The Debate Regarding the Authorship of the Gospel of John

A Research Paper

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The Gospel of John

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**Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is to research the debate regarding the authorship of the Gospel of John. Some scholars such as Stamps and Beck have asserted that John’s Gospel is actually written anonymously.”¹ As early as 1820, Karl Gottlieb Bretschneider also expressed doubts about Johns’ authenticity.² However, the Church had accepted the apostle John as the author from the early Church fathers. According to Kostenber, as recently as 1832 scholars such as Fried Schleiermacher continued to accept the idea that the apostle John was the author of the gospel.³

This paper will explore the claims of the detractors that do not accept John as the author of this gospel. The internal and external evidence that indicates that John was the author of this gospel will be discussed. Arguments will be presented that assert that John was indeed the author of his gospel. Possible dates and location of his writing will be explored. Works of the early church fathers and historians will be presented that argue that John was the author.

**Bretschneider and Strauss**

As mentioned in the introduction, in the early 1800’s scholars such as Bretsschneider and Strauss began raising doubts about the authorship of the gospel of John. One concern was the differences between John and the Synoptic Gospels. Stephen C. Barton writes, “The nineteenth-century challenge by the likes of Karl Gottlieb Bretschneider and David Friedrich Strauss to the historical reliability of the Gospel, given the marked differences between John and the Synoptics and the characteristically Johannine idiom of the discourses.”⁴ Black and Beck define the

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² Ibid, 200.
³ Ibid, 200.
Synoptics as, “the first three canonical gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke. It is derived from the fact that these three Gospels can be arranged and harmonized section by section so as to allow the eye to see at a glance numerous passages that are common to them all, as well as portions that are peculiar to only two, or even one, of them.”

The book of John is different than the Synoptics. Some material is left out and it appears as if John assumes that his readers are already familiar with the other Gospels. Augustine believed that, “The canonical order of the Gospels also indicated the order of composition: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John. This theory is thought to find some support in the statements of the early church fathers and has been presumed for much of church history. Modern advocates include John Chapman and B.C. Butler.”

Strauss also insisted that the Gospel of John was basically a myth. Strauss could also not accept the idea of Christ being God. Carson writes, “So far as Johannine studies are concerned, his major significance was that he applied this approach to Christology, with the result that John’s presentation of Jesus as genuinely and simultaneously God and man also falls under the category ‘myth’, and John’s Gospel becomes the least historically credible of the canonical Gospels.” Strauss had attempted to destroy any historical understanding of Christianity.

Kostenberger states that Strauss, “Claimed that all four gospels, but especially John, should be classified, not as accurate historical narratives, but as myths and legends. Moreover, like Bretschneider, Strauss believed that the Synoptics and John contained irreconcilable differences,

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6 Ibid, 12.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
so that one had to choose either one or the other gospel tradition—and Strauss, for his part, preferred the Synoptics.”

**Rebuttal to Bretschneider and Strauss**

As discussed above, John’s gospel is unique. In fact, 92 percent of the gospel is unique. Kostenberger points out that, “John’s gospel does not feature many of the significant components found in the other gospels, such as narrative parables, Jesus’s teaching on the kingdom of God, the eschatological discourse, the Sermon on the Mount including the Lord’s Prayer, and many others.” Kostenberger continues to show the uniqueness of John’s gospel by saying, “In fact while Matthew and Luke share over 90 percent of Mark’s material, only 8 percent of John’s content is paralleled in the Synoptics (e.g., the feeding of the five thousand in 6:1-14); 92 percent of John’s gospel is unique.”

John Hart agrees with Kostenberger on the uniqueness of John’s gospel. Hart states, “While the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) contain much parallel material, over 90 percent of John is unique. Unlike the Synoptics, John’s unique content (e.g., woman at the well, Nicodemus) was designed primarily for evangelism (20:30-31).”

Carson also lists many of the same topics that are left out of John’s gospel. He also comments on some that are unique to the gospel. Carson writes,

John includes a fair amount of material of which the Synoptists make no mention. All of the material in John 2-4, for instance, including his miraculous transformation of water into wine, his dialogue with Nicodemus and his ministry in Samaria, find no Synoptic counterpart. Further, the resurrection of Lazarus, Jesus’ frequent visits to Jerusalem, and his extended dialogues or discourses in the temple and in various synagogues, not to mention much of his private instruction to his disciples, are all exclusive to the Fourth Gospel.

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11 Ibid, 188.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
The scholar’s above have acknowledged at length regarding the differences in John’s gospel. But do these differences suggest that it could not have been an authentic account of Christ written by an eyewitness? Kostenberger points out that John contains, “traces of acquaintance with the Synoptic tradition (if not the actual written gospels), with which John expects his readers to be familiar. Note, for example, 1:40, where Andrew is called ‘Simon Peter’s brother,’ even though Peter has not been mentioned. Or consider 3:24” *(This was before John [the Baptist] was put in prison).”*¹⁵ This would suggest that John assumed that his reader’s already knew this information from the other gospels. John wanted to add something unique that had not been covered in the other narratives.

Paul Enns echoes this idea of John “supplementing” the Synoptics. Enns states that it is generally agreed that, “John wrote his gospel last and, therefore, probably wrote to supplement the other gospels. For that reason John probably had in view the church and world in general as his audience. In contrast to the Synoptists, John wrote to a general audience.”¹⁶

Kostenberger also suggests that John had a different focus stating, “For John, what is significant is not Jesus’s amazing deeds in and of themselves. Rather, all of Jesus’s ‘works’ point to the essence of who Jesus is—the Christ, the Son of God. In the style of ancient biographies, John recounts the deeds of a person (in this case, Jesus) primarily as a means of illuminating his essence.”¹⁷

Because Jesus is considered divine, should the gospel be dismissed as a myth? The other gospel’s touch on this subject as well. Jesus was worshiped in Matthew by the magi, “After coming into the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell to the ground and

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¹⁷ Ibid.
worshiped Him” Matt. 2:11, NASB). Only God can accept worship. In the gospel of Mark Jesus indicates that He and the Father are one, “Whoever receives one child like this in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me does not receive Me, but Him who sent Me” (Mk. 9:37).

The divinity of Jesus is not a new doctrine in the gospel of John; it is just more of a focus to show the true essence of Jesus the Son of God.

The deity of Jesus is a topic than runs through the entire New Testament. The apostle Paul argued that, “Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men” (Ph. 2:5-7). This sounds like Paul believed in the deity of Jesus. That He was uniquely God and man.

**Johannine Community Hypothesis**

Another theory that has questioned the authorship of the gospel of John is called the Johannine community hypothesis. This hypothesis suggests that, “John’s focus on internal community relations indicates that his entire gospel is a sectarian document. Using a sociological grid, certain scholars have included that the so-called Johannine community, like the Qumran community, had a negative attitude toward the outside world, perhaps because they were ostracized for their faith.”

Culpepper was one proponent of the Johannine community hypothesis. Carson writes, “His work is largely given over to a delineation of various ‘schools’ in the ancient world: the Pythagorean school, the Greek academy, the lyceum, the ‘school’ at Qumran, the house of Hillel, Philo’s ‘school’ and so forth.” However, Carson argues that Culpepper, “offers no criteria whatsoever to distinguish how this ‘school’ could be distinguished from a group of Christians

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18 Ibid, 135.
who cherish the Evangelist’s writings and commend them to others.”

Carson argues that the theory of a Johannine community is based entirely on inference.

Kostenberger asserts that the Johannine community theory rose to great prominence even though there was no evidence of this community. Kostenberger points out that recent scholars such as Hengel and Bauckham, “have decisively shown that there is no historical evidence even for the existence of such a ‘Johannine community’ and that John’s gospel is not a sectarian document but rather an apostolic gospel aimed at universal readership.”

**Internal Evidence of John as Author**

The internal evidence is found in the text of John itself. The text indicates that the writer was an eyewitness to the works of Jesus. In the first chapter of John the writer states, “And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth” (Jn. 1:14). The writer uses the word “us” and “we saw His glory.” This choice of words appears to point to an eyewitness of the ministry of Jesus. Kostenberger suggests that we are given the answer to who the “us” and “we” are, “What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him’ (2:11). At the very outset, John’s gospel claims to represent apostolic eyewitness testimony regarding Jesus’ earthly ministry.”

Throughout the gospel of John the writer refers to “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” This title is used in the last chapter of John, “Peter, turning around, saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them; the one who also had leaned back on His bosom at the supper and said, ‘Lord,

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20 Ibid, 81.
21 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid, 4.
who is the one who betrays You?” (Jn. 21:20). Also in verse 24 the writer asserts, “This is the
disciple who is testifying to these things, and we know that his testimony is true” (Jn. 20:24). So
it is evident that it is one of the remaining eleven disciples. Kostenberger narrows the identity
down even further noting that “the disciple whom Jesus loved” was fishing with six other
disciples at the Sea of Galilee. Kostenberger points out that, “he cannot be Simon Peter,
Thomas…or Nathanael (= Bartholomew?), but must be either one of the sons of Zebedee or one
of the two ‘other disciples.’ If he is one of the sons of Zebedee, he can hardly be James, since
according to 21:23 there was a rumor in the early church that the ‘disciple whom Jesus loved’
would not die, but James was martyred already in AD 42.” This begins to narrow the possibilities
on the identity of “the disciple whom Jesus loved.”

In John’s gospel, “the disciple whom Jesus loved” is closely associated with Peter. If this
is the case, then other Scriptures should be able to identify who this close associate of Peter’s
was. Kostenberger asserts that, “The answer could not be more unambiguous: it is John the son
of Zebedee (Luke 22:8; Acts 3-4; 8:14-25; Gal. 2:9). Thus we can conclude that the internal
evidence of John’s gospel, corroborated by evidence from the rest of the New Testament, points
unequivocally to John the son of Zebedee as the author of John’s gospel.”²⁵

Hart also suggests that the writing of the Gospel of John is similar to other books written
by John. Hart states, “The similarities with Revelation, written by John, reinforce the strong case
made for the traditional view that the apostle John wrote the book.”²⁶ The internal evidence is
convincing that the apostle John did write the gospel of John.

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²⁵ Ibid, 5.
External Evidence

Polycarp was an early church father who was a disciple of the apostle John. Eusebius writes of Polycarp, “But Polycarp also was not only instructed by the apostles, and acquainted with many that had seen Christ, but was also appointed by apostles in Asia bishop of the church of Smyrna. We too saw him in our early youth; for he lived a long time, and died, when a very old man, a glorious and most illustrious martyr’s death, having always taught the things which he had learned from the apostles, which the Church also hands down, and which alone are true.”27

Irenaeus writes that Polycarp had stated, “John the disciple of the Lord, who leaned back on his breast, published the Gospel while he was resident at Ephesus in Asia’ (Adv. Haer. 3.1.2). This early father thus identified the author of John’s gospel unambiguously with John the apostle, who is called ‘the disciple whom Jesus loved’ in John 13:23 and later passages.”28 Clement of Alexandria also commented that, “John, last of all,…composed a spiritual Gospel’ (quoted by Eusebius, H.E. 6.14.7). From the end of the second century on, the church is virtually unanimous in attributing the Fourth Gospel’s authorship to John, the son of Zebedee.”29

Hart agrees with the accuracy of the statement made by Irenaeus. Hart writes, “The early church father Irenaeus (d. AD 200) claimed that John wrote the Fourth Gospel after he was released from prison on the island of Patmos (Rv 1:9) and lived in Ephesus. Irenaeus also wrote that he personally learned this information from the aged Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna (d. AD 155), who in turn was disciple by the apostle John.”30 Hart also agrees with the external evidence


29 Ibid.

regarding the apostle John as author. Hart writes, “External evidence, through the testimony of Ignatius, Polycarp, Tatian, Theophilus, and others, attests to John’s authorship of the gospel.”  

There has only been one reference to the author of John’s gospel that some suggest it refers to someone other than John the apostle. Papias is quoted by Eusebius as stating, “And if anyone chanced to come who had actually been a follower of the elders, I would enquire as to the discourses of the elders, what Andrew or what Peter said, or what Philip, or what Thomas or James, or what John or Matthew or any other of the Lord’s disciples; and the things which Aristion and John the Elder, disciples of the Lord, say.” Kostenberger, Kellum, and Quarles go on to explain that, “It is more likely that Papias referred to John the son of Zebedee by two different names, distinguishing between deceased eyewitnesses of Jesus’ ministry and those who were still alive in his day. The Papias quote wanes in importance when set in the context of other early evidence.”

**The Date of John’s Gospel**

After weighing the internal and external evidence for the apostle John as author of the gospel the question arises when was it written? As stated above, Irenaeus wrote the gospel was written after John left the island of Patmos and was living in Ephesus. Scholars such as Hart suggested above that the gospel of John was written last. Carson writes that no argument for the year can be considered convincing, “Almost any date between about AD 55 and AD 95 is possible. Even so, 21:23 suggests it was probably nearer the end of that period than the beginning.”

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31 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
Hart contends that the gospel was probably written between AD 80-90. Hart argues, “A first century date for the writing of John has been confirmed by the 1920 discovery of the Greek ms fragment of John known as P 52, written c. AD 125. The original must have been penned much earlier, perhaps c. AD 80-90.” Kostenberger elaborates on the archaeological evidence pointing out the John Rylands papyrus which was, “an Egyptian fragment containing John18:31-33 and 37-38 and dated around 1925. Allowing for time for John’s original manuscript to be copied and to make its way from Ephesus in Asia Minor to Egypt, this pushes the date of writing of John’s gospel back to the late first century.”

Kostenberger agrees that the gospel was probably written in the AD 80’s after the destruction of the temple. Kostenberger states, “John’s purpose in emphasizing Jesus’s replacement of the temple and Jewish festivals was probably to exploit the temple’s destruction evangelistically in order to reach Diaspora Jews and gentiles attracted to Judaism (proselytes).

Conclusion

This paper was written to explore the debate over the authorship of the gospel of John. The detractors’ theories such as Bretschneider and Strauss. The arguments regarding the differences between the gospel of John and the Synoptic gospels were explored. It was pointed out that there is indeed a difference in the gospel of John and the other gospel’s. However this does not make the gospel a myth, it shows that John’s gospel was written last and it assumes that the readers are already familiar with the other narratives of the life of Christ.

37 Ibid, 8.
38 Ibid.
John also focused on the essence of who Jesus was. Kostenberger writes, “As Clement of Alexandria put it, John ‘composed a spiritual Gospel.’ By this Clement meant to imply not that the other gospels are unspiritual, but that John is more overtly interested in the theological underpinnings of Jesus’s person and work than the Synoptics.”

The paper also discussed Strauss’s problem with John portraying Jesus as both God and man. Strauss argued that John should be considered myth because it demonstrated the deity of Christ. This paper argued that the deity of Jesus is not exclusive to the gospel of John. Scriptures were given from other gospels and the writings of Paul to show that the deity of Jesus is a common theology all through the New Testament.

The Johannine Community Hypothesis was also explored. This hypothesis argues that John depends on sources, John’s background was Greek not Jewish, John cannot be taken seriously as an historical witness, and that John’s theology reflects later thought. Carson argued that there is no evidence for a school of thought that produced the gospel and the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, “Indicates that the language of John’s gospel, rather than reflecting Hellenistic traits, is closely paralleled in this particular brand of Judaism. This discovery effectively overturned the thesis that the Fourth Gospel is a product of Greek community.”

This paper also looked at the internal evidence of the gospel of John. The phrase “the disciple whom Jesus loved” was discussed and seems to point to the apostle John as the author. When compared with other Scriptures the apostle John and Peter have a close relationship as portrayed in John between Peter and “the disciple whom Jesus loved.”

The external evidence was also explored. Early church fathers such as Irenaeus and Polycarp’s testimony were considered. This did not only affirm that the apostle John was the

39 Ibid.
41 Ibid, 201.
author of the gospel, it also provided a location in Ephesus as the place the gospel was penned. It also provided a time after John left the island of Patmos.

This research also looked at possible time frames for the authorship of this gospel. The research seems to agree that the gospel of John was written sometime after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in the AD 80’s. John probably used the destruction of the temple to help evangelize the community.

After conducting the research for this paper, it appears very evident that the author of the gospel of John was in fact John the apostle of Jesus. This seems to be backed up by the internal and external evidence. This would provide a historical and accurate eyewitness account of Jesus Christ as witnessed by the apostle John. “This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and wrote these things, and we know that his testimony is true” (Jn. 21:24).
Bibliography


