

Who Wrote the Fourth Gospel?

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The Synoptic gospels are officially anonymous, meaning they do not explicitly reveal the identity of the author within the text itself. We know the identity of the authors through church tradition as well as the titles that early scribes affixed to the manuscripts they copied: "The Gospel according to Matthew," "The Gospel according to Mark," "The Gospel according to Luke." The fourth Gospel, however, is different. It identifies the author within the text itself:

Peter turned and saw **the disciple whom Jesus loved** following them, the one who also had leaned back against him during the supper and had said, "Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?" 21 When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, "Lord, what about this man?" 22 Jesus said to him, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!" 23 So the saying spread abroad among the brothers that **this disciple** was not to die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he was not to die, but, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?" 24 **This is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things, and who has written these things**, and we know that his testimony is true. (John 21:20-24)

The disciple whom Jesus loved wrote the fourth gospel. But who, exactly, does this refer to? This is not the first time we read of this character in the fourth gospel. He is explicitly mentioned in 13:23-25, 19:26-27, 20:2-10, 21:7, and 21:20 as "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (or some similar variation). He is implicitly identified in 1:35-40 as an unnamed disciple,¹ in 18:15-16 as the "other disciple," and in 19:35 as "he who saw" the blood and water pour out of Jesus when he was speared on the cross.² As such, he has come to be known as the beloved disciple (BD).

¹We are told about two disciples of John the Baptist who began to follow Jesus (1:35,37). One is named as Andrew (v.40), but the other is left unnamed. Given the fact that the author names so many others who met Jesus, it's as if the author is intentionally leaving this second disciple unnamed. This mysterious disciple is most likely the unnamed beloved disciple that is spoken of later in the book since we are told that the BD was one of the disciples who was with Jesus "from the beginning" (13:21-26; 15:27). It would be quite strange if the author did not record his meeting with Jesus in the beginning of Jesus' ministry, if indeed the BD was present with Jesus from the beginning.

It would also make sense for the beloved disciple to appear in the beginning of the work since ancient authors often indicated their primary source by bookending their composition with the name of their source. Mark bookends his gospel with references to Peter (1:16; 16:7), and Peter is mentioned 22 times in the short book. Luke bookends his gospel with references to Peter as well (5:4; 24:34), and mentions him 28 times. It would not be unexpected, then, for the author of the fourth gospel to bookend his gospel with references to the beloved disciple. He is introduced covertly in 1:35,37, and then once again at the end of the gospel in 21:24.

²The identification of this witness as the BD is not as clear as the other passages, but the identification seems fairly solid. First, rather than identifying who it was that saw this, the author chooses to speak of him cryptically as "he who saw it."

Secondly, it is said of this witness that "his testimony is true, and **he knows that he is telling the truth.**" If this were someone other than Lazarus, we would fully expect the affirmation that his testimony is true, but not the second affirmation that this witness knows he is telling the truth. That second statement reflects the witnesses personal thoughts and assurance. Such a statement is best explained as being autobiographical; i.e. it was written by Lazarus about himself. He is the witness who saw blood and water pour out of Jesus' body when He died on the cross.

Finally, what is said about this witness is virtually identical to what is later said regarding the BD. In 19:35 it is said that "**his testimony is true**, and he knows that he is telling the truth. In 21:24 it is said of the BD that "we know **his testimony is true.**" The verbal similarity is clearly intended as a clue to identifying this witness of Jesus' death.

Traditionally, the BD has been identified as the Apostle John. That is why the fourth gospel bears the title of the “Gospel According to John” in our Bibles. However, there are good reasons to doubt this identification. I am persuaded that John is not the BD, but he is the author of the fourth gospel. This may sound contradictory, but only if you assume that the BD is the author of the fourth gospel. I will argue that the BD is not the *author* of the fourth gospel, but the primary *source* used by the author of the fourth gospel. There is compelling evidence to suggest that the BD is Lazarus, and that Lazarus committed his recollections of Jesus to writing. John, the author of the fourth gospel, used this written source material to compose his gospel. He did not merely publish what Lazarus had written, but edited the content to construct a truly new piece of literature. John added an introduction and conclusion, and edited Lazarus’ material to fit his literary purposes and construct a well-ordered account of Jesus’ ministry and Passion.

To make my case, we will examine both the external (evidence outside of the text) and internal (evidence within the text) evidence regarding authorship of the fourth gospel.

EXTERNAL EVIDENCE

Traditionally, the Apostle John has been identified as the author of the fourth gospel. This identification is largely substantiated by the external evidence. There are two primary sources of external evidence: extant manuscripts and the traditions of the early church.

Extant Manuscripts

Our first source of external evidence is the extant manuscripts of the fourth gospel. Every extant manuscript that still contains the book title attributes the gospel to “John.” The title is contained in at least seven manuscripts dated prior to the sixth century,³ and reads “gospel according to John” or “according to John.”

Early Church Fathers

The second source of external evidence is church tradition as preserved in the writings of the early church fathers. They universally agree that the fourth gospel was written by someone named John, but not all of them specify which John wrote the gospel. Some identify him as the apostle, while others seem to identify him as John the Elder – another leader of the early church. That is why I qualified my statement to say that identifying the Apostle John was the author of the fourth gospel is “*largely* substantiated by the external evidence.” Let’s review our earliest sources regarding the authorship of the fourth gospel.

Papias

Papias was bishop of Hierapolis, near Laodicea and Colossae. He wrote a five-book work titled *Exposition of the Logia of the Lord* circa A.D. 110. Unfortunately, this work has been lost to antiquity, but fragments

³p66 (~200), p75 (early 3rd century), Codex Sinaiticus (4th century), Codex Vaticanus (4th century), Codex Alexandrinus (5th century), Codex Bezae (5th century), and Codex Washingtoniensis (5th century). In addition to these Greek manuscripts, there are a number of early translations as well including the Sahidic Coptic (3rd century), Curetonian Syriac (3rd/4th century), Fayyumic Coptic (4th century), Achmimic Coptic (4th century), Old Latin (4th century), Proto-Bohairic Coptic (4th/5th century), and Middle Egyptian Fayyumic Coptic (4th/5th century).

of it have survived in the quotations of later authors such as Eusebius of Caesarea's *Ecclesiastical History*. Eusebius quotes Papias as writing:

I shall not hesitate also to put into properly ordered form for you everything I learned carefully in the past from **the elders** and noted down well, for the truth of which I vouch. For unlike most people I did not enjoy those who have a great deal to say, but those who teach the truth. Nor did I enjoy **those who recall someone else's commandments** given by the Lord to the faith and proceeding from the truth itself. And if by chance **anyone who had been in attendance on the elders** should come my way, I inquired about the words of **the elders** — [that is,] what [according to the elders] Andrew or Peter said, or Philip, or Thomas or James, or John or Matthew or any other of the **Lord's disciples**, and whatever Ariston and the **elder John, the Lord's disciples**, were saying. For I did not think that information from books would profit me as much as information from a living and surviving voice. (*Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.3-4)

Papias identified four categories of people:

1. The elders
2. Those who heard the elders
3. Jesus' disciples
4. Ariston⁴ and John the Elder

The distinction between groups 3 and 4 is important. Papias uses the aorist *eipen* when speaking of Jesus' disciples (which, given the names in the list, it's clear that Papias is referring to the apostles). The aorist is used for past tense, implying that the apostles were already dead at the time Papias was writing. However, when Papias speaks of Ariston and John the Elder, he uses the present tense *legousin*, implying that they were still alive and teaching at the time Papias was writing. That means Papias was separated from the apostles in time, but separated from Ariston and John the Elder only by space.⁵

Note that Papias also speaks of two Johns. One is a disciple (apostle) of the Lord and in the category of those already dead, whereas the other is identified as "the elder" and in the category of a living voice. John the Elder is not the same person as John the Apostle.⁶ Papias has not had personal contact with Ariston or John the Elder because they are separated by distance, but he has interviewed those who were disciples of Ariston and John the Elder, and passed on the information he gleaned.

The first bit of information Papias communicates is something John the Elder had said regarding the construction of the gospels. His purpose in communicating this information was not to identify the authors or defend authorial origination, but to explain why some of the gospels lacked the sort of literary and chronological order typical of other Greco-Roman histories.⁷ Since there was no apologetic value in identifying the authors, there is no reason to believe that Papias was making the authors up.

Unfortunately, Eusebius only quoted what Papias said concerning the gospels of Matthew and Mark. He did not quote what Papias wrote concerning the gospels of Luke or John. However, there is good reason to believe that Eusebius may have intentionally omitted Papias' comments regarding the fourth gospel because they conflicted with Eusebius' own views regarding authorship. Let me explain.

⁴Probably the first bishop of Smyrna as indicated in the *Apostolic Constitutions* 7.46.

⁵Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), 419.

⁶Bauckham, 17.

⁷Bauckham, 227.

Eusebius may have quoted Papias because of Papias' reference to the two Johns. Eusebius did not believe the book of Revelation was canonical. He attributed it to John the Elder rather than John the Apostle. Papias established the existence of this other John, who was roughly contemporaneous with the Apostle John. However, Eusebius did believe that John the Apostle wrote the fourth gospel. Perhaps the reason he did not include Papias' comments on the origin of the fourth gospel because Papias said John the Elder claimed authorship of that gospel. In other words, perhaps Eusebius only quoted of Papias what was useful for confirming his own views of Revelation, but omitted what Papias wrote when it contradicted his own views of the authorship of the fourth gospel.⁸ It is possible, therefore, but by no means certain, that Papias affirmed the fourth gospel was written by John the Elder.

Ptolemy

Ptolemy, a heretic in the early- and mid- 2nd century, identifies the author of the fourth gospel as "the apostle" in a letter to Flora quoted in Epiphanius:

On the other hand, one cannot impute the Law to the injustice of the opposite, God, for it is opposed to injustice. Such persons do not comprehend what was said by the Savior. For a house or city divided against itself cannot stand [Mt 12:25], declared our Savior. Furthermore, **the apostle** says that creation of the world is due to him, for everything was made through him and apart from him nothing was made [Jn 1:3]. Thus he takes away in advance the baseless wisdom of the false accusers, and shows that the creation is not due to a God who corrupts but to the one who is just and hates evil." (Epiphanius, *Against Heresies*, 33.3.1 - 33.7.10)

Muratorian Canon

The Muratorian Canon (~ A.D. 150), which contains our earliest canonical list, seems to identify the author as a John other than the apostle:

The fourth of the Gospels, that of **John, (one) of the disciples**. When his **fellow-disciples and bishops** urged him, he said: Fast with me from today for three days, and what will be revealed to each one let us relate to one another. In the same night it was revealed to **Andrew, one of the apostles**, that, while all were to go over [it], John in his own name should write everything down. And therefore, though various rudiments are taught in the several Gospel books, yet that matters nothing for the faith of believers, since by the one and guiding Spirit everything is declared in all: concerning the birth, concerning the passion, concerning the resurrection, concerning the intercourse with his disciples and concerning his two comings, the first despised in lowliness, which has come to pass, the second glorious in kingly power, which is yet to come. What wonder then if John, being thus always true to himself, adduces particular points in his epistles also, where he says of himself: What we have seen with our eyes and have heard with our ears and our hands have handled, that have we written to you. For so he confesses not merely an eye and ear witness, but also a writer of all the marvels of the Lord in order.

The fact that the author makes a distinction between John as "one of the disciples" and Andrew "the apostle" implies that John is not an apostle, but merely a disciple of Jesus and bishop (elder). Depending on what one makes of Eusebius' use of Papias, this is either the first or second identification of John the Elder as the author of the fourth gospel in the second century.

⁸Bauckham, 424.

Irenaeus

In A.D. 180, Irenaeus affirmed the authors of all four Gospels in *Against Heresies*:

Matthew published his own Gospel among the Hebrews in their own tongue, when Peter and Paul were preaching the Gospel in Rome and founding the church there. After their departure, Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, himself handed down to us in writing the substance of Peter's preaching. Luke, the follower of Paul, set down in a book the Gospel preached by his teacher. Then John, the disciple of the Lord, who also leaned on his breast, himself produced his Gospel while he was living at Ephesus in Asia. (*Against Heresies* 3.1.1)

Irenaeus not only identifies John as the author of the fourth gospel, but also identifies John as the BD. While Irenaeus does not specify which John wrote the gospel in this context, he had previously named John and identified him as an apostle:

Now, that the first stage of early life embraces thirty years, and that this extends onwards to the fortieth year, everyone will admit; but from the fortieth and fiftieth year a man begins to decline towards old age, which our Lord possessed while He still fulfilled the office of a Teacher, even as the Gospel and all the elders testify; those who were conversant in Asia with John, the disciple of the Lord, [affirming] that John conveyed to them that information. And he remained among them up to the times of Trajan. Some of them, moreover, saw **not only John, but the other apostles also**, and heard the very same account from them, and bear testimony as to the [validity of] the statement. (*Against Heresies*, 2.22.5)

That Irenaeus identifies this John with the apostle is also evident by his synonymous usage of "apostle" and "disciple of the Lord" both before and after the quote in question (1.9.2; 3.3.4).⁹

Theophilus

In ~A.D. 180, Theophilus of Antioch was the first to unambiguously quote a passage from the fourth gospel and attribute it to someone named John.¹⁰ He writes in *Apology to Autolytus* 2.22, "And hence the holy writings teach us and all the spirit-bearing men, one of whom, John, says, 'In the Beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God.'" Which, John, however, cannot be ascertained.

Polycrates

Polycrates was bishop of Ephesus in late second century. We only have an excerpt from his writings preserved in Eusebius, of a letter he wrote to Bishop Victor of Rome (~A.D. 190-195). Polycrates not only identifies the BD as John, but also says that he was a high priest: "John also, he who leaned back on the Lord's breast, who was a priest, wearing the high-priestly frontlet, both witness and teacher. He has fallen asleep at Ephesus." (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.24.2-7).

If Polycrates is correct, then the BD whom Polycrates identified as John could not have been the Apostle John since there is nothing in Scripture to suggest that the Apostle John was a high priest. Indeed, there is no historical record of anyone named John serving as high priest in the first century. This John would have had to have been a priest prior to Jesus' ministry since no disciple of Jesus would have or could have been a high priest after Jesus' resurrection. Surely Polycrates is mistaken. Bauckham thinks that Polycrates arrived at this conclusion based on an exegetical method rather than historical tradition. Polycrates identified the author of John with the John of Acts 4:6, just as he identified Philip the

⁹Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 24-5.

¹⁰D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 139.

evangelist with Philip the apostle in another place.¹¹ What's important for our purposes, however, is that if Polycrates identified John with Acts 4:6, then he must not have believed that the author of the fourth gospel was the Apostle John. Given the fact that Polycrates' history seems to be wrong, however, not much can be made of his claims. At best, he perpetuates the tradition that someone named John wrote the fourth gospel.

Clement of Alexandria

Clement of Alexandria, writing ~A.D. 180, said this of the fourth gospel:

Of all those who had been with the Lord, only Matthew and John left us their recollections, and tradition says that they took to writing perforce.... John, it is said, used all the time a message which was not written down, and at last took to writing for the following cause. The three gospels which had been written down before were distributed to all including himself; it is said he welcomed them and testified to their truth but said that there was only lacking to the narrative the account of what was done by Christ at first and at the beginning of the preaching.... They say accordingly that John was asked to relate in his own gospel the period passed over in silence by the former evangelists. (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.24.1-13)

In ~A.D. 200-210, Clement of Alexandria wrote again: "But, last of all, John, perceiving that the external facts had been made plain in the Gospel, being urged by his friends, and inspired by the Spirit, composed a spiritual Gospel." (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.14.7)

Clement does not specify that the Apostle John wrote the fourth gospel, but given the juxtaposition with Matthew as "those who had been with the Lord," it seems likely that he believed it to be the apostle.

Origen

Origen, in his commentary on Matthew (~A.D. 246-248), writes:

Among the four Gospels, which are the only indisputable ones in the Church of God under heaven, I have learned by tradition that the first was written by Matthew, who was once a publican, but afterwards an apostle of Jesus Christ, and it was prepared for the converts from Judaism, and published in the Hebrew language. The second is by Mark, who composed it according to the instructions of Peter, who in his Catholic epistle acknowledges him as a son, saying, "The church that is at Babylon elected together with you, salutes you, and so doth Marcus, my son." And the third by Luke, the Gospel commended by Paul, and composed for Gentile converts. Last of all that by John.

...

Why need we speak of him who reclined upon the bosom of Jesus, John, who has left us one Gospel, though he confessed that he might write so many that the world could not contain them? And he wrote also the Apocalypse, but was commanded to keep silence and not to write the words of the seven thunders. (Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.* 6.25.4-6, 9)

Origen clearly identifies the BD as John, but it's not clear as to which John. Again, in his *Homilies on Joshua*, Origen writes concerning the NT books (~250 AD):

So too our Lord Jesus Christ...sent his apostles as priests carrying well-wrought trumpets. First Matthew sounded the priestly trumpet in his Gospel, Mark also, and Luke, and John, each gave forth a strain on their priestly trumpets. Peter moreover sounds with the two trumpets of his Epistles; James also and Jude. Still the number is incomplete, and John gives forth the trumpet sound through his Epistles; and Luke while describing the deeds of the apostles. Latest of all, moreover, that one comes who said, "I think

¹¹Bauckham, 450-1.

that God has set us forth as the apostles last of all" [1 Cor 4:9], and thundering on the fourteen trumpets of his Epistles he threw down, even to their very foundations, the wall of Jericho, that is to say, all the instruments of idolatry and the dogmas of the philosophers.

Once again, Origen identifies the author of the fourth gospel as John, but does not specify if he was the apostle or not. We do know, however, that Origen believed the author of the fourth gospel was also the author of the book of Revelation. Since we know Origen believed John the Apostle wrote the latter, it follows that Origen believed John the Apostle was the BD and wrote the fourth gospel.¹²

Eusebius

Finally, the early third century bishop of Caesarea, Eusebius, had this to say about the fourth gospel:

At that time **the apostle and evangelist John**, the one whom Jesus loved, was still living in Asia, and governing the churches of that region, having returned after the death of Domitian from his exile on the island. And that he was still alive at that time may be established by the testimony of two witnesses. They should be trustworthy who have maintained the orthodoxy of the Church; and such indeed were Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria. The former in the second book of his work *Against Heresies*, writes as follows: "And all the elders that associated with John the disciple of the Lord in Asia bear witness that John delivered it to them. For he remained among them until the time of Trajan." And in the third book of the same work he attests the same thing in the following words: "But the church in Ephesus also, which was founded by Paul, and where John remained until the time of Trajan, is a faithful witness of the apostolic tradition." (*Ecclesiastical History* 3.23.1-4)

And again:

And in the first place his Gospel, which is known to all the churches under heaven, must be acknowledged as genuine. That it has with good reason been put by the ancients in the fourth place, after the other three Gospels, may be made evident in the following way. Those great and truly divine men, I mean the apostles of Christ, were purified in their life, and were adorned with every virtue of the soul, but were uncultivated in speech. They were confident indeed in their trust in the divine and wonder-working power which was granted unto them by the Savior, but they did not know how, nor did they attempt to proclaim the doctrines of their teacher in studied and artistic language, but employing only the demonstration of the divine Spirit, which worked with them, and the wonder-working power of Christ, which was displayed through them, they published the knowledge of the kingdom of heaven throughout the whole world, paying little attention to the composition of written works. And this they did because they were assisted in their ministry by one greater than man. Paul, for instance, who surpassed them all in vigor of expression and in richness of thought, committed to writing no more than the briefest epistles, although he had innumerable mysterious matters to communicate, for he had attained even unto the sights of the third heaven, had been carried to the very paradise of God, and had been deemed worthy to hear unspeakable utterances there. And the rest of the followers of our Savior, the twelve apostles, the seventy disciples, and countless others besides, were not ignorant of these things. Nevertheless, **of all the disciples of the Lord, only Matthew and John have left us written memorials**, and they, tradition says, were led to write only under the pressure of necessity. For Matthew, who had at first preached to the Hebrews, when he was about to go to other peoples, committed his Gospel to writing in his native tongue, and thus compensated those whom he was obliged to leave for the loss of his presence. And when Mark and Luke had already published their Gospels, they say that John, who had employed all his time in proclaiming the Gospel orally, finally proceeded to write for the following reason. The three Gospels already mentioned having come into the hands of all and into his own too, they say that he accepted them and bore witness to their truthfulness; but that there was lacking in them an account of

¹²In his *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 1:14, Origen writes, "John, son of Zebedee, says in his Apocalypse...." See <https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf09/anf09.xv.iii.i.xiv.html>.

the deeds done by Christ at the beginning of his ministry. And this indeed is true. For it is evident that the three evangelists recorded only the deeds done by the Savior for one year after the imprisonment of John the Baptist and indicated this in the beginning of their account.

...

They say, therefore, that the **apostle John**, being asked to do it for this reason, gave in his Gospel an account of the period which had been omitted by the earlier evangelists, and of the deeds done by the Saviour during that period; that is, of those which were done before the imprisonment of the Baptist. And this is indicated by him, they say, in the following words: "This beginning of miracles did Jesus"; and again when he refers to the Baptist, in the midst of the deeds of Jesus, as still baptizing in Ænon near Salim; where he states the matter clearly in the words: "For John was not yet cast into prison." John accordingly, in his Gospel, records the deeds of Christ which were performed before the Baptist was cast into prison, but the other three evangelists mention the events which happened after that time. (*Ecclesiastical History* 3.24.2-8,11-12)

Eusebius unambiguously claims that John the Apostle was the author of the fourth gospel.

While it's clear that all early church fathers agreed that someone named John wrote the gospel, some of the earliest writers attributed it to John the Elder rather than John the Apostle. If John the Elder was the author, perhaps the two Johns became quickly confused by those outside of Ephesus, and later Christians without intimate knowledge of the history of authorship simply assumed that "John" referred to the Apostle John.¹³ It is also possible that those who attributed it to John the Elder were mistaken. The only thing we can know for certain is that everyone thought someone named John wrote the gospel. As such, the external evidence for John's authorship is on solid footing.

Anti-Marcionite Prologues

Prologues to the gospels of Mark, Luke, and John began to be included in some Old Latin translations sometime between the late second century and the fourth century. The following prologue to John is found in approximately ten manuscripts:

The Gospel of John was revealed and given to the churches by John while still in the body, just as Papias of Hieropolis, the close disciple of John, related in the exoterics, that is, in the last five books. Indeed he wrote down the gospel, while John was dictating carefully. But the heretic Marcion, after being condemned by him because he was teaching the opposite to him [John], was expelled by John. But he [Marcion] had brought writings or letters to him [John] from the brothers which were in Pontus.

The most powerful argument in favor of the authenticity of this tradition is the fact that the author of this relatively early Johannean prologue claims to be getting his information from Papias' own writings (as opposed to some oral tradition), even specifying the approximate location of the passage within Papias' five volume work. However, we don't have access to this supposed Papias passage to determine (1) that it exists, and (2) that the author of the Anti-Marcionite Prologue interpreted it correctly.

Most scholars do not accept this as accurate tradition, and for good reason. It contradicts one of the few surviving quotes we have from Papias' work (cited earlier). Papias made it clear that he did not personally know any of the apostles, including John, nor did he personally know John the Elder. As such, he could not have been a "hearer of John" as Irenaeus claimed (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5.33.4), nor John's amanuensis for the Fourth Gospel as this Anti-Marcionite Prologue claims.

While this ancient prologue affirms that someone named John wrote the fourth gospel, it does not specify that it was John the Apostle as opposed to John the Elder or some other John. That said, I think

¹³Bauckham, 416.

we are safe to assume that the apostle is in view since there is no qualifier associated with John's name. Qualifiers are not needed when referring to the most famous person to bear that name. For example, if I want to refer to the King of rock and roll, there is no need for me to append "Presley" to the name "Elvis." Everyone would assume I am referring to Elvis Presley. A qualifier is only needed if I am referring to an Elvis other than the famed singer. Likewise, the best-known John in the early church is the Apostle John, and thus it stands to reason that the prologue refers to the apostle.

If the Apostle John is in view, however, then this is yet another reason to doubt the reliability of this tradition. Marcion wasn't born until at least A.D. 85, and thus it is impossible that the Apostle John expelled Marcion for his false teachings. John the Elder may have lived long enough to expel Marcion, however, so if there is any historical veracity to this claim, it would argue for identifying the "John" of the prologue as John the Elder rather than John the Apostle.

INTERNAL EVIDENCE

Now that we have examined the external evidence for authorship, let's turn to the internal evidence.

Evidence for Johanine Authorship

There is good internal evidence for identifying the author as the Apostle John:

1. Given the designation of "the disciple whom Jesus loved," it stands to reason that this disciple was very close to Jesus, and thus part of his inner core of disciples. Peter, James, and John are described in the Synoptics as belonging to Jesus' inner circle, so we would naturally expect the BD to be one of these three men (particularly given the close association between the BD and Peter in John 13 and 20-21). It cannot be Peter because Peter is named in scenes with the BD. It cannot be James because he died too early to be the author (A.D. 44; see Acts 12:2).
2. The BD was present at the Last Supper (John 13:21-25), which is only said to have been attended by the Twelve. Since the author never referred to himself by name, he cannot be any of the disciples specifically named at the Last Supper: Judas Iscariot (13:2,26-27), Peter (13:6-9), Thomas (14:5), Philip (14:8-9), or Judas the son of James (14:22).
3. The BD is one of the seven present for Jesus' post-resurrection appearance at the Sea of Tiberias: "Simon Peter, Thomas (called the Twin), Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples were together. ... That disciple whom Jesus loved therefore said to Peter, 'It is the Lord!'" (21:2,7a). The BD could not be Peter or Thomas since they were named at the Last Supper. He could not be James since he was already dead when the gospel was written. That leaves Nathaniel, the Apostle John, or one of these two unnamed disciples. Nathaniel was named in John 1:45-49, which leaves John or one of the two unnamed disciples.
4. John is never named in Gospel (other than a reference to his surname "sons of Zebedee" in 21:2). It would be strange for the Apostle John to be otherwise absent from this gospel given his prominence in the Synoptics and the fact that he was part of Jesus' inner circle. That is, of course, unless John the Apostle is spoken of throughout the gospel under the moniker "the disciple whom Jesus loved."
5. John the Baptist is the only John that is named as such in the gospel. Unlike the Synoptics, however, he is not called "the Baptist," but simply "John." The best explanation for the lack of

this qualifier is that the author, John the Apostle, had no need to distinguish between the two Johns as did the Synoptics since he referred to himself as the BD instead.¹⁴

Evidence against Johanine Authorship

While this is an impressive list of arguments for Johanine authorship, there is an equally impressive list of arguments against the Apostle John's authorship as well:

1. None of the events in which John participated in the Synoptics are recorded in the fourth gospel (his own calling by Jesus, the raising of Jairus' daughter, the Transfiguration). If the Apostle John authored this gospel, why would he fail to recount such personal and important events from his own unique point of view?
2. If, as is argued, the Apostle John chose to refer to himself as the BD rather than using his name, why would he finally mention himself by name (as a son of Zebedee) in 21:2? If the BD wanted to remain unnamed and mysterious, why would he name himself here and risk giving away his identity? The fact that the author refers to the sons of Zebedee is the best reason to believe the BD is not one of the sons of Zebedee, but rather one of the two unnamed disciples. The BD is consistently identified as an unnamed disciple in the gospel (1:35-40; 18:15-16; 20:2-10). It stands to reason, then, that the reason the BD left two of the seven disciples unnamed was to make it clear that he was present with those whom he named, but not one of the named disciples.
3. The BD was present at the Last Supper, but Peter's words to the BD only make sense if the BD was not one of the Twelve. When Jesus said "one of you will betray me," the disciples are said to "look at one another, uncertain of whom he spoke" (John 13:21-22). Mark adds that Jesus specified "it is one of the Twelve" (Mark 14:20; see also John 6:70). The apostles were suspicious of one another, and yet Peter had no qualms about asking the BD to ask Jesus who the betrayer is (John 13:24). Apparently, Peter was not suspicious of the BD. Why not? Because the BD was not one of the Twelve. As such, the BD could not have been the Apostle John.¹⁵
4. John the Apostle was a Galilean fisherman (Matthew 4:18-22; Luke 5:7,10). How would a Galilean fisherman know Caiaphas the high priest, and have been so influential as to gain access to the high priest's courtyard while his master was on trial for his life, and not be fearful (John 18:15-16)? He would need personal connections, and possibly be a priest himself.
5. The BD is given care of Jesus' mother by Jesus while on the cross (19:26-27). The text says BD took her into his home "from that hour." This suggests that the BD lived near Jerusalem, not in Galilee as did the Apostle John.

How might those who deny Johanine, apostolic authorship of the fourth gospel respond to the arguments presented in favor of his authorship?

1. While the designation "the disciple whom Jesus loved" clearly implies that this disciple was close to Jesus, it does not necessitate that he be part of Jesus' inner circle or even a traveling disciple

¹⁴Blomberg, 30.

¹⁵There is other evidence to support the notion that the Last Supper was attended by more than just the Twelve. In Mark 14:16, two disciples were sent ahead of the Twelve to prepare the Passover meal, and then the Twelve followed later (v. 17). There is no reason to think these two disciples did not stay to eat the meal. More importantly, in Mark 14:18-20, Jesus, speaking of the identity of His betrayer, said, "It is one of the twelve, one who dips his hand with me into the bowl." If only the Twelve were present, there would have been no need for Jesus to speak to them as "the Twelve." Jesus would have said simply, "It is one of you." The fact that He had to specify that it was one of the Twelve indicates that more were present for the supper than just the Twelve.

with Jesus. Given how much of the content of the fourth gospel takes place in or near Jerusalem (whereas most of the content of the Synoptics takes place outside of Jerusalem), the BD may have been a disciple who resided near Jerusalem and only met with Jesus when Jesus was in the local vicinity.

2. While it is true the BD was present at the Last Supper, and that it was attended by the Twelve, this does not mean the BD had to be a member of the Twelve. This presumes that the Twelve were the only disciples present for the meal. The BD could have been the owner of the house in which they met, or there could have been other disciples present the text does not name. There is good textual evidence to suggest that other disciples were present. We read in Mark 14:16 that two disciples were sent ahead of the Twelve to prepare the meal. These disciples needed to eat the Passover as well, and there is no reason to suppose that they would have eaten the meal at a place other than where they had prepared the meal for Jesus and the Twelve. Mark 14:18-20 also indicates that there were more than the Twelve present. When identifying who would betray Him, Jesus said, "It is one of the twelve, one who dips his hand with me into the bowl." If only the Twelve were present, there would have been no need to say "one of the twelve." Jesus would have simply said, "It is one of you."
3. While the BD is named as one of the company in which the Apostle John was present ("sons of Zebedee," 21:2,7), the way that the author goes out of his way to refer to himself as the BD rather than by name argues against identifying the BD as one of the five named disciples. It is better to understand the BD as being one of the two unnamed disciples who were also present.
4. While it is strange that John the Apostle is only named once (in passing) in the gospel, that does not argue for identifying John as the BD. If the author was not a traveling companion of Jesus, we would not expect for him to be a witness of the various events for which John was present. As such, we would not expect for John to be mentioned as often in the fourth gospel.

It is interesting to note that, with the exception of Peter, the author does not give attention to the same disciples that the Synoptics do. In the fourth gospel, greater attention is given to some of the "outer circle" of the Twelve, and we read about other unknown or little-known disciples as well. This includes the apostles Andrew¹⁶, Philip¹⁷, and Thomas.¹⁸ Minor disciples are also focused on, including Nathanael (1:45-49; 21:2), Lazarus (11; 12:2), Mary Magdalene (11:1-2,19-20,28,31-32,45; 12:2-8; 19:25; 20:1,11,16-18), Martha (11:1,5,19-21,24,30,39; 12:2), and Mary the wife of Cleopas (19:25). Perhaps the reason the author of the fourth gospel focused on the outer-circle apostles and lesser-known disciples is because he was not in the inner circle of the apostles.

5. The fact that John the baptizer is not given the designation, "the baptizer," in the fourth gospel does not argue for John the Apostle being the author. This argument assumes that John the Apostle must be present in the gospel since he features so prominently in the Synoptics. As noted in #4, however, the author of the fourth gospel seemed to focus on the lesser-known apostles and disciples of Jesus. If he chose not to include stories that included the Apostle John by name, then he would have no need of distinguishing the two Johns. Observing the lack of designation for the baptizer only calls attention to the fact that John the Apostle is not named in the gospel (though he is alluded to by the name of his father). Why he is not named is not clear. It could be because the author is the Apostle John who has chosen to call himself by another

¹⁶Andrew is mentioned in the Synoptics, but is only given speaking parts in the fourth gospel – 1:40-42; 6:8-10; 12:22.

¹⁷Philip is mentioned by name only one time in each Synoptic gospel, compared to four times with speaking parts in the fourth gospel – 1:43-46; 6:5-7; 12:21-22; 14:8-9.

¹⁸Thomas is mentioned by name only one time in each Synoptic gospel, compared to four episodes with speaking parts in the fourth gospel – 11:16; 14:5; 20:24-28; 21:2.

name (the BD), or because the author (who is not the Apostle John) has chosen not to write about this well-known apostle, focusing on other disciples of Jesus instead. The absence of “the baptizer” does not argue for or against Johanine authorship.

Evidence that Lazarus was the Author of the Fourth Gospel

Some, such as Ben Witherington III and Basil Davis, have suggested that the BD is Lazarus. Here are some of the reasons to identify the BD as Lazarus:¹⁹

1. Lazarus is the only character for whom it is said that Jesus loved him. Indeed, there is a special emphasis on Jesus’ love for Lazarus. Lazarus is identified by his sisters as “he whom you love,” (11:3). Apparently, Jesus’ special love for Lazarus was so well known that even Lazarus’ sisters referred to their brother in this way as opposed to using his given name. Even the mourners said, “Look how much he loved him” (11:36).
2. It is only after the introduction of Lazarus that we see references to the BD. When the BD is first mentioned in 13:23, he is described as “the one Jesus loved.” This is almost identical to the description of Lazarus in 11:3.²⁰ It seems to be the author’s way of referring back to 11:3, so as to identify the BD as Lazarus in no uncertain terms.
3. At the end of the fourth gospel, we are told that Christians came to believe that the BD would live to see Jesus’ return (John 21:20-23). While this belief was based on Jesus’ words, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?,” it is easy to see how this belief would have been formed about Lazarus in particular since Jesus had formerly raised him from the dead. Since he had been raised from the dead by Jesus, it is easy to see how people might have come to believe that he would not die again before Christ’s return.
4. Lazarus is the only one of whom it is said that many people came to believe on account of his miracle (12:11), and the stated purpose of the BD’s gospel was so that people might believe (John 20:30-31). It would be no surprise to identify the author with the very person responsible for so many coming to faith in Jesus’ day.
5. The BD is given care of Jesus’ mother by Jesus on the cross (19:26-27). The text says the BD took her into his home “from that hour.” This suggests that the BD lived near Jerusalem. Lazarus was from Bethany (11:1; 12:1), which was less than two miles from Jerusalem (11:18).
6. Lazarus’ close proximity to Jerusalem may explain why John’s Gospel has so little to say about Jesus’ Galilean ministry and so much to say about Jesus’ ministry around Jerusalem. Apparently Lazarus was not a traveling companion of Jesus, and as such, he focused on events for which he was present or happened in his geographical area.

¹⁹Basil S. Davis, “The Identity of the Disciple Whom Jesus Loved,” *The Expository Times*, 2002, DOI: 0.1177/001452460211300705, pp. 230-231.

²⁰Here is the Greek construction of each verse:

ον φιλεισ 11:3
πως εφιλει αυτον 11:36
ον αγαπα 13:23
ον αγαπα 19:26
ον εφιλει 20:2
ον αγαπα 21:7
ον αγαπα 21:20

While one might argue that since the love for Lazarus was spoken of as *phileo*, while the love spoken of for the BD was *agapao*, that there is no literary connection being made between the two. Two things need to be considered, however. First *agapao* was a specific way of referring to a “beloved” rather than love in general terms. Secondly, Jesus’ love for the BD is also spoken of in terms of *phileo* love in John 20:2, so there is no hard-and-fast distinction between the two such that we must identify the object of love as different.

The first two reasons are the most persuasive reasons for thinking that Lazarus is the BD. How could the text be more explicit regarding the identity of the BD than to explicitly declare how much Jesus loved Lazarus on two separate occasions? The fact that references to the BD only appear after Lazarus has been described as being loved by Jesus – and that, more than half-way through the book – is particularly telling. The author was not trying to hide the identity of the BD as many have supposed. Referring to Lazarus as the BD was simply a way of referring to him using a moniker that was widely used of Lazarus by others.²¹

Reconciling the Internal and External Evidence

The internal evidence for identifying the BD as Lazarus rather than John the Apostle is very compelling. However, the internal evidence is in direct conflict with the external evidence that universally identifies the author of the fourth gospel as John (with some sources explicitly identifying the BD as John). If Lazarus wrote the fourth gospel, how is it that all of the external evidence says it was written by someone named John (whether it be the apostle or the elder)? I propose that the internal and external evidence can be perfectly harmonized when we take John 21:24-25 seriously. These verses make it clear that two individuals contributed to the gospel of John. The BD provided the source material that the author of the gospel edited into its current form.

Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them, the one who also had leaned back against him during the supper and had said, "Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?" ²¹ When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, "Lord, what about this man?" ²² Jesus said to him, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!" ²³ So the saying spread abroad among the brothers that this disciple was not to die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he was not to die, but, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?" ²⁴ This is **the disciple** who is bearing witness about these things, and **who has written these things**, and **we know** that **his testimony** is true. (John 21:20-24)

The "we" in verse 24 is distinct from "his." Whoever wrote verse 24 clearly distinguished himself/themselves from the BD, who is identified as the source of the gospel. The "we" represents the editor(s). Could this editor have been someone named John? The answer depends on how we understand the plural "we know" in verse 24.

Who is "We"?

Does the "we" in "we know" represent an editorial committee or community of believers who were editing Lazarus' material, or a specific individual? On the face of it, the plural suggests the former. However, there are two considerations that inveigh against this conclusion. First, while the editor uses the plural "we know" in verse 24, he goes on to say "I suppose" in verse 25. We have then, both singular and plural pronouns being used by the same editor. Given the precedent of literary practices, it's more reasonable to think that an individual would use plural pronouns to refer to himself than to think a plurality of persons would use singular pronouns to refer to themselves.

Second, all have recognized that the style of the fourth gospel is very similar to the style of the three epistles attributed to John (particularly the first epistle). The same author seems to be responsible for all

²¹As I'll argue later, Lazarus himself probably did not use the moniker of himself. It was probably an editorial change by John when he edited Lazarus' written material.

four literary works. It is interesting to note, therefore, that the singular author of the epistles uses the plural “we” to refer to himself. Consider 1 John 1:1-5:

That which was from the beginning, which **we** have heard, which **we** have seen with **our** eyes, which **we** looked upon and have touched with **our** hands, concerning the word of life— 2 the life was made manifest, and **we** have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to **us**— 3 that which **we** have seen and heard **we** proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with **us**; and indeed **our** fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. 4 And **we** are writing these things so that **our** joy may be complete. 5 This is the message **we** have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.

Given the abundance of plural pronouns, one would get the impression that this epistle was written by a group of individuals, and yet in 2:1a it becomes clear that there is a single author: “My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin.” This juxtaposition between the plural “we” and the singular “I” is the same phenomenon we saw in John 21:24-25. Some may object that the author is simply including his readers in the reference. While the author does so in other places throughout the first epistle, that option is ruled out for 1:1-5 because “we” is distinguished from “you” (the readers) in 1:2-3, and 5.

We see a similar phenomenon in 3 John. The author identifies himself as the singular “elder” in 3 John 1, but then goes on to speak of “our authority” in verse nine and “our testimony” in verse 12.

Given the fact that the same author used plural pronouns to refer to himself alone in his epistles argues against interpreting “we know” in John 20:24 as referring to an editorial committee and in favor of interpreting it to refer to a single individual, John.²² Whether this was John the Apostle or John the Elder cannot be known for certain, although I think a good case can be made that it was John the Elder. My guess is that the name “John” stuck to this gospel, but the attribution of “the Elder” did not. Over time, people came to assume that this John was the widely known and more famous John, the Apostle.

John Edited Lazarus’ Written Testimony

John 20:24 makes it clear that the editor, John, was working from a written source rather than an oral source since he says the BD “has **written** these things.” In other words, John did not interview Lazarus to obtain these stories and then commit them to written form, but was working from something that Lazarus himself had written.

What did John do with this material? He probably edited the wording, and perhaps even the order of events to suit his literary purposes. It is unlikely that he would have simply picked up the source word-for-word. It would be difficult to attribute authorship of the book to John had he done so. At best he would be the publisher, not the author. I would argue that the editing was rather extensive. Scholars recognize that the style of the fourth gospel is very similar to the style of the three epistles attributed to John, and the opening to First John is very similar to the opening of the fourth gospel. The only way to explain how material written by Lazarus (in the gospel) could be so similar to material written by John

²²Some might wonder whether it is possible that the “we” of John 20:24 refers to a singular editor plus his readers. This is, indeed, a possibility. Whether it was John’s way of referring to himself or John’s way of including his readers, it refers to a single author rather than a group of editors.

(in the epistles) is if John highly edited Lazarus' material to be more in line with John's own style and voice. One of John's edits is likely the phrase "beloved disciple" itself. As Ben Witherington III writes:

Let's pause for a moment on that phrase "the Beloved Disciple." Jesus famously said he came to be a servant, he rebuked his disciples for their debate about which one of them was the greatest, he held up children as examples to his boastful disciples, and he preached humility. What kind of disciple would go around calling himself "the Beloved Disciple"? It's a fair question. I think that this is not what that disciple called himself. It is what his family and later Christian friends and community called him.

If Witherington is right, John is responsible for editing Lazarus' references to himself to reflect the way Lazarus' was referred to by the community. The only exception, of course, would be the references in chapter 12, since those are necessary to establish the BD's identity.

Second, he created a new ending for the gospel, and probably an introduction as well. What is the extent of John's ending? At the very least, it consists of John 21:24-25. It is more probable, however, that the entirety of chapter 21 was composed by John and annexed to Lazarus' material. Chapter 20 recounts the discovery of the empty tomb and three resurrection appearances of Jesus, followed by a fitting conclusion: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book;³¹ but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (20:30-31). And yet, immediately after this apparent conclusion, we are treated to another resurrection appearance.

What's the purpose of this encore? It seems that this additional appearance was the work of the editor, John, who appended this resurrection appearance to Lazarus' written testimony because (1) the BD was present for this appearance, and (2) it was the occasion for an important dialogue regarding the future of the BD that had caused confusion among the believing community to which John wrote.²³ More will be said regarding this in a moment.

It seems that John also wrote an introduction for Lazarus' material. Evidence for this is found in the fact that the beginning of the fourth gospel is very similar to the beginning of John's first epistle:

(John 1:1-5,9-14) In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. 4 In him was life, and the life was the light of men. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. ... 9 The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. 12 But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh

²³One might argue that John 21:1-23 is the work of the BD on the basis that it is the only resurrection appearance for which the BD was present. It would be odd to think that the BD would not have included this account in his written testimony. This is a good argument, however, I think it is outweighed by the fact that 20:30-31 appears to be a clear conclusion to what had been written. It is possible, however, that this appearance was included in Lazarus' material, but John moved it to after Lazarus' original conclusion so John could use it as a springboard to talk about the BD and Jesus' saying regarding the BD that had caused so much confusion among the believers. This may explain why there are so many details in the account that only an eyewitness such as the BD could have provided ("just as day was breaking" (4), "right side of the boat" (6), "put on his outer garment" (7), "about a hundred yards off" (8), "a charcoal fire" (9), "with fish and bread" (9), "153" fish (11), "the net was not torn" (11). Against this possibility, however, is the fact that the text explicitly says this was the "third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead." Since chapter 20 recounts the first two appearances, that would mean this appearance could not have been reported prior to 20:30 in Lazarus' original material (unless it was John who added the note that this was the third appearance, and he only means to say that it is the third appearance he is reporting).

nor of the will of man, but of God. 14 And the **Word became flesh** and dwelt among us, and **we have seen his glory**, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

(1 John 1:1-5) That which was from **the beginning**, which we have heard, which **we have seen with our eyes**, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning **the word of life**— 2 **the life** was made manifest, and **we have seen it**, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and **was made manifest** to us— 3 that which **we have seen** and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. 4 And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. 5 This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is **light**, and in him is no **darkness** at all.

It is difficult to tell exactly where John's introduction ends and his edited version of Lazarus' written testimony begins. At the very least, John's introduction covers 1:1-18. This material is very different in tone from what follows it, and is clearly intended to be read as an introduction. It sets the stage for what follows.

Occasion for the Composition

The additional resurrection appearance that John appended to Lazarus' written testimony may tell us something about the occasion for the creation of the fourth gospel. The fact that John was editing a *written* source from Lazarus is instructive. Again, we read in John 21:20-24:

Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them, the one who also had leaned back against him during the supper and had said, "Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?" ²¹ **When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, "Lord, what about this man?"** ²² **Jesus said to him, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!"** ²³ **So the saying spread abroad among the brothers that this disciple was not to die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he was not to die, but, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?"** ²⁴ This is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things, and who has written these things, and we know that his testimony is true. (John 21:20-24)

This is a very strange saying, and a very strange way to end a gospel. Why did the editor feel it so important to include this dialogue between Jesus and Peter regarding the BD at the very end of the gospel? The most plausible explanation is that the BD had recently died, causing those who misunderstood Jesus' saying regarding the BD to doubt Jesus' second coming. After all, if Jesus said the BD would not die before Jesus returned, and yet the BD died, then perhaps Jesus was wrong about His return. Perhaps Jesus was wrong because He is not the Son of God. John, aware of this misunderstanding and how it was wreaking havoc on these believers' faith, chose to write a gospel utilizing Lazarus' own testimony that would also clarify Jesus' statement regarding Lazarus' future (John used a written source rather than an oral source because Lazarus had already died). John clarified that Jesus never said Lazarus would remain alive until Jesus' return, but merely that his future was of no concern to Peter. Ben Witherington III agrees:

Yet when we get to the end of the document we have a very peculiar testimony—"this (i.e. the Beloved Disciple) is the disciple who is testifying to these things, and has written them down, and we know his testimony is true." (21:24). What makes this sentence doubly interesting is that it comes after a very strange disclaimer—Jesus did not say the Beloved Disciple would live until he returned.

Why in the world do we need that disclaimer? Apparently because the Beloved Disciple's community thought he uniquely would do so. But why would they think that and why stress it here? The normal, and I think correct answer to this question is that the Beloved Disciple had finally died, and Jesus had not yet returned, and so the community he was a part of wanted to reassure people that Jesus had not falsely predicted the endurance of the Beloved Disciple longer than he actually lived. As to why the community of the Beloved Disciple would think he would not die before the return of Jesus, I can think of a very good reason— Jesus had already raised him from the dead once. Surely, he would not die again.²⁴

Timing of the Composition

If it is true that John edited Lazarus' written sources sometime after Lazarus died, this might resolve a tension between the internal evidence and external evidence regarding when the fourth gospel was written. The internal evidence suggests that the gospel was written before the temple was destroyed in A.D. 70. We read in John 5:2 that "there **is** in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, in Aramaic called Bethesda, which has five roofed colonnades." The author uses the present tense, indicative that the pool of Bethesda and the Sheep Gate still existed at the time of the writing. However, church tradition tells us that John wrote the gospel in Asia after the death of Emperor Domitian (died September 18, A.D. 96). Eusebius represents this tradition, appealing to the writings of Irenaeus and Clement in support:

At that time the apostle and evangelist John, the one whom Jesus loved, was still living in Asia, and governing the churches of that region, **having returned after the death of Domitian from his exile on the island**. And that he was still alive at that time may be established by the testimony of two witnesses. They should be trustworthy who have maintained the orthodoxy of the Church; and such indeed were Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria. The former in the second book of his work *Against Heresies*, writes as follows: **"And all the elders that associated with John the disciple of the Lord in Asia bear witness that John delivered it to them. For he remained among them until the time of Trajan."** And in the third book of the same work he attests the same thing in the following words: "But the church in Ephesus also, which was founded by Paul, and where John remained until the time of Trajan, is a faithful witness of the apostolic tradition." Clement likewise in his book entitled *What Rich Man can be saved?* indicates the time, and subjoins a narrative which is most attractive to those that enjoy hearing what is beautiful and profitable. Take and read the account which runs as follows: Listen to a tale, which is not a mere tale, but a narrative concerning John the apostle, which has been handed down and treasured up in memory. **For when, after the tyrant's death, he returned from the isle of Patmos to Ephesus....** (*Ecclesiastical History* 3.23.1-6a)

Irenaeus himself writes:

Now, that the first stage of early life embraces thirty years, and that this extends onwards to the fortieth year, everyone will admit; but from the fortieth and fiftieth year a man begins to decline towards old age, which our Lord possessed while He still fulfilled the office of a Teacher, even as the Gospel and all the elders testify; **those who were conversant in Asia with John, the disciple of the Lord, [affirming] that John conveyed to them that information. And he remained among them up to the times of Trajan.** (*Against Heresies*, 2.22.5)"

Emperor Domitian died in A.D. 96 and Emperor Trajan ruled from A.D. 98-117. That means the fourth gospel would have been written sometime between A.D. 96-117. That's why most scholars date the fourth gospel to the late 90s A.D. The internal and external evidence are easily harmonized when we recognize that the fourth gospel has two dates of origin. Lazarus' written testimony was penned prior to A.D. 70, whereas John's editorial work on that source to create the fourth gospel was done after A.D. 70.

²⁴Ben Witherington, "Chapter Five: Forgeries in Conflicts with Jews and Pagans," a review of Bart Ehrman's book *Forged*; available from <http://www.patheos.com/community/bibleandculture/2011/04/08/chapter-five-forgeries-in-conflicts-with-jews-and-pagans/>; Internet; accessed 09 April 2011.

While John knew the Sheep Gate and pool of Bethesda no longer existed in his day, since he was presenting Lazarus' testimony, and Lazarus' testimony was written prior to A.D. 70, John chose to leave the present tense in 5:2 as-is rather than edit it to a past tense to fit the present circumstances.

CONCLUSION

The fourth gospel claims to be the testimony of someone referred to as the BD. Internal evidence highly suggests that Lazarus is the BD, however, external evidence is unanimous that the author of the fourth gospel is someone name John (whether the apostle or the elder). Since we know there was an editor of the gospel who was responsible for editing the BD's written testimony, a plausible way of explaining how a gospel containing the written testimony of Lazarus could have been attributed to someone named John is to suggest that someone named John was the editor who arranged Lazarus' written material into the form we read today sometime in the late 90s. As editor of the material, authorship could rightly be attributed to John. Over time, however, John's role as editor of Lazarus' material was lost to the church's memory and John came to be identified with the BD himself.

It is unclear if the editor was the Apostle John or the lesser known John the Elder. If he was the latter, he came to be confused with the more famous John. Either way, church tradition is correct to attribute the fourth gospel to a prominent church leader named John, and the title of the fourth gospel appearing in our Bibles – "the Gospel According to John" – is fully justified.

OBJECTIONS

Contrary to Church Tradition

One objection that could be raised to this historical reconstruction is that it is inconsistent with church tradition regarding the impetus for John's composition of the gospel. According to a couple of early church fathers, John was urged by others to write his gospel as a way of recounting information left out of the Synoptic gospels.

Nevertheless, **of all the disciples of the Lord, only Matthew and John have left us written memorials**, and they, tradition says, were led to write only under the pressure of necessity. For Matthew, who had at first preached to the Hebrews, when he was about to go to other peoples, committed his Gospel to writing in his native tongue, and thus compensated those whom he was obliged to leave for the loss of his presence. And when Mark and Luke had already published their Gospels, they say that John, who had employed all his time in proclaiming the Gospel orally, finally proceeded to write for the following reason. The three Gospels already mentioned having come into the hands of all and into his own too, they say that he accepted them and bore witness to their truthfulness; but that there was lacking in them an account of the deeds done by Christ at the beginning of his ministry. And this indeed is true. For it is evident that the three evangelists recorded only the deeds done by the Savior for one year after the imprisonment of John the Baptist and indicated this in the beginning of their account.

...

They say, therefore, that the **apostle John**, being asked to do it for this reason, gave in his Gospel an account of the period which had been omitted by the earlier evangelists, and of the deeds done by the Saviour during that period; that is, of those which were done before the imprisonment of the Baptist. And this is indicated by him, they say, in the following words: "This beginning of miracles did Jesus"; and again when he refers to the Baptist, in the midst of the deeds of Jesus, as still baptizing in Ænon near Salim; where he states the matter clearly in the words: "For John was not yet cast into prison. John accordingly, in his Gospel, records the deeds of Christ which were performed before the Baptist was cast into prison,

but the other three evangelists mention the events which happened after that time. (*Ecclesiastical History* 3.24.2-8,11-12)

If John was asked to write a gospel containing the words and deeds of Christ that the Synoptics did not cover, it implies that John himself wrote this information. However, that is not a necessary implication. It could be that this is why John chose to use Lazarus' material as his source. He knew that Lazarus' account filled in the gap of Jesus' early ministry, Jesus' ministry around Jerusalem, and many other events and teachings not contained in the Synoptic gospels.

It is also possible that this church tradition is mistaken. There are plenty of historical claims made by the early church that we have very good reason to believe are false (such as the order in which the gospels were written, Papias as John's amanuensis, etc.)

Is it Right to Call John the "Author"?

If, as I have argued, John used Lazarus' written material for all but the first 18 verses and last chapter, can John rightly be considered the author? To many, this sounds like John is a publisher rather than an author (and perhaps a thief of intellectual property). However, we need to judge John according to ancient rather than modern standards. There were no copyright laws in John's day. While it would have been viewed as immoral to "publish" someone else's material under your own name, it was perfectly acceptable to edit someone else's material to fit your own literary purposes. Indeed, we see this very thing happening in the Synoptic Gospels. Matthew and Luke both used the Gospel of Mark as the basis for their own gospels. They edited Mark's material by rearranging it, changing words, summarizing, etc. They added their own material as well, making the final product their own. Despite heavy borrowing from Mark, authorial attribution is rightly credited to Matthew and Luke.

The parallel between the Gospel of Mark and the fourth gospel is even more fitting. Church tradition tells us that Mark's gospel is based on the oral testimony of Peter. Similarly, John's gospel is based on the written testimony of Lazarus. Mark is rightly deemed the author of the Gospel of Mark because of the way he edited Peter's testimony into a polished composition. Likewise, John is rightly deemed the author of the Gospel of John because of the way he edited Lazarus' testimony into a polished work of literature.