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Michael Wheeler
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PART I

The Evangelist, the gospel, the Word

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CHAPTER I

The Apostle of love
St John the Evangelist

Now there was leaning on Jesus' bosom one of his disciples, whom Jesus loved.

(John 13.23)

YOUNG DISCIPLE AND AGED DIVINE

By the end of the nineteenth century, most medieval churches in England had received some attention from Victorian restorers and from makers of stained glass. Face the altar and you will often see, in stained glass above it or to each side, late Victorian images of the Virgin Mary and, usually to the right, St John the Evangelist, standing at the foot of the Cross (Figure 1).¹ Like their medieval precursors, Victorian artists tended to portray the Evangelist as a beardless and long-haired young man. If his gospel was the last to be written and if he also wrote the Apocalypse, or book of Revelation, in exile on Patmos, John the beloved disciple who had leaned 'on Jesus' bosom' at the last supper must have been young; or so tradition taught.

Victorian representations of St John as an idealized young man are the subject of the last section in this chapter, following discussions of the Evangelist as a privileged witness and contemplative, and as the beloved disciple and the Apostle of love. First, however, we should consider what nineteenth-century theologians and Bible commentators, both British and Continental, made of the young disciple and the aged 'John the Divine'.

At mid-century, the iconographer Anna Jameson could assert that, unlike in the cases of Matthew, Mark and Luke, whose gospels had only recently been denominated 'synoptic', enough was known about John to 'convey a distinct impression of his personal character, and an idea of what his personal appearance may have been, supposing this outward semblance to

¹ See also Martin Harrison, *Victorian stained glass* (Barrie, Jenkins, 1980), illustration 21 and colour plate 16. Also popular were representations in stained glass of Christ blessing the people, with Mary on the left and John on the right: see e.g. *ibid.*, illustration 6.



Figure 1 St John the Evangelist, east window, St Mary's Monxton, Hampshire, detail

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have harmonised with the inward being'.² Like Jameson, biblical scholars were reliant upon tradition rather than scripture for much of their information on John's later life as a pillar of the Early Church; but there was a good deal of evidence available on the Evangelist who was thought to have been the last surviving witness of Jesus' ministry and death. As Henry Alford, editor of the Greek New Testament, put it: 'For the after-history of John, we are dependent on tradition. And here we have evidence more trustworthy than in the case of any other Apostle.'³

The analysis of 'evidences' of Christianity had become increasingly rigorous as the 'quest of the historical Jesus' intensified in the first half of the nineteenth century.⁴ Thereafter, a growing band of authors of lives of Christ, in Germany, France and Britain, weighed and sifted the findings of the archaeologists working in the Holy Land, testing them against ancient texts. The quest of the historical John ran alongside that of 'the Master' and was included in the itineraries of those bound for 'Bible lands'. When the Prince of Wales made an Eastern tour in 1862 he was accompanied by Arthur Penrhyn Stanley, Broad Church author of *Sinai and Palestine* (1856) and soon to be Dean of Westminster. Stanley made full use of recently visited sites as visual aids to reflection, in his sermons on board HMS *Osborne*. On 18 May 1862, the fourth Sunday after Easter, 'on the day after visiting Patmos and Ephesus', he preached on a text from John's gospel, commenting that

We, in the course of yesterday, have been on the track of the very Apostle who wrote down these words for his own support and ours. We have seen at Patmos and at Ephesus the last traces of S. John, with whom we parted, as it were, on the shores of his own lake of Tiberias. Let us ask ourselves what are the lessons which he has left to us?⁵

To follow in the footsteps of St John the Evangelist, either directly, on a tour, or remotely, through one of the many illustrated guides to the Holy Land published in the second half of the century, was to put oneself in

² Anna Jameson, *Sacred and legendary art*, new edn, 2 vols. (London and New York: Longmans, Green, 1891), vol. 1, p. 158. (1st edn 1848.)

³ Henry Alford, ed., *The Greek testament . . . for the use of theological students and ministers*, 7th edn, 4 vols. (London and Cambridge: Rivingtons/Deighton, Bell, 1874–5), vol. 1, Prolegomena, p. 52. (1st edn 1849–61.)

⁴ See Albert Schweitzer, *The quest of the historical Jesus: a critical study of its progress from Reimarus to Wrede* (Black, 1948). (1st edn 1906, trans. 1910.)

⁵ Arthur Penrhyn Stanley, *Sermons preached before His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, during his tour in the East in the spring of 1862, with notices of some of the localities visited* (Murray, 1863), p. 93. For an account of the tour, which followed the death of Prince Albert, see Rowland Edmund Prothero, *Life and letters of Dean Stanley* (Nelson, 1909), pp. 307–28. (1st edn 1893.)

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touch with the Apostle who, it was believed, had heard his Master's voice and had survived longest in order to give his testimony to the Early Church, first orally and then through his writings – the fourth gospel, the epistles of John, and the visionary Apocalypse. German scholars, however, who were on the track of the gospel writer or writers, and Ernest Renan, in his *Vie de Jésus* (1863), questioned the evidence on which such pilgrimages were based. Continental exponents of the Higher Criticism of the New Testament (higher in the sense that it raised discussion above the level of the purely philological⁶) were read carefully by British colleagues. From the early 1860s onwards, the formidable triumvirate of Westcott, Lightfoot and Hort engaged in a systematic response to theologians such as Baur, who had questioned the authenticity of the fourth gospel.⁷ Distinguished successors of the 'Trinity three' continued to argue until the end of the century that John, son of Zebedee, wrote the gospel.⁸ Some thinking churchgoers in Britain had been alarmed, however,⁹ and by the end of the century confidence in the tradition that John was the beloved disciple and author of all the Johannine books of the New Testament had been shaken. Dan Brown's Professor Teabing, in *The Da Vinci code* (2003), is not the first to suggest (incorrectly) that the figure on Jesus' right in Leonardo's *The last supper* is Mary Magdalene, rather than St John the Evangelist. The disappearance of the historical John in the world's most notorious airport novel only marks the latest stage in a long process of attenuation.

Most Victorian believers, however, both venerated the Evangelist as a saint in heaven, especially on his feast day (27 December), and loved him as an authentic historical figure. Among nineteenth-century scholars, Catholics tended to be more comfortable with legend than their Anglican or Nonconformist contemporaries, and could accept Alban Butler's account of John in his frequently reprinted *Lives of the saints* (1756–9).¹⁰ Anglican

⁶ 'It merely means the criticism which is not purely linguistic or philological, but also takes into account the discoveries of history and archæology, the teachings of comparative religion, and the consideration of the ordinary laws of evidence, of documentary transmission, of psychology, and of human literature': Frederic William Farrar, *The Bible: its meaning and supremacy*, 2nd edn (Longmans, Green, 1901), p. 122. (1st edn 1897.)

⁷ See chapter 2 below and Stephen Neill, *The interpretation of the New Testament, 1861–1961: the Firth Lectures, 1962* (Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 1–103.

⁸ See e.g. Charles Gore, *The Incarnation of the Son of God*, Bampton lectures (Murray, 1916), p. 250. (1st edn 1891.)

⁹ See chapter 2 below and Owen Chadwick, *The Victorian Church*, Ecclesiastical History of England, ed. John Compton Dickinson, vols. vii–viii (Black, 1966–70), vol. viii, pp. 60–75.

¹⁰ See Alban Butler, *The lives of the Fathers, martyrs and other principal saints*, ed. Frederick Charles Husenbeth, illuminated edn, 2 vols. (London and Dublin: Virtue, 1883–6), vol. ii, pp. 840–8. Cf. Robert Nelson, *A companion for the festivals and fasts of the Church of England, with collects and prayers for each solemnity*, 37th edn (Rivington, 1826), p. 75. (1st edn 1704.)

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traditionalists, however, such as Canon Christopher Wordsworth, nephew of the poet and subsequently Bishop of Lincoln, differed only slightly in emphasis,¹¹ and Wordsworth's summary of John's life reflects beliefs that were widely held in mid-Victorian England. He wrote in his edition of the Greek New Testament (1856–60):

The following particulars concerning St. John's personal history are collected from Holy Scripture and Ancient Authors.

St John was the Son of Zebedee, a Galilæan fisherman of some worldly wealth, and of Salome, and perhaps originally a disciple of John the Baptist; when young, he was called by Jesus Christ, and he and his brother James, and Peter were admitted by our Lord into the closest intimacy with Himself. He was the disciple whom Jesus loved, and who leaned on His breast at the Paschal Supper, and to whose care our Lord committed His mother when He was on the Cross.

At the close of the Gospel History, St. John is seen united in fraternal fellowship with St. Peter. For some time after the Ascension St. John was the constant companion of that Apostle, and they are sent together by the Apostles, from Jerusalem, to confirm the baptized converts at Samaria, and they are mentioned as present together at Jerusalem, on the occasion of St. Paul's visit at the Council of Jerusalem, A.D. 50, fourteen years after the conversion of St. Paul.

St. John resided for some time in Asia Minor, and died at Ephesus. But his residence in Asia does not appear to have commenced until some years after our Lord's Ascension . . .

Some ancient writers affirm that St. John was a martyr in will, at Rome, in the persecutions of the Christians under the Emperor Domitian, who reigned from A.D. 92 to A.D. 96, and that he was then cast into a cauldron of boiling oil; and having been preserved from death, was banished by that Emperor to the island of Patmos, where, as St. John himself relates, he saw the *Revelation*, which he describes in the book bearing that name; and that he afterwards returned to Ephesus, and there wrote his Gospel.¹²

Whereas Wordsworth did not comment on the personality of John, Edward Hayes Plumptre, Professor of Divinity at King's College, London, wrote on the subject in his article on the Apostle (for him also the Evangelist) in William Smith's celebrated *Dictionary of the Bible* (1863). Plumptre argued that the 'popular notion, fostered by the received types of Christian art, of a nature gentle, yielding, feminine', could not be sustained in the light

¹¹ Roman Catholics tended to place more emphasis upon John's virginity than did Protestants, for example. See R. Alan Culpepper, *John, the son of Zebedee: the life of a legend*, Studies on personalities of the New Testament (1994; rpt. Edinburgh: Clark, 2000), p. 176.

¹² Christopher Wordsworth, ed., *The New Testament of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, in the original Greek, with introduction and notes*, new edn, 2 vols. (Rivingtons, 1877), vol. 1, Gospels, pp. 266–7. (1st edn 1856–61.)

of some 'striking facts'.¹³ The name 'Boanerges' (Mark 3.17), implies a 'vehemence, zeal, intensity, which gave to those who had it the might of Sons of Thunder'. That spirit broke out when John and his brother James 'joined their mother in asking for the highest places in the kingdom', and 'declared that they were ready to face the dark terrors of the cup that he drank and the baptism that he was baptised with' (Matthew 20.20–4, Mark 10.35–41); when they 'rebuked one who cast out devils in the Lord's name' (Luke 9.49); and when they 'sought to call down fire from heaven upon a village of the Samaritans' (Luke 9.54).

Plumptre and Wordsworth offered the kind of account of St John that was coming under close scrutiny by other scholars, and particularly by members of the Tübingen school in Germany and by Renan in France. Renan, a lapsed Catholic writing for Catholics, was an orientalist with a gift for evoking the atmosphere of the Holy Land, which he visited in his researches on the Early Church, and for romanticizing the story of Jesus and his followers. *Vie de Jésus* was reprinted seven times in the first three months after publication; within a year there was an English translation and five different German translations. While Renan recognized that the fourth gospel may have originated from the 'great school of Asia Minor, which was connected with John', towards the end of the first century, and was 'worthy of high esteem', and even to be preferred to the synoptics, he found it difficult to square the sophistication of the gospel with the background of the supposed single author.¹⁴

By professing to describe the Jesus of the fourth gospel, while denying that gospel's authenticity and its miracles, Renan laid himself open to accusations of insincerity. One school of German theologians, however, was grateful to Renan, who was at least historical, and thereby delivered them from David Friedrich Strauss and his reading of the gospels as grounded in myth rather than history, in his famous *Das Leben Jesu* (1835–6).¹⁵ Nevertheless, both writers were deeply sceptical about the idealized picture of St John the Evangelist that had come down to them. Strauss argued that John was jealous of Peter, which explained why the 'advantages of Peter' in the synoptic gospels were 'invalidated in a peculiar manner, and put into the shade, in favour of John' in the fourth gospel.¹⁶ Renan suggested that

¹³ Edward Hayes Plumptre, 'John, the Apostle', in *A dictionary of the Bible, comprising its antiquities, biography, geography, and natural history*, ed. William Smith, 3 vols. (Murray, 1863), vol. 1, pp. 1103–8 (p. 1105).

¹⁴ See Ernest Renan, *The life of Jesus* (London and Paris: Trübner/Lévy, 1864), p. 14.

¹⁵ See Schweitzer, *The quest of the historical Jesus*, p. 190.

¹⁶ David Friedrich Strauss, *The life of Jesus critically examined*, trans. Marian Evans [George Eliot], 2nd edn (London and New York: Sonnenschein/Macmillan, 1892), pp. 328–9. (1st edn 1846.)

the author of the fourth gospel 'betrays the desire to fortify his authority, to shew that he has been the favourite of Jesus'.¹⁷ When the English rationalist Charles Hennell wrote his famous *Inquiry concerning the origin of Christianity* (1838), he had not read Strauss, who was impressed by the work and later wrote a preface to its German translation. In a chapter entitled 'On the date and credibility of the Gospel of John', Hennell commented upon the Apostle being 'under the strongest temptation to indulge in fiction'.¹⁸

Such claims of distortion in the fourth gospel were answered most effectively by a later generation in Britain who embraced the Higher Criticism, but who had a more nuanced understanding of the nature and purpose of interpretation. Charles Gore, for example, writing on 'The Holy Spirit and inspiration' in *Lux mundi* (1889), argued that 'In S. John's Gospel . . . we have an account of our Lord which has obviously passed through the medium of a most remarkable personality. We have the outcome of the meditation, as well as the recollection, of the Apostle . . . he is interpreting and not distorting the record . . .'.¹⁹ So what were the writers of Christian biography to make of this remarkable if ambiguous personality? In contrast to Hennell, Strauss and Renan, the authors of the most popular lives of Christ published in Britain recognized his impetuosity but perpetuated the idealization of the saint by emphasizing his modesty or reticence in withholding his name, for example.²⁰ Similarly, in Westcott's monumental commentary on *The gospel according to St. John* (1880), he cites Lightfoot's research into the arrangement, as described in Talmudic glosses, whereby John leaned 'on Jesus' bosom' at the last supper (John 13.23), indicating that 'this very incident . . . in which it has been supposed that St. John claims precedence over St. Peter, shews on the contrary that he sets himself second to him'.²¹

This familiar verse was also used as evidence for the defence in the debate on the authorship of the fourth gospel. Alford, for example, pointed out that the assumption that John is the 'author of our Gospel, also identifies

¹⁷ Renan, *The life of Jesus*, pp. 15–16.

¹⁸ Charles Christian Hennell, *An inquiry concerning the origin of Christianity* (Smallfield, 1838), pp. 108–9. (On George Eliot's appreciative early reading of Hennell, see Gordon Sherman Haight, *George Eliot: a biography* (Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 38–40, 44.)

¹⁹ Charles Gore, ed., *Lux Mundi: a series of studies in the religion of the incarnation*, 8th edn (Murray, 1890), p. 347.

²⁰ See John Cunningham Geikie, *The life and words of Christ*, 2 vols. (Hodder, Stoughton, 1883), vol. 1, p. 439, and Frederic William Farrar, *The life of Christ*, illustrated edn (Cassell, 1891), p. 114. Gladstone, who admired other works by Renan, described *The Life of Jesus* as a 'piece of trumpery': John Morley, *The life of William Ewart Gladstone*, 3 vols. (Macmillan, 1903), vol. 11, p. 476.

²¹ See Brooke Foss Westcott, ed., *The gospel according to St John: the Authorised Version, with introduction and notes* (Murray, 1882), p. 194.

him with “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” so often mentioned in it’.²² On the question of John’s pride in his references to the beloved disciple, Westcott commented on John 19.26, where the crucified Christ commits his mother to the care of the ‘disciple standing by, whom he loved’: ‘The clause is at once an explanation of what follows, and a word of thanksgiving; of humility, not of pride.’²³

When it came to the later history of John, and his role in the Early Church, Westcott had formerly claimed for John a supreme position, in his *Introduction to the study of the gospels* (1860). Here he suggested that John was the ‘living link’ that united the two great ages, those of the Apostles and of the Church; and that, as head of the Church in Asia, he was the ‘guardian of a faith already established, and not, like St Peter, the founder of an outward Church’.²⁴ But did the ‘Father of Asia’, as Cardinal Wiseman called him, write the Apocalypse, or Book of Revelation?²⁵

Although the place of the Apocalypse among the Johannine writings had been viewed with some uncertainty since the third century,²⁶ ‘John the Divine’ was still identified with ‘John the Evangelist’ in the 1890s by mainstream biblical scholars in Britain; and the Evangelist’s or his school’s authorship of at least the first of the three ‘Epistles of St John’ was regarded as a virtual certainty.²⁷ In St Augustine’s homilies on the gospel and first epistle, reprinted in the late 1840s by the Tractarians, he had written: ‘It is nothing strange to your ears, my beloved, that the Evangelist John like an eagle takes a loftier flight, and mounts beyond the darkness of the earth, and with stronger eyes looks upon the light of Truth.’²⁸ Henry Edward Manning, preaching as an Anglican before his conversion to Catholicism in 1851, said something equally direct about John as a witness to events ‘in heaven’.²⁹

²² Alford, ed., *The Greek Testament*, vol. 1, p. 51. Cf. Geikie, *The life and words of Christ*, vol. 1, pp. 439–40.

²³ Westcott, ed., *The gospel according to St. John*, p. 276. Cf. Strauss, *The life of Jesus*, pp. 686–7, and Renan, *The life of Jesus*, p. 289, note 5.

²⁴ Brooke Foss Westcott, *An introduction to the study of the gospels*, 5th edn (Macmillan, 1875), pp. 252–3.

²⁵ Nicholas Wiseman, *Sermons preached on various occasions* (Dublin: Duffy, 1889), p. 169.

²⁶ See Culpepper, *John, the son of Zebedee*, p. 95.

²⁷ See e.g. John Owen Farquhar Murray, ‘The several books of the New Testament’, in *The Cambridge companion to the Bible* (Cambridge University Press, 1892), pp. 174–233 (pp. 222, 225). Today most biblical scholars disagree, but for an exception see Stephen Stewart Smalley, *The Revelation to John: a commentary on the Greek text of the Apocalypse* (SPCK, 2005).

²⁸ St Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, *Homilies on the gospel according to St. John, and his first epistle*, trans. Henry Browne, Library of Fathers of the Holy Catholic Church, anterior to the division of the East and West, ed. Edward Bouverie Pusey, *et al.*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Parker, 1838–85), vol. 1, p. 230.

²⁹ Henry Edward Manning, *Sermons*, 4 vols. (Burns, 1842–50), vol. 1, p. 333.