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Only One John: The Apostle Who Wrote Five Books

Most scholars who identify the apostle John with “the Beloved Disciple” are willing to grant that person a role (perhaps limited, perhaps pronounced) in the composition of the Gospel of John. However, the strong tendency in scholarship is to associate the three Johannine Epistles with another person named John and the book of Revelation with yet a third person who bore that name:

New Testament Writing	To Be Associated with
Gospel of John	John the apostle
1 John	John the elder
2 John	John the elder
3 John	John the elder
Revelation	John the seer (otherwise unknown)

But a strong minority of scholars contest this.

No Need for a Distinct “John the Elder”

First, the scholars challenge the contention of Eusebius (fourth-century historian) to the effect that John the apostle and John the elder were two different people.

Robert Gundry notes that Eusebius begins by quoting Papias (an early-second-century church leader):

“If anyone came who had followed the elders, I inquired into the words of the elders, what Andrew 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 Elder John, the Lord’s disciples, were saying.” (Papias, quoted by Eusebius in *Church History* 3.39.4)

Then Gundry says,

Both times that the name John appears, it appears with both the designations “elder” and “the Lord’s disciple.” By contrast, Aristion—even though designated a “Lord’s disciple”—lacks the title “elder” when mentioned alongside John. This contrast points toward a single individual named John. Papias wanted to make plain the single identity of John by repeating the designation “elder,” just used for the apostles but omitted with Aristion; and Papias mentioned John a second time because John was the only one of the Lord’s disciples still living and speaking who was also an apostle. Admittedly, Eusebius interpreted Papias as referring to two different men named John and even claimed a tradition of two men named John and having different memorials in Ephesus. But one and the same person may have more than one memorial and sometimes does.¹

So contra Eusebius and centuries of tradition, John the apostle and John the elder were the same person, namely the person who is called “the beloved disciple” in the fourth Gospel.

No Need for a Distinct “John the Seer”

Most modern scholars do not think that either John the apostle or John the elder wrote Revelation. They attribute the book to yet another John—a person we may call “John the seer”—who is otherwise unknown to us. One major reason is that the book of Revelation exhibits stylistic differences strikingly different from the Gospel and letters.

Gundry writes,

It is true that from a grammatical and literary standpoint the Greek style of Revelation is inferior to that of the Gospel and Letters. But in part the “bad grammar” may be *deliberate*, for purposes of emphasis and allusion to Old Testament passages in Hebraic style, rather than due to ignorance or blundering. In parts the “bad grammar” may also stem from an *ecstatic* state of mind, due to John’s having received prophecies in the form of visions. Or writing as a prisoner on the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea, he did not have the advantage of an amanuensis to smooth out his rough style, as he probably did have for his Gospel and Letters.²

The minority argument, then, is that one person, John the apostle, elder, and beloved disciple, wrote five books of the New Testament: the Gospel, the three letters, and the book of Revelation.

1. Robert H. Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament*, 4th edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 257.

2. Gundry, *Survey of the New Testament*, 506–7.