

John, the “Anonymous” Evangelist

Introduction

This morning, we begin a journey through “**the Gospel**” – specifically, the Gospel *according to John*. This title isn’t an inspired title; it’s not part of the original manuscript. So why do we believe that this fourth Gospel is the Gospel “according to John”? In fact, all four of the Gospels are technically “anonymous.” Nowhere in the Gospel according to Matthew does Matthew identify himself as the author, and the same thing goes for Mark, and Luke, and John. So why, then, do *we* know the four Gospels as “Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John” – much like we know that two plus two is four?¹

I. The Uninspired Testimony of the Early Church: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John

There’s only one Gospel, isn’t there? The Gospel of Jesus Christ. It’s this single Gospel—the story of Jesus’ life and death and resurrection—that was “published” in different places, for different audiences, by four different men. The original manuscript of each Gospel must have been in the form of a scroll as they were all published separately, but maybe as early as 125 AD they were all gathered together into a single codex or book and this book with its four different parts came to be known simply as “The Gospel.” In other words, it was a single Gospel, and yet a “*fourfold*” Gospel. Think about the symbolism of the number four that we’ve seen in the past. How appropriate is it that this central story of the person and work of our Redeemer should be given fourfold expression! This is a point that wasn’t lost on the early church fathers. Carson says that for Irenaeus (who lived in the second century), “that the Gospel should be ‘fourfold’... was as natural as that there should be four winds.” It seems that it was when these four different presentations of the one Gospel were all gathered together into a single book that these titles were added: “according to Matthew,” “according to Mark,” “according to Luke,” “according to John.” It’s even possible that these titles were added earlier when the Gospels were still circulating separately. The point here is that it was not the inspired authors themselves who signed their names to their books, but others in the church who testified from the earliest days to their authorship (and that testimony is very strong²).

¹ For the following, see Carson, pp. 21-22, 68.

² Polycarp was a Christian pastor in Smyrna who was born somewhere between 65 and 70 AD and died a martyr’s death at the stake when he was around 85 years old. Polycarp was a disciple of the Apostle John and was probably around 30 years old when John died. Irenaeus was, in turn a disciple of Polycarp. Irenaeus writes:

“I remember the events of those day smore clearly than those which have happened recently, for what we learn as children grows up with the soul and becomes united to it, so I can speak even of the place in which the blessed Polycarp sat and disputed, how he came in and went out, the character of his life, the appearance of his body, the discourse which he made to the people, how he reported his converse with John and with the others who had seen the Lord, how he remembered their words, and what were the things concerning the Lord which he had heard from them, including his miracles and his teaching, and how Polycarp had received them from the eyewitnesses of the word of life, and reported all things in agreement with the Scriptures.” (Quoted in Carson, 26)

It was on the strength not only of what was perhaps common knowledge, but also on the strength of this personal connection to the Apostle John that Irenaeus could also write of the fourth Gospel: “John the disciple of the Lord, who leaned back on his breast, published the Gospel while he was resident at Ephesus in Asia.” (Quoted in Carson, 26).

Now what's important to remember is that the Gospel writers weren't trying to hide their authorship as though they wanted to keep it a secret. It would have been common knowledge to everyone in the early church (or at least to those in the areas where the Gospels were first published) that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were the ones who wrote their respective Gospels. So, then, why are they so careful to stay "anonymous"? It's interesting that all the apocryphal Gospels, which begin to appear in the middle of the second century, make explicit claims to be written by an Apostle or by some other close associate of Jesus (Gospel of Peter; Gospel of Thomas; cf. Bruce, quoted in Carson). But the only Gospels ever accepted by the church as Apostolic and canonical are the Gospels that will always remain "anonymous."

II. John: "Missing in Action"?

Now there's a sense in which we could say that in no Gospel does the author work harder to stay "anonymous" than in this Gospel according to John. Mark and Luke were not among the twelve Apostles (though they were close associates with the Apostles; Luke with Paul [Acts] and Mark with Peter [1 Pet. 5:13]), so it's not surprising that we don't find them mentioned anywhere (at least not by name) in a story where they didn't play any major role.³ But things are different with Matthew. Matthew was one of the twelve disciples who were closely associated with Jesus throughout His whole public ministry. So in the Gospel of Matthew (and in Mark and Luke) we find Matthew's name in the list of the twelve disciples (Mat. 10:2-4; Mk. 3:16-19; Lk. 6:14-16). The Gospel of Matthew is also the only place where we read about the call of Matthew to follow Jesus.

- Matthew 9:9 — As Jesus passed on from there, he saw **a man called Matthew** sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him.

In other words, Matthew refers to himself by name twice in his Gospel. He never identifies himself in his Gospel as the author, but he's not completely anonymous.

Now Matthew was in some senses more of a minor disciple. But that's not the case with John. We know *from Matthew, and Mark, and Luke* that John figured very prominently in the earthly ministry of Jesus. *Matthew, Mark, and Luke* all record Jesus' calling of John along with his brother James and the brothers Peter and Andrew.

- Mark 1:16–20 (cf. Mat. 4:18-22; Lk. 5:8-11) — Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, [Jesus] saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee **and John his brother**, who were in their boat mending the nets. And immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke also tell us that along with James (his brother) and Peter, John was a part of that "inner circle" of three disciples who were in some sense closest to Jesus.

³ Mark and Luke aren't mentioned by name in *any* of the four Gospels (but see Mk. 14:51-52).

- Mark 5:37 (cf. Lk. 8:51) — [Jesus] allowed no one to follow him [to witness the raising of Jairus’ daughter] except Peter and James **and John** the brother of James.
- Mark 9:2 (cf. Mat. 17:1; Lk. 9:28) — After six days Jesus took with him Peter and James **and John**, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them.
- Mark 14:32–33 (cf. Mat. 26:37) — [Jesus] said to his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.” And he took with him Peter and James **and John**, and began to be greatly distressed and troubled.

We read in Luke:

- Luke 22:8 — Jesus sent Peter **and John**, saying, “Go and prepare the Passover for us, that we may eat it.”

That last reference to just “Peter and John” points us ahead to the book of Acts where we see Peter and John constantly together as two of the main leaders in the early church.

- Acts 1:13 (cf. Mk. 13:3) — When they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying, **Peter and John** and James and Andrew...⁴
- Acts 3:1 (cf. 3:3-4, 11) — **Peter and John** were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour [the healing of the lame beggar].
- Acts 4:13 (cf. 4:19) — Now when they saw the boldness of **Peter and John**... [called before the counsel]
- Acts 8:14 — When the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them **Peter and John**.

In Galatians two, Paul tells us that along with a “different” James (not John’s brother), it was Peter and John who together were “pillars” of the church in Jerusalem (Gal. 2:9). In light of this major “prominence” of John as one of those most closely associated with Jesus throughout His earthly ministry, as a leader among the disciples, and as one of the foremost leaders in the early church, how are we to explain the fact that in this *fourth* Gospel the name “John” (referring to John the Apostle) never appears—never—not even once?⁵ This is all the more surprising when we consider the fact that this fourth Gospel mentions *more* of the apostles *by name* (if we leave out the lists in Matthew, Mark, and Luke) than any of the other Gospels. In addition to **Peter** and **Andrew** (1:40, 44; 6:8; 12:22), the fourth Gospel includes one-of-a-kind accounts of each of these disciples *by name*: **Thomas** (11:16; 14:5; 20:24, 26, 27, 28; 21:2), **Nathanael/ Bartholomew** (1:45-49; 21:2), **Philip** (1:43-48; 6:5, 7; 12:21-22; 14:8-9), and the “other” **Judas/Thaddaeus** (not Iscariot; 14:22). These are the “obscure” disciples who appear only in “the list” in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. But in the fourth Gospel they’re brought out of obscurity as their interactions with Jesus are described and they’re identified by name. And yet not once in the fourth Gospel do we hear John’s name, *or* the name of James his brother, the two disciples who with Peter were closest to Jesus.

⁴ Notice how the brothers Peter and Andrew are separated in this list and the traditional order of “James and John” (probably reflecting birth order) is reversed (cf. Lk. 9:28; contra Mat. 4:21; 10:2; 17:1; Mk. 1:29; 5:37; 10:35, 41; 13:3; 14:33; Lk. 9:54).

⁵ There is a passing reference to the sons of Zebedee in 21:2.

It feels very much like John (and James) are, you could say, “missing in action.” So what is your detective instinct telling you right about now? James was martyred in 44 AD (Acts 12:1-2), far too early for him to have authored this Gospel. So that leaves us with John. Who else would be more likely—in a Gospel that mentions more names of the disciples than any other—to leave out two of the most “prominent” names of all? Sometimes arguments from silence can carry a whole lot of weight. Who is the author of the fourth Gospel? It must be John precisely because John isn’t there. Or is he?

Some of us might be asking, “Why are we trying so hard to find John if John himself wished to stay anonymous?” I said at the beginning that there’s a sense in which in no other Gospel does the author work harder to remain “anonymous” than in this Gospel “according to John.” John never identifies himself as the author and John’s name is never mentioned anywhere in the fourth Gospel. But is it true that we never see John in the pages of this Gospel (outside of 21:2)?

III. The unnamed, “anonymous” disciple

For all the naming of disciples that happens in the fourth Gospel (often very explicit and detailed), there is one particular disciple who is included and talked about (at least in five places, and maybe in seven places⁶)—a disciple particularly close to Jesus—but one who is never named. At least, we’re never given his “proper” name. He’s there in the Gospel, but he remains, we could say, stubbornly—obstinately—“anonymous.”⁷ We’re never given his *proper* name, but five times he is called, very simply, “the disciple *whom Jesus loved*.” In John chapter 13 we learn that this disciple was present at the Last Supper.

- **John 13:21–26** — After saying these things, Jesus was troubled in his spirit, and testified, “Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me.” The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he spoke. **One of his disciples, whom Jesus loved**, was reclining at table at Jesus’ side, so Simon Peter motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. So **that disciple**, leaning back against Jesus, said to him, “Lord, who is it?” Jesus answered, “It is he to whom I will give this morsel of bread when I have dipped it.”

Matthew and Mark both tell us that Jesus ate the last Passover meal with “the twelve” (Mat. 26:20; Mk. 14:17), so we know that this disciple must have been one of the twelve. Notice the close relationship between this unnamed disciple and Jesus. Notice also the hint of a special connection between this disciple and Simon Peter. Throughout the rest of this Upper Room Discourse, the author of this Gospel mentions five other disciples by name: Peter, Judas Iscariot, the “other” Judas (14:22), Thomas (14:5), and Philip (14:8). So this *particular* disciple whom Jesus loved will not be any of these. For that matter, he probably won’t be among any of the other named disciples in the fourth Gospel, so that rules out Andrew and Nathanael leaving only James and John, James the son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, and Matthew. In John chapter 19 we learn that this unnamed disciple was present at the scene of Christ’s crucifixion. Watch for the simple touches of an eyewitness:

⁶ The two debated places are Jn. 1:35-40 and Jn. 18:15-16

⁷ For the following see the concise summary of the argument in Carson (71-72).

- John 19:25–27 — Standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and **the disciple whom he loved** *standing nearby*, he said to his mother, “Woman, behold, your son!” Then he said to **the disciple**, “Behold, your mother!” And from that hour **the disciple** took her to his own home.

Are you seeing how stubbornly “anonymous” this disciple remains. Notice also how closely this disciple must have been associated with Jesus. Matthew and Mark both mention that among the women who were there at Christ’s crucifixion were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph (who is probably the same as “Mary the wife of Clopas” in John), and Salome – who Matthew identifies as *the mother of the sons of Zebedee* (Mat. 27:55-56; Mk. 15:40). If we are right to match these lists from Matthew, and Mark, and John (though there were other women present), then the sister of Jesus’ mother, Mary, would be none other than Salome, the wife of Zebedee and the mother of James and John. In other words, John would have been a first cousin of Jesus. If this is right, then we can see why it was this “disciple whom Jesus loved” who took Mary into his own home: he would have been Mary’s nephew, the son of Mary’s sister Salome – either James or John.⁸ In John chapter 20 we learn that this unnamed disciple was also there at the empty tomb early on Sunday morning. Notice, again, the quiet, unassuming marks of an eyewitness:

- John 20:1–10 — Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and **the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved**, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” So Peter went out with **the other disciple**, and they were going toward the tomb. *Both of them were running together*, but **the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first**. And *stooping to look in*, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself. Then **the other disciple**, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed.

Are you seeing again how this “other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved” remains so stubbornly, obstinately “anonymous”? Anonymous in the sense that he’s never given his proper name, but not anonymous in the sense that he is there in the fourth Gospel. Notice, also, the close connection once again between this disciple and Peter as Mary ran to tell them the news and as they then ran together to the tomb. In John chapter 21 we learn that this unnamed disciple was also among those to whom Jesus appeared after His resurrection on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Notice, again, the mark of an eyewitness:

- John 21:2–7 — Simon Peter, Thomas (called the Twin), Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples were together. Simon Peter said to them, “I am going fishing.” They said to him, “We will go with you.” They went out and got into the

⁸ If this unnamed disciple is also the author of this Gospel, then we’re certainly not surprised that Salome, just like her two sons James and John, is not named in the fourth Gospel. Zebedee is named, but only “indirectly” (“the sons of Zebedee”; Jn. 21:2).

boat, but that night they caught nothing. *Just as day was breaking*, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, “Children, do you have any fish?” They answered him, “No.” He said to them, “Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in, because of the quantity of fish. **That disciple whom Jesus loved** therefore said to Peter, “It is the Lord!”

For the third time we see the connection between this unnamed disciple and Peter. We know that of those who were in the boat, this disciple would almost certainly not have been Nathanael, or Thomas, or Philip, or the “other” Judas, or Andrew. So that leaves James and John, along with James the son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, and Matthew. All the evidence points to John. In my opinion, it’s like a big, neon, flashing arrow. So: anonymous on the one hand, and on the other hand, not really anonymous at all. In the final passage where we see the disciple whom Jesus loved, we’ll see that he apparently lived far longer than James who was put to death by Herod in 44 AD (Acts 12:1-2). We’ll also see for the fourth time his close connection with Peter. It was that same morning after the miraculous catch of fish and after eating breakfast with Jesus that Jesus was walking and talking with Peter. After Jesus had spoken to Peter about his death the author of the fourth Gospel tells us:

- John 21:20–23 — Peter turned and saw **the disciple whom Jesus loved** following them... When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, “Lord, what about **this man**?” Jesus said to him, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!” 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?”

Stubbornly, obstinately anonymous to the very end. And yet it’s hard—it’s even impossible for me—not to give this disciple a name. JOHN. If, then, this disciple whom Jesus loved is John, then what does this disciple have to do with the writing of this fourth Gospel? We read in chapter twenty-one, verse twenty-four:

- John 21:24 — **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.

Whoever the “we” may be, they clearly knew exactly who this disciple was. There’s no point in identifying him as the author of the Gospel if they don’t know who he is. And yet they, too, observe the same restraint that John has observed from the beginning of his Gospel to the end, referring to him not as “John” but as “this...disciple.” Which disciple? “*This... disciple*” – the disciple who refers to himself only as the one *whom Jesus loved*.

Conclusion

And now we come to the very last words of the fourth Gospel:

- John 21:25 — Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, *I* suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.

After 21 chapters that tiny little word nearly jumps off the page at us. Suddenly, for the first time in John's Gospel, "I." **Who is this "I"?** Yes, he is John. We all know that. But we also know that John himself wishes to be known in this Gospel *only* as the disciple *whom Jesus loved*.

This is the same John who, along with his brother James, was called by Jesus a "Son of Thunder" (Mk. 3:16-17). We can understand why when we remember that John is the one who once tried to stop someone casting out demons in Jesus' name because he wasn't one of those following along with John and the other disciples (Mk. 9:38-40; Lk. 9:49-50). When the Samaritans refused hospitality to Jesus, John is the one, along with James, who asked Jesus: "Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" (Lk. 9:52-56) And John is the one, along with James, who made this request of Jesus: "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory" (Mk. 10:35-40). John was zealous for the Messiah and for Messiah's kingdom. For John, in those early days, it was only natural that if he truly believed in the Messiah's coming kingdom and if he truly believed that Jesus was the Messiah, then as an expression of this belief he ought to desire the highest place of honor in that kingdom. But in the end, something happened to John that completely and totally transformed him. Rather than be known as the one who would be seated in glory at the right or left hand of Jesus, John could say that the only thing in all the world that mattered to him was that he, an unworthy sinner, had been *loved*—and was still *loved*—by Jesus. Carson writes:

"Those who are most profoundly aware of their own sin and need, and who in consequence most deeply feel the wonders of the grace of God that has reached out and saved them, *even them*, are those who are most likely to talk about themselves as the objects of God's love in Christ Jesus. Those who do not think of themselves in such terms ought to... [To think of oneself] as the peculiar object of the love of Jesus... is scarcely the mark of arrogance; it is, rather, the mark of brokenness."

The author of the fourth Gospel is not, in the end, anonymous. It's just that he wished to be known in his Gospel *only* as the disciple *whom Jesus loved*. That was all that mattered to John. That was all that John needed to know. Is this all that matters to you? Is this all that you need to know? Do you know the wonder and the joy of being loved, personally, by Jesus, your Redeemer? As we come to know Jesus in John's gospel, I pray that God will help me to see myself as nothing more nor less than one who is the peculiar object of His love. I pray that God will help you to see yourself as nothing more nor less than the peculiar object of Jesus' love. And if we have been loved by Him we are free, then, to love Him in return and to always make much of His love in our lives (cf. Carson).