

The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel

Christianity is centred on the person of Jesus Christ. It might be a surprise to some that no serious scholar doubts that Jesus really lived¹ – but Christianity goes much further than that. The Gospel of John begins with the astonishing claim that Jesus was no less than God Himself! John claims that, in Jesus, God became human flesh and lived among us. And that He did it in order to bring us into eternal relationship with Himself – to make us 'children of God' *forever*. John's Gospel goes on to describe Jesus' miraculous 'signs' and his heart-searching words that testified to His true identity as 'the Christ'. The Gospel ends with the words,

'Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.' John 20:20-31

What is on offer then is an intimate personal relationship with God beginning now and lasting for all eternity. But can a serious person in the 21st century actually believe all this? Isn't the Bible full of myth and legendary embellishment? And how can we know Jesus actually said any of what John records? And hasn't it been changed and edited and added to over hundreds of years? Richard Dawkins calls the Bible 'a chaotically cobbled-together anthology of disjointed documents, composed, revised, translated, distorted and 'improved' by hundreds of anonymous authors, editors and copyists, unknown to us and mostly unknown to each other, spanning nine centuries'.

So Jesus may have lived, and the message of Christianity might sound attractive, but is it true? And how would we even begin to start answering the question? Well the Bible contains four 'Gospels', biographies of Jesus, that claim to tell us what Jesus said and did. The question is, are they historical accounts? Let's take the Gospel of John, the fourth Gospel. Is there good evidence to believe that what we read in John's Gospel is a true account of what Jesus actually said and did?

Up until a few hundred years ago, no-one really questioned whether John's Gospel was historical. But with growing scepticism over the reality of God and the supernatural (a philosophical and cultural movement known as the Enlightenment), scholars began to suggest other explanations for the origins of the Gospel. Against the traditional view of the Gospel having been written by a disciple of Jesus and eyewitness to his life, death and resurrection, they argued that the Gospel was, in reality, written by someone living hundreds of years later, and hundreds of miles away. And the concepts in John, they said, were too Greek, and not Jewish enough (as the other three Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, were). John's idea that Jesus was 'God in the flesh', for example, was said to reflect much later developments in Christian theology. So for these reasons, by around 1900, most New Testament scholars believed that John's Gospel could not be considered as reliable history.

But those reasons are completely outdated. Several discoveries have proved them to be entirely false. One piece of evidence that sent shockwaves through Biblical studies was the discovery of a little fragment of parchment in an Egyptian market in 1920. It was only a few inches in size, but it completely changed the debate. It's called P52 (you can go and see it in the John Rylands library in Manchester) and, on both sides, it contains words from the Gospel of John that most scholars agree were written between 117AD and 138AD². And because this fragment is an Egyptian copy, it means that the original document must have been written even earlier, in fact, probably within the first century – which means *within living memory of the life of Jesus*. No longer could anyone argue that John's Gospel was written so long after the events that it had no chance of being a reliable account.

And yet, the predominant view remained that John was shot through with very Greek ideas and so could not be trusted. But then in 1947, an incredible discovery was made by a Palestinian shepherd boy near the Dead Sea. In a cave, he found hundreds of ancient manuscripts, apparently produced by a secretive Jewish sect, protected in large stone jars and hidden for over 2000 years! The Dead Sea Scrolls, as they came to be known, were an amazing discovery for Biblical scholarship in general. But what they did for John's Gospel was prove that John's concepts were actually much more Jewish than they were Greek.³

So the accepted view of John's Gospel, held by most Biblical scholars in the 19th and early 20th centuries, was proved to be incorrect. John's Gospel was not a late Greek import, but rather the evidence pointed to a Palestinian Jew writing within living memory of the life of Jesus.

However, these discoveries led to the development of a new and equally sceptical theory about the emergence of the Gospel of John. Many began to think that the Gospel was stitched together from a number of different sources, and not really concerned with being historical at all. Rather it was written to speak to the issues faced by a secluded early Christian community (the 'Johannine Community' – for which there is almost no evidence whatsoever⁴).

But over the past 50 years, a growing number of New Testament scholars have taken what has been called a 'new look' on John's Gospel, arguing that scholarly assumptions of the past need to make way for John to be seen for what it is: a first century work,⁵ written by a single individual,⁶ who was an eyewitness of the events of the life of Jesus.⁷

If this is true, then what we have in John's Gospel is an insight into the life and words of the most influential person ever to have walked the earth, from one of his closest associates. So let's take a look at some of the evidence.

Eyewitness Testimony

John's Gospel *claims* to have been written by an eyewitness: 'This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. We know that his testimony is true' (21:24). An eyewitness should get details right, even background information like names and places and geography. And that's exactly what we find in John – the names and locations of towns⁸, the distances between them⁹ and the best route to take from one to the other¹⁰ are all correct. Jacob's Well¹¹, some bathing pools in Jerusalem¹², and a little stream¹³, are all in the correct locations in John's narratives. Furthermore, several places mentioned in the Gospel were long thought to be fictional, but recent archaeology has proved John accurate. The Pool of Bethesda where Jesus healed a man born blind (John 5), the Stone Pavement where Pilate sentenced Jesus to death, and Golgotha – 'the place of the skull' – where He was crucified, all show John's Gospel to be right, and previous assumptions wrong¹⁴ (both John 19).

So not only is the Gospel early enough to have been written within living memory of the events, it had to have been written by someone with intimate knowledge of where these events took place.

Summary

An increasing number of scholars are losing confidence in the idea that the Gospel of John was written by a community of writers but was the work of a single author who was an eye witness of the events described. Scholars disagree as to when this Gospel was actually written – some say around AD65¹⁵ and others as late as AD96.¹⁶

But even if the Gospel was written as early as AD60, that's still 30 years after the life of Jesus, so can we really trust that John remembers accurately the content of Jesus' teaching (even if he was an eyewitness)? Well take something like the Falklands War, which took place around 30 years ago. No-one doubts the accounts of soldiers who fought in the Battle of Goose Green – who did what, who said what. Things like that stay etched on your memory for life. But what John saw and heard was easily as memorable: he'd given up his life to follow a man he believed had come down from heaven, who performed incredible miracles, but was arrested, tried, crucified, yet rose again from the dead! That's exactly the kind of thing that would be very hard to forget!

There are three further difficulties with the historical basis for John that require some attention.

Authorship

The Gospel nowhere explicitly states who the author is. So how can we be confident that John, whom the other Gospels describe as a disciple who had a very close relationship with Jesus, actually wrote the Gospel?

Well there are some very strong clues. The Gospel is attributed to an individual called 'the disciple whom Jesus loved'.¹⁷ In the final chapter, we're told that 'This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. We know that his testimony is true' (21:24). There are three reasons to be confident that this 'beloved disciple' is in fact John the Apostle, one of Jesus' closest disciples.

Firstly, this is what the earliest evidence states. A famous second century bishop of Lyons in France, Irenaeus, wrote, 'Finally John, the disciple of the Lord, who had also lain on his breast, himself published the Gospel, while he was residing at Ephesus in Asia'¹⁸. And the historian Eusebius says that Irenaeus got this information from a man called Polycarp, who was a disciple of John himself.¹⁹ So the tradition that John the Apostle wrote the Gospel appears to go right back to the source. And no other author is suggested in antiquity.

Secondly, this explains why John the Apostle isn't even mentioned in the Gospel.²⁰ The other Gospels show John as one of Jesus' inner three disciples, privy to events the others were not, and a key figure throughout Jesus' ministry. Elsewhere in the New Testament, he is described as a 'pillar' of the early church.²¹

So it would be very strange for such a prominent individual to be excluded entirely from the narrative of the fourth Gospel, unless, he himself is 'the disciple whom Jesus loved'. And for John to direct attention away from himself, and take such a name, makes perfect sense in light of the Christian message his Gospel is all about.

Lastly, this 'beloved disciple' appears to have a close connection and similar status to the Apostle Peter, almost even a rivalry.²² They run together to the tomb when they hear the astonishing news of

Jesus' resurrection (ch.20), and the final chapter has the Risen Lord prophesying about their respective deaths. There is just no other candidate who fits this picture better than John the Apostle.

As we have seen, scholars have put forward other explanations for the origin of the Gospel. But with mounting evidence that it is indeed the work of a single author who was an eyewitness of the events, it is difficult to see why it would be attributed anyone other than John the Apostle.

The actual words of Jesus?

So the date, archaeological and internal evidence make it likely that the Gospel was penned by an eyewitness who was most probably John the 'beloved disciple', but how can we be confident that what we're reading are actually Jesus' own words? This is a more difficult question to answer than might first appear. John records Jesus speaking in long sermons, but it is often difficult to distinguish between where Jesus finishes and the narrator begins. Compare, for example, the words of Jesus, the narrator, and John the Baptist in John chapter 3. All three contain very similar wording and tone.

Recent studies have shown that John's Gospel fits with the ancient genre of *bioi* (similar to modern biographies), with the readers' expectation being that if the author was an eyewitness of the events, what they wrote should be historical, not legendary²³. And in a world that had not yet invented quotation marks nor saw the need for them, 'it was entirely acceptable to paraphrase a speaker's words in one's own style without sharply distinguishing between the styles of speaker and narrator'²⁴. Biblical scholars thus distinguish between the *ipsissima vox* (actual voice) and the *ipsissima verba* (actual words). Reporting word for word was not the important thing, but accurately reporting the *meaning* of what was said. And when we remember that John was writing in the *lingua franca*, Greek, while Jesus had spoken in the local Aramaic language, it becomes much less of a problem that John's style pervades the Gospel.

Doesn't John contradict the other Gospels?

John's Gospel certainly does appear quite different from the other three Gospels. If anyone reads the New Testament from the beginning, the same stories, sayings and parables come up in Matthew, Mark and Luke, almost word for word at times. But when we arrive at John, we find hardly anything repeated and a whole lot of new information. So Does John contradict the other Gospels?

One instance where it definitely looks like that is the surprising account of the 'cleansing' of the temple. In the Synoptics (Matthew, Mark and Luke), Jesus enters Jerusalem after Palm Sunday, and is enraged to see the temple being used as a market place, so He overturns the tables, chases out the merchants, and shouts Scripture in defence of His actions. Matthew, Mark and Luke all record this event as the final straw for the authorities and which led to Jesus' arrest and death (e.g. Mark 11:18).

But in John's Gospel, we find the temple cleansing right at the start of Jesus' ministry – in chapter 2! So has John got it wrong? This is often given as proof that John has little concern for telling events as they actually happened.

There's not necessarily a problem with Gospel authors ordering their material thematically rather than chronologically,²⁵ but on a careful reading of the two accounts (e.g. Mark 11:15-19 and John 2:13-22)

something rather different begins to appear more likely. Mark records that at Jesus' trial, He is accused of saying that He would destroy the temple (14:58), but in Mark's account Jesus says nothing of the kind. He did say something very much like it however – 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up' – in *John's* account (2:19). Mark mentions that the accusers could not agree on what Jesus had actually said, which would seem strange if they were referring to something said only a few days before, but would fit much better with a vague memory of an event which took place a few years previously – i.e. at the beginning of His public ministry. So Jesus 'cleansed' the temple twice, once at the start of His ministry and once at the end. In the first instance this would have been quite exciting even for the religious leaders, because many were waiting for God's Messiah to appear who would destroy Roman oppression. But once it was clear Jesus did not fit their profile, a second ruckus in the temple was much less welcome.

Furthermore, John gives a date in his account – the rebuilding of the temple was begun '46 years ago' – which would place John's cleaning around AD 27/28, two years before Jesus' crucifixion and the other accounts of a temple cleansing. So rather than an example of a contradiction between John and the other Gospels, what we have is an example of 'multiple attestation' of witnesses – two different views of the same life and events, which corroborate rather than contradict one another.

That John is so different from the other Gospels can be well explained by the fact that John very likely wrote much later, after the writing of the other Gospels and felt no need to repeat what was already well known. Far from contradicting the other Gospels, careful examination shows many examples of 'interlocking' between John and the Synoptics, in which instances in the first three Gospels are explained by information unique to John, and vice versa.²⁶

A growing number of scholars are moving to the view that John's Gospel is much more historical and accurate than was once thought, and abandoning the old assumptions. Influential scholar Richard Bauckham states: 'In my view the Gospel is an integral whole... and was designed by a single author. I have returned to the traditional view that the distinctiveness of this Gospel... is due to a theologically and literarily skilled author who produced this distinctive version of the story of Jesus.'²⁷

These are written so that...

So is John's Gospel historically reliable? For a lot of people, that isn't even a question worth asking, for one very specific reason: this Gospel contains miracle stories, and miracles don't happen! Water turned into wine, a man born blind given sight, another raised from the dead – that these are described in John's Gospel simply proves that it is legendary. But, in a sense, that's assuming the answer before we've looked at the evidence. If Jesus was who He said He was and did the things John says He did, then there *is* a God, a Creator of the universe. And few people would contend that a God powerful enough to create such a universe isn't also powerful enough to intervene within it. Surely the strange and wonderful things that follow the life of Jesus are exactly the kinds of things we would expect to occur if God came to earth! And, ending where we began, what we read in his Gospel is not even the half of it! But 'these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name' (John 20:20-31).

If John's Gospel is reliable history, then what we have there is an insight into the life and words of the most influential person ever to have lived, from one of His closest associates. And if Jesus is who John believed him to be, then eternal life as 'children of God' is on offer to us. So shouldn't we take a look at the Gospel itself?

¹ Even the most sceptical scholars argue that there is no doubt that Jesus lived and taught in 1st century Palestine (e.g. Bart Ehrman, or The Jesus Seminar).

² Due to the handwriting, which is Hadrianic.

³ Bauckham, *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple*, 2007, p.23 Bauckham adds that the concepts in John are better explained by John's reliance on the Old Testament.

⁴ *ibid.* p.13

⁵ Robinson, *Re-dating the New Testament*, 1976.

⁶ Culpepper, *The Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 1983. Culpepper doesn't argue that the Gospel is historically reliable, but showed its beauty as a literary unity.

⁷ Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 2008; Martin Hengel, *The Johannine Question*, 2009 (1993).

⁸ E.g. Cana in Galilee (2:1-11) and Capernaum (2:12).

⁹ 15 *stadia* between Bethany and Jerusalem (11:18).

¹⁰ E.g. through Samaria from Jerusalem to Galilee (4:3-4).

¹¹ 4:6.

¹² The Pools of Bethesda (5:2) and Siloam (9:1-9).

¹³ The Kidron brook (18:1), an ephemeral stream or *wadi*.

¹⁴ 5:2; 19:31; 19:17-31. Golgotha has been identified as an 800 year old quarry with a rocky hillock which had a skull-like appearance. It was outside the city walls at the time of Jesus' death – as John says, 'near the city' – but a decade later the wall was extended so that Golgotha was incorporated into the city.

¹⁵ JAT Robinson, *Redating the New Testament*, 1977.

¹⁶ FF. Bruce, *The Gospel of John*, 1983.

¹⁷ Referred to in several texts towards the end of the Gospel (13:23, 19:26, 21:7, 21:20), and may also be referred to without being named in 1:35-39, 18:15, 19:35, 20:2-10)

¹⁸ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.

¹⁹ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book 4.

²⁰ Apart from a reference to 'the sons of Zebedee' (21:2) – i.e. John and his brother James.

²¹ Gal. 2:9.

²² David Wenham, *John's Gospel*, 2003, p.39.

²³ Bauckham, 2007, pp.16-21; ch.4.

²⁴ Craig Blomberg, <http://www.4truth.net/fourtruthpbible.aspx?pageid=8589952783>. Accessed 11/12/14.

²⁵ Mark certainly appears to have done that in chapter 14. Verses 1-2 make a clear chronological statement about where his account has got to in the sequence of events leading up to Jesus' death (the Passover was 'only two days away'). But the following account of Jesus' 'anointing for burial' beginning in verse 3 actually occurred 6 days before the Passover, according to John 12:1. But when it is noticed that next event in Mark's narrative is the Last Supper, and that Mark 14:3 takes place at an unspecified time ('While he was in Bethany') it becomes clear that Mark has re-located the account of Jesus' anointing to sit alongside another occasion on which Jesus' death was foreshadowed.

²⁶ Craig Blomberg explains: John 3:24 makes passing reference to a time 'before John was put in prison,' yet nowhere else in John's Gospel does any reference to this imprisonment appear. Presumably John was assuming his audience had at least heard of that event, as narrated in Mark 6:14-29 and parallels. Or again, in his account of Jesus' trials, John almost totally omits Christ's climactic appearance before the Sanhedrin, presided over by Caiaphas. Yet he makes two passing remarks that show that he knows of that event... (John 18:24; v.28). Again, John must be able to assume that his audience knew the story (it appears in all the Synoptics – Mark 14:53-65 and parallels). Meanwhile, John is interested in describing a preliminary hearing before the previous high priest, Caiaphas's father-in-law, Annas (John 18:13, 19-23). In other instances, the interlocking works in the reverse direction. Readers of only the Synoptic Gospels might wonder why the Jewish leaders had to send Jesus to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate (Mark 15:1-3 par.). If they had found Jesus guilty of blasphemy, why didn't they just stone him according to their Law? Only John provides the answer: the Jewish leaders under Rome were not permitted to carry out the death penalty in such cases (John 18:31). Similarly, those reading only Matthew, Mark, and Luke might wonder if Jesus' first disciples actually left their occupations instantly to follow Him the very first time He ever set eyes on them. Mark 1:16-20 and parallels could certainly be taken that way, without any additional information. But John 1:35-42 makes clear that several of the apostles first met Jesus while they were followers of John the Baptist. They would have witnessed His baptism, become familiar with His ministry, and then later responded to a more formal call to be one of twelve who literally went on the road with Jesus.

²⁷ Bauckham, 2007, p12.