The Question of Aporiai or Cohesion in the Fourth Gospel: A Response to Urban C. von Wahlde

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Introduction

One of the central issues in Johannine studies which has garnered much attention in the past several decades or so is the authorship of the Fourth Gospel (or [the Gospel of] John), and related to that, the question of whether John is one complete document or a composite document from different stages of composition and redaction. The question of authorship and composition also extends to the other three Gospels as well, since none of them contain any inherent claims to authorship, at least ostensibly; in other words, they are formally anonymous. But even if the Gospels did contain statements of attestation to authorship in them, there may still be questions of authenticity perhaps based on internal criteria and inconsistencies that are found in the text—even the letters in the New Testament that identify Paul as their author are scrutinized in this manner—so internal claims to authorship will not necessarily solve this problem to everyone's satisfaction, although I do think that explicit statements of attestation to authorship should be taken seriously. This study, however, is limited to the Gospel of John. The recent discussion of authorship and origins of John has in some ways been popularized by the interest of Richard Bauckham in his *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* and *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple*, where he posits that the author of John was not the traditionally-held son of Zebedee, and hence one of the Twelve, and neither was the author an unknown redactor and compiler of a later period, but instead, he argues that the author was a lesser-known disciple of Jesus who was an eyewitness of his life and ministry, who later came to be a significant elder of the early church. This view

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1 Generally, the term “Fourth Gospel” is used, though not always, to refer to the Gospel by disassociating it from the person John. Here, I will refer to the Fourth Gospel by the various nomenclatures “John,” “the Gospel of John,” or “John's Gospel,” without any implication to its authorship.


has been adopted by others besides Bauckham,⁴ and seems to be an attractive alternative to the traditionally-held view that it was John the Apostle. But what seems to be missing in many of these discussions by those who argue for authorship by a single writer, whether John the Apostle or John the Elder, is that there are very many options that have been proposed throughout scholarly history on this topic, besides these two. For example, in Johannine studies, there are many who still hold to the view that John is actually a composite volume consisting of various stages of composition and/or redaction.⁵ More notably, James Charlesworth has noted at least twenty-two possible candidates for the authorship of John—although he uses the nomenclature “Beloved Disciple.”⁶ This number may seem by some to be gratuitously large, but given the fact that there are no internal claims to authorship within John itself and that there are numerous potential individuals that may fit in one way or another the criteria usually given for the author of John, it seems that the extent of the list is justified.

This brings up an important point regarding the identity of the Beloved Disciple in relation to the identity of the author of John.⁷ Although many contend that the two figures overlap, some arguing or simply assuming that the two are one and the same, there are others who see these two as distinct, unrelated identities, especially those who view the Beloved Disciple as a literary typos, a fictional character created by the author(s) of John as a literary device.⁸ For instance, R. Alan Culpepper states that the Beloved Disciple should be viewed as an “idealized characterization of an historical figure.”⁹ It is not my interest in this essay, at least directly, to solve the problem of the Beloved Disciple in relation to the authorship of John, except to mention that solving the Beloved

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