar:

among whom were both Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the less and of Joses, and *Salome*;

who, when he was in Galilee, followed him, and ministered unto him.

⁸ The patristic evidence has been marshalled many times. An excellent treatment is in J. N. Sanders, *The Fourth Gospel in the Early Church*.

(See also Mark 16 1.) Evidently the mother of the sons of Zebedee was named Salome; and it is made clear that, even at the end of Jesus' ministry, she and her sons maintained their Galilean home.

Yet the Fourth Gospel shows little interest in Galilee. It allows Jesus but three brief trips thither during his entire ministry (John 2 1-12; 4 1-3, 43-54; 6 1-7 9) and puts all the rest of his work in Jerusalem and Judea. It never mentions Salome or the Galilean residence. It even makes a mistake about distances in Galilee (4 52) of which Zebedee's and Salome's son could hardly have been guilty.

2. *John the son of Zebedee was a fisherman* (Matt 4 21; Mark 1 19; Luke 5 10). A book by him might be expected to show considerable interest in fishing! Now our First Gospel does give seven incidents and sayings that involve fishing (Matt 4 18 ff., 21 ff.; 7 9 ff.; 13 47 ff.; 14 14 ff.; 15 32 ff.; 17 24 ff.). The Second has four (Mark 1 16 ff., 19 ff.; 6 34 ff.; 8 1 ff.). The Third has four (Luke 5 1 ff., 4 ff.; 11 11 ff.; 24 36 ff.). But the Fourth Gospel has only three (John 6 4 ff.; 21 1 ff., 9 ff.) and two of these are in the appendix.⁹

3. *John the son of Zebedee had a brother James* (Matt 4 21; 10 2; 17 1; Mark 1 19; 3 17; 5 37; 10 35; Luke 5 10; Acts 12 2). According to the first three gospels, Peter, James, and John formed a kind of triumvirate among the Twelve, and James and John worked together constantly. Yet in the Fourth Gospel this triumvirate is never hinted at, and James is never named at all. The only possible allusion to him is in the phrase "sons of Zebedee" which occurs just once, and that in the appendix (John 21 2).

4. *Jesus called the brothers James and John "sons of thunder"* (Mark 3 17). The phrase probably represents an Aramaic expression meaning "sons of wrath," i. e., wrathful and emotional men. Now the Fourth Gospel does stress the sinfulness of rejecting Christ, and once or twice it foretells suffering that is to befall his disciples (e. g., at 16 2; 21 18 f.). Yet of all the gospels, this one is the most tranquil, the most mystical, and the least disturbed at the agonies and vicissitudes that beset the early church.

5. *John the son of Zebedee is described, along with Peter, as "illiterate and ignorant"* (Acts 4 13). Paul seems to endorse this description for, though he calls these men "pillars of the church," he adds that "it is nothing to me what they once were" (Gal 2 6, 9), implying that they had a lowly origin.

Now "illiterate and ignorant" may mean either (a) lacking in general learning and literary ability, or (b) unlearned in the Mosaic law and its interpretation. The latter would reflect the more technical usage

⁹ Probably 6 4 ff. was also added later. See my article, "Two Editions of John," *JBL*, 75 (1956), pp. 303-14.

among Jews, but we cannot be sure that the author of Acts knew that. On neither interpretation, however, does the description fit the fourth evangelist.

(a) There have been many analyses of the Greek of the Fourth Gospel.¹⁰ Probably the opinion of Dionysius of Alexandria, who wrote early in the third century, is as sound as that of any modern student of the language. The gospel and first epistle, Dionysius said,¹¹

were written, not only without error as regards the Greek language, but also most artistically in their expressions, in their reasonings, and in their arrangements of explanations. They are far indeed from betraying any barbarism or solecism, or any vulgarism whatever. For the writer had, as it seems, both the requisites of discourse — namely, the gift of knowledge and the gift of expression.

Adolf Deissmann compared the parataxis in the Fourth Gospel with that to be found in uneducated Greek of the papyri.¹² It may be, as Deissmann concluded, that the evangelist had not had a formal Greek education. It is evident, however, that he was not an uncultivated writer. While his language is not classical, and lacks some subtleties of contemporary literature, still it is good Greek. The author avoids bizarre expressions, and is never at a loss for a word. Moreover, to the extent that he “made up” discourses to fit the occasion, he was in accord with the standards of the best Greek historians. Thucydides, for example, said that he put on the lips of each speaker the sentiments suitable to the occasions, as he believed they would be likely to express them — though he sought to give the general purport of what was actually said.¹³

Again, the fourth evangelist had a superb grasp of the theological significance of the gospel tradition. As Loisy pointed out long ago, the author was instructed in Judaism and well-versed in its hellenistic expression. He knew the mystery religions so well that, Loisy could maintain, he interpreted Christianity as itself a salvation mystery.¹⁴ Be that as it may, the evangelist's knowledge is much too wide to permit him to be called “illiterate and ignorant.”

(b) If, on the other hand, the phrase means “ignorant of the law of Moses,” this misses the Johannine author still more widely. Where, for example, the Second Gospel never once mentions “the law,” the Fourth refers constantly to it, either explicitly or by allusion to incidents and passages in it.¹⁵ The saying, “The Scripture cannot be broken,” puts our

¹⁰ Cf. C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, pp. 5 ff.

¹¹ Quoted by Eusebius, *H. E.* vii, 24 f.; tr. by G. Milligan, *The New Testament Documents*, pp. 262 ff.

¹² *Light From the Ancient East*, pp. 127 ff. Cf. C. K. Barrett, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

¹³ *De Bello P.* i, 22.

¹⁴ A. Loisy, *L'évangile selon Saint Jean*. Cf. W. F. Howard, *The Fourth Gospel in Recent Criticism and Interpretation*⁴, p. 87.

¹⁵ See John 1 17, 45, 51; 3 14; 4 5, 6, 12; 5 45–47; 6 31, 32, 49, 58; 7 19, 22, 23, 49; 8 13, 17, 39, 52, 53, 58; 9 16 ff., 28 f., 31–33; 12 34; 18 31; 19 7.

author, and Jesus himself, in line with the strictest Jewish conception of verbal inspiration. The author knew the law on the right of an accused person to speak before the judges (7 51); that the testimony of at least two witnesses was required for the establishment of any fact (8 17); that circumcision on the eighth day took precedence of the Sabbath laws (7 22 f.); that the carrying of a mattress on the Sabbath was illegal (5 10). He was familiar with first-century Jewish thought and with rabbinic methods of argument: the Sabbath controversies and Pharisaic emphasis on the Sabbath (5 10; 9 16; 7 23); that human beings cannot ascend to heaven (3 13); that the Evil One is "the prince of this world" (12 31; 14 30; 16 11); the rabbinic belief that minute searching of the Scriptures for involved arguments is meritorious (5 39); rabbinic rules of evidence (5 31; 8 13) and the fact that a claim to originality would, in rabbinic eyes, damage the case of any one who made it (7 16). The author's own exegesis is thoroughly rabbinic when he refers to "angels ascending and descending" (1 51), and when he pictures Abraham as going into all of history and seeing in advance the day of the Messiah (8 56). Even the hymn to the Logos, which opens the gospel, is couched in terms strongly reminiscent of what the rabbis said about the Torah:¹⁶

Who was at the beginning,
 who was near to God,
 who was divine;
 by whom all was done
 and in whom was life.

Yet the Talmud was not written down until many decades after this gospel. Hence the evangelist's knowledge must have come from direct and informed contact with rabbinic teachers themselves.

Fourteen times our author refers to the Torah. Over and over he exhibits knowledge of contemporary culture, both Palestinian and hellenistic. He writes simple but good Greek. So, no matter how we take the phrase, he was *not* "unlearned and ignorant" as the writer of Acts says that John the son of Zebedee was.

6. *John the son of Zebedee was bold* (Acts 4 13) and, from the other descriptions of him, clearly *a man of action*. A gospel from his pen ought, surely, to stress the deeds of Jesus, to devote comparatively less space to teachings, and still less to contemplation. Yet the Fourth Gospel is supremely the contemplative gospel. It records *fewer* separate incidents and *more* discourses of our Lord than does any of the other three.

7. *John the son of Zebedee was interested in demon exorcism*. He seems to have been on hand for every such healing that the Synoptics record (Matt 9 32; 12 22; Mark 1 23, 32; 5 1; 7 24; 9 17; Luke 11 14). He was

¹⁶ Strack-Billerbeck, *Kommentar*, II, pp. 353 ff. Cf. L. de Grandmaison, *Jesus Christ, His Person, Message and Credentials*, I, p. 165.

among those whom Jesus commissioned to cast out demons (Mark 3 15) and who were successful (Mark 6 13). On one occasion, when some of the disciples were not successful (Mark 9 17 f.), John was not among their number. He was concerned that a person outside Jesus' band should not cast out demons in Jesus' name; and he, alone of the Twelve, took the matter up with his Master (Mark 9 38). Thus the Apostle John was, if anything, more intensely concerned about demon exorcism than the others were. Yet the Fourth Gospel never mentions the subject.

8. *John the son of Zebedee was, apparently, especially interested in apocalyptic.* With his Galilean background, this was natural. He was one of two who asked about thrones in the Messiah's kingdom (Mark 10 35 ff.), and one of three who asked about the signs that should presage the end (Mark 13 3). The latter question elicited from Jesus the final apocalyptic discourse (Matt. 24, 25; Mark 13; Luke 21 10 ff.). Not only does the Fourth Gospel omit this discourse; it has, in fact, little apocalyptic at all.

9. *Both sons of Zebedee sought to undercut the other disciples* by getting Jesus to award them the two chief thrones alongside his in the coming kingdom (Mark 10 35 ff.). This made the other disciples "very angry" (Mark 10 41), and it is likely that considerable tension ensued. Indeed there had been other quarrels over precedence (Mark 9 33-37), and Luke says that these continued right into the Last Supper (Luke 22 24). Yet the fourth evangelist seems totally unaware of rivalry among the disciples; and, in sharp contrast with the behavior of Zebedee's sons, it treats all of the Twelve (save Judas Iscariot) with uniform kindness and respect.

10. *John the son of Zebedee was vengeful and angry toward the Samaritans* because they had rejected his Lord, and he wished to call down fire from heaven upon them (Luke 9 54). True, he later went with Peter to Samaria to confirm Philip's converts (Acts 8 14-25), but Acts says the other apostles "sent" him there. On that visit, where Peter is said to have been very active and outspoken, not one word or deed of John's is reported. In the Fourth Gospel, in contrast, the Samaritans receive the disciples and sell them food. Jesus has a highly successful ministry in Samaria. Not only do the people welcome him. They are the first of his hearers ever to call him Savior of the world (John 4 39-42).

11. *When the apostles Peter and John were missionaries together, Peter was always the spokesman* (Acts 1 13-15 ff.; 3 1-7; 8 14-24). Now in the Fourth Gospel, Peter nearly always appears in the presence of "the other disciple" or "the disciple whom Jesus loved,"¹⁷ and here it is always Peter's companion, not Peter himself, who takes the initiative. The other

¹⁷ The two phrases almost certainly describe the same man. Cf. Pierson Parker, "John and John Mark," *JBL*, 79 (1960), p. 101, n. 13.

man is converted before Peter (John 1 35-42). He relays Peter's question to Jesus (13 23-26). He gains Peter's admittance to the high priest's court (18 15 f.). He precedes Peter to the tomb, and is the first to "believe" (20 4, 5, 8). He recognizes the risen Lord on the seashore, and tells Peter who it is (21 7). Thus, whereas in Acts the apostle John always bows to Peter's leadership, in the Fourth Gospel it is Peter who bows to the leadership of this other friend and interpreter.

12. *When, in the NT, two or more of the apostles are named, John the son of Zedebee is never in first place.* In lists of the Twelve he is second (Acts 1 13) or third (Mark 3 17) or fourth (Matt 10 2; Luke 6 14). In the "triumvirate" with Peter and James, John comes second (Luke 8 51; 9 28) or, far more often, last (Matt 17 1; Mark 1 29; 5 37; 9 2; 13 3; 14 33; cf. Gal 2 9). That Luke occasionally prefers the order Peter-John-James, instead of Peter-James-John, may be because Luke records the early cutting off of James' leadership by death (Acts 12 2). In any case, when John is with James alone, James takes the precedence (Matt 4 21; Mark 1 19; 10 35, 41; Luke 5 10; 9 54). When, similarly, he is with Peter alone, Peter takes the precedence (Luke 22 8; Acts 3 1, 3, 4; 4 13, 19; 8 14). For John's subordinate position there may be corroboration in Acts 15 4-29. If this describes the same meeting as Gal 2 1-10, then the apostle John was on hand at the Council of Jerusalem. Yet Acts gives no sign that he took part in the deliberations, and leadership was entirely in the hands of Peter, and of James "the brother of the Lord."

All this is utterly unlike him whom the Fourth Gospel designates "the disciple who wrote these things." The latter is always ahead of Peter, opens the way for him, explains to him. This author is *the* disciple for whom Jesus especially cared. Moreover, from the way in which Peter beckons to him at the Last Supper (John 13 24, 25) it is plain that he, and not any of the others, has been given the place of honor at Jesus' right hand.

Alongside the descriptions of John the son of Zebedee, just outlined, the NT contains other evidence which makes it difficult to connect the Fourth Gospel with that apostle.

13. John the son of Zebedee is never named in this gospel. Even the collective "sons of Zebedee" appears but once, and that in the appendix.

14. So far as the fourth evangelist shows special knowledge of Palestinian geography, this is confined almost exclusively to Samaria or the *south*: Bethany,¹⁸ Aenon near Salim, Bethzatha, Ephraim, Gabbatha. On the other hand "Tiberias," the name he prefers for the Sea of Galilee, was not used by inhabitants of that area. These facts cannot

¹⁸ On the meaning of "Bethany beyond Jordan" cf. my article in *JBL*, 74 (1955), pp. 257-61.

easily be squared with authorship either by the son of Zebedee or by any one closely associated with him.

15. While the Fourth Gospel mentions Peter more often than does any other gospel, it does so mostly at the beginning and end of Jesus' ministry. It shows little interest in, or knowledge of, Peter's doings in Galilee. Yet according to the other gospels, and Acts 10 37 f., Peter was very active in Galilee, and in that work was closely associated with Zebedee's sons.

16. John 18 15 f. says that the other disciple was "known to the high priest," and that he was able to command obedience from a maid of the high priest's court. It simply is not believable that the son of Zebedee, an uneducated fisherman from the north, should have had these privileges. Still more decisively, at Acts 4 5-23 the high priest and all his court treat the apostle John as a total stranger.

17. Luke 24 12 recounts Peter's visit to the empty tomb, but mentions no other disciple accompanying him. The Lukan verse may be unauthentic, for it is absent from a few MSS.¹⁹ Still, *somebody* wrote it, if only in reminiscence of John 20 2 ff. The failure to mention the other disciple is most readily explained if the latter lacked apostolic eminence, that is, if he was not one of the Twelve.

Finally, the Fourth Gospel records not one incident in which, according to the other gospels and Acts, John the son of Zebedee figured prominently. Yet these include some of the most deeply moving events in the entire gospel story.

18. *John the son of Zebedee witnessed Jesus' agony in Gethsemane* (Matt 26 37; Mark 14 33; Luke 22 39-41 also implies that John was there). The Gethsemane agony is not so much as hinted at in the Fourth Gospel.

19. *John the son of Zebedee went with Peter to prepare the Last Supper* (Luke 22 8). Their instructions were to locate a house in Jerusalem, evidently the home of one of Jesus' Jerusalem followers; to see that the room was in order; and to get the meal ready. The Fourth Gospel does not describe any such preparation, by any disciple at all.

20. *John the son of Zebedee watched Jesus raise Jairus' daughter from the dead* (Mark 5 37-42; Luke 8 51-55). This wonder ought to have enthralled the Fourth Evangelist. For one thing, he is interested in Jewish rulers. Far more importantly, Jesus is for him "the resurrection and the life" (John 11 25). To another such raising, and its consequences, he devotes more space than the Synoptists ever allow to any miracle (John 11 1-53; 12 1 f., 9-11, 17 f.). Of Jairus' daughter, however, he has nothing to say.

¹⁹ D *it*. It is found, however, in the vast majority of Alexandrian and Caesarean, as well as Byzantine, MSS.

21. Most significantly of all, *John the son of Zebedee was present at the Transfiguration* (Matt 17 1 ff.; Mark 9 2; Luke 9 28). This incident, depicting as it does the glory of the Christ, comes closer to the Johannine view of him than does almost any other event in the first three gospels. Surely such a sight would emblazon itself on John's memory, never to be forgotten. The Fourth Evangelist does not mention it.

Here, then, are the pictures of John the son of Zebedee, which the NT consistently gives, and of the fourth evangelist as it has emerged thus far: The apostle was an unlettered fisherman from the north country; the evangelist was a cultured citizen of Jerusalem. The apostle was a stranger to the Jerusalem authorities; the evangelist was a familiar visitor at the high priest's court. The apostle was constantly with Jesus during his Galilean ministry; the evangelist shows little knowledge of Galilee, and little interest in Jesus' work there. The apostle was relatively obscure among the Twelve; the evangelist claims to have been the favored disciple. The apostle was a silent follower of Peter; the evangelist was Peter's spokesman. The apostle was fascinated with demon exorcism; the evangelist paid no attention to it. The apostle was a strong apocalypticist; the evangelist was a contemplative, with little bent toward apocalyptic. The apostle was bold, vengeful, and excitable; the evangelist was tranquil, and hardly concerned with troubles that beset the church. The apostle was angry at the Samaritans for rejecting his Lord; the evangelist was cordial to the Samaritans for being the first to accept his Lord. The apostle witnessed the raising of a girl from death, the Transfiguration, and the agony in the garden; the evangelist shows no knowledge of these things.

Of course a man will grow and develop with the passage of time. Experience and widening contacts no doubt conferred upon this son of Zebedee an education and a culture that earlier he had lacked. Certainly the impact of the Christ would change and deepen his spirit, until he learned to love what once had hated. Grant these possibilities to the full, however, and they still will not connect this man with this gospel. For the NT presents many facets of this John's character, and of his experience. *Not one of them is reflected in the Fourth Gospel.* For John the son of Zebedee to have written this book, the personality which he brought before Jesus would have had to be not transformed, but blotted out.