Andrew of Bethsaida and the Johannine Circle

The Muratorian Tradition and the Gospel Text

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There is no book, either inside the New Testament or outside it, that is really like the Fourth Gospel.

C. H. Dodd, “The Background of the Fourth Gospel”

The following chapters represent an interpretation of the problem of Johannine origins in the light of a family of accounts that share or reflect the influence of certain narrative elements. I have called these the earliest tradition because, neglecting Irenaeus’ claim that John wrote the Gospel at Ephesus and Polycrates’ puzzling description of the author as a priest, teacher, and beloved disciple, these sources offer the earliest narrative account, an account which, although occurring in texts belonging to the second, and third, and fourth centuries, by context must belong to the late first or early second century. The principal witnesses are the Muratorian Canon, a document variously dated from the second to the fourth century, that is embedded in the Muratorian Fragment, a manuscript of the eighth century, which account is seconded by Papias of Hierapolis, by the so-called Anti-Marcionite Prologue to John, and by other authorities, among them Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Jerome, which, taken together argue the existence of a second-century (or earlier), written or unwritten, account of Johannine origins that did not influence Irenaeus.

Emil Schürer prophesied a century of scholarly interest when he wrote in 1889, “No other question of NT criticism is of such significance as the origin
of our Fourth Gospel…. So no other question agitates people as much as the Johannine question.”¹ And agitated the question was. In his book on the Fourth Gospel Ernst Haenchen titled a chapter “The Dismantling of Ancient Johannine Tradition by Modern Scholarship,” documenting there the century-long prescinding from the traditional theory of Johannine origins, its centerpiece the belief that John the son of Zebedee was author and eyewitness.² Erhardt Friedrich Vogel (1750–1823), armed with the presuppositions of Enlightenment rationalism, anticipated the conclusions of Ferdinand Christian Bauer (1792–1860) and the Tübingen school with doubts that the Gospel had any connection with the apostle John and a complementary certainty that the Fourth Gospel belonged to the second century.³ Rejection of the traditional theory by nineteenth-century critics presaged a wider abandonment of the conviction that the son of Zebedee was either witness or author. C. H. Dodd observed in 1965 that any such connection was “entirely gratuitous.”⁴

But despite perennial scholarly interest, represented by an (almost literally) immense bibliography of monographs and commentaries, no alternative to the traditional account has won broad acceptance. The theory, urged episodically, often by critics of authority, that the Gospel takes its title not from the son of Zebedee but from a later Ephesian teacher called John the Presbyter and associated with the First Epistle, has never failed of advocates and remains an important piece in the Johannine puzzle, but neither has it won consensus.⁵ At this distance in time, given the state of evidence that has been contemplated for at least eighteen-hundred years and reviewed critically for two hundred without producing a common history, it is unlikely that there will soon be a widely accepted account of the origin of what is often considered the most winning, spiritually dense, and theologically important book of the New Testament.

Of course every important consideration touching the origin of the Gospel could not be canvassed in even a very long book, certainly not in this study, so I have accepted certain presuppositions, acknowledging that while each could be challenged, these assumptions, lying within the circle of scholarly plausibility, are defensible. The Gospel rests on the witness of a disciple, one of the Twelve who was not John the son of Zebedee, the disciple whom Jesus loved, whose existence the author attests but whom he does not name, and who may be identified with either the John for whom the Gospel is named, a later editor (perhaps John the Presbyter), or an unnamed
disciple. The common conviction of piety, assumed by scholars following the
evidence offered by Irenaeus of Lyons in the 180s, accepted by the church
into the twentieth century and represented by the figure on a thousand rood
beams, that John the son of Zebedee was the witness who stood by the cross
(John 19:35), has not, despite the weight of tradition, proved convincing to
great critics, Raymond Brown, C. H. Dodd, and Rudolf Schnackenb
g among them, or to contemporary scholarship generally. But while consensus
has built around the proposition that the son of Zebedee was not the witness
of 19:35, the Beloved Disciple on whose testimony the Gospel’s claim to
historicity depends, the ‘eyewitness’ of John 1:14 and 1 John 1:1–3, or the
editor who composed the text, criticism has been slow to present a convinc-
ing claimant to the title “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” We do, however,
have the benefit of a century of scholarly research. In the majority view the
Beloved Disciple was not an ideal construct, but the historical witness of
19:35, who in some sense ‘wrote’ the Gospel as 21:24 maintains. As such he
was one of the Johannine disciples and therefore probably included in the
Twelve, a category to which the five disciples important in the Gospel
narrative belong even though “the Twelve” is a category that lies at the edge

Every text has a context, apart from which it will be as enigmatic as
Etruscan inscriptions or the intersecting lines of Linear A, evidence of we-
know-not-what. The historical context that shaped the testimony of the
witness on whom the Gospel relies is the last decades of Second Temple
Judaism, the age of the Herodians, the sons and grandsons of Herod the
Great, having as its literary and religious heritage not only the Old Testament
but the rich tradition of inter-testamental apocalyptic, prophetic movements
like John the Baptist’s, and the religious fervor of the Essenes, Qumran, and
the Mandeans, all sects seeking purity and redemption from the entangling
loyalties of the flesh. It is, however, addressed to, or at least its assumed
readership includes, a wider Gentile circle made up of those who must be
told that the Passover is a feast of the Jews and for whom such common
terms as rabbi must be translated. Complicating an already complicated
context is the fact that the Gospel was written in the shadows of the rich
world of theosophical speculation attested by Nag Hammadi that over time
would become a threat to both Judaism and Christianity, emerging as the
Gnosticism of Valentinus and the other ‘spirituals’ and the philosophical
mysticism of the Hermetic literature.
And all this took place against a political background in which the fading light of Maccabean expectations flickered still despite three centuries of Hellenizing rule by the Seleucids and the present fact of Roman authority, at first welcomed by the Jews but gradually resented as the Romans allowed the displacing of the Hasmonaean priesthood, itself reminiscent of the last age of Jewish near-independence, in favor of the Herodians. Finally, official unwisdom in demanding seventeen talents of silver from the sacred temple treasury was answered by Jewish fecklessness in refusing to accept the sacrifices of Gentiles, including the traditional offerings made on behalf of Augustus and the Roman people. This stubbornness, representing the triumph of the Zealots over the Pharisees, was underwritten by expectations that God would intervene to establish his kingdom through his Messiah.

God’s perfecting intervention on behalf of his people, universal except among the Sadducees, was anticipated with differing emphases: by Jesus according to the Gospel of Matthew (24) as the coming of the Day and the dividing of the times; by the Johannine Gospel’s author, who remembered Jesus’ promise to return to take his disciples to himself (14:2); by Paul (1 Thess 4:13–18) and Lazarus’s sister (John 11:24), who expected Jesus to return bringing with him those who slept; by the woman at the well, who expected the Messiah to tell her everything (John 4:25); by the witnesses to the ascension of Acts 1:7, who looked forward, like Judas and Simon the Zealot, to the political restoration of Israel; by the author of 1 John (3:2) who anticipated union with Christ; and by the prophet in the cosmic vision of the Apocalypse 21 and 22 (cf. 2 Pet 3:1–12), in which the seer looked forward to the reign of the Lamb of God in a renewed creation.

When the author of the Gospel begins his narrative by quoting the words of John the Baptist, “Behold the Lamb of God.... I have seen and testified that he is the Son of God,” he assumed this overarching fact, that the Messiah would appear, that time would turn a corner, that the Day prophesied by Isaiah and Jeremiah was at hand, which would make first-century Palestine the hinge of history. This expectation when ‘spiritualized’ would inspire the Gnostics, when historicized would fuel the Jewish rebellion in 69, and when developed as the once-and-future reign of Christ the King, anticipated at Pentecost, to be fulfilled when Jesus returns in glory, would become the foundation of the religion of Paul, Ignatius, and Irenaeus.

This was the crucible of hope in which the intentions of both the Johannine witness and those who wrote in his name were formed, and for which
intentions the most significant evidence is the text of his Gospel, read of course in the context established by what can be known of the readers and their historical situation. In any event the sum of the sources never ‘explains’ the document exhaustively and undue emphasis upon influences may detract from the meaning of the text.

It should be noted en passant that the text of the Gospel is attested early and is stable; theories of displacement remain speculative and no manuscript lacking chapter 21 exists. Robinson quotes Barrett:

> I take it that if the Gospel makes sense as it stands it can generally be assumed that this was the sense it was intended to make. That it may seem to me to make better sense when rearranged I do not regard as adequate reason for abandoning an order which undoubtedly runs back into the second century—the order, indeed, in which the book was published.\(^{11}\)

The Gospel text was not enigmatic to its first readers. When the author of John chose not to attempt a sacred biography along the lines of Matthew and Luke; when, writing from a post-Pentecostal point of view, he designed the narrative of Jesus’ pre-passion ministry as a detailed account of the call of the disciples plus a series of ‘signs’ interspersed and interpreted by discourses, made the Passion Narrative and the accompanying discourses of Jesus roughly half the book; when he told but did not tell the reader the identity of the witness who is the historical anchor of his account, he was doing so self-consciously and in a way that makes the Gospel a literary whole that its first readers would have found as intelligible as they would have found it spiritually nourishing, however puzzling certain aspects may seem to those who were not present at (or near) creation.

That there are aporiai, difficult transitions that sometimes seem superficial and contrived, calculated to keep the story moving, is undeniable.\(^{12}\) Yet the text can be read to show that the Gospel was (arguably) written by one reflective and knowledgeable, who created a work marked by a central intelligence possessed of an overarching purpose and able to incorporate remembered events and words in a more or less self-consistent, if not always seamless, composition.\(^{13}\) Perhaps when the author tells us in the concluding verse (21:25) that writing down everything \(καθ’ ἕν,\) one by one, sequentially, would be impossible, he is describing his own method and claiming a limited success in presenting with impressive narrative unity just those events that his evangelical purpose requires. While efforts to name the Beloved Disciple
have not been notably convincing, scholarly consideration of the place of the Gospel and Epistles in the literature of the first-century Church has made new proposals credible. The conviction of B. W. Bacon and others that the Gospel is late, stamped with Hellenizing, philosophic language and ideas, has largely been abandoned as it has become clear that the literary culture of Palestine itself was Hellenized.  

“Palestinian Judaism (and Christianity) was more Hellenistic and more syncretistic than had earlier been supposed.” And with the weakening of the imaginal link to Asia there has been a notable shift in Johannine geography. Recent archaeology suggests that the author of the Gospel was well acquainted with Jerusalem, which supports a Palestinian milieu and an early rather than a later date. While it is difficult to imagine evidence that would shake decisively the tradition that the Gospel was written in Ephesus, the presence of Aramaisms and certain considerations of influence have made it difficult to dismiss the possibility that at some level John reflects a Syrian background.

The once near-commonplace that the writer of the Fourth Gospel relied upon one or more of the Synoptics, while still ably defended, is no longer presupposed. The case will never be closed, but the conviction that John is to be seen as a work to be read on its own terms, reflecting a distinctive Johannine tradition, has won a secure place in scholarly consideration. This revisionist opinion was proposed in 1938 by Percival Gardner-Smith, who in his brief study of the Gospel of John and the Synoptics asked, “Is it easier to account for the similarities between John and the Synoptists without a theory of literary dependence, or to explain the discrepancies if such a theory has been accepted?” It is not difficult to know what literary dependence among the Gospels looks like, for the so-called Synoptic Problem is fueled by the ever-puzzling but obvious literary interdependence, often verbal, precise, and extensive, among Matthew, Mark, and Luke. For the most part Johannine descriptions of events and recollections of Jesus’ words lack that character, and for a reason Gardner-Smith proposed. In its formation the tradition relied upon memory, variously transcribed; what we have in the Gospels are events common to the story of Jesus remembered and described differently, displaying that similarity-within-differences that would be expected of such a process. “The presumption is surely justified that an underlying event has at some point controlled the reports rather than simply the reports each other.”

As it happened, the literary independence of John was an idea bred up on the Cam. Gardner-Smith had been dean of Jesus College; C. H. Dodd would
be professor of divinity in the university after 1935, and J. A. T. Robinson dean of Trinity from 1975 until his death in 1983. Robinson, who considered Dodd his mentor, began his *Priority of John* with the recollection of the opening sentence of Dodd’s 1957 lecture before the Cambridge Theological Society: “The presumption of literary dependence of John on the Synoptists no longer holds.”20 Dodd went on to publish in 1965 his *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel*, in which he concluded that the Gospel represented a tradition independent of the Synoptics. In 1985 Robinson’s *Priority of John*, in which Robinson argued the independence, priority, and early date of the Fourth Gospel, was published posthumously. In New Testament studies no majority opinion or apparent consensus enjoys permanent favor, and since 1985, as D. M. Smith points out, the Gardner-Smith consensus has been “significantly eroded.”21 But that ‘consensus’ as proposed by Gardner-Smith and developed by Dodd and Robinson, while it is not essential to the argument of this study, holds an honorable place and gains credibility if, as Dodd and others maintain, the Gospel is rooted in a distinctive, discrete local tradition.22

Advocacy of the independence or priority of John is closely related to the conviction that the Gospel was written early. Barrett wrote, “If the traditional date of the gospel is correct, one wonders where the evangelist can have lived if indeed he knew none of the earlier gospels; and if his book is rightly regarded as a theological variation on a historical theme it is natural rather than difficult to believe that he had read at least Mark, and had pondered—and understood—its meaning.”23 “Theological variation on a historical theme” is the ghost of the idea that John is a Hellenizing theological interpretation that sits loose to history, so it is not surprising that for Barrett the traditional date was probably early second century, by which time the Johannine author must indeed have been a recluse to have been ignorant of the Synoptics. But if the Gospel is dated as early as sixty or sixty-five, the author’s failure to show awareness of a certain responsibility to Synoptic sources is less puzzling.

The present project, the certainties of apostolic authorship and a relatively late date having been challenged, is to craft an account that is explication of the text and external evidence, answering to these sources in a way that illuminates and unites them, one which might focus historical research regarding the Johannine books in a new direction. Samuel Butler once wrote that the test of a good critic is whether he knows when and how to believe on
insufficient evidence; for a definitive theory of Johannine origins, evidence, while it may be compelling, will always be insufficient. And while the question of authorship is important—Christianity is rooted in history—Robinson rightly observed that the power and authority of the Gospel do not depend on it; “nor, obviously, shall we ever reach proof or certainty.”

In writing this essay I have stood away from what I consider undue reserve toward evidence from the first two centuries, which evidence is often without compelling cause treated with a confident skepticism, a habit of mind evident in the scholarly interpretation of both the Muratorian Canon and the so-called Anti-Marcionite Prologue to the Gospel, both sources that claim to offer knowledge of the circumstances surrounding the writing of John. Both were considered by those who brought them forward, Samuel Prideaux Tregelles for the Muratorian Canon in 1867 and Adolf von Harnack and Dom Donatien De Bruyne for the Prologues in the 1920s, important, early, and in part reliable. Over the century following, however, both have often been characterized as late and lacking historical significance, perhaps in part because little effort has been made to see how these accounts might be contextualized by the Gospel itself. Similarly, the witness of Papias of Hierapolis, from the time when Eusebius pronounced him small-minded (σμικρὸς ὁν τὸν νοῦν), perhaps for no greater reason than Papias’ un-Origenistic eschatology, although frequently canvassed, has not been given the weight it deserves, and this despite Papias’ solid reputation and the extensive quotation of his *Five Books* by orthodox Fathers.

These three texts, the famous Papias text preserved in the third book of Eusebius’ history, the Anti-Marcionite Prologue to John, and the account of Johannine origins preserved in the Muratorian Canon, with certain echoes of these accounts in third and fourth century literature, taken together, witness an alternative account of Johannine origins which described the Gospel as the composition of a spirit-filled group over whom John presided, their work authenticated by an absent apostle, an account which the Gospel text can be read as supporting.

With regard to the argument from style and language, I have accepted—despite the fact that critics are far from unanimous—the view that the Gospel and the Epistles bear the stamp of the same mind, although the authorship exercised in the Epistles and in the Gospel may be of very different kinds and the stamp of authorial style may show significant variations. To the degree that this conclusion can be maintained, it follows that the Epistles and