

## The Destination and Purpose of the Fourth Gospel

Paul Wyns

J. Ashton describes the problem of John's audience as follows,

There are, broadly speaking, three questions that may be asked concerning John's audience or readership: was it (a) universal or particular; (b) Jewish or Gentile (or possibly Samaritan -somewhere in between the two); (c) Christian or non-Christian? If a non-Christian audience is intended then the writer's aim could be either polemic (attack) or apologetic (defence) or kerygmatic (missionary); if, on the other hand, the audience is Christian then the purpose could be either hortatory (to warn or encourage) or catechetical (to teach or remind). These possibilities are not mutually exclusive, since a writer may have more than one purpose in writing and more than one audience in mind.<sup>1</sup>

In this article and in subsequent articles it will be proposed that the Fourth Gospel (4G) was an early composition (c. 40 C.E.) addressed to the Diaspora community in Ephesus, before the definitive split with Christianity occurred.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 102.

The synagogue congregation is envisaged as an eclectic mix of first century Jews, (including sectarian movements such as Enochic Judaists, Pharisees, etc.) proselytes, Jewish Christians and followers of the Baptist. The situation warranted a Gospel that emphasised the superiority of Christ. It will be argued in this and subsequent articles that the 4G and the epistle to the Hebrews (c. 67 C.E.) are directed at the Ephesian community, essentially to answer the same problems. Of course, any reconstruction of the original setting that is based on internal evidence alone is open to the charge of subjectivity and circularity. D. A. Carson observes that,

A substantial number of modern proposals has sprung from some scholar's reconstruction of the Johannine community that is alleged to have called this book forth...Inevitably a degree of circularity is set up: the community is reconstructed by drawing inferences from the Fourth Gospel, and once this background is sufficiently widely accepted, the next generation of scholars tends to build on it, or modify it only slightly, by showing how the Fourth Gospel achieves its purpose by addressing that situation so tellingly. The circularity is not necessarily vicious, but is far weaker than is often assumed, owing to the high number of merely possible but by no means compelling inferences that are invoked to delineate the community in the first place.<sup>1</sup>

However, this is mitigated by presenting a cumulative case, drawn from multiple NT sources. Although individual points may be interpreted differently, their collective weight is to be given serious consideration. The progression of this study will throw light on the development of early Christianity away from the synagogue.

### *A Survey of Johannine Studies*

Before our investigation commences it is perhaps useful to look at current advances in Johannine scholarship. The following survey does not pretend to

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<sup>1</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John: An Introduction and Commentary* (Pillar New Testament Commentary: Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 87. ([Ed. AP] Carson's observation is true of maybe all biblical scholarship: doctoral research rarely thinks out of the box and contents itself with nuancing the existing consensus as its contribution to "originality".)

be exhaustive – it is merely an outline of the major trends in Johannine scholarship regarding dating, composition and the audience of the 4G.<sup>1</sup> Often theories will not stand the test of time and will need to be amended when new facts surface.

The 4G was always thought to be a linear development of NT theology, following the view that a high or developed Christology must necessarily be late – this had to be subsequently amended with the discovery of Rylands Papyrus 457, an Egyptian Codex fragment containing John 18:31-33, 37, 38, and dated by scholars to the early second century. This pushed the date of the Gospel back towards Christ and validated its claims to eye-witness testimony, given that time was needed to write the Gospel and to copy and circulate it as far afield as Egypt. A date of 90-100 is now widely accepted by scholars of all persuasions. We would argue that 90-100 represents the *terminus ad quem* (latest possible date). As J. A. T. Robinson remarks, “radical critics like Baur began by dating it anything up to 170 and have since steadily come down”.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, scholarship has long sought to understand the 4G against the Greek conceptual world. In his seminal studies on the 4G, C. H. Dodd understood the reader as a devout and thoughtful citizen of Ephesus, tolerably well acquainted with Hellenistic ideas. Ashton remarks that the reader that Dodd envisions is,

...too Greek and insufficiently Jewish. Dodd’s ideas were worked out long before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls.<sup>3</sup>

The readers to whom John wrote needed to be told the significance of the word ‘Messiah’ (1:41) and names like ‘Siloam’ (9:7). On the other hand, he was prepared to give the Hebrew version of Greek terms meaning

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<sup>1</sup> For a recent survey, see G. S. Sloyan, *What are they Saying about John?* (New York: Paulist Press, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> J. A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1976), 259; for a book review of *Redating*, see *Christadelphian EJournal of Biblical Interpretation 2007 Annual*, 123-126.

<sup>3</sup> Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel*, 103.

‘pavement’ (19:13) or ‘the place of the skull’ (19:17). Presumably they were native Greek speaking Diaspora Jews, who had lost their familiarity with Hebrew. The 4G demonstrates particular concerns for Samaritans (4:9; 8:48) as well as Gentiles (Greek Diaspora Jews? 7:35; 12:2) and hostility towards the “Jews” (Ἰουδαῖοι). The 71 occurrences of the forms of Ἰουδαῖοι have engendered much discussion,<sup>1</sup> but the context and number (70+1) indicate that we are dealing with a particular group of “Jews”, namely the *Jewish authorities* – the high priest and the ruling council of the **Sanhedrin** (seventy), who were supposedly “teachers in Israel” (John 3:1, 10).

In the last decades of the 20c., a paradigm shift occurred, which saw wider recognition of the essential Jewish (rather than Hellenistic) background of the 4G. In his assessment of J. L. Martyn’s contribution to Johannine scholarship, D. Moody Smith states in his foreword to Martyn’s re-issued work that,

Martyn, unlike the dominant interpreters before him, took seriously the tension and hostility between “the Jews” and Jesus as the key to the historical life-setting and purpose of the Gospel of John. His entire proposal is based on two assumptions or insights. First, the prominence of the Jews and their hostility to Jesus and his disciples likely represents a genuine historical setting (that is, it is not an exercise in theological symbolism). Second, this historical setting can scarcely be that of Jesus and his actual, original disciples and opponents. As is well known, Martyn finds the major key to that setting in the thrice repeated reference to the expulsion from the synagogue of those who confess belief in Jesus (9:22; 12:42; 16:2), and more particularly in the evangelist’s statement that “the Jews had already agreed that if anyone should confess him to be the Messiah, he would be an excommunicate from the synagogue”.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, R. G. Bratcher, “The Jews’ in the Gospel of John” *BT* 26 (1975): 401-9.

<sup>2</sup> J. L. Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.; Louisville: WJK Press, 2003), 6.

Martyn based his identification of John's background on the "Birkat Ha-Minim" (*Benediction Concerning Heretics*),<sup>1</sup> a Jewish prayer that was supposedly employed to smoke out Christians who, when they refused to repeat it in the Synagogue, were ex-communicated. However, W. Meeks<sup>2</sup> regards the benediction as a kind of red herring in Johannine scholarship, as the benediction's date and purpose are disputed. Robinson states that it is "an inference whose precarious basis it is desirable to expose in some detail",<sup>3</sup> and D. R. A. Hare regards the connection as entirely unproven.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, Martyn's contribution to Johannine Studies is useful. For example, Carson observes in relation to John 9 and the account of the Lame Man,

By far the most influential work on this chapter in recent years is that of J. Louis Martyn (HTFG, pp.24ff.), who uses John 9 as the critical 'test case' for his overarching thesis. Martyn believes that John's Gospel was written to help the church, probably in Ephesus, in its degenerating relationships with the local synagogue. To that end, John composed several of his chapters on two tiers, or at two levels. The first level takes place 'back there', during the ministry of Jesus; the second takes place in the life of the church at Ephesus.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Often called the "Twelfth Benediction"; for further reading see Y. Y. Tepler, *Birkat Haminim: Jews & Christians in Conflict in the Ancient World* (Texts & Studies in Ancient Judaism; trans. S. Weingarten; Tübingen: Mohr (Siebeck), 2007).

<sup>2</sup> W. Meeks, "Breaking Away: Three New Testament Pictures of Christianity's Separation from the Jewish Communities" in *To See Ourselves as Others See Us: Christians, Jews, "Others" in Late Antiquity* (eds., J. Neusner and E. S. Friedrichs; Studies in the Humanities 9; Chico: Scholars Press, 1985), 93-115 (102).

<sup>3</sup> Robinson, *Redating*, 272-273.

<sup>4</sup> D. R. A. Hare, *The Theme of Jewish persecution of Christians in the Gospel according to St Matthew* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 48-56.

<sup>5</sup> Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 360.

While we would hesitate to agree with all of Martyn's conclusions, our own investigation has confirmed that the 4G does work at two levels. Robinson illustrates this when he observes of John 7:35,

Where the Jews ask: Where does he (Jesus) intend to go, that we should not be able to find him? Will he go to the Dispersion among the Greeks, and teach the Greeks?

...Like other uncomprehending remarks in the gospel, and especially those a few verses later about Galilee and Bethlehem (7:40-42, 52), this is both a total misunderstanding and the ironic truth. Of course Jesus will not go to the Greeks of the dispersion (he is going to the Father)—yet they will find him (unlike the disbelieving Judaeans).<sup>1</sup>

The 4G functions at two levels—"back there"—in the time of Jesus, and in the present "here and now" of John's readers.

In agreement with Meeks, therefore, we would prefer to think of the benediction as a linear development in which the promulgation of the Birkat Ha-Minim was a culmination rather than the beginning point of a development. This development commenced with the persecution of Stephen and the apostles and ended some 50 years (or more) later with the benediction and the excommunication of Christians.

Martyn's observation that the historical setting (of the Gospel) can scarcely be that of Jesus and his actual disciples and opponents is influenced by the perceived late date of the benediction (although this date is disputed). However, it can be conceded that John used particular historical settings from Jesus' ministry for **his own objectives**: namely, it was up to the Evangelist (under guidance of the Spirit) to select the particular incidents and the particular emphasis (spin) that he wished to place on those incidents in order to get his message across to his audience; (he was not merely writing a biography). John certainly had plenty of material to choose from (21:25) and his selection criteria were determined by the problems that were facing his readers. We might then say that the Gospel had dual reference points: to the

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<sup>1</sup> Robinson, *Redating*, 293.

“real Jesus” (and his historical setting) – “back there” – and to the current problems- the “here and now” of John’s contemporaries (and their particular historical setting).

John’s approach was to achieve a blend that would inform the reader about the life of Jesus as well as addressing the reader’s current problems. If the original incidents had no basis in history then they would have lost all power to exhort the reader. Robinson (following his mentor, Dodd)<sup>1</sup> believes that the 4G is more primitive than comparable synoptic material and that it correctly reflects the religious, political and geographical conditions of Palestine and Jerusalem prior to the Jewish war of 66-70. Consequently, Robinson dates the Gospel c. 40-65 C.E., and in his book, *Priority of John*, he forcefully puts the case that it is the Gospel closest to the “source” (namely, to Jesus himself, although this does not necessarily mean that it was the first Gospel written).

### *John the Baptist in the Fourth Gospel*

John the Baptist had a huge impact on the national consciousness and he is described in glowing terms by the Pharisee Josephus (c. 93-94 C.E.).<sup>2</sup> The Baptist’s influence was felt as far afield as Ephesus (Acts 18:25; 19:1-7). J. Taylor observes,

Since mention of John the Baptist in the New Testament is obviously overlaid with a developing insistence on Jesus’ superiority, we can suppose that the issue of John himself was a problem for the early Church. Clearly, John was not a nobody in his time, and the Gospels accord him respect. However, John was not permitted too much respect; people had to know his place. As John Meier states, most

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<sup>1</sup> Although Dodd believes that the primitive tradition was somehow preserved and written down much later (90-100), his conclusion is conditioned by his belief that the Gospel is a later development. Robinson discounts this – a Gospel containing primitive material points more naturally to an early date.

<sup>2</sup> *Ant.* 18.116-119.

often “the interpretation aims at neutralizing the Baptist’s independence to make him safe for Christianity”.<sup>1</sup>

L. Morris concurs:

The great Apollos is first introduced as one who “knew only the baptism of John” (Acts 18:25). Our author [of the Fourth Gospel] does not enter into controversy with such people, but he insists more than any of the other Evangelists on the subordinate place of the Baptist. One of the aims of this Gospel plainly was to show how clearly and consistently John had pointed people to Jesus. Apparently the movement associated with the Baptist’s name was particularly strong in the region where this Gospel was written. If, as seems probable, the author of the Gospel came from the group originally centered on John, his interest in his former teacher would be natural. This interest would not be lessened by the fact that John’s was the witness borne to Christ by the last of the prophets of the old covenant.<sup>2</sup>

### *The Place of Composition*

The external evidence rests predominately on the statement from Irenaeus (c. 130-200 C.E.): “John the disciple of the Lord, who leaned on his breast, also published the Gospel while living at Ephesus in Asia” (*Haer.* 3, 1.1; quoted in Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 5.8.4), and is assessed in the standard commentaries. After discussing the merits of Ephesus, Antioch and Alexandria as the place of composition, Morris comments,

None of these suggestions can be said to be compelling, and in the end we are left without certain proof. Perhaps there is little more to be said

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<sup>1</sup> J. E. Taylor, *The immerser: John the Baptist within second temple Judaism* (Studying the Historical Jesus; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 5.

<sup>2</sup> L. Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 78.

for Ephesus than for either of the others, but this is as far as we can go.<sup>1</sup>

C. K. Barrett presents the problem with the internal evidence as follows:

The New Testament knows nothing of the residence of the apostle John in Asia. 1 John is anonymous; 2 and 3 John profess to have been written by an ‘Elder’ (2 John 1; 3 John 1). Revelation, clearly a work which had its origin in Asia, was written by a person called John, but he seems to distinguish himself from the apostles (see 18.20; 21.14). In Galatians John is found in Jerusalem (Gal. 2.9). Perhaps more important is the fact that neither Ephesians nor Acts shows any awareness of the presence of John in Ephesus. In particular, there is nothing in the speech attributed to Paul in Acts 20.18-35 (that addressed to the Ephesian elders at Miletus) to suggest that the compiler of Acts, who, no doubt, was responsible for the present form of the speech, knew that John had subsequently lent his stabilizing influence to that church.<sup>2</sup>

Barrett’s observations are insightful as they delineate the questions that must be answered, namely, (1) why do Pauline and other writings reflect no knowledge of John’s ministry in Ephesus; and (2) what is the relationship between the Johannine writings; are they written by John the son of Zebedee (or by different John’s - John the Elder *and* John son of Zebedee)?

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<sup>1</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 55.

<sup>2</sup> C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction With Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Louisville: WJK Press; 1978), 102. However, he adds different qualifying statements: “The case for Ephesus as the place of origin of the gospel is not strong, though perhaps a little stronger than has recently been allowed...” (129); “Ephesus remains, perhaps, the best choice because of the residue of weight in the Irenaeus tradition...” (131); “Over against this however must be set the fact that in the last decades of the first century there lived a John in Ephesus — the John of the Apocalypse....” (133).

## Conclusion

Just as science only advances when the orthodoxy is challenged and tested against observation, so also Biblical scholarship can only advance when hypotheses are tested. Sometimes a new consensus can be reached relatively quickly when new discoveries are made (such as a Papyrus or the DSS); otherwise, advances must be made more slowly, by re-evaluating and sifting the internal evidence again – this is more difficult and often subjective. Bearing this in mind we will take away the following general points from scholarship and apply them in future articles in a fresh look at the destination and purpose of the 4G.

1. Consensus date 90-100 but advocates for an earlier date 40-65.
2. Destination probably Ephesus but external evidence weak.
3. Gospel reflects Jewish hostility to Christians but not necessarily a post-70 separation caused by Twelfth Benediction.
4. Gospel reflects problems with followers of John the Baptist.
5. Problem (omission): Pauline writings unaware of John in Ephesus.
6. Problem (relationship): Are all the Johannine writings by the same hand?

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1 J. Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 98, remarks, “Why was it, for instance, that despite Paul’s remarkably wide ranging activities in the Greek-speaking world on both sides of the