THE AUTHORSHIP OF THE FOURTH GOSPEL
A NEW DOCUMENT.

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In the course of cataloguing the Syriac manuscripts of my collection I lately came across some rather remarkable statements dealing with the authorship of the fourth Gospel. These statements are found in Mingana Syriac 540 which contains the Peshitta New Testament of the East Syrian or Nestorian Church. The manuscript is relatively modern as it is dated Saturday, 23rd September, of the year 2060 of the Greeks (A.D. 1749), but it is a faithful copy of a much older original, which may be ascribed to about A.D. 750. I have arrived at this conclusion from the nature and the character of the Massoretic signs that the copyist is reproducing in his transcription. Nothing further need be said of the text, as readers can examine it for themselves in the facsimiles attached to the present short article.

On fol. 100\textsuperscript{a}, before the Gospel of John, occurs the following statement: “The holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ (according to) the preaching of John the younger.”

And at the end of the Gospel itself (fol. 129\textsuperscript{a}) is the following colophon: “Here ends the writing of the holy Gospel (according to) the preaching of John who spoke in Greek in Bithynia.”

These two statements are certainly remarkable in that they deviate considerably from a constant tradition of the Church known to every historian, to the effect: (a) that the Apostle John wrote his Gospel at Ephesus and not in Bithynia, (b) that the fourth Gospel was written by John the Apostle himself after the other three evangelists, called the Synoptists, had composed theirs, and not by a John called the younger, a term which evidently implies that there was also another John, who by hypothesis would be John the elder.

It is useful here to add that to my knowledge the above statements
are not found in any other Syriac manuscript of the Gospels. This is true in the case of the MSS. preserved in the British Museum (Wright’s catalogue), in the Vatican (Assemani’s catalogue), in Cambridge (Wright’s and Cook’s catalogue), in Paris (Zotenberg’s catalogue), and in many other Gospel MSS. of my own collection. Indeed the colophons of all these MSS. definitely state: “Here ends the Gospel of John who spoke in Greek at Ephesus” and never “in Bithynia.”

Before proceeding further, I will set forth here a third document, the text of which is given below, because it has some bearing on the matter under discussion:

At the end of the same MS. is a treatise definitely attributed by the scribe to Eusebius of Caesarea, which contains a short historical account of each of the twelve Apostles and the seventy Disciples of our Lord. The wording of the document is in two places slightly ambiguous but the general meaning of its sentences may be considered as certain. In the section devoted to John the evangelist (ff. 267b-268a) it states that after he had preached in Asia he was banished by Tiberius to the island of Patmos whence, eventually, he went to Ephesus, whither he was followed by three of his disciples: (a) Ignatius, who afterwards became bishop of Antioch and was martyred in Rome by having been thrown before wild beasts; (b) Polycarp, who became later bishop of Smyrna and obtained the crown of martyrdom by fire; (c) John to whom the Apostle John granted priesthood and the episcopal See after him. When the Apostle John reached old age he died and was buried by his disciple John who succeeded the Apostle in the See of Ephesus. The tombs of both John the Apostle and John his disciple are at Ephesus but that of the former is hidden, “and it is John the disciple who wrote the Revelations, as he states that he heard all that he wrote from the mouth of John the evangelist.”

I must state, however, that a considerable number of the MSS. of my collection are not yet catalogued. This treatise is found in some other MSS. of my collection attributed to the same Eusebius. Tradition is to the effect that he was banished under the reign of Domitian.

The first author who mentions two tombs of two Johns at Ephesus seems to be Dionysius of Alexandria in Eusebius’ Eccl. Hist., vii. 25.
According to this document there are, therefore, two Johns: John the apostle and John his disciple who wrote the “Revelations.” It does not, however, like the previous one, attribute the authorship of the fourth Gospel to John “the younger,” but we may infer in the absence of a third John, that the epithet “the younger” applied to the John mentioned in the previous document may be somewhat explained by the hypothesis that it designates “the younger John” the pupil of “the elder John,” who in this case would be the Apostle himself. However that may be, is it not possible to believe that the word “evangelist” used here after the name of John does not imply definitely that he actually wrote the Gospel, but only alludes to the mere fact that he was the John under whose name the fourth Gospel was, in the popular belief, written?

We may further conjecture that the MS. being of East Syrian origin the word “Revelations” used in it may not refer to the Apocalypse or the canonical Book of the Revelation, as this Book is generally excluded from the Canon of the East Syrian Church. I personally believe that this word would in the mouth of a writer from
Syria designate any Scriptural matter held to be revealed or inspired by God.

A word should here be added as to whether the above two statements may not be due to the fancy of the copyist. I believe that such an hypothesis would be very improbable for many reasons, of which the following will suffice: (a) We may take it for certain that the copyist knew nothing of "Bithynia" and had not even heard its name. (b) This copyist is the well-known scribe of the Homo family of the village of Alkosh, from whose pen we have many other MSS. (not Biblical) in East and West, and all of them testify to the painstaking care and exactness which he undoubtedly possessed. Indeed he is one of the most conscientious scribes of Syriac literature.

Finally, it is improbable that the epithet "the younger" denotes the Apostle John on the ground that he was the youngest of the Apostles. John has never been referred to in this way in Syriac literature; on the contrary tradition having given him an old age at the time of his writing his Gospel, the expression "the elder" would be more fitting in his case than that of "the younger."

Of course the expression presbyter "the elder" as applied to John, either the evangelist or some other, is not a new one. The second and third Epistles of John begin with the words "the elder unto the elect lady and her children" and "the elder unto the well-beloved Gaius." The most explicit mention made of John "the elder," however, is by Papias: ¹ "When any one who had been a follower of the elders came, I questioned him concerning the words of the elders: what Andrew or what Peter said, or what was said by Philip or Thomas, or John or Mathew, or any other of the disciples of the Lord, and also concerning the things that Ariston and the elder John, the disciples of the Lord, say."

A well-known hypothesis of Harnack is to the effect that the fourth Gospel is to be attributed to John the elder, a disciple of the Apostles, who has embodied in his work some words of his master so that it might rightly be called "the Gospel of John the elder according to John, son of Zebedee."

It is useless here to go over all the literature of the Johannine writings, of which the reader can find a good summary in Hastings

¹ Eusebius' *Ecc. Hist.*, iii. 39.
Dictionary of the Bible and the Encyclopaedia Biblica, but we may assert that as a net result of our new documents:

(a) Papias' statement regarding the existence of a disciple John can now be considered to be possibly correct.

(b) Harnack's hypothesis concerning the composition of the fourth Gospel by a disciple of the Apostle has for the first time received documentary support which we are not at liberty to discount.

(c) The tradition regarding the composition of the fourth Gospel at Ephesus is now for the first time challenged by documentary evidence, and the possibility that it was composed in Bithynia has to be considered.

Many more suggestions naturally arise out of the present documents but we must content ourselves with their publication, and leave any further conclusions that may be drawn from them to future students. I feel confident that they will repay further investigation as they appear to me to represent a relic of an ancient tradition. This remark applies exclusively to the first two statements and not to the last document attributed to Eusebius, which is in a totally different category.