

Why Scholars Believe St. John, the Apostle is NOT the Author of the Gospel of John

By Michal E. Hunt
Agapebiblestudy.com

The first questions we must address are the questions of authorship and the date this Gospel account was written. Today most modern Biblical scholars do not accept that John (Yehohanan) the Apostle, son of Zebedee, brother of James the Greater, and Bishop of Ephesus is the author of the fourth Gospel despite the fact that the Fathers of the Church unanimously identified the Apostle John as the inspired writer. Why then is John the Apostle's authorship almost universally rejected in modern critical scholarship? The answer involves several objections as to why the son of the fisherman Zebedee could have authored such a deeply theological text. The following list is a summary of the most often expressed arguments **against** Johannine authorship:

Argument #1: The fourth Gospel does not agree with the synoptic accounts (Matthew, Mark and Luke): The most often quoted argument against St. John's authorship is that so much of the synoptic Gospel portrait of Jesus is missing from the fourth Gospel account and what is included is very different. Many modern scholars allege that an Apostle close to Jesus could not have written this very different Gospel account. This argument does not address the fact that John may have had good theological and/or literary reasons for omitting what was covered in the other Gospels and ignores or dismisses the testimony of early Church Fathers like the great Biblical scholar, theologian, and head of the catechetical school in Alexandria, Egypt, St. Clement of Alexandria (ca. AD150-211/216). St. Clement wrote: *"John, last of all, seeing that the plain facts had been clearly set forth in the Gospels, and being urged by his acquaintances, composed a spiritual Gospel under the divine inspiration of the Spirit."* The inspired writer of the fourth Gospel may also be addressing these differences when he records in John 20:30,31 *"There were many other signs that Jesus worked in the sight of the disciples, but they are not recorded in this book. These are recorded so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing this you may have life through his name."* And again in John 21:25 the inspired writer of the fourth Gospel writes *"There was much else that Jesus did; if it were written down in detail, I do not suppose the world itself would hold all the books that would be written."* In other words, the fourth Gospel does not claim to record all that Jesus said or did.

Argument #2: That the fourth Gospel's themes of love and unity could not have been produced by one of the Apostles to whom Jesus gave the name "Sons of Thunder" in Mark 3:17. According to this argument James and his brother John were wrathful, emotional, and ambitious men who wanted to call down fire on the Samaritans (Luke 9:54) and desired to secure a place of honor at Jesus' right hand in His coming kingdom (Mark 10:35-45). This argument offers only a one-dimensional view at the sons of Zebedee. Surely decades of suffering for Christ and years of growing in faith and understanding yielded a much more mature man of Christian faith. By the time the fourth Gospel was written John Zebedee, the Bishop of Ephesus, was no longer the impetuous youth described in the synoptic Gospels.

Argument #3: Probably the most popular argument against Johannine authorship 60 years ago was **that the author of the fourth Gospel must have been a Hellenistic (Greek culture) Israelite of the Diaspora** (living outside Israel/Judea) or a Greek gentile convert to Judaism and/or Christianity because the language and concepts of the fourth Gospel were simple not found in Jewish literature of the 1st century AD but instead reflected Greek thought and language. Scholars with this view pointed out that terms and concepts peculiar to the fourth Gospel like the divine "Logos", the contrast between "light and darkness", etc. were strictly Greek cultural expressions. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947 proved that the theology of the fourth Gospel was part of the 1st century AD Jewish community view. The Scrolls not only contained copies of all the Old Testament texts with the exception of the Book of Esther (many in multiple copies) but also commentaries on Old Testament books and documents of the Community at Qumran where the scrolls were found. These sectarian documents expressed the same language and concepts that scholars had previously thought was unique to the fourth Gospel. The similarities are so striking that today many scholars believe there was a connection between John the Apostle and the religious Community at Qumran near to where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered.

Argument #4: **Another frequently used argument is that John the Apostle, a poor fisherman from the Galilee, was too uneducated and unsophisticated to have written the fourth Gospel.** There is no evidence in Sacred Scripture that John was poor. Scholars have quite a good idea of the scale of John's family's fishing operation on the Sea of Galilee. He and his brother James along with their father, Zebedee, were partners in the fishing business with the brothers Peter and Andrew ([Luke 5:7](#)). They owned several boats and had hired helpers ([Mark 1:20](#)). They were free to start and stop work when it suited them ([John 21:1-3](#) and [Luke 5:11](#)). They were also able to leave their business for a 3 year period to follow Jesus and yet were able to return to the Galilee at the end of 3 years to boats they still owned (see [John 21:1-3](#)). We know that fish was a food staple of the ancient world ("*Bread and fish, with the addition of olive-oil and wine, formed in ancient times the most substantial parts of the diet of the people, rich and poor.*" M. Rostovtzerff, *The Social and Economic History of the Hellenistic World*). We also know that the Roman authorities hired fishermen on the Galilee to provide fish, salted, pickled and dried, to be exported to Rome and other Roman cities. The contracts required the fisherman to provide a set number of fish and anything they caught beyond the limit was extra income. The size and quality of Peter's house, excavated at Capernaum, confirms the impression that these were men of means who controlled their own lives. It is larger than most of the other houses excavated there and is located directly across from the local Synagogue, a prestigious location. I do not know of any serious scholar who believes Peter, Andrew and Zebedee & Sons were poor.

[Acts 4:13](#) is usually cited as proof that John and Peter lacked education. This passage, from the New Jerusalem Bible translation reads: "*They [members of the Jewish Law court] were astonished at the fearless show by Peter and John, considering that they were uneducated laymen...*" The people of Jerusalem and the more sophisticated Greek-culture Jews of the Diaspora generally regarded themselves as superior to the "hicks" from the Galilee, but what is

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really meant by this passage from Acts is that the members of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish law court which was composed of Biblical scholars trained in the Law and Temple priests, were amazed at the eloquence of Peter's defense when he and John were brought before them and charged with false teaching. Their statement "uneducated laymen", *'am-ha'aretz*, is more literally translated "common men". Considering the fact that Peter and the others Apostles had not received a formal theological education that prepared one to become a member of the hereditary ministerial priesthood nor were they formally trained scribes or rabbis, the members of the court were impressed with Peter's fearless defense. Therefore, the passage does not indicate that the Apostles lacked education, only that the members of the court were astonished at the eloquence of their defense.

In the first century AD every village in Judea and the Galilee had a school in association with the local Synagogue to teach boys to read and write Hebrew (the liturgical language) and/or Aramaic (common language) and probably some Greek (the international language/ the language of commerce). Boys also studied Scripture intensively from about the ages of five to twelve, and boys who showed particular promise would have been sent to Jerusalem to continue their studies. In any event, it is entirely credible that John the Apostle, who grew up in a Greek-culture dominated Galilee (even his friends Andrew and Philip had purely Greek names), who took a leading role in a multi-cultural ministry that spanned over 60 years and serving as the Bishop of the Christian churches of Asia Minor for circa 50 years, would have learned considerable Greek with or without any formal education in the language. Then too, the Greek of the fourth Gospel is the simplest of the New Testament Greek texts; precisely what one might expect from a man who learned Greek as a second language.

Argument #5: Finally, one of the most often cited arguments is that John the Apostle's name does not appear anywhere in the fourth Gospel. This is true; John's name, the name of his brother the Apostle James, nor the names of his parents Zebedee and Salome, appears in this Gospel where these names are all mentioned in the other Gospels. However, none of the Gospels bears the names of the Holy Spirit inspired writers just as many of the Old Testament texts lack the names of the human authors. Then too, there is no reason for John's name to appear in the text if he were already well known to his original audience as an Apostle and the Bishop of Ephesus. Despite the fact that the sacred writer does not identify himself in the text there are clues, internal evidence in the fourth Gospel, that a minority of modern scholars believe clearly point to John the Apostle as the sacred writer. And, one must consider that the absence of the name of this one very important Apostle in this Gospel, rather than eliminating John as the inspired writer, points to John who, in his humility, omits his personal name and assumes the identity of the "beloved disciple," a role which all of us are called to fill.