

WITHOUT HONOUR - WHERE?¹

A historian looks at John 4:44

ABSTRACT

John 4:44 suggests either that Jesus' home was not in Galilee, or that his recent mission to Jerusalem and Judea had been a failure. Neither is consistent with the rest of the Fourth Gospel. From Eusebius, we deduce that the author, identified as the Apostle John ("John the Elder" being Eusebius' invention), is correcting the false impression given by Mark that Jesus began his ministry by his dramatic bursting into Galilee at 1:14. Jesus knew that to attempt this would have resulted in failure. St John shows that, instead, Jesus began his career with a triumphant mission to Jerusalem and Judea, only tackling Galilee after first succeeding in the south.

KEYWORDS: John the Apostle, ministry of Jesus, source critic, historian, John the Elder.

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After the two days he departed to Galilee. For Jesus himself testified that a prophet has no honour in his own country (e0n th|~ i0di/a| patri/di). So when he came to Galilee, the Galileans welcomed him, having seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the feast, for they too had gone to the feast. (John 4:43-45 RSV)

Where was the home country, the i1dia patri/j, of Jesus of Nazareth? Of course, Nazareth in Galilee. Most of us thought we knew, until we turned up this passage. What is the logic of the middle sentence? The initial "For" (ga\r) seems to indicate that Jesus is moving from a place where he has no honour to somewhere more congenial. And indeed on arrival he is fêted. So does the writer not know where Jesus comes from? Or is Jesus deliberately putting his head in the lion's mouth, expecting rejection, only to get a pleasant surprise when he arrives? But then, why the "So" (ou]n) beginning v.45, where "But" would be due? Something has gone very wrong with the logic!

Many of the Great and Good, beginning with Origen, have found a way to cut the

¹ The original version of this paper was given to the Johannine Seminar of the British New Testament Conference at Exeter University on 8 September 2007.

Gordian knot. The logic works perfectly if we understand that Jesus is escaping from his "own country", where he has been for a while, without honour, into Galilee, where he is welcomed. The price of this is that we have to define Jerusalem and Judea, where he has been for some time prior to spending two days *en passant* in Samaria, as his "own country". So C.H. Dodd tells us, without batting an eyelid, that "Jerusalem is the patri/j of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel, iv.44".² So also C.K. Barrett: "[F]or John, Jerusalem, not Galilee, is the proper scene on which the Messiah must teach, work, and die."³ And again, he tells us, Judea, not Nazareth or Galilee, was Jesus' "'own home' where his 'own people' did not receive him," citing John 1:11.⁴ R.H. Lightfoot was another.⁵ They are in good company. B.F. Westcott had indeed no doubt that "Galilee was the ordinary scene of Christ's ministry."⁶ But after listing the possible candidates for his "own country" at John 4:44 - Galilee generally, Nazareth, Lower Galilee surrounding Nazareth, or Ju*dea - he dismisses the first three with "the fatal objection that it seems impossible that St John should speak of Galilee in this connexion as Christ's 'own country' (...Compare vii.41,42)." As we blink, he explains:

Both by fact and by the current interpretation of prophecy, Judæa alone could receive that title....Moreover, Judæa is naturally suggested by the circumstances. The Lord had not been received with due honour at Jerusalem. His Messianic claim had not been welcomed. He did not trust Himself to the Jews there. He was forced to retire. If many followed Him, they were not representatives of the people, and their faith reposed in miracles. No apostle was a Jew in this narrower sense. Nothing then can be more appropriate than to mark this outward *failure* of the appeal to Judæa by an application of the common proverb...followed by the notice of the ready welcome given to Christ by the Galilæans.⁷

The scholar doth protest too much, methinks. The state of play today is summarised by Gail R. O'Day in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, who herself opts for Judea, but is less embarrassed about it than Westcott.⁸

² C.H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: CUP, 1968) 352.

³ C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, 2nd edition, London: SPCK, 1978) 246.

⁴ C.K. Barrett, "John," *Peake's Commentary on the Bible* (edd. M. Black and H.H. Rowley; Sunbury-on-Thames: Nelson, 1962) 844-69, at 850.

⁵ S. Neill and N.T. Wright say that for him, "Judæa, not Galilee, is in this Gospel the *patrijs*, the native country, of Jesus; it is only as it were by chance that he is a Galilean": *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861-1986*, 2nd edition (Oxford: OUP, 1988) 270.

⁶ B.F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St John: The Authorised Version: With Introduction and Notes* (London: Murray, 1900) lxxxi.

⁷ Westcott, *St John*, 77-78 (emphasis added).

⁸ G.R. O'Day, "The Gospel of John: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections" in *The New Interpreter's Bible* 9, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 493-865, at 574, as follows. For Galilee: Chrysostom; R.E. Brown, *The Gospel According to St John (I-XII)*, AB 29 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 187; R. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A*

How do we resolve this? Let us begin by establishing three propositions:

(1) The proverb about a prophet being without honour in his own patri/j is attributed to Jesus in each of the three Synoptic Gospels. In Luke 4:24 it refers explicitly to Nazareth; in Matt 13:57 and Mark 6:4, implicitly so.⁹ It would be very strange therefore if St John, apparently quoting them, should assign the same proverb to Jesus with a different intent. *There must be therefore be a strong presumption in favour of a reference to Nazareth or its Galilean surrounds* - that is to say, to the north rather than the south.

(2) *John himself is absolutely clear that "Jesus of Nazareth", as he himself repeatedly calls him (1:45; 18:5; 18:7; 19:19), came from Galilee.* The scornful refutation reported at 7:41-42, "Is the Christ to come from Galilee?" (rather than Bethlehem, the village of David), presupposes that Jesus really did come from there, as everyone knew. This is emphatically confirmed by the rebuttal of Nicodemus reported ten verses later: "Are you from Galilee too? Search and you will see that no prophet is to rise from Galilee." (7:52) Jesus comes from Galilee, so he cannot possibly be the prophet. Barrett's citation of John 1:11 is a red herring: "He came to his own [neuter], and his own people received him not", cannot be stretched to mean Judea as distinct from Galilee. It is a counsel of last refuge.

(3) *Jesus' prior ministry in Judea and Jerusalem is depicted by St John, whatever the commentators say, as a rip-roaring success.* So in Jerusalem at the Passover, "many believed in his name when they saw the signs which he did" (2:23). These even included fellow-Galileans (4:45). Again, when Jesus embarks upon a baptising mission in Judea, the disciples of John the Baptist become worried by the very extent of Jesus' success, and report to their master, "Rabbi, he who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you bore witness, here he is, baptising, and all are going to him." (3:26) Next, the Pharisees are rattled by that very success: "Now when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptising more disciples than John..., he left Judea and departed into Galilee." (4:1, 3). This is in no way diminished in the first case by the fact that Jesus "did not trust himself" to the crowds at the Passover (2:24). He needs success, but too much of it at this stage would be premature. He is not yet ready for that kind of confrontation. Hence the suggestion that his mission to Judea and Jerusalem had been a *failure* cannot be made good from John's text. On the contrary, he was almost too

Commentary (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971) 204. For Judea: Origen; E.C. Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel* (London: Faber & Faber, 1947) 260-1; C.K. Barrett, *St John*, 246.

⁹ It also appears in the Oxyrhynchus Papyrus 1 and the *Gospel of Thomas* 31.

successful. And it was on the back of that success that he made the dramatic return to Galilee reported at 4:45.

So we have a dilemma. If the dictum about the prophet being without honour in his own patri/j refers to Galilee, it is refuted by the *logic of its context*, which tells us immediately how the Galileans did in fact honour him. If on the other hand it refers to Judea, it is refuted by *history*, for on John's own account the mission to Judea has just been a huge popular success. On either count the evangelist seemingly emerges as an inconsistent dimwit. Neither population is dishonouring Jesus. So why bring in the proverb at all?

Where we go from here depends largely upon one's style of scholarship. Most would find "inconsistent dimwit" a little problematical as a description of the Fourth Evangelist. The *source critic*, interested primarily in the genesis of the *text*, has a ready armoury for coping with such emergencies: multiple authorship, strata of various depths, conflicting traditions and so forth. He quarries primarily in the gospel text before him, which is duly broken down into a succession of stages and sources, where anonymity is the order of the day. No historical individual is therefore assigned too prominent a part. Examples of this approach come readily to hand. One with a particularly good pedigree is Stephen S. Smalley's section on Composition, in his entry on John's Gospel in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*.¹⁰ Another is René Kieffer, commenting on John in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, who writes blandly that "These verses have been composed either by a redactor or by the evangelist in a later edition of his gospel."¹¹ No textual support is offered for this; indeed, no support of any kind, or suggestion as to *why* anyone might have done this. So nothing is solved. It is only a small step into the broader New Testament before we begin contrasting a Johannine tradition of a Jesus from Judea with a Marcan, or Synoptic, tradition of a Jesus from Galilee - or do we?

The *historian* however is more interested in *people*, the originators of the sources. He takes to heart the wry comment of E. Earle Ellis, "One must resist the modern tendency to assume that in early Christianity only unknowns could be authors."¹² So he asks questions like,

- (1) Who were the writer or writers of the Gospel?
- (2) What did they think they were doing?
- (3) What did the early Church believe about them?
- (4) What grounds did they have for these beliefs?

¹⁰ S.S. Smalley, "John, The Gospel According to," *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* (edd. B.M. Metzger and M.D. Coogan; New York, Oxford: OUP, 1993) 373-77.

¹¹ R. Kieffer, "John," *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (edd. J. Barton and J. Muddiman; Oxford: OUP, 2001) 960-1000 at 969.

¹² E.E. Ellis, *The Making of the New Testament Documents* (Boston: Brill, 1999) 36.

(5) What if anything can we learn from them?

As a dedicated practitioner of Occam's Razor, he will want to minimise the number of hypotheses he makes unconfirmed by external support. So he will in this instance turn to the historian Eusebius of Caesarea, where he finds two remarkable passages with a bearing on the writing of John.

"And the Presbyter used to say this, 'Mark became Peter's interpreter and wrote accurately (a0kribw~j) all that he remembered, not, indeed, in order (ta/cei), of the things said or done by the Lord.[]'" (HE 3.39.15)¹³

John, it is said, used all the time a message which was not written down, and at last took to writing for the following cause. The three gospels which had been written down before were distributed to all including himself; it is said that he welcomed them and testified to their truth but *said that there was only lacking to the narrative the account of what was done by Christ at first and at the beginning of the preaching*. The story is surely true. It is at least possible to see that the three evangelists related only what the Saviour did during one year after John the Baptist had been put in prison and that they stated this at the beginning of their narrative. (HE 3.24.7-8)

Of these the first is a quotation from Papias, reporting "the Presbyter (or Elder) John" (often mistranslated "John the Elder"), the second an anonymous tradition. I have argued elsewhere¹⁴ that Papias, a diligent, painstaking and reliable researcher, is wholly undeserving of the patronising dismissal he is almost universally accorded today. I have presented also in Annex A below Petrie's case that "the Presbyter John" and John the Apostle are one and the same.¹⁵

Hence in the first quotation we have good reason to see a verdict upon Mark's Gospel by his earliest known critic, the Apostle John, author of our Fourth Gospel and as (at least credibly) one of Jesus' earliest disciples (John 1:35-42), a very possible eyewitness of his Judean mission. It should give us pause. John seems to be saying that what Mark wrote was accurate enough, but there was something wrong with its structure (ta/cij). He could of course just be referring to Mark's order of events. This would be illustrated by John's repositioning of the cleansing of the temple from the last week in Jesus' life, where Mark has it (11:12-18), to his earliest ministry (John 2:13-22) - and here I am persuaded by John Robinson's article on

¹³ Quotations from Eusebius are taken from *Ecclesiastical History I* (Books 1-5) tr. K. Lake, LCL 153 (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard, 1926).

¹⁴ M. Mosse, *The Three Gospels: New Testament History Introduced by the Synoptic Problem* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007) 103-28, 163-77.

¹⁵ C.S. Petrie, "The Authorship of 'The Gospel According to Matthew': A reconsideration of the External Evidence," *NTS* 14 (1967) 15-32.

Johannine history that St John has got it right.¹⁶ Again, as is generally understood, John has, in his frequent references to Jesus' attendance in Jerusalem and elsewhere at the Jewish festivals, supplied us with a chronological structure which is absent in Mark.

However the second quotation, for all that it is less well attested, does at least suggest another, and for us more significant, possible and consistent interpretation of the Apostle's comment. *Mark started too late*. In Mark (1:14), Jesus bursts dramatically into Galilee proclaiming the good news, on the arrest of John the Baptist, as the *first recorded event* in his public ministry. If there is any truth at all in our second quotation, St John found fault with this presentation, so seriously that he sought to rectify the fault in a Gospel of his own. And as we have seen, his own portrayal of the dramatic return to Galilee at 4:43-5 - quite definitely in my judgement the same event¹⁷ - follows an original account of a prolonged prior mission to Jerusalem and Judea. (This is not of course to deny that John had a full agenda of his own in writing a Gospel. But it does suggest that he was in part providing a conscious corrective to a Mark with which he expected his readers to be already familiar.)

If we are anything like on the right track, we will now be asking, why did John think the matter was so important? At this point the veil begins to lift. Mark, by giving the impression that Jesus began his public ministry in Galilee, is wholly obscuring the Lord's thinking - thinking to which as Jesus' closest associate, John was, or later became, privy, and which Mark himself actually records (6:4). *Jesus was firmly convinced that, if he began his work in Galilee, his mission would die before it was born*. As a Galilean himself from Nazareth, he would fail to generate the necessary momentum of faith required to get his movement off the ground. *Such is the way with prophets: they are not acceptable on their home territory*. So what did he do? He took the bull by the horns and began his work in Jerusalem, where prophets belong (cf. Luke 13:33-34), in the Temple, at the very heart of the Jewish religion, and at the most sacred feast of the Passover. There he created a sensation, fully supported by signs and wonders. This he followed up with a successful mission to the Judean countryside that attracted widespread notice (John 3:22-36). Then, with a popular swell behind him, he was ready to return to his native Galilee, the conquering hero, the local boy made good.^{18,19}

¹⁶ J.A.T. Robinson, "His witness is true: A test of the Johannine claim," *Jesus and the Politics of His Day* (edd. E. Bammel and C.F.D. Moule; Cambridge: CUP, 1984) 453-476.

¹⁷ This is broadly justifiable from the chronological context. In John 4:1 the Baptist is alive and baptising. By 5:35 he is a past event, presumably dead. His arrest, not actually mentioned by John but which Mark 1:14 associates with Jesus' return to Galilee, therefore lies between John 4:1 and 5:35, which also bracket John's account of the return at 4:45. Hence in all probability the two evangelists are describing the same event. John's rather selective account of Jesus' Galilean ministry then continues until 7:9. That Mark 1:14 does not refer to the Baptist's death is shown by Mark's later account of that event at 6:14-29. In both John and the Synoptics, the indication of John's death is immediately followed by Jesus' feeding of the five thousand and walking on the water (Mark 6:30-56 and parallels; John 6:1-24).

¹⁸ Yet even then he was to find the response from Galilee at times disappointing (Mark 6:1-6; Matt 11:20-24 and parallels).

This puts a very different complexion on Jesus' early ministry. It also adds a little flesh to our reading of John. It explains for instance why in the wedding at Cana in Galilee (2:1-11), Jesus was so reluctant to perform a miracle, and the cryptic way in which he eventually did so. Starting his career there and then would have been fatal. He had not yet ministered in Jerusalem, the proper place for a prophet. But on his return from Judea, the problem had gone. Back once more in Cana, he performs publicly but *in absentia* a healing of the royal official's son (4:46-54). However John stresses not once but twice, that Jesus has now returned *from Judea to Galilee* (4:47, 54). He could not, or would not, have done such a thing before. But having made his mark in the south, he is free to be himself at home in the north.

It makes sense also of John's later narrative. In 7:1 we find Jesus avoiding Judea, where his life is under threat. So his brothers encourage him to go there, "that your disciples may see the works you are doing." (7:3) What disciples? Clearly not the Twelve, who have scarcely left his side. Nor the masses of Galilee, who have recent experience of his miracles, as in the healing of the five thousand (6:1-15). What we have is a throwback to his original Judean mission, when many were baptised (3:22; 4:1-2). The followers he made then, it is urged, are due for a revisit after Jesus' prolonged stay in Galilee.

We now begin to understand the constraints to which Jesus was responding. In Galilee initially, Jesus was in danger of starting too early at the prompting of his mother, with the consequence of his mission aborting on account of lack of faith. So he went to Jerusalem and Judea, where he met with faith. Indeed, he nearly became too popular too early, provoking a premature conflict with the Pharisees. So he returned to Galilee on the back of that popularity. Later, he found himself becoming dangerously popular in Galilee after feeding the five thousand, and withdrew again into the hills before rejoining the Twelve (6:15-21). Yet always he remained in control of himself and his circumstances. Always he retained his sense of timing, his "hour" (John 2:4; 7:6, 8; 8:20; 12:23, 27; 13:1, 17:1; cf. Mark 14:41).

So, with a little help from Eusebius, we have now resolved our opening paradox. Jesus' patri/j is indeed Nazareth in Galilee. John has deliberately constructed his Gospel so as to make good a deficiency which he perceives in Mark, who implies that Jesus began his public ministry in Galilee. This could not have been the case, says John, for Jesus knew well that such a strategy would have been doomed to failure. And John proves his own case by citing the decisive dictum which Mark himself has recorded as coming from Jesus' own lips: "For Jesus himself testified that a prophet has no honour in his own country."

Martin Mosse,
October 2007.

¹⁹ Westcott, *St John*, 78n, notices such an interpretation only to dismiss it.

ANNEX A

"JOHN THE ELDER" *REDIVIVUS*?

Richard Bauckham, in a powerful recent work of historiography, has done us all a service in reaffirming the eyewitness content of the gospels.²⁰ In particular, he argues strongly that the Fourth Gospel was written by an eyewitness, the Beloved Disciple,²¹ with which I concur. However he goes on to identify this writer with Eusebius' "Elder John," as distinct from the Apostle and son of Zebedee, a view which has often been maintained, but perhaps most influentially in our day by Martin Hengel,²² and for which Bauckham argues at great length.²³ This suggests to me that it may be timely to draw attention back to C. Stewart Petrie's brilliant assault of 1967 on the hypothesis of "John the Elder," (better translated "the Elder John" or "the Presbyter John") which deserves to be reread in full.²⁴ I offer here briefly some of his salient points with a few comments of my own.²⁵

Petrie identifies as the key to the problem Eusebius' report at *HE* 7.25 of Dionysius of Alexandria (c.247-264), a pupil of Origen who for stylistic and other reasons wished to dissociate the book of Revelation from John the Apostle, acknowledged author of the Gospel and letters of John. In particular, he took exception to Revelation's doctrine of the millennial kingdom of Christ upon earth (cf. *HE* 7.24.1-5), and therefore sought to attribute this book to any John other than the holy Apostle or John Mark. Being unable to identify any particular John as the culprit, the only support he could muster was his supposition (oi]mai) that there was another John in Asia, based upon a rumour (fasi\n) of two tombs at Ephesus, both of which were said to be John's (*HE* 7.25.16).

Eusebius, holds Petrie, has perpetrated upon us a bold and highly successful bluff. Sharing Dionysius' disapproval of the millennialism of Revelation espoused by Papias (*HE* 3.39.12),²⁶ he has spotted a way of conjuring up an author for it where Dionysius failed, from an ambiguous description Papias gives of his own historical researches:

[I]f ever anyone came who had followed the presbyters, I inquired into the words of the presbyters, what Andrew

²⁰ R. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 2006).

²¹ Bauckham, *Jesus*, 358-83.

²² M. Hengel, *The Johannine Question* (London: SCM, 1989), especially 24-32.

²³ Bauckham, *Jesus*, 412-71.

²⁴ Petrie, "The Authorship".

²⁵ See also the account and references at Ellis, *The Making*, 143-46.

²⁶ See A. Meredith, "The Evidence of Papias for the Priority of Matthew", *Synoptic Studies: The Ampleforth Conferences of 1982 and 1983*, *JSNT Sup* 7 (ed. C.M. Tuckett; Sheffield: JSOT 1984) 187-96, on Eusebius' attempt to discredit Papias' millennial views.

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or Peter or Philip or Thomas or James or John or Matthew, or any other of the Lord's disciples, had said, and what Aristion and the presbyter John, the Lord's disciples, were saying. (*HE* 3.39.3-4)

Eusebius himself identifies these two groups (*HE* 3.39.5) as

- (1) apostles, and
- (2) "others outside the number of the apostles",

thus making them mutually exclusive. Hence, since there is a John in each, there must be two Johns. The only external support he can muster for this is "the story of those [i.e. Dionysius] who have said that there were two of the same name in Asia," and the rumour of the two tombs at Ephesus (proving what exactly?), which he converts into a fact (*HE* 3.39.6). This second John he has distinguished as "the Presbyter" (or, "Elder"), in spite of the fact that this description is given to John in both lists, leaving us in the dark as to what the term "presbyter" actually signifies.

Moderns, on the other hand, while offering various explanations of "presbyter," regularly (as Bauckham, 17 and 419) interpret Papias as distinguishing

- (1) those who "had said" (but were no longer doing so, presumably because dead), from
- (2) those "were saying" (and continuing to do so, being still alive).

Thus again we have two mutually exclusive lists, and so two Johns.

What is going on? Transparency returns when we recognise first, that Papias' two groups are *not* mutually exclusive, and second, that by "presbyter", he simply means, "apostle," i.e. one of the Twelve. This gives us

- (1) the apostles, who may or may not be alive, and
- (2) the surviving disciples of Jesus, who may or may not be apostles.

These two groups have one common member, the Apostle John.

That this makes perfect sense may be verified by simply rereading the quotation and substituting "apostle" for each occurrence of "presbyter". Papias is asking the visitors to Hierapolis two eminently reasonable questions:

- (1) "What used the apostles to teach?", and
- (2) "What do the surviving disciples teach today?"

He has, perhaps a little misleadingly, applied the same word *maqhtai*/, disciples, to both groups, but there is ample precedent in each case. This is not atypical for Papias: on my understanding he uses *lo/gia* to mean sometimes just the "sayings," and sometimes the "sayings and doings," of Jesus, bequeathing us all many headaches in the process.²⁷

As it happens, the Apostle was on account of his longevity also known as, "The Presbyter" (e.g. *HE* 3.39.15 quoted above, 2 John 1 and 3 John 1), which would have the sense of, "The Patriarch," "The Grand Old Man" or "The Ancient Worthy"; and it is this which has given Eusebius' deception its force.

This view of "the Presbyter" is confirmed by the fact that (to my knowledge) the early Church nowhere else finds the name 'John' to be ambiguous. Most significantly, when Paul reports to the Galatians his visit to the pillars of the Church in Jerusalem of c.AD 48, he merely claims to have met "James, Peter and John" (Gal 2:9).²⁸ No more identification was necessary.

We are thus at liberty to ascribe the Fourth Gospel to St John the Apostle of Ephesus, the son of Zebedee, as I believe did the entire early Church including Papias, Eusebius, and Dionysius of Alexandria. Nevertheless even on Professor Bauckham's ascription to "John the Elder," it remains the case that the author of the Gospel and the critic of Mark quoted above are one and the same, which is all that this paper requires.

²⁷ Mosse, *The Three Gospels*, 116-19.

²⁸ John the Baptist and John Mark are of course readily discernible from context (e.g. Acts 10:37, 13:5).