

The Johannine Question Answered

Introduction

The “Johannine Question” is about the identity of the author, or authors, of the five New Testament writings comprising what has come to be called ‘the Johannine corpus’: the Book of Revelation, the Fourth Gospel, and the First, Second and Third Letters of John. Church tradition, from the earliest days, has maintained that the author of these five works was the apostle John, son of Zebedee, who migrated to Ephesus just before the first Jewish revolt (66-70 CE), directed the Church in Asia Minor and died there at an advanced age, around 98 CE. Although there is nothing improbable about this, and it has been accepted by most of the faithful for the last two millennia, questions have arisen at various periods and for different reasons. In the 3rd and 4th centuries, the questions were mostly focused on the author of the Book of Revelation. The apostolic authorship of this book was rejected by some, but it nevertheless remained in the New Testament canon. Doubts lingered in the literature, however, and fueled a resurgence of questioning in the 19th and 20th centuries. The same evidence that was initially used against the Book of Revelation was enhanced by new findings from old manuscripts, and now undermines the apostolic authorship of the entire Johannine corpus. Over the last century the debate has inspired many books, with several of them propounding authors other than the apostle John. The latest frontrunner in the quest for a non-apostolic author is the ‘elder John’,¹ a purely hypothetical figure, for whom there is no unambiguous evidence separating him from the apostle John. Nevertheless, he continues to be hailed by many scholars as the author of most, if not all, of the books previously attributed to the apostle John.

This is an extraordinary situation: some of the most highly esteemed, even venerated, books of the New Testament are now said to have been authored by ‘John the elder’, a person whose existence, apart from John the apostle, has never been confirmed or corroborated.² The present essay is an attempt to trace how we have arrived at this truly bizarre solution to the “Johannine Question”, and to offer a resolution.

The Early Questioners

In a previous article,³ the two earliest attempts to discredit the apostolic authorship of the Book of Revelation were presented: firstly that of Gaius the Roman presbyter, who around 200 CE

¹ Please note that the terminology varies in this article, but the ‘elder John’, ‘John the elder’, or ‘the elder’, with or without capitalized initial letter, all refer to the same figure.

² After his survey of the research, R. Alan Culpepper writes: “Most Johannine scholars would probably agree with the sentence of Robert Eisler that nowhere in the whole realm of history is there a more elusive ghost than “John the Elder.” In fact, even the existence of John the Elder has been contested. D.A. Carson recently concluded: “it is far from certain that there was an ‘elder John’ independent of the apostle, and if there was, it is still less certain that he wrote anything. The ambiguity of the evidence, which makes disparate interpretations virtually inevitable, lends the whole issue of John the Elder a phantom quality”, *John, the Son of Zebedee: The Life of a Legend*, Columbia, SC: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1994; 298.

³ ‘The Author of the Book of Revelation Was a Galilean Apostle’ which can be found at <http://www.newtorah.org/pdf/The%20Author%20of%20the%20Book%20of%20Revelation%20final.pdf> .

attributed the text to a despised heretic called Cerinthus, with support from a group of like-minded objectors, later named mockingly ‘the Alogi’ by Epiphanius, and secondly Bishop Dionysius of Alexandria, who examined the text around 250 CE and found it to be lacking the literary qualities he would expect of a work by an apostle. He therefore attributed it to another John, whose identity he did not know, but whose presence in Ephesus could be inferred from the existence of two tombs for John in that city.

Neither of these questioners of apostolic authorship would have reached a wider readership, up to the present day, had it not been for the Church historian Eusebius, who wrote about both Gaius and Dionysius in his *History of the Church* (324 CE), reproducing Dionysius’ literary criticism in full.⁴ It appears that Gaius’ opinions were rebuffed within a few years by another Roman presbyter called Hippolytus in a lost work called “*Heads against Gaius*”.⁵ In contrast, the criticism of Dionysius has endured down the centuries, thanks to its publication by Eusebius, whose *History of the Church* has been, and still is, very widely read and studied. Because of its persisting influence up to this day, there is still a need for the rebuttal of Dionysius’ criticism in the form it has been given to us by Eusebius.⁶

In *The History of the Church*, Eusebius’ own position is profoundly ambiguous. On the one hand he faithfully reports the tradition that John the apostle was the author of the Book of Revelation and the Fourth Gospel,⁷ but on the other hand he gives wide publicity to Dionysius’ criticism.⁸ His ambiguity is clearly visible when he classifies the Book of Revelation both among the “recognized” apostolic works and among the “spurious”,⁹ remarking that opinions as to where it belonged were evenly divided. He appears to invite the readers to judge for themselves.¹⁰ By giving the writings of Bishop Dionysius so much exposure in his *History*, Eusebius indirectly showed that he agreed with this criticism of the Book of Revelation. In fact, Eusebius takes it one step further by suggesting the tomb of the other John in Ephesus belonged to a person called ‘the elder John’, who was not an apostle, but supposedly lived in the same area as the apostle John, at around the same time. To this day, the existence of a non-apostolic ‘elder John’ has never been confirmed and the other tomb has been identified as the place where John the apostle’s body lay until a church could be built to house a more permanent tomb. Both tombs continued to be frequented by the faithful until the Christians were expelled from Turkey in the 1920’s.¹¹

⁴ Eusebius, *History of the Church*, III,28; VII,25; Eng trans G.A. Williamson, London: Penguin Classics, 1989.

⁵ Cf. Charles Hill, *The Johannine Corpus in the Early Church*, Oxford: OUP, 2004; 99.

⁶ This was one of the main aims of the previous article, cited in note 3. It is evident that Dionysius was unaware that the apostles spoke Aramaic and that Greek was not their mother tongue, for he judges the Book of Revelation to be ‘not the work of an apostle’ precisely because of the incorrect Greek (cf. *History of the Church*, VII,25). What is astonishing is that his criticism has impacted scholarship for so long. As the article attempts to show, the literary characteristics that Dionysius rejects as ‘non-apostolic’ are actually good evidence for the author’s Galilean origin and for the authenticity of his book.

⁷ *History of the Church*, III,18; III,20; III,23; IV,18; V,8; VI,25.

⁸ *History of the Church*, III,39.4-7; VII,25.

⁹ *History of the Church*, III,24.18; III, 24.18; III, 25.2-4.

¹⁰ *History of the Church*, III,25.2,4.

¹¹ Cf. Culpepper, *John*, 147-50.

Eusebius' proposal is based upon a novel interpretation of a passage from the prologue of a work in five volumes, long lost, written by Papias, Bishop of Hieropolis in Asia Minor, and dated to around 110-120 CE. In this passage, cited by Eusebius, Papias describes the sources and methods of his work, which he called *Exposition of the Sayings of the Lord*. The crucial part of this statement by Papias reads: "And whenever anyone came who had been a follower of the elders, I inquired about the words of the elders—what Andrew or Peter *said*, or Philip, or Thomas, or James, or John, or Matthew, or any other of the Lord's disciples, and whatever Aristion and the elder John, the Lord's disciples, *are still saying*".¹² If it is apt to call this passage 'the birthplace of the elder John',¹³ understood as a non-apostolic individual separate from the apostle John, then it would be fair to say that Eusebius was the midwife who assisted at the birth.

In order to illustrate the double meaning of this famous passage from Papias' book, it helps to consider an analogous statement concerning the Beatles, who were musically active as a pop group around 50 years ago, more or less the same period of time separating Papias from the first group of apostles he names: "And whenever anyone came who was a fan of the Beatles, I listened to their recordings of what John and George, Paul and Ringo *played* and of what Pete Best and Sir Paul *are still playing*." The four Beatles correspond to the twelve apostles, the recordings are the sayings of their immediate followers, and the fans are those who listen to, and share, the recordings. The main point here is that those who are familiar with the Beatles know that John and George have died and that Paul is still alive and making music (as of 2018). They also know that Paul was knighted and is now called Sir Paul.¹⁴ They may not know or remember Pete Best, who played the drums before Ringo joined and is therefore regarded as a Beatle, but is not one of the famous four.

The analogy is particularly useful in showing how the meaning changes for those who do not know anything about the Beatles, or the present condition of their members. For these, it may appear that all the original four have died and that Sir Paul in the second group must therefore be different from the Paul in the first group. Returning to the original statement of Papias,¹⁵ all we need to ask is:

- a) whether Papias was assuming that his readers knew about the original disciples, and especially about the apostle John, who had since become an elderly Church leader with the dignified title of 'John the elder',
- b) or whether Papias was really writing to inform readers centuries later, distant in time and place, who knew none of these things?

It is fairly certain that Papias was writing for his contemporaries, or near contemporaries, to whom he felt no need to explain that the first John was the same person as John the elder, and that this great figure was still alive at the time he first started to collect his material. To

¹² *History of the Church*, III,39.4.

¹³ A metaphor coined by B.W. Bacon, and quoted in Culpepper, *John*, 298.

¹⁴ John Lennon was assassinated in December 1980 and George Harrison died of lung cancer in November 2001. Paul was knighted in 1997.

¹⁵ *History of the Church*, III,39.4.

interpret Papias' statement otherwise is to take it out of its original context, lose sight of the author's intention and misinterpret the meaning, which is exactly what Eusebius did, driven by the desire to find a non-apostolic author with the name of John, to whom he could attribute the Book of Revelation.

In brief, the passage of Papias cited by Eusebius¹⁶ is profoundly ambiguous: depending on one's connection with the local Church, it could either be telling us that John the apostle was still alive when Papias was collecting his material, at which time he was called the 'elder John', or that John the apostle and John the elder were two different disciples of Jesus. As Eusebius, writing 200 years after Papias, was the first to propose the second option, it is quite likely that the first option was widely accepted until then, since readers of Papias knew about the apostle John and had no doubt that he was indeed the same person as the 'elder John'. This would explain how Irenaeus could unwaveringly affirm that Papias was 'a hearer of John the apostle', for he knew that the apostle and 'the elder John' were the same person, a point later denied by Eusebius.¹⁷

Eusebius had evidently been persuaded by Dionysius of Alexandria that John the apostle did not write the Book of Revelation and seized on this ambiguous passage in Papias to propose a separate, non-apostolic 'elder John' as the author. Eusebius' *History of the Church* was widely read in the East and so would have directly influenced the leaders of the Oriental Churches to reject the Book of Revelation for not being the work of the apostle John. It was subsequently excluded from the New Testament canon of the Eastern Church for many centuries. In the Western Church, Eusebius' book was not so widely read, perhaps because of his support of the heretical Arian position prior to the Ecumenical Council of Nicaea, and so the apostolic authorship of the Book of Revelation was undisputed until the early 19th century, when the scholars in the universities started asking 'critical' questions.

Alleged Martyrdom of Apostle John

However, long before modern scholars started critically investigating the authorship of the collection of books attributed by Church tradition to the apostle John, there were some minor developments in the Eastern Church which came to light in manuscripts discovered in the 19th century and had an immediate effect on questions of authorship. It should be said that, at the time they were written, these developments do not seem to be related, in any way, to claims or counterclaims concerning the authorship of the Book of Revelation or of the other writings of the Johannine corpus.

The first of these developments was the establishment of a date in the liturgical calendar, December 27th, to celebrate the "martyrdom of the apostles John and James at Jerusalem", appearing first in the Syrian martyrology of Edessa in 411 CE, but ultimately deriving from a Greek martyrology composed at the Byzantine city of Nicomedia in about 360 CE, more than

¹⁶ *History of the Church*, III,39.4.

¹⁷ *History of the Church*, III,39.1-7.

200 years after the supposed event.¹⁸ The factors leading to the adoption of this commemoration are not known, but it is likely to be a conjecture arising out of Jesus' response to the Zebedee brothers' request to sit beside him in his Kingdom: "The cup that I drink, you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right or at my left is not mine to give, but is for those for whom it is prepared" (Mk 10,39; cf. Mt 20,23). Interpreted as a prophecy regarding the fate of the two brothers, James and John, there would have been a strong presumption of fulfilment (despite Jn 21,22-23), although tradition has recorded only the martyrdom of James, by King Agrippa, in Jerusalem in the year 42 CE (Acts 12,2). Regarding the apostle John, the tradition represented by Eusebius is unanimous in affirming that he died in old age, at Ephesus, soon after the start of Trajan's reign in 98 CE.¹⁹ From the Syrian martyrology, the commemoration eventually spread to a few other areas, but not to all, and certainly not to Jerusalem, where the absence of such a memorial for the apostle John, is strong evidence against its veracity.

The other 'development' was a reference to the 2nd book of the 5 volume work by Papias, *Exposition of the Sayings of the Lord*, in a 36 volume work called *Christian History* dated to 434-39 CE and written by Philip of Side, a deacon ordained by John Chrysostom. The reference survives in an excerpt of a 7th century collection preserved in a single 14th-15th century manuscript called *Codex Baroccianus* 142 (also known as the 'De Boor fragment'). After mentioning Papias' list of sources including 'another John' called the elder, and the view erroneously 'held by some' that this John was the author of the Book of Revelation, the 2nd and 3rd letters of John, the excerpt goes on to assert that "Papias says in his second book that John the Evangelist and his brother were slain by the Jews".²⁰

It is echoed in the 9th century *Chronicle* by George the Sinner, but only in one out of 26 surviving manuscripts dated to the 11th-12th century (*Codex Coislinianus* III.134; all the rest record the peaceful death of John). There it is written that "John has been deemed worthy of martyrdom. For Papias, the Bishop of Hieropolis, having been an eyewitness of him (or of it?), says in the second book of his 'Dominical Oracles,' that he was killed by Jews, having evidently fulfilled with his brother the prediction of Christ concerning them".²¹ The author goes on to claim incorrectly that this report was corroborated by Origen in his *Commentary on Matthew*,²² justifying doubts about the accuracy of his reference to Papias, which, in its emphasis on the role of Jews, appears to depend entirely on the earlier work by Philip of Side.

Philip of Side's reputation for accuracy must also be doubted by the fact that the apostle James, who was indeed martyred in 42 CE, was not martyred by the Jews, but by King Agrippa, to 'please the Jews' (Acts 12,2). As the reference of Philip of Side is completely lacking in historical detail (date, place, manner of martyrdom) and its main emphasis is upon the agency of the Jews, it looks like an attempt to incriminate and possibly incite against the Jews. As a

¹⁸ Culpepper, *John*, 172.

¹⁹ *History of the Church* III.1, III.23.

²⁰ Quoted from Culpepper, *John*, 171.

²¹ Again quoted from Culpepper, *John*, 171.

²² Culpepper explains: "concerning Matthew 20:23, Origen says only that Herod killed James and that John was sent into exile by the emperor" *John*, 171.

close associate of John Chrysostom, Philip of Side may also have cultivated a strong anti-Jewish animus.²³ Finally, if Papias had indeed written about the martyrdom of the apostle John in his second book, it would certainly have been picked up by other writers, such as Origen, who knows nothing of it,²⁴ or Eusebius, who writes nothing about it.²⁵ The suggestion that Eusebius would have deliberately suppressed Papias' reference to John's martyrdom, "in order to support the apostolic authorship of the Johannine corpus",²⁶ is groundless, firstly because it would have been ineffective, as Eusebius could have claimed John wrote his corpus prior to his alleged martyrdom, and secondly because Papias' work was still circulating at that time, so Eusebius could not have hidden the report.²⁷ It seems fair to conclude that the reference to Papias in the excerpt by Philip of Side is either fabricated or garbled beyond recognition. It could have been based on a misunderstanding of 'witness' as a legal term, whose meaning evolved after the first century to denote someone who died witnessing, 'a martyr'. Perhaps, in his 2nd book, Papias spoke of John 'giving witness' to the Jews in a general way, but not specifically through the violent death of martyrdom ('red martyrdom'). The later legend about the apostle surviving immersion in boiling oil, in Rome, certainly supports the tradition that he was spared a violent death and died in old age.²⁸

The Later Questioners

Apart from the lasting doubts sown by Dionysius and Eusebius in the 4th century, there were no other memorable challenges to the apostolic authority of the Book of Revelation, until the awakening of critical scholarship in the early 19th century. Then, not only the Book of Revelation, but the entire Johannine corpus and indeed all the Bible, came under critical scrutiny by university scholars. The Tübingen school in Germany led this field of research from the mid-18th to the early 19th century, when it was joined by scholars in the USA and Britain.

²³ James Parkes gives a vivid summary of a series of sermons preached by John Chrysostom, in Antioch, in response to the close Jewish-Christian relations prevailing there. The intention seems to be to implant an anti-Semitic attitude among Christians and sow hatred between the two communities: "In eight sermons which he delivered in 387 he speaks with a bitterness and lack of restraint unusual even in that place and century... In these discourses there is no sneer too mean, no gibe too bitter for him to fling at the Jewish people. No text is too remote to be able to be twisted to their confusion, no argument is too casuistical, no blasphemy too startling for him to employ; and most astonishing of all, at the end he turns to the Christians, and in words full of sympathy and toleration he urges them not to be too hard on those who have erred in following Jewish practices or in visiting Jewish synagogues. Dealing with the Christians, no text which urges forgiveness is forgotten: dealing with the Jews only one verse of the New Testament is omitted: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." The only explanation of his bitterness contained in the sermons themselves is the too close fellowship between Jews and Christians in Antioch.... When it is clear that God hates them, it is the duty of Christians to hate them too..." *The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue: A Study in the Origins of Antisemitism*, New York: Atheneum, 1969; 163-66. As a deacon and disciple of Chrysostom, Philip of Side may easily have been recruited into his campaign of inciting Christians against Jews.

²⁴ Cf. note 22 above.

²⁵ Cf. note 19 above.

²⁶ Culpepper, *John*, 305; Martin Hengel, *The Johannine Question*, London: SCM Press, 1989; 21.

²⁷ Culpepper, *John*, 155.

²⁸ From an extract of Tertullian's *On Prescription Against Heretics*, 36, in Culpepper, *John*, 140.

This was a time when manuscripts, writings and historical documents from past ages were being reopened, examined and translated from foreign languages, archaeological expeditions were yielding new finds and soon traditional understandings were inadequate to explain the new discoveries. All the old questions, and a host of new ones, were arising from the more complex and detailed picture of antiquity that was emerging. The Fourth Gospel, in particular, now became the focus of inquiry: its differences from the Synoptic Gospels, its unhistorical depiction of Christ, its purpose, dating and authorship all came up for reconsideration. To a number of renowned scholars, the Fourth Gospel's reception history suggested a delay in acceptance by the mainstream churches because of its early embrace by gnostic thinkers of the Valentinian school—an academic *idee fixe* which Charles Hill named the 'Orthodox Johannophobia Paradigm' before uprooting it completely in his comprehensive work *The Johannine Corpus in the Early Church*.²⁹ While there has been a constant flow of devotional books upholding and updating the traditional position affirming apostolic authorship, the progress of historical critical research has never been impressed by their relatively narrow and subjective reconstructions. The academic search for the historical John has pressed on, in parallel with the search for the historical Jesus and the great expansion of knowledge from contemporary archeological, historical and literary sources.

Martin Hengel and the Johannine Question

By the end of the 20th century, it seemed that no one could bring all the diverging strands of research together into a coherent synthesis. In order to explain the enigmatic character of the writings in the Johannine corpus, leading scholars had proposed theories with a multiplicity of sources, authors, redactors, disciples and a school, raising even more questions than they could answer. But then, in 1989, Martin Hengel reversed the trend in a landmark study that greatly reduced the number of variables and focused on a single question he called *The Johannine Question*, about which he remarks: "Of course this remains hypothetical (like all attempts to solve the Johannine question in the last 150 years): the attempt to assign to the Johannine corpus one particular historical location—already well attested in the early church—and one towering theologian and founder of a school as its author. However, I think that after a century of critical attempts at deconstruction such a hypothesis (which is not new at all) has more to be said for it than against it".³⁰

The single most important question identified by Hengel is indeed the question of authorship, which arises directly from the 'crucial question' of why John's identity was hidden in the first place.³¹ Culpepper summarizes his conclusions concisely: "Hengel's thesis in short is that the

²⁹ Charles Hill, *The Johannine Corpus in the Early Church*, 465-75.

³⁰ Martin Hengel, *The Johannine Question*, trans John Bowden, London: SCM Press, 1989; 108. This study was justly hailed as "a treasury of scholarship on the early references to John and the Johannine writings. It calls us back to the substantial scholarship of the Harnack, Lightfoot, Schlatter, Zahn and others who had a high respect of the historical value of the second-century patristic writers. Hengel forged a challenging thesis as a reasonable explanation of the riddles posed by the five Johannine writings, their relationships with synoptic Gospels, their setting in the Johannine school, and the references in the second century to John the Elder, the apostle John, and the Johannine corpus. The scope and coherence of the thesis add to its strength", Culpepper, *John*, 307.

³¹ *Johannine Question*, 3.

Gospel and the Epistles of John (and probably an early version of the Apocalypse) were composed by one ‘towering theologian, and founder and head of the Johannine school.’ This influential teacher of Asia Minor, however, was not the apostle but a disciple called John the Elder.”³²

1. This prompts the first criticism of Hengel’s thesis. Apart from his description of John the Elder as a priestly aristocrat born, bred and firmly rooted in Jerusalem, who fraternized with the upper class and ignored the poor, everything he says about this figure could very well describe the later life of John the apostle, who was based in Jerusalem from around 33-63 CE and then in Ephesus until his death in 98 CE.³³ Even Hengel’s estimate of the elder’s dates of birth (15 CE) and death (100 CE) would match those proposed for John the apostle.³⁴ This close resemblance could explain Hengel’s frequent interjections deterring readers from identifying his John the Elder with John the apostle: “We know virtually nothing specific about his personal prehistory”,³⁵ “this Gospel cannot come from a Galilean fisherman”,³⁶ “This special and deliberate stress on the southern province and the capital is one of the reasons which make it extremely improbable that the Gospel was written or even prompted by a Galilean disciple”,³⁷ “We may recall the old tradition that the second son of Zebedee, John, was also ‘killed by the Jews’”,³⁸ not to mention all the references to Hengel’s anti-apostolic arguments elsewhere in his book.³⁹

Hengel’s anti-apostolic zeal is indeed necessary in order to impose his non-apostolic John the elder in exactly the same place, and at exactly the same time, as tradition had determined for the apostle John. His zeal far exceeds the combined efforts of Eusebius and Dionysius against the apostolic authorship of the Book of Revelation, for here the target has grown to the entire Johannine corpus and claims support from the 5th century Syrian martyrology (411 CE) and Philip of Side’s vague reference to a passage claiming to be by Papias (439 CE), about the killing of John by the Jews (see above). In his need to “kill off” the apostle and avoid having the two near-identical Johns residing in Asia Minor at the same time, Hengel assumes the apostle John was slain after his brother James,⁴⁰ but before the appearance of John the Elder in Asia Minor,⁴¹ which is to say between 42 and 62 CE. This is indeed a period in which the apostle John is mentioned only once in the New Testament: on a visit to Jerusalem in 47 CE, Paul met the three leaders of the mother Church, including John, and calls them the ‘ones seeming to be pillars’ (Gal 2,9). It is hugely improbable for John, in this prominent leadership position, to be martyred between 47-62 CE without any news of the event reaching the rest of the world before the year 439 CE, and then only in the form of a vague reference by a single

³² Culpepper, *John*, 305.

³³ See especially *Johannine Question*, 109-135.

³⁴ *Johannine Question*, 133. In the previous article, ‘The Author of the Book of Revelation was a Galilean Apostle’, (cited in note 3 above) my own estimate of the apostle John’s dates was 12-98 CE.

³⁵ *Johannine Question*, 123.

³⁶ *Johannine Question*, 130.

³⁷ *Johannine Question*, 124; “the southern province and the capital” refer to Judaea and Jerusalem.

³⁸ *Johannine Question*, 115.

³⁹ *Johannine Question*, 21-23 and 158 note 121.

⁴⁰ *Johannine Question*, 159, note 121h.

⁴¹ *Johannine Question*, 134.

church historian citing an uncorroborated 2nd century source.⁴² The silence in the historical records at this time does not mean that John was dead, or that the historian Eusebius was deliberately suppressing the record of his martyrdom,⁴³ but that he was quietly preparing for the next phase of his life as leader of the Church in Asia Minor, where he would be known as John the elder.

2. This takes us to the next general criticism of Hengel's thesis. As it is dependent upon the same interpretation of the ambiguous Papias fragment that Eusebius first proposed—the interpretation which 'gave birth' to the figure of a non-apostolic 'elder John'⁴⁴—Hengel's thesis lends itself to the same criticism. This is not the only interpretation possible, as explained above, and seems to have been ignored by most churchmen both before and after Eusebius. To this day the existence of a non-apostolic 'elder John', separate from the apostle John, has never been corroborated. It is a spurious interpretation of the Papias' fragment, invented by Eusebius with the tendentious aim of removing the apostle John as author of the Book of Revelation. Furthermore, the interpretation relies heavily on the distinction between John *without* a title, but listed among other known apostles, and John *with* the title 'elder'. However, it is well known that the apostle John received the title 'elder' when he was one of the Church leaders in Jerusalem, whom Paul calls "pillars" (Gal 2,9), but in Acts are called "apostles and elders" (Acts 15,2.4.6.22.23; 16,4) or just "the elders" (Acts 11,30; 21,18). So it would appear that John was called an apostle in his younger days and an elder in later life, all the time remaining a disciple of the Lord. Nevertheless, Hengel is 'title sensitive' and often makes deductions based on whether John is, or is not, called an apostle.⁴⁵ He seems to be influenced by an anachronistic tendency to interpret first-century usage of the terms 'apostle' and 'elder' from a later perspective, when 'elder' had become the title of a particular office and rank within the Church hierarchy.

In the first century, however, there was no such distinction between 'elders' and 'apostles', as shown by Alastair Campbell in his study on 'The Elders of the Jerusalem Church': "The elders' did refer to those who succeeded members of the original Twelve in the leadership of the Jerusalem church as they died or departed to other places, but the title did not exclude members of the Twelve, since it was never the title of an office separate from that of an apostle. *Some of the elders belonged to the original Twelve, others were replacements.* The term 'elder' connoted dignity and authority; it did not denote someone who had not been an

⁴² Culpepper concurs: "On the other hand, the thesis, while a plausible and reasonable construction of the evidence, is unconvincing at key points. The linchpin of the argument—the identification of the Elder John (from the single reference in Papias) with the elder of 2 John 1 and 3 John 1—will not bear the weight of the argument that is built on it. For many, the evidence for the early martyrdom of John the son of Zebedee remains problematic", *John*, 307.

⁴³ As suggested by Hengel, *Johannine Question*, 21; it was debunked above in 'Alleged Martyrdom of Apostle John'. Also detected and challenged by Culpepper, *John*, 305 and 307: "Why is it more credible that Eusebius suppressed the evidence of the early martyrdom of John the son of Zebedee than that Irenaeus shortened the chain of tradition leading back to John?"

⁴⁴ *History of the Church*, III.39.3-4.

⁴⁵ *Johannine Question*, 4, 7, 8, 9, 12, 15, 126.

original member. Quite the reverse! There were no more worthy bearers of the title ‘elder’ than those who had been there from the beginning”.⁴⁶

So according to first-century usage, ‘the elder’ was an optimal title for the aging apostle John, son of Zebedee. In fact, it is conceivable that he strongly rejected the title ‘apostle’, as his writings, and the writings of his followers in Asia Minor, mostly avoid that term and use ‘disciple’ instead.⁴⁷ The reasons for this are not wholly clear, but there were many ‘false apostles’ in Asia at the end of the first century, who must have brought this designation into disrepute (cf. Rev 2,2; 2Cor 11,5.13; *Didache* 11). A more compelling reason for the disappearance of the term ‘apostle’ may have been the inescapable connection between the twelve apostles of Christ, who were said to symbolize the rulers of a restored Israel, and the resurgence of hopes for Jewish national restoration at the end of the first century, leading up to the catastrophic Bar Kochba revolt (132-135 CE). This would have caused a serious clash of loyalties among the many Jewish Christians, confusing their faith in Christ and his apostles with Jewish aspirations for national restoration. It may indeed have caused many to return to the Synagogue, in the false hope that the Lord was going to return soon, with his twelve apostles, to rule over a restored nation of Israel.⁴⁸ So for these reasons, and possibly others, the apostle John forbade the use of the title ‘apostle’, starting with himself, and replaced it with ‘disciple’ and ‘elder’.

3. The third and final criticism of Hengel’s thesis concerns his identification of the ‘beloved disciple’, who is also the author of the Gospel (Jn 21,20-24), with a priestly aristocratic, but non-apostolic, disciple called ‘elder John’ from Jerusalem. Hengel claims that the apostle John’s past life as Galilean fisherman and Jerusalem Church leader disqualifies him from being the beloved disciple and author, but the reasoning is carelessly outsourced in the first part and is a *non sequitur* in the second: “There are too many historical reasons against supposing that the Gospel was composed by John the son of Zebedee, which was the predominant view from the middle of the second century on. They have already been given: this Gospel cannot come from a Galilean fisherman and is also hard to reconcile with the significance that John had for a long time in the Jerusalem community as one of the three pillars (Gal 2,9)”.⁴⁹ For the ‘many historical reasons’, Hengel refers the reader to an article by a scholar writing in 1962 as if he

⁴⁶ R. Alastair Campbell, ‘The Elders of the Jerusalem Church’, *Journal of Theological Studies*, NS, Vol 44 (1993), 519; the italics are mine. The study continues: “Support for this can be found in the way a connection between apostles and elders surfaces persistently in Christian writings both in and beyond the New Testament. Thus the writer of 1 Peter has the apostle in whose name he writes style himself ‘fellow elder’ (1 Peter 5:1). The author of 2 and 3 John, while doubtless claiming apostolic authority, styles himself ‘The Elder’ (2 John 1). Papias uses the term ‘elder’ either of the apostles themselves (as many think) or of their immediate disciples, but in any case not of a church office (Eus *HE* 3,39.4). Ignatius, who finds the bishop and deacons to be types of the Father and of Christ, consistently sees the elders as types of the apostles (Ign. Magn. 6.1, Trall. 3.1, etc). Only in the perspective of a later generation did the terms ‘elder’ and ‘apostle’ become mutually exclusive terms of rank within a hierarchy.”

⁴⁷ “It seems that the Fourth Gospel, without offering reasons, studiously avoids using the title apostle, while presuming the concept and terminology of sending”, Betz, Hans Dieter, ‘Apostle’, *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Ed. D.N. Freedman, 6 vols., New York: Doubleday, 1992; vol 1, 311.

⁴⁸ This is precisely the dilemma addressed by the prophecy in the Book of Revelation, which essentially repeats and expands Paul’s warning that the ‘Son of Perdition’ (the Beast from the Sea, Rev 13) must come first (2Thess 2,1-12), while emphasizing that the rule of Christ with his saints is a spiritual reign (Rev 20,4-6).

⁴⁹ *Johannine Question*, 130.

were the spokesmen for the pioneer critical scholars of the 20's, 30's and 40's, for whom "John, the Son of Zebedee, had nothing at all to do with the writing of this gospel".⁵⁰ It is an uncompromising and polemical tract, which no doubt explains Hengel's own dogmatic stance, but does little else.⁵¹ For the rest, one wonders why the Gospel cannot come from a Galilean fisherman, if, at the end of this Gospel, it is described how the author/beloved disciple willingly joins an all-night fishing expedition on Lake Tiberias with Peter and five other disciples (Jn 21,1-14). This is certainly not what a priestly aristocrat from Jerusalem would do, but it is entirely consistent with the identification of the author/beloved disciple with the apostle John, former Galilean fisherman and fishing partner of Peter and Andrew.⁵²

Hengel's identification of the 'two other disciples' at the end of the list of seven (Jn 21,2) in the same narrative, as Aristion and 'the elder John',⁵³ is artificial and gratuitous. The connection between the two anonymous disciples in this episode from 33 CE and the two longest surviving disciples known to Papias 65 years later, is very tenuous to say the least. Of course, it allows Hengel to identify his non-apostolic 'elder John' with the beloved disciple, but only at the cost of setting up the improbable, and somewhat comical, scene of a priestly aristocrat disciple from Jerusalem embarking for an all-night fishing expedition on Lake Tiberias. Comparison of the list of disciples in John 21,2, with the lists in the seven other sources tabulated by Hengel to prove his point, actually show that Philip and Andrew are the most likely candidates for the 'two other disciples' in John 21,2, since they are mentioned in all

⁵⁰ Pierson Parker, 'John the Son of Zebedee and the Fourth Gospel', *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 81, 1962; 35-43. Until the last paragraph of his tract, Parker takes no account of the fact that John 1) writes in old age and about 65 years after the events, 2) writes to supplement, not to replace, the other 3 gospels which he has read and verified (cf. Eusebius, *History of the Church*, III.24,7), 3) has lost his brother James in circumstances he does not wish to recall, 4) admits that he could write much more (Jn 20,30-31; 21,25). Only in the last paragraph does Parker seem to understand that there are diachronic developments and nuances to consider, but not for long, for he quickly returns to his synchronic black and white version: "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". This is polemics, not scholarship. It should have had no part in Hengel's reasoning.

⁵¹ On page 158, note 121, of *Johannine Question*, Hengel provides a list of 8 references to ancient documents that allude to a martyrdom suffered by the apostle John. These either include or relate to the three documents discussed above, in the section: Alleged Martyrdom of Apostle John. From this evidence, Hengel concludes that the report by Papias ("that John the evangelist and his brother James were slain by the Jews") has "a certain plausibility" and that later church tradition suppressed this report in order to assert the apostolicity of John of Ephesus. In response: firstly the report refers to 'John the evangelist', implying that he had already written the Gospel before being slain, and secondly there is no reason why the Church should suppress this report in order to assert that John was an apostle: he could easily be both an apostle and a martyr. However, for the Church, there was no suppression and no martyrdom, as the prophecy of Jn 21,22-23 superseded that of Mk 10,39/Mt 20,23 (especially in connection with Hengel's note 121e, page 158).

⁵² In response to Hengel's "this Gospel cannot come from a Galilean fisherman" (*Johannine Question*, 130), it must be said that the fishing expedition in Jn 21,1-14 confirms that the author/beloved disciple was indeed a Galilean fisherman, and that it is therefore far more plausible for a Galilean fisherman to write a Gospel than it is for a priestly aristocratic Jerusalemite to embark on an all-night fishing expedition in Galilee.

⁵³ Taken from the now famous list of sources recorded by Papias and cited by Eusebius in his *History of the Church*, III.39,3-4.

the lists except the list in John 21, although in one of them only Philip is mentioned, but not Andrew.⁵⁴

However, identifying the ‘two other disciples’ (Jn 21,2) tenuously with the non-apostolic disciples Aristion and ‘elder John’ allows Hengel to construct his answer to the ‘crucial question’ of why the identity of the beloved disciple is veiled. In brief, that is the way the editors wanted it: “This vagueness is deliberate”.⁵⁵ “In the Fourth Gospel the identity of the mysterious beloved disciple is certainly veiled, and the editor(s) uncover(s) the author’s incognito only by hints. Did they want to hide his identity because the author did not come from the acknowledged group of twelve, and because about 100 his relationship to Jesus as ‘beloved disciple’ was anything but acknowledged everywhere? This crucial question will accompany us till the end of the investigation”.⁵⁶ At the end of the investigation Hengel does indeed present his answer to the ‘crucial question’.⁵⁷

The answer he gives is that it is a “guessing game” designed to make it appear that the beloved disciple is John the apostle, although he is really the non-apostolic ‘elder John’.⁵⁸ It is a cunning way for the editors of the Fourth Gospel “to establish their Gospel as an ‘apostolic one’”. In the list of John 21,2, continues Hengel, the beloved disciple “could be one of the sons of Zebedee, and indeed because of the title of the Gospel could be John the apostle of the Synoptic Gospels—but need not be, for there are some features which tell against this; he could just as well be one of the two anonymous disciples, indeed it might be more likely. As we have a guessing game at the beginning of the Gospel with the unknown disciple of John the Baptist and colleague of Andrew, so at the end we have another in 21.1,7,20ff. with the beloved disciple and his identification. The editors—like the author—want the riddle to remain unsolved, the issue to be left open. So they take the reader some way towards the sons of Zebedee but refuse, indeed prevent, a truly unequivocal identification. This feature too, is one of the deliberate contradictions in the Gospels. The redactors could truly have made things easier for themselves”.⁵⁹

Instead of stopping at this point and asking why the editors may have wanted the identity of the beloved disciple and author to remain veiled and enigmatic, in view of the situation prevailing in Ephesus at the time, Hengel continues on the guessing game theme: “the editors did not want simply to identify one specific individual— a certain John—as the true disciple. He was meant to be and remain ‘ambivalent’.”⁶⁰ According to Hengel, the editors deliberately wanted to superimpose the personalities of John the apostle and the non-apostolic ‘elder John’ into the one beloved disciple, presented as the ‘ideal disciple’ of Jesus. In this way they wanted to ‘immortalize’ the two persons in the one beloved disciple, and more practically, they wanted to

⁵⁴ *Johannine Question*, 18: the lists of the apostles are from Papias, John 1, John 21, Philip of Side, Mark 3, Acts 1, *Epistula Apostolorum*, and *Apostolic Constitutions*. Philip and Andrew are mentioned in all the lists except the list in John 21, although in the list of Philip of Side, only Philip is mentioned, not Andrew.

⁵⁵ *Johannine Question*, 128.

⁵⁶ *Johannine Question*, 3.

⁵⁷ *Johannine Question*, 128-132.

⁵⁸ A new category: “Homonymous Pseudonymity”?

⁵⁹ *Johannine Question*, 128.

⁶⁰ *Johannine Question*, 128-9.

pass off the work of the non-apostolic ‘elder John’ as ‘apostolic’. In his proposal for an ‘editorial merging’ of the two Johns, Hengel actually comes within a hairsbreadth of identifying them as the same person. The only thing preventing this union is Hengel’s rigid, one could say Pharisaic, refusal to accept that a Galilean fisherman could become an evangelist: “this Gospel cannot come from a Galilean fisherman”.⁶¹ Nevertheless, the differences dissolve and the union is restored when we reconsider the enigmatic “Johannine Question” against the contemporary situation of the Church, as it is represented in the first three chapters of the Book of Revelation.

Resolution of the Johannine Question

The situation in Ephesus at the time the Gospel was written and edited was hostile to followers of Christ (96-98 CE). John introduces himself as a companion in the affliction, kingdom and endurance in Jesus (Rev 1,9). The hostility was pervasive and came from all quarters, from the Roman administration, from the more pious pagans and from the Jews. Not long before, John had returned from exile on the Island of Patmos (96 CE), where he had been banished as a punishment for his work of witnessing Jesus and the Word of God (Rev 1,9). Antipas had been martyred in Pergamon (2,13) and several Christian prisoners awaited execution in Smyrna (2,10). Christianity was still regarded as “an illegal association” by the Romans, as an ungodly threat by adorers of the pagan gods, and as a despised religious rival by the Jews. *The purpose of concealing the beloved disciple’s identity was simply to protect the beloved disciple from further persecution.* The redactor did not want to risk having the beloved disciple brought before the Roman magistrates again, by allowing him to be identified, by one of the ubiquitous spies and informers, as the author of the literature of this new and not-yet-legal community. And so they decided to ‘encode’ the connection between the apostle and his Gospel, in order to keep his identity secret to those on the outside. The faithful, those on the inside, could easily have been informed, by word of mouth, that ‘the one whom Jesus loves’ was a code for John, in Hebrew Yochanan, whose meaning is very similar: ‘the one whom God favours’.

In Chapter 21 the editors are more forthcoming, because this chapter makes most sense if it was written after John had died in 98 CE. For those on the inside, the narratives in this chapter tell us that the beloved disciple was the author (Jn 21,20-24), that he was a Galilean fisherman and companion of Peter (21,1-14) and that, although he died, he will remain until the Second Coming (21,15-19) to accomplish the prophetic mission described in his Book of Revelation (Rev 10,11–11,1-2). With these three short passages the faithful would have grasped his identity fully, without ambiguity, but for those on the outside, it was still an enigma.

So one might ask why, even after the disciple’s death, the editors were still not completely transparent, but left the enigma of the author’s identity tantalizingly uncertain for those who

⁶¹ *Johannine Question*, 130. One is reminded of John Chrysostom’s *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, where he exalted the power of Christ by describing first John’s humble origins: “For when a barbarian and an untaught person utters things which no man on earth ever knew, and does not only utter (...) but besides this, affords another and a stronger proof that what he says is divinely inspired, namely the convincing all his hearers through all time; who will not wonder at the power that dwells in him?” Culpepper, *John*, 159-60.

were not familiar with the apostle's life and mission. Following the same line of reasoning, the editors did not divulge more details about the author in order to prevent violence also to his tomb, where his body had been laid to rest. The same need for precaution may have prompted the anonymity surrounding the identity of the 'two other disciples' (21,2), whom we have identified as Philip and Andrew. If Eusebius, Clement and Polycrates are correct, Philip the apostle was buried at Hieropolis, not far from Ephesus, although others maintain that this must have been tomb of Philip the evangelist.⁶² Seen against the background of hostility and persecution, the enigma around the identity of the author is understandable, both in his life and after his death.

Having reframed the "Johannine Question" in this way, not as a guessing game or as a literary device to create the illusion of apostolicity, but rather as an expedient to protect the beloved disciple and his earthly remains from violence and damage, it is necessary to admit that there is actually no ambiguity about his identity.⁶³ There were just those on the inside who knew and those on the outside who did not know. The enigma has no need for another author to explain its mystery. To postulate another disciple is to miss the point, to be on the outside, to impose a meaning that was not intended—eisegesis of the most aggressive kind. There is only one beloved disciple and, as Hengel has so comprehensively documented, he is "one towering theologian and founder of a school", as well as being author of all five books of the Johannine corpus and leader of the Church in Asia Minor. He is also, perhaps to Hengel's disappointment, a Galilean fisherman, apostle, disciple, seer, teacher and elder—"the Elder" of the elders.

The crucial part of the "Johannine Question" has been resolved, but other less urgent issues remain. Most pressing, perhaps, is the need to explain how one author, John, an Aramaic speaker who did not speak or write Greek at all well, can be regarded as the author of such widely differing books as the Book of Revelation and the Fourth Gospel. With this question, we have made a full circle and returned to the problem confronted by Dionysius at the start of all the questioning. However, rather than propose a different author for whom no evidence exists, it may be fruitful to introduce, into the discussion of authorship, a new concept we could call "degrees of literary mediation".

For most of the first century and beyond, it was usual for the author of a book, document or letter to dictate his text to a trained scribe, or amanuensis, even if he could write competently

⁶² *History of the Church*, III,30-31; the argument holds whether it was the tomb of the apostle or the evangelist, or both. Either way, it was a tomb that was venerated by pilgrims. Interestingly, the reports on the excavation of Philip's tomb in Hieropolis, by Francesco D'Andria, also refers to this tomb as the tomb of the Philip the apostle; 'Philip's Tomb Discovered—But not where expected', *Biblical Archeological Review*, Jan/Feb 2012. Is it possible that Philip, the Greek-speaking apostle from Bethsaida (Jn 12,20-22), joined Stephen and the other 5 'Hellenists' (Acts 6,5), preached to the Samaritans and coastal cities, before settling in Caesaria (Acts 8,4-40), where he was known as the evangelist (Acts 21,8-9)? If so, this would be another example of the title 'apostle' being superseded by another title, 'evangelist', and causing confusion, as in the case of John the apostle and John the elder; for a thorough investigation of the issues, see Christopher R. Matthews, *Philip: Apostle and Evangelist, Configurations of a Tradition*, Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2002.

⁶³ The question of authorial identity is very similar to that in the Book of Revelation, where recognition of his identity relies a great deal on the familiar relationship between the author and those communities in Asia that he is addressing. Hence local Church tradition provides the main source of evidence for his identity.

himself.⁶⁴ The one who dictated remained the undisputed author and would often confirm his authorship of the new document by writing a short sentence in his own handwriting, signed with his name. This is evident in some of Paul's letters, for example (1Cor 16,21; Gal 6,11; Col 4,18; 2Thess 3,17; Phil 19).⁶⁵ The scribes, whose educational level and professional skills would vary considerably from one to the next, would have been highly motivated to create a literary product of good quality, as this would affect their future employment and income. In order to ensure a good quality product, they would certainly need to make any corrections they deemed necessary, which in turn would depend on their own level of education and skill. From this brief description of the normal writing process, it is clear that every new document was a cooperative effort between the author and the scribe. The final document would not only reflect the high level of cooperation, but its literary quality would vary according to the education and skills of every scribe. If one author used several different scribes for his literary output, we should therefore expect to see considerable variations in that author's style, vocabulary and grammar, depending on the education and skills of the scribes he employed.

Now, if the author was not a native Greek speaker, like John, but spoke Greek as a foreigner, the scribal input would have had to be even more intense, in order to produce a satisfactory literary product. Or in other words, the 'degree of literary mediation' had to be so much greater, and may have also included some radical corrections in style, vocabulary and grammar. Nevertheless, the one who dictated it is still the author of that document, even though his literary expression may have been changed extensively by the scribe. Again, the literary quality of the final product will vary according to the education and skills of the scribe and also, in this case, on his understanding of the author's own language. No doubt the author's patterns of thought and personal expression will come through into the text, regardless of the scribal input, but the superficial qualities of the language may vary significantly from one scribe to the next. This scribal variability can be expected to make judgments of authorship, if based on literary criticism alone, very shaky and unreliable. Judgments of authorship based on similarities of style, grammar and vocabulary may indeed reflect the same author and scribe team, but very little can be deduced from differences in literary characteristics, as these could reflect several variables: a different scribe, a different author, an editor making corrections, or all of these.⁶⁶

There is good evidence in the Fourth Gospel that John was helped by at least one scribe and probably by more (Jn 21,24-25). We should therefore expect the Gospel to be the product of cooperation between the author John and the scribe or scribes. Regardless of the 'degree of literary mediation' provided by the scribes, and it was probably quite substantial, the author is still John. Compare this situation with the Book of Revelation, at the other end of the scale. In this text, the author tells us that that risen Lord asked him to write the book (Rev 1,11) and then include a serious warning to those who would change the text in any way (Rev 22,18-19).

⁶⁴ Cf. Chris Keith, "In my own hand": Grapho-literacy and the Apostle Paul', *Biblica*, Vol 89, 2008; 39-58.

⁶⁵ Ibid 40-42.

⁶⁶ Comparative studies of vocabulary such as those of Schüssler Fiorenza, cited by Culpepper (*John*, 99-101), should be interpreted in the light of these variables. Is it not possible that the scribes correcting the vocabulary of John's text of the Book of Revelation had also been copying the Gospel of Luke and the letters of Paul, and that is why there are similarities in vocabulary with these works?

These divine instructions ensured that there was minimal scribal input in the production of this text, so it remained almost entirely the work of John himself, with some superficial corrections in vocabulary and grammar at most. In between these two extremes are the letters of John, for which scribal input would have varied in proportion to their linguistic style and complexity. Due to evident similarities in literary characteristics, it is likely that the same scribes cooperated with the author, John, to produce the letters and the Gospel, lending support to the proposal that the Johannine school was actually a scribal centre for the production of manuscripts.⁶⁷

In summary, the literary variation between the writings of the Johannine corpus is best explained by ‘the degree of literary mediation’ that has been invested in each work, by the scribe or scribes working with the author. Especially in the case of John, whose native language was Aramaic and not Greek, it was, above all, the degree of scribal investment that determined the literary characteristics and quality of the final version of his writings.

Conclusions

The ‘Johannine Question’ is basically about the identity of the author of the Johannine corpus, consisting of the five New Testament writings attributed to John, for it seemed inconceivable to many modern scholars that all these writings could have been written by the same author, and a Galilean fisherman at that, as was taught for centuries by Church tradition.

Long before modern scholars had questioned the authorship of these works, a series of spurious interpretations by ancient churchmen had set the stage. Firstly, the poor literary quality of the Book of Revelation prompted Dionysius to deny John the apostle was the author (c. 250 CE), although the poor quality Greek is entirely consistent with a text written by a Galilean Jewish apostle. Secondly Eusebius compounded this dubious judgment (324 CE) by distinguishing John the elder, mentioned as a source by Papias, from John the apostle and then identified him as the author the Book of Revelation, even though John the apostle and John the elder were seen as the same person up until Eusebius and ever since. Thirdly a single historian writing in 439 CE, called Philip of Side, reports that Papias, in his lost work, had written that John the apostle and his brother James were killed “by the Jews”, even though many churchmen had read his books and none had reported this before him. Upon a foundation created by these three ‘twists’, modern scholars have built a tall and complex structure of questions, proposals and arguments. To the upholders of church tradition, however, the foundations are shaky indeed and cannot support the weight of the scholars’ reconstructions: the whole building is erected upon ‘a mistake upon a mistake upon a mistake’.

Nevertheless, the scholarly edifice is still standing. A multitude of alternative solutions have been proposed by scholars over the last century, but none of these have answered the ‘Johannine Question’ in a satisfactory way. The best attempt is that of Martin Hengel in his 1989 study entitled *The Johannine Question*, in which he manages to unite the production of all five books under one principal author, working together with a school of fellow writers in

⁶⁷ See previous article, ‘The Author of the Book of Revelation was a Galilean Apostle’, cited in note 3.

Ephesus, at the end of the first century. His thesis almost works, but fails at key points, particularly in asserting the early martyrdom of John the apostle and in identifying, as principal author, a fellow disciple of the apostle John—not another Galilean fisherman, but an educated, priestly, aristocratic “*doppelgänger*” from Jerusalem, a hypothetical twin, called ‘the elder John’. This figure was originally ‘birthed’ by Eusebius from an ‘inadvertently pregnant’ statement of Papias with the specific aim of removing the authorship of the Book of Revelation from its true author, John the apostle. Underlying this literary fiction of a non-apostolic ‘John the elder’, there is the genuine puzzlement of Dionysius concerning the authorship of the Book of Revelation, or what one might call the ‘Original Johannine Question’. Tracing the origin of the ‘Johannine Question’ back in time, in this way, indicates that its answer might lie with the Book of Revelation. In other words, first we must determine the truth about the author of the Book of Revelation and then, perhaps only then, the answers to the authorship of the rest of the Johannine corpus will follow.

In a previous article we presented three specific aspects of the Book of Revelation that indicated a Galilean author and followed this by showing how it was quite plausible for a young man, like the apostle John, to acquire the language and literacy skills to enable him, in later life, to write a text like the Book of Revelation, despite having a primary education based on the hearing and reading of the Bible in the predominantly oral culture of Galilee. There is nothing inherently improbable about this trajectory, which included a long period of residence in Jerusalem (33-63 CE). Furthermore, the author’s ungrammatical Jewish Greek helps to explain the crude literary quality of the text, which, instead of arguing against apostolic authorship as Dionysius insisted, is good evidence in favour. On a more general level, the Book of Revelation gives invaluable information (especially in Rev 1–3) for the unravelling of the ‘Johannine question’ in the other books attributed to John.

Having re-established the apostle John as author of the Book of Revelation, the other works in the Johannine corpus can be more easily understood as the products of cooperation between John, whose mother tongue was Aramaic, and a well-trained, probably bilingual, scribe or scribes, who corrected what John dictated and wrote it down in acceptable literary Greek. We have referred to this as a high ‘level of literary mediation’, and it contrasts with a very low level of literary mediation in the writing of the Book of Revelation. Hence the difference in the literary characteristics of these two works. In view of the similarity of literary features between the Gospel and the three letters attributed to John, it is likely that the same scribe or scribes worked with the author to produce all these works.

As for the enigmatic presentation of the author in all these writings, but especially in the Fourth Gospel—the ‘crucial question’ posed by Martin Hengel—the best solution is the simplest: this was a deliberate ploy by the scribes, or editors, to protect the author and ensure that he was not hunted down again and punished for his “witness to Jesus Christ and the Word of God” (cf. Rev 1,9).

John Ben-Daniel,
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