

# WAS CERINTHUS A JOHANNINE THEOLOGIAN?

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## Abstract:

This paper critically engages the reconstructions of Cerinthus as an early interpreter of the Fourth Gospel put forward by Simone Pétrement, April D. De-Conick and M. David Litwa. I challenge the arguments that Cerinthus's demiurgical theology and separationist Christology was influenced by the content of the Fourth Gospel and that the Johannine Epistles and the *Epistula Apostolorum* were written to counter Cerinthus's interpretations of the Fourth Gospel. Instead of construing the tradition about the confrontation between John, "the Lord's disciple," and Cerinthus in a public bathhouse in Ephesus that Irenaeus of Lyon inherited from Polycarp of Smyrna in reference to a battle over the interpretation of the Fourth Gospel, I argue that Irenaeus misidentified the John in Polycarp's story as an apostle and the author of the Fourth Gospel. Finally, the accusation that Cerinthus forged the Fourth Gospel that appears in Epiphanius of Salamis's *Panarion* and Dionysius bar Salibi's *Commentary on the Apocalypse* probably reflects a misinterpretation of an earlier argument put forward by Gaius of Rome. The data thus does not support the thesis that the theology of the Fourth Gospel was developed under the influence of or in opposition to Cerinthus's teachings.

## Key Words:

Fourth gospel, Cerinthus, separationist Christology, demiurgical theology

## Introduction

A late first-century Christian teacher in Ephesus named Cerinthus was reimagined as one of the first heretics by his ancient Christian detractors. They set him in opposition to the apostles in general (*Ep. Apos.* 1.2; 7.1; Epiphanius, *Pan.* 28.2.3–6.8) or the Apostle John in particular (Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.3.4; 11.1). They judged his theological beliefs to be false (Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.26.1; Epiphanius, *Pan.* 28.1.2–2.2), his eschatological hopes to be carnal (Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 3.28.2, 5; 7.25.3), and his ethical stances to be nonsensical (Epiphanius, *Pan.* 28.2.1–2). It may come as a surprise, then, that some Christians allegedly ascribed the book of Revelation and the Fourth Gospel to him (Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 3.28.2, 4; 7.25.2; Epiphanius, *Pan.* 51.3.6; Dionysius bar Salibi, *Comm. Apoc.* 1–2).<sup>1</sup> The allegations that Cerinthus forged these biblical writings seem like transparent attempts to bring them into disrepute. Simone Pétrement, April D. DeConick, and M. David Litwa, however, contend that Cerinthus was at least an early exegete of the Fourth Gospel, even if he may not have had a hand in its composition.<sup>2</sup> On the contrary, I will argue that Cerinthus was neither the author nor an interpreter of the Fourth Gospel and that he was only linked to this text in select Patristic and Medieval sources due to the misinterpretation of the earlier traditions about him.

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<sup>1</sup> I will designate the “Gospel According to John” as the Fourth Gospel.

<sup>2</sup> Simone Pétrement, *A Separate God: The Origins and Teachings of Gnosticism*, trans. Carol Harrison, London: Darton Longman, and Todd 1991, 301–302; April D. DeConick, “Why are the Heavens Closed? The Johannine Revelation of the Father in the Catholic-Gnostic Debate,” in: C. H. Williams and C. Rowland (eds.), *John’s Gospel and Intimations of Apocalyptic*, London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark 2013, 177; April D. DeConick, “Who is Hiding in the Gospel of John: Reconceptualizing Johannine Origins and the Roots of Gnosticism,” in: A.D. DeConick and G. Adamson (eds.), *Histories of the Hidden God: Concealment and Revelation in Western Gnostic, Esoteric, and Mystical Traditions*, Durham: Acumen 2013, 19; April D. DeConick, *The Gnostic New Age: How a Countercultural Spirituality Revolutionized Religion from Antiquity to Today*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2016, 159; M. David Litwa, *Found Christianities: Remaking the World of the Second Century CE*, London: Bloomsbury, 2022, 41.

## The Case for Identifying Cerinthus as a Johannine Theologian

DeConick re-discovered a possible reading of John 8:44 that certain Patristic commentators strenuously opposed.<sup>3</sup> The verse could be rendered as asserting that Israel's deity is the father "of the devil" (τοῦ διαβόλου) and that the devil is a murderer and a liar along with "his father" (ό πατήρ αὐτοῦ).<sup>4</sup> Litwa builds on her grammatical observations.<sup>5</sup> He identifies the wicked "ruler of this world" in John 12:31, 14:30, and 16:11 as the god of Israel,<sup>6</sup> whereas DeConick still interprets these verses as referring to the devil.<sup>7</sup> The Johannine prologue contrasts the Mosaic Law with the "grace and truth" that Jesus proclaimed to the world (1:17) and the Johannine Jesus speaks about "your" or "their" Law (8:17; 10:34; 15:25). The Johannine Jesus may have perceived the commandments to have originated with Israel's creator god rather than with his transcendent heavenly father.<sup>8</sup>

If DeConick's reading of John 8:44 is adopted, *πάντα* ("all things") in 1:3 probably excludes the material cosmos that was fashioned by an inferior creator. The things that "came into being" (ἐγένετο) through the agency of the *λόγος* ("word") may have been spiritual emanations.<sup>9</sup> This is close to how the later Valentinian commentator Ptolemy grounded his emanation theories in the Johannine prologue (Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.8.5). Moreover, the affirmation that "the word became flesh" in John 1:14 need not be taken in a fully incarnational sense, for the word may have become enfleshed when the spirit descended on Jesus at his

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<sup>3</sup> For the controversial reception of this verse, see DeConick, "Why," 151–77; DeConick, "Who," 14–19; DeConick, *The Gnostic New Age*, 142–43; M. David Litwa, "The Father of the Devil (John 8:44): A Christian Exegetical Inspiration for the Evil Creator," *Vigiliae Christianae* 74.5 (2020), 540–65 (547–63).

<sup>4</sup> DeConick, "Why," 149–151; DeConick, "Who," 13; DeConick, *The Gnostic New Age*, 142.

<sup>5</sup> Litwa, "The Father," 543–45; Litwa, *Found Christianities*, 37.

<sup>6</sup> Litwa, *Found Christianities*, 38.

<sup>7</sup> DeConick, "Who," 23.

<sup>8</sup> DeConick, "Who," 22; Litwa, *Found Christianities*, 35.

<sup>9</sup> DeConick, *The Gnostic New Age*, 157.

baptism in 1:32.<sup>10</sup> “The spirit” (ο πνεῦμα) then left Jesus after he uttered his last words from the cross in John 19:30.

DeConick and Litwa suggest that the Fourth Gospel was quite amenable to Cerinthus’s worldview,<sup>11</sup> which the late second-century bishop Irenaeus of Lyon describes in his work *Against Heresies* as follows:

A certain Cerinthus ... said that the world was created not by the primal God but by a power separate from the authority above the universe and ignorant of the God who is over all. He taught that Jesus was not born from a virgin but was the son of Joseph and Mary, born just like all other people – although he was more righteous and wise. After his baptism, Christ descended upon Jesus from the Supreme Authority over the universe in the form of a dove. Afterward, he preached the unknown Father and performed miracles. In the end, Christ deserted Jesus, and Jesus both suffered and was raised. Christ, however, remained without suffering, since he was spiritual.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> For a survey of scholars who reach this exegetical conclusion, see Pamela Kinlaw, *The Christ is Jesus: Metamorphosis, Possession, and Johannine Christology*, Leiden: Brill 2005, 126–35.

<sup>11</sup> Although Pétrement (“A Separate God,” 301–302) too conjectures that Cerinthus reflected on the Fourth Gospel and oversimplified its Christology, she also thinks that the fourth evangelist opposed Cerinthus and championed positions about creation and the incarnation that challenged Cerinthus’s opinions (cf. John 1:3, 14).

<sup>12</sup> This translation of the *Refutation of All Heresies* 7.33.1–2, which has preserved the Greek text of Irenaeus’s *Against Heresies* 1.26.1, is taken from M. David Litwa, *Refutation of All Heresies: Translated with an Introduction and Notes*, Atlanta: SBL 2016, 566–69. The Refutor omits “in Asia,” though these words appear in the Latin translation of *Against Heresies* 1.26.1, and adds a line to Irenaeus’s text about Cerinthus’s Egyptian education (i.e. αὐτὸς Αἰγυπτίων παιδείᾳ ἀσκηθείς), so I have skipped over these amendments with ellipses. For the critical edition of the Refutor’s Greek text, see Paul Wendland, ed., *Hippolytus Werke. Dritter Band. Refutatio Omnium Haeresium*, GCS 26, Leipzig, J.C. Hinrichs’sche Buchhandlung, 1916, 220–21.

In other words, Cerinthus accepted a demiurgical theology and a separationist Christology.<sup>13</sup> Of course, Irenaeus had a very different reading of the Fourth Gospel. He reckoned that the Evangelist John foresaw the erroneous notion that the Lord consisted of two separable substances (*Haer.* 3.16.5) and penned his Gospel to refute Cerinthus's error in negating the unity between Jesus's human and divine natures (3.11.1). Daniel R. Streett points out the inconsistency over whether John was writing before or after teachers such as Cerinthus began promulgating this Christological system of thought.<sup>14</sup> He detects additional inconsistencies in Irenaeus's reporting of Cerinthus's teachings. At another point, Irenaeus summed up how "there are those who say" that Jesus was a "receptacle" of the Christ aeon and that Jesus was the son, the Christ was his father, and Jesus's father was the supreme deity (3.16.1).<sup>15</sup> However, Irenaeus did not have Cerinthus alone in his purview in this passage, for he was conflating the Christological viewpoints of a variety of thinkers.

Irenaeus passed on a humorous anecdote from "the ones who had heard" (οἱ ἀκηκόοτες) Polycarp, the deceased bishop of Smyrna and his former mentor, about how John "the Lord's disciple" reacted when he saw Cerinthus. This is what Irenaeus recounted:

And there are those who heard from him [i.e. Polycarp] that John, the Lord's disciple, went out to bathe while in Ephesus, and when he saw Cerinthus inside he ran out of the bathhouse without having bathed, saying, "Let's get out of here,

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<sup>13</sup> For the case for replacing the flawed category "Gnosticism" with "biblical demiurgical tradition," see Michael Allen Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1996, 29–52. This isolates the belief in an inferior demiurge or "craftsman" as the defining feature. I have defined a "separationist Christology" as positing that only the human Jesus, and not the divine entity that temporarily possessed him, died on the cross. See Michael J. Kok, "Classifying Cerinthus's Christology," *Journal of Early Christian History* 9.1 (2019), 30–48 (36, 39, 45).

<sup>14</sup> Daniel R. Streett, *They Went Out from Us: The Identity of the Opponents in First John*, Berlin: De Gruyter 2011, 70.

<sup>15</sup> Streett, *They Went Out*, 69–70.

in case the bathhouse collapses, for Cerinthus, the enemy of truth, is inside!”<sup>16</sup>

This story is typically classified, in the words of Raymond E. Brown, as an “etiological tale personifying in the figures of Cerinthus and John a dispute between Cerinthians and a branch of the Johannine community.”<sup>17</sup> Likewise, Lorne Zelyck takes it as an application of the admonition in 2 John 10–11 to not greet schismatic teachers.<sup>18</sup> Irenaeus urged his readers to imitate John’s example by breaking off fellowship with Christians who renounced fundamental theological doctrines (1.16.3; 3.3.4; cf. Tit 3:10; 2 John 11).<sup>19</sup>

According to DeConick and Litwa, Polycarp devised this tale to ward off older Cerinthian interpretations of the Fourth Gospel.<sup>20</sup> DeConick writes that Polycarp “identified Cerinthus’s interpretation of the Gospel as so evil that it will bring God’s judgment down upon all those who associate with him.”<sup>21</sup> She finds further evidence of Cerinthus’s exegesis of the Fourth Gospel by mirror-reading the *Epistula Apostolorum*, which aligns Cerinthus with the demiurgical theologian Simon (1.1; 7.1) and insists against them that the word of the maker and ruler of the world became flesh in Mary’s womb (3.2, 13).<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> This translation of Eusebius’s *Ecclesiastical History* 4.14.6, which has preserved the Greek text of Irenaeus’s *Against Heresies* 3.3.4, is taken from Jeremy Schott, *The History of the Church: A New Translation*, Oakland: University of California Press 2019, 191. For the critical edition of Eusebius’s Greek text, see Eduard Schwartz and Theodor Mommsen, eds., *Eusebius Werke. Zweiter Band, Erster Teil. Die Kirchengeschichte*. GSC 9.1, Leipzig, J.C. Hinrichs’sche Buchhandlung, 1903, 332, 234.

<sup>17</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, Anchor Bible 30, Garden City: Doubleday 1982, 767.

<sup>18</sup> Lorne Zelyck, “The Story of John Meeting Cerinthus,” in: T. Burke (ed.) *New Testament Apocrypha: More Noncanonical Scriptures*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2023, 47.

<sup>19</sup> Zelyck, “The Story”, 42.

<sup>20</sup> DeConick, *The Gnostic New Age*, 158; Litwa, *Found Christianities*, 39.

<sup>21</sup> DeConick, *The Gnostic New Age*, 158.

<sup>22</sup> DeConick, *The Gnostic New Age*, 157–58. Joan E. Taylor (“Cerinthus and the Gospel of Mark: The Priority of the Longer Ending,” *COMSt Bulletin* 8.2 [2022]: 683–86) similarly mirror-reads the emphasis on the corporeality of Jesus’s resurrection in the *Epistula Apostolorum* (cf. 11.6–8; 12.1; 19.18; 21.1–3) as hinting that Cerinthus only believed that Jesus was spiritually raised.

The earliest evidence for a debate over the meaning of the Fourth Gospel may be in the Johannine Epistles. Brown and Streett list several commentators who identify the secessionists in the so-called “Johannine community” as Cerinthus’s followers,<sup>23</sup> though Brown held that the Johannine secessionists only devalued Jesus’s humanity and atoning death but did not go as far as Cerinthus in sharply distinguishing the human Jesus from the divine Christ.<sup>24</sup> Their alleged declarations that “Jesus is not the Christ” (Ιησοῦς οὐκ ἔστιν ὁ Χριστός) or that “Jesus Christ has come in the flesh” (Ιησοῦν Χριστὸν ἐν σαρκὶ ἐληλυθότα) could be taken as severing the union between the fleshly Jesus and the spiritual Christ (1 John 2:22; 4:2; cf. 2 John 1:7). If Jesus Christ came “through water and blood,” not water “only,” then he was the Christ when he was baptized in water and when his blood was shed on the cross (1 John 5:6). Another interpretation of the imagery is that Jesus was the Christ at his conception (i.e. blood); he did not become the Christ when he was baptized.<sup>25</sup>

In DeConick’s view, the epistolary author read John 8:44 appositionally, meaning that the “father” of Jesus’s interlocutors in the chapter was the “devil,” and depicted the Johannine secessionists as the devil’s children too.<sup>26</sup> They hated their metaphorical siblings, just like the murderer Cain hated his brother, and disobeyed the divine commandments (cf. 1 John 2:3–5; 3:4–24; 5:1–4). Pamela Kinlaw considers the message in 1 John that Jesus and the spirit were eternally united to be especially relevant to the recipients of the letter who were instructed to remain in permanent fellowship with each other.<sup>27</sup>

If the traditions rehearsed so far aimed to re-claim the Fourth Gospel after it fell into Cerinthus’s hands, the critics of the Johannine corpus who are documented in the fourth-century bishop Epiphanius of Salamis’s heresiological treatise *Panarion* suspected that the Fourth Gospel and Revelation were Cerinthus’s own forgeries (*Pan.* 51.3.6). Epiphanius called them the “Alogi” because, in his mind, they were “irrational” to

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<sup>23</sup> Brown, *The Epistles*, 65n.149; Streett, *They Went Out*, 133n.3, 176n.11, 276n.87.

<sup>24</sup> Brown, *The Epistles*, 73–79.

<sup>25</sup> DeConick, “Why”, 176; DeConick, “Who” (see n. 104), 18.

<sup>26</sup> DeConick, “Why”, 170–75; DeConick, “Who”, 14–18; DeConick, *The Gnostic New Age*, 152–53.

<sup>27</sup> Kinlaw, *The Christ*, 95–7, 105–7.

ascribe a Gospel that depicted Jesus as the incarnate divine word to Cerinthus when this contradicted Cerinthus's Christology (e.g., 51.3.1–2, 6; 4.1–2). Epiphanius dated them after the launch of a controversial prophetic movement in Phrygia and after the dispute between the Christians in Asia Minor and Rome over the dating of Easter (51.1.1).<sup>28</sup> Irenaeus was involved in the ensuing conflicts over both issues (Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 5.3.4–4.2; 24.11–17). Epiphanius's chapter on the Alogi concludes by quoting Irenaeus's rebuke of unnamed persons who rejected the "Paraclete" that the Johannine Jesus promised his heavenly father would send (51.35.1–3; cf. Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.11.9; John 14:16).

Dionysius bar Salibi, a bishop in the city of Amid in Mesopotamia in the twelfth century, is more specific about the person who attributed the Johannine writings to Cerinthus in the preface of his Syriac *Commentary on the Apocalypse*. He asserts that "Hippolytus of Rome states that a man named Gaius had appeared, who said that neither the Gospel nor yet the Revelation was John's; but that they were the work of Cerinthus the heretic" (*Comm. Apoc.* 1–2).<sup>29</sup> Another Syriac bishop named 'Abdishko' bar Berika put together a catalogue around 1300 CE and credited the title (or titles) "Points against Gaius, and a Defense on behalf of the Revelation and Gospel of John the Apostle and Evangelist" to the bishop Hippolytus.<sup>30</sup> There is scholarly debate over whether he was referring to the same work whose Greek title has been inscribed on the plinth of a statue that was re-dedicated to Hippolytus. The first word of the inscription is unclear and the rest of it can be translated "concerning" or

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<sup>28</sup> Dean Furlong, *The Identity of John the Evangelist: Revision and Reinterpretation in Early Christian Sources*, Minneapolis: Fortress 2020, 79.

<sup>29</sup> This translation is taken from Theodore H. Robinson, "The Authorship of the Muratorian Canon," *Exp* 7 (1906): 487. For the critical text and a Latin translation, see Jaroslav Sedláèek, *Dionysius Bar Salibi, In Apocalypsim, Actus et Epistulass Catholicas*, CSCO 53, 60, Paris: Poussielgue, 1909–1910, 1–2.

<sup>30</sup> This translation is taken from J.D. Smith Jr., "Gaius and the Controversy over the Johannine Literature", Ph.D. Diss., Yale University, 1979, 224. Smith Jr. ("Gaius," 225) argues that this was the title of a single work, while other scholars argue that the conjunction "and" was placed between two separate titles. For the latter view, see August Bludau, *Die ersten Gegner der Johannesschriften*, Freiburg: Heider 1925, 164–65; Allen Brent, *Hippolytus and the Roman Church in the Third Century: Communities in Tension before the Emergence of a Monarch-Bishop*, VCSupp 31, Leiden: Brill 1995, 170; T. Scott Manor, *Epiphanius' Alogi and the Johannine Controversy*, SVC 135, Leiden: Brill 2016, 97.

“on behalf of the Gospel According to John and Apocalypse” (ύπὲρ τοῦ κατὰ Ἰωάννην εὐαγγελίου καὶ ἀποκαλύψεως).<sup>31</sup>

The fourth-century Christian historian Eusebius dated Hippolytus and Gaius around the same time and commended Gaius as a learned scholar who composed his *Dialogue with Proclus* when Zephyrinus was the bishop of Rome between 199 and 217 CE (*Hist. Eccl.* 6.20.2–3).<sup>32</sup> Eusebius provides the following quotation from Gaius’s now-lost work:

Bur Cerinthus, who wrote revelations as though they were by a great apostle, introduces us to mind-blowing wonders, lying that they had been shown to him by angels, and saying that after the resurrection the kingdom of Christ will be upon the earth and once again the flesh will live in Jerusalem governed by the flesh, to serve lusts and pleasures. He is the enemy of the scriptures of God, and wishing to lead people astray, he says that the “marriage feast” will last for a period of a thousand years.<sup>33</sup>

Moreover, Eusebius repeats the early third-century bishop Dionysius of Alexandria’s testimony that there are “some” who “say” that Revelation was written by Cerinthus, who “wanted to ascribe the name of someone trustworthy to his own creation,” and that Cerinthus anticipated that “the kingdom of Christ would be terrestrial, and comprised of things Cerinthus himself enjoyed.”<sup>34</sup> Cerinthus enjoyed feasting, marriages, festivals, and sacrificial offerings (3.28.4; 7.25.3). It is difficult to deter-

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<sup>31</sup> For this debate, see Brent, *Hippolytus*, 172; Francis Watson, *Gospel Writing: A Canonical Perspective*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2013, 481–82, 482n.128; Manor, *Epiphanius’ Alogi*, 139; Furlong, *The Identity*, 79.

<sup>32</sup> Eusebius also referred to Beryllus, who was the bishop of the Arabians in Bostra. Since Dionysius bar Salibi designated Hippolytus as “Hippolytus of Bostra,” Brent (*Hippolytus*, 149) and Manor (*Epiphanius’ Alogi*, 105–106) regard this as evidence that he was directly dependent on Eusebius’s *Ecclesiastical History*.

<sup>33</sup> This translation of Eusebius’s *Ecclesiastical History* 3.28.2 is taken from Schott, *The History*, 151.

<sup>34</sup> This translation of select portions of Eusebius’s *Ecclesiastical History* 7.25.2 and 3 (cf. 3.28.4) is taken from Schott, *The History*, 369.

mine from Eusebius's limited excerpt whether there is a direct, intertextual relationship between the writings of Gaius and Dionysius.<sup>35</sup> It is clear from Eusebius's citations of these two non-extant texts that Revelation's authorship was contested, but he did not cite Gaius's opinion about the authorship of the Fourth Gospel.

Eduard Schwartz conjectures that Gaius had access to a source in which both the Fourth Gospel and Revelation had been attributed to Cerinthus, but decided to only repeat the charge about Revelation's supposedly pseudonymous authorship.<sup>36</sup> Pétrement and DeConick disagree with Schwartz insofar as they judge the accusation that Cerinthus forged the Fourth Gospel to be the older tradition and that Gaius was the one to add that he forged Revelation as well.<sup>37</sup> They infer that Gaius re-imagined Cerinthus as a millenarian, which influenced Dionysius, solely because he attributed Revelation to him.<sup>38</sup> Litwa grants that Gaius misattributed Revelation to Cerinthus, but does not find it inconceivable that Cerinthus shared the chiliastic expectations held by some of his fellow Christians in Asia Minor or that he found a way to reconcile his

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<sup>35</sup> For this debate, see Bludau, *Die ersten Gegner*, 50; Gustave Bardy, "Cérinthe," *Revue biblique* 30 (1921): 344–73 (361); A.F.J. Klijn and G.J. Reinink, *Patristic Evidence for Jewish-Christian Sects*, Novum Testamentum Supplements 36, Leiden: Brill 1973, 8; Smith Jr., "Gaius," 188; Brown, *The Epistles*, 768n.10; Brent, *Hippolytus*, 136; Matti Myllykowski, "Cerinthus," in: A. Maijanen and P. Luomanen (eds.), *Companion to Second-Century "Heretics"*, Leiden: Brill 2005, 242; Manor, *Epiphanius' Alogi*, 81; Michael J. Kok, *The Beloved Apostle? The Transformation of the Apostle John into the Fourth Evangelist*, Eugene: Cascade 2017, 119; Furlong, *The Identity*, 75–76.

<sup>36</sup> Eduard Schwartz (ed.), "Johannes und Kerinthos," in: *Gesammelte Schriften: Zum Neuen Testament und zum Frühen Christentum*, Berlin: De Gruyter 1963, 5.173–74. Schwartz revised his previous conclusion that Gaius was the originator of the charge that Cerinthus forged both the Fourth Gospel and Revelation and that Eusebius had read a copy of Gaius's *Dialogue with Proclus* that had the disparaging comments about the Fourth Gospel edited out of it. See Schwartz, "Über den Tod der Söhne Zebedaei: ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Johannevangeliums" in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, 5.107.

<sup>37</sup> Pétrement, *A Separate God*, 305; DeConick, *The Gnostic New Age*, 159.

<sup>38</sup> Pétrement, *A Separate God*, 306; DeConick, *The Gnostic New Age*, 159. This view is also supported by Klijn and Reinink, *Patristic Evidence*, 5; Brown, *The Epistles*, 770.

chiliastic eschatology to his demiurgical theology as he was tinkering “in the laboratory of Christian ideas.”<sup>39</sup>

## The Case Against Identifying Cerinthus as a Johannine Theologian

It is debatable whether Cerinthus derived his theological ideas from the Fourth Gospel. Stephen R. Llewelyn, Alexandra Robinson, and Blake E. Wassell have demonstrated that there are sufficient grammatical reasons for taking the devil in apposition to the father in John 8:44a (i.e. “you are of your father the devil”) and the “lie” ( $\psi\epsilon\tilde{\nu}\delta\omega\varsigma$ ) as the antecedent of the  $\alpha\tilde{\nu}\tau\omega\tilde{\nu}$  in 8:44b (i.e. the father “of it”).<sup>40</sup> The devil set the passion narrative into motion when he possessed Judas (13:27), so he is the most plausible candidate for the world ruler who Jesus defeated by dying, and the sense that the world came under his control is paralleled in the Synoptic tradition (e.g., Matt. 4:8–9/Luke 4:5–6). The material universe was likely part of the “all things” in John 1:3, but the “world” did not recognize its incarnate creator in 1:10. The  $\lambda\circ\gamma\circ\varsigma$  was the “word” that the god of the Hebrew Scriptures spoke when forming creation (1:1; cf. Gen 1:3).

The assertion that no one had seen Jesus’s heavenly father (cf. 1:18; 6:46) is hard to square with the biblical narratives about Abraham, Moses, and Isaiah, but the rationale may be that they saw Jesus in his pre-existent divine state (5:46; 8:56; 12:41). John 1:17 could be expressing the continuity between the revelations bequeathed to Moses and Jesus, as Moses testified about Jesus (cf. 5:46), and the Johannine Jesus reasons

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<sup>39</sup> Litwa, *Found Christianities*, 42. For attempts to reconcile the tension between the belief that the material world was created by an inferior demiurge and the hope that it would nevertheless be re-created into a millennial paradise, see Charles E. Hill, “Cerinthus, Gnostic or Chiliast? A New Solution to an Old Problem,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 8.2 (2000): 135–72 (160–62, 164–67); Christoph Marksches, “Kerinth: Wer war er und was lehrte er?” *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 41 (1998): 48–76 (57, 72–73); Gunnar af Hällström and Oskar Skarsaune, “Cerinthus, Elxai, and Other Alleged Jewish Christian Teachers and Groups,” in: O. Skarsaune and R. Hvalvik (eds.), *Jewish Believers in Jesus: The Early Centuries*, Peabody: Hendrickson 2007, 494; Kok, “Classifying”, 43–44.

<sup>40</sup> Stephen R. Llewelyn, Alexandra Robinson, and Blake E. Wassell, “Does John 8:48 Imply That the Devil Has a Father? Contesting the Pro-Gnostic Reading,” *Novum Testamentum* 60.1 (2018): 14–23.

that the very Scriptures that his opponents assumed were on their side support him (8:17; 10:34; 15:25).<sup>41</sup> Jesus's father was worshipped by the Jewish people at his house in Jerusalem (2:16; 4:20, 22).

It is not evident that “the word became flesh” when the spirit descended upon Jesus at his baptism. John 1:14 may mean that the word was embodied for the entirety of Jesus's earthly life, while 1:32 may just be an echo of the Synoptic tradition that Jesus was anointed by the spirit for his messianic task at his baptism. Kinlaw interprets the unique detail that the spirit “remained” (ἔμεινεν) on Jesus in John 1:32 as indicating that the union between them was permanent, in contrast to Cerinthus's position that the union between the human Jesus and the divine aeon within him was temporary,<sup>42</sup> but this verse and the usage of the key verb μένω throughout the Fourth Gospel need not be read in reference to Cerinthus at all. Given the emphasis in 1:32 that the divine spirit “remained” on Jesus from this point forward, the only “spirit” that Jesus relinquished on the cross was his own.

Even if Cerinthus could have made the interpretive decisions outlined by DeConick and Litwa, it is unlikely that he did so as there is no evidence before the fourth century that he conceptualized the creator of the world as demonic. According to Irenaeus, Cerinthus's demiurgical “power” (δύναμις//*virtus*) was ignorant but not evil. Cerinthus's belief that an intermediary agent was the cause of creation was just a way to protect the transcendence of an immutable, impassible, supreme deity.<sup>43</sup> Later Christian writers claimed that Cerinthus believed that the world was created by angels and they were arguably dependent on a common source (cf. Ps-Tert, *Haer.* 3.2; Epiphanius, *Pan.* 28.1.2; Filaster, *Haer.*

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<sup>41</sup> For the polar-opposite perspective on the fourth evangelist's attitude towards the law-giver Moses, see Wally V. Cirafesi, *John within Judaism: Religion, Ethnicity, and the Shaping of Jesus-Oriented Jewishness in the Fourth Gospel*, AJEC 112, Leiden: Brill 2022, 132–144.

<sup>42</sup> Kinlaw, *The Christ*, 110, 134–35, 174.

<sup>43</sup> Martin Hengel, *Die johanneische Frage: Ein Lösungsversuch mit einem Beitrag zur Apokalypse von Jörg Frey*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 1993, 178n.77; Marksches, “Kerinth,” 56–57, 72–73; Kok, “Classifying”, 37, 40; Taylor, “Cerinthus”, 679.

36.1),<sup>44</sup> but Epiphanius was the first one to characterize the angel who created the world and mediated the commandments to Moses in Cerinthus's theology as an evil being (*Pan.* 28.2.1–2).

Martin Hengel comments on how the absence of any polemic against a demiurgical theology in the Johannine Gospel or Epistles makes it doubtful that they were criticizing Cerinthus's misappropriation of the Johannine tradition.<sup>45</sup> Pétrement suspects that Irenaeus misrepresented Cerinthus as a demiurgical theologian, but she still maintains that Cerinthus's separationist Christology was drawn from the Fourth Gospel.<sup>46</sup> Yet the polemical remarks in 1 John 2:22, 4:2, and 2 John 1:7 may not have been directed at Cerinthus's Christology. They are ambiguous enough that they have been deciphered in countless ways, from attacking the docetic disavowal of Jesus's corporeal existence to the renunciation of his messianic status.<sup>47</sup> 1 John 5:6 may not be a polemical remark. Instead, it simply states that the theophany at Jesus's baptism, Jesus's sacrificial blood, and the spirit are the three witnesses verifying Jesus's Christological identity.<sup>48</sup>

Irenaeus did guess that the Apostle John wrote his Gospel to debunk Cerinthus's Christology, but his deduction was based on his identification of the John in Polycarp's bathhouse story as the Apostle John. The tradition that the Apostle John was the fourth evangelist was well established in Irenaeus's time (*Haer.* 3.1.1). According to Bernhard Mutschler's calculations,<sup>49</sup> Irenaeus named the Evangelist John approximately

<sup>44</sup> This source is usually identified with Hippolytus's lost *Syntagma against Thirty-Two Heretics*. See Brown, *The Epistles*, 768; Pétrement, *A Separate God*, 306–7; Myllykowski, "Cerinthus," 216. Yet it is not necessary to posit this hypothetical source if Pseudo-Tertullian influenced Epiphanius and Epiphanius influenced Filaster. See Manor, *Epiphanius's Alogi*, 137.

<sup>45</sup> Hengel, *Die johanneische Frage*, 179–80.

<sup>46</sup> Pétrement, *A Separate God*, 302–3.

<sup>47</sup> See the survey of scholarly interpretations in Streett, *They Went Out*, 6–111.

<sup>48</sup> Streett, *They Went Out*, 300–36.

<sup>49</sup> Bernhard Mutschler, "John and His Gospel in the Mirror of Irenaeus of Lyons: Perspectives of Recent Research," in: T. Rasimus (ed.), *The Legacy of John: Second-Century Reception of the Fourth Gospel*, Leiden: Brill 2010, 320. Since Richard Bauckham (*Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, Second Edition, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2017, 469) differentiates John "the Lord's disciple" from the Apostle John, he calculates that the former figure appears fifty-nine times and the latter five times in Irenaeus's writings.

sixty times and introduced citations from the Johannine corpus eleven times with a formula about what “the Lord’s disciple” says.<sup>50</sup> Whenever he referred to some other John, Irenaeus clarified this person’s identity.<sup>51</sup> Although he never clarifies that John “the Lord’s disciple” was the son of Zebedee,<sup>52</sup> he elsewhere calls him an “apostle” (1.9.2, 3; cf. 3.5.1; 11.9),<sup>53</sup> groups him with “other apostles” (2.22.5), and compares him and Polycarp to the apostles and their disciples (3.3.4).<sup>54</sup> Irenaeus limited the number of apostles to the Twelve and Paul. The election of the twelfth apostle after Judas’s defection brought the number of apostles to completion (3.12.1), but Paul was an exception due to his self-designation as an apostle.<sup>55</sup> To challenge the Valentinians’ interpretation of Jesus’s selection of twelve apostles as a symbol for the Duodecad, Irenaeus responded that Jesus did not pick eight apostles to signify their Ogdoad or ten to signify their Decad (2.21.1).

Richard Bauckham and Dean Furlong object that Irenaeus expanded the number of apostles in select instances. Irenaeus noticed that the Valentinians accorded no significance to the Seventy in Luke 10:1–20

<sup>50</sup> Mutschler, “John”, 320.

<sup>51</sup> Lorne Zelyck, “Irenaeus and the Authorship of the Fourth Gospel,” in: S.E. Porter and H.T. Ong (eds.), *The Origins of John’s Gospel*, Leiden: Brill 2016, 240–41. For instance, Irenaeus refers to the John “who was called Mark” when recounting Acts 15–16 (e.g., *Haer.* 3.14.1) or rehearses where John the “Baptizer” or “forerunner” of Jesus appears in the Gospels (e.g., 1.3.5; 3.9.1; 10.1; 3.10.2; 4.4.2, 3; 7.2; 5.17.4; 32.2).

<sup>52</sup> Bauckham (*Jesus*, 458) observes that, while Irenaeus clearly refers to episodes in the Gospels or the book of Acts when referring to John the son of Zebedee (cf. *Haer.* 2.24.4; 3.12.3–5; 15), he does not identify him as “the Lord’s disciple.” However, Zelyck (“Irenaeus,” 241) rightly notes that the John in these passages is not explicitly identified as Zebedee’s son. Irenaeus only used the phrase “sons of Zebedee” once when paraphrasing Matthew 20:20 (cf. *Haer.* 1.21.2), but he presumed that his readers were familiar enough with the Synoptic Gospels and Acts to know that the John he was discussing in the previous references was the Apostle John. Zelyck (“Irenaeus,” 247) notes other instances when Irenaeus undoubtedly refers to “the Lord’s disciple” John without using this title (e.g., 3.8.3; 4.2.1; 10.1; 17.6; 21.3).

<sup>53</sup> Bauckham (*Jesus*, 461–2) downplays the import of *Against Heresies* 1.9.2, 3, because Irenaeus was repeating Ptolemy’s identification of the fourth evangelist as an “apostle.”

<sup>54</sup> Zelyck, “Irenaeus”, 242–24; cf. Culpepper, *John*, 124.

<sup>55</sup> Zelyck, “Irenaeus”, 248, 251; Michael J. Kok, *The Beloved Apostle? The Transformation of the Apostle John into the Fourth Evangelist*, Eugene: Cascade 2017, 94.

(2.21.1–2). Since the apostles stand for aeons in their reasoning, his rebuttal would be more persuasive if the Seventy were apostles.<sup>56</sup> Irenaeus may not have realized the implications of his argument as he fell short of labelling them apostles; his aim was not to enlarge the group of apostles, but to ridicule the Valentinians' numerological speculations.<sup>57</sup> He reasoned that, since John the Baptizer was greater than a prophet (cf. Matt. 11:9//Luke 7:26) and apostles outrank prophets (cf. 1 Cor 12:28), the Baptizer was like an apostle in bearing witness to Jesus (*Haer.* 3.11.4).<sup>58</sup> He may have deemed the Baptizer's role to be functionally equivalent to the apostles without counting him as an apostle.<sup>59</sup> He maintained that Polycarp was ordained to his episcopal office by plural apostles (*Haer.* 3.3.4),<sup>60</sup> but he may have exaggerated the number of apostles that Polycarp had come into contact with as he only knew about Polycarp's relationship with John "the Lord's disciple."

Bauckham's and Furlong's counterexamples do not substantiate their thesis that when Irenaeus called John "the Lord's disciple" an apostle, he was not identifying him as one of the twelve apostles. Irenaeus identified Peter and Paul as "disciples" of Jesus too (e.g., 1.25.2), but the Apostle John was for him *the disciple par excellence*.<sup>61</sup> Μαθητής ("disciple") appears seventy-eight times in the Fourth Gospel and Irenaeus may be indebted to its terminology when lauding the disciple who reclined on Jesus's bosom (3.1.1; cf. John 13:23).<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Bauckham, *Jesus*, 462; Dean Furlong, *The Identity of John the Evangelist: Revision and Reinterpretation in Early Christian Sources*, Minneapolis: Fortress 2020, 41–42.

<sup>57</sup> Zelyck, "Irenaeus", 249. Furlong (*The Identity*, 42) counters that Irenaeus did not use the term apostles because it was not in his Lukan source, but he may have agreed with Luke that the Seventy were not apostles. Apart from Acts 14:14, Luke restricts the apostles to the Twelve (e.g., Acts 1:21–6).

<sup>58</sup> Bauckham, *Jesus*, 462; Furlong, *The Identity*, 41–2.

<sup>59</sup> Zelyck, "Irenaeus", 250–1.

<sup>60</sup> Furlong, *The Identity*, 42–3.

<sup>61</sup> Zelyck, "Irenaeus", 252.

<sup>62</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, *John, the Son of Zebedee: The Life of a Legend*, Minneapolis: Fortress 2000, 124; Mutschler, "John," 321–2; Zelyck, "Irenaeus," 253; Bauckham, *Jesus*, 459; Kok, *The Beloved Apostle*, 93; Michael J. Kok, *Tax Collector to Gospel Writer: Patristic Traditions about the Evangelist Matthew*, Minneapolis: Fortress 2023, 42. Some scholars argue that

Irenaeus believed that it was the Apostle John who went to the public bathhouse in Ephesus. Although the bathhouse story has been dismissed as “fourth-hand folklore”<sup>63</sup> and as a “floating legend,”<sup>64</sup> Irenaeus may have been part of Polycarp’s audience when he told it and may have only meant that it was well-known among Polycarp’s hearers.<sup>65</sup> Gustave Bardy and Christoph Marksches do not deem the story to be historically implausible and find the chain of transmission from Polycarp to Irenaeus to be too short to so easily dismiss it as a late etiological legend about the Fourth Gospel.<sup>66</sup> Even if it was a fictionalized account of a meeting between John and Cerinthus that Polycarp told to amuse his students, it may reflect the real animosity between these two individuals. The question is whether Irenaeus rightly identified the John in this story as the Apostle John rather than some other figure.

Considering the shorter average age spans of people in antiquity, the likelihood that the Apostle John was alive after the commencement of the Roman Emperor Trajan’s reign in 98 CE as reported by Irenaeus (*Haer. 3.3.4*) seems low but not impossible. Additionally, Irenaeus’s tradition about the longevity of the Apostle John’s life clashes with the Markan Jesus’s prediction that he would drink his cup and receive his baptism (Mark 10:39). Jesus metaphorically drank the cup on the cross (14:36) and the metaphors were taken in reference to martyrdom by John Chrysostom (*Hom. Matt. 20.23*), Cyril (*Cat. 3.10*), Cyprian (*Rebapt.*

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Papias of Hierapolis set a precedent for distinctively calling John “the disciple of the Lord” (cf. John Chapman, *John the Presbyter and the Fourth Gospel*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1911, 24, 43, 59, 62; Furlong, *The Identity*, 43), but Papias only refers to “the Lord’s disciples” (οἱ τοῦ κυρίου μαθηταί) in the plural.

<sup>63</sup> Streett, *They Went Out*, 70–1.

<sup>64</sup> Benjamin Bacon, “The Elder John in Jerusalem,” *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 26 (1927), 187–202 (192). Note that Bacon insists that the legend could have originally been set in Judea because one of his aims was to deconstruct the tradition of the residence of John “the Lord’s disciple” in Ephesus.

<sup>65</sup> Bauckham, *Jesus*, 456.

<sup>66</sup> Bardy, “Céerinthe,” 348 – 49; Marksches, “Kerinth,” 54.

13), and Aphrahat (*Dem. 21.23*) as well as in the Latin *Incomplete Commentary on Matthew* (*Hom. 35 on Matt 20*).<sup>67</sup> Granted, Acts 12:2 only narrates the execution of John's brother and Origen saw Jesus's prophecy as fulfilled by John's exile on the island of Patmos (*Comm. in. Mt. 16.6*),<sup>68</sup> but the author of Mark 10:39 would be surprised to learn that one of the sons of Zebedee died of natural causes.

Although Irenaeus linked Polycarp to an aged Apostle John (Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl. 5.20.4*), sources such as Polycarp's *Letter to the Philippians*, the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, and Pionius's *Life of Polycarp* are silent about their connection.<sup>69</sup> The silence is less remarkable if Polycarp interacted with a less reputable old man named John. Despite forgetting the individual whom Polycarp was talking about, Irenaeus benefited from misidentifying this figure as the Apostle John by claiming to be in the line of apostolic succession.<sup>70</sup>

Polycarp may have been referring to another John who was known to Papias, an early second-century bishop of Hierapolis. Papias nicknamed this John "the elder." Irenaeus misidentified Papias's informant as the Apostle John by misreading the prologue to Papias's *Exposition of*

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<sup>67</sup> Furlong, *The Identity*, 20–21. Furlong also considers the De Boor fragments, which attribute to Papias of Hierapolis the claim that John and his brother James were killed by the Jews, in his analysis. For debate about the value of these fragments, see W.R. Schoedel, *The Apostolic Fathers: A New Translation and Commentary: Volume 5: Polycarp, Martyrdom of Polycarp, Fragments of Papias*, rev. ed.; Eugene, Or.: Wipf & Stock 2020, 5.118–21; Hengel, *Die johanneische Frage*, 88–91, 317, 319; Culpepper, *John*, 171–4; Enrico Norelli, *Papia di Hierapolis: Esposizione Degli Oracoli Del Signore I frammenti*, Milan: Paoline, 2005, 364–83, 434–41; Shanks, *Papias*, 219–25, 239–40; Furlong, *The Identity*, 23–8; Bauckham, *Jesus*, 458–62; Stephen C. Carlson, *Papias of Hierapolis Expositions of Dominical Oracles: The Fragments, Testimonia, and Reception of a Second-Century Commentator*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2021, 65–75; Kok, *Tax Collector*, 36–39.

<sup>68</sup> Furlong (*The Identity*, 66–67) notes that this could be conceived as a deferred death sentence. He adds that the Latin *Vetus Interpretatio* version of Origen's *Commentary on Matthew* describes how the sons of Zebedee attained "perfection" (*perfectio*). Origen presupposes that the John who had visions on the island of Patmos was the Apostle John, but the author of Revelation admired the twelve apostles as past figureheads (cf. Rev 21:14).

<sup>69</sup> Culpepper, *John*, 126–7; Kok, *The Beloved Apostle*, 94–95.

<sup>70</sup> Bacon, "The Elder John", 190; Zelyck, "Irenaeus", 254–57; Kok, *The Beloved Apostle*, 95–96; Kok, *Tax Collector*, 43.

*the Oracles of the Lord* (5.33.4; cf. Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 3.39.3).<sup>71</sup> After listing a John among seven “disciples of the Lord” and expressing an interest in what they “said” (εἶπεν) as related by the followers of the elders, Papias disclosed that he wanted to know what “the Lord’s disciples” Aristion and “the elder” John were “saying” (λέγουσιν). Since Aristion was one of “the Lord’s disciples,” the phrase cannot be restricted to the apostles.<sup>72</sup> The article before “elder” (πρεσβύτερος) may be anaphoric (i.e. “the aforementioned elder”),<sup>73</sup> meaning that Papias was mentioning the same John twice.<sup>74</sup> Conversely, regardless of whether Papias equated the “elders” and “the disciples of the Lord” or distinguished them,<sup>75</sup> he should not have discussed plural elders if he intended for the article to be taken anaphorically.<sup>76</sup> The shift in verb tense likely signals

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<sup>71</sup> A.C. Perumalil (“Are Not Papias and Irenaeus Competent to Report on the Gospels?” *Expository Times* 91 [1980], 332–37 [333–34]) protests that John is not called “the Lord’s disciple” in *Against Heresies* 5.34.4, but Irenaeus attached this epithet to him in 5.33.3. See Kok, *The Beloved Apostle*, 63; Carlson, *Papias*, 33n.163.

<sup>72</sup> For the text-critical case for retaining the second occurrence of “the Lord’s disciples” and the possible meanings of the phrase, see J. Munck, “Presbyters and Disciples of the Lord in Papias,” *Harvard Theological Review* 52 (1959), 223–40 (230).

<sup>73</sup> Monte A. Shanks, *Papias and the New Testament*, Eugene: Pickwick 2013, 19–21, 155–6.

<sup>74</sup> Chapman, *John*, 35–6; Robert H. Gundry, “The Apostolically Johannine Pre-Papian Tradition Concerning the Gospels of Mark and Matthew,” in: R. H. Gundry (ed.), *The Old is Better: New Testament Essays in Support of Traditional Interpretations*, WUNT 178; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2005, 55; Shanks, *Papias*, 133.

<sup>75</sup> Munck, “Presbyters”, 236–37, 239; David G. Deeks, “Papias Revisited,” *Expository Times* 88.11 (1977), 296–301 (296–7); Gundry, “The Apostolically Johannine Pre-Papian Tradition”, 53–4; Shanks, *Papias*, 140–3. Other commentators distinguish the elders from the Lord’s disciples including Chapman, *John*, 10–2; Schoedel, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 5.90, 98; U. H. J. Körtner, *Papias von Hierapolis: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des frühen Christentums*, FRLANT 133; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1983, 114–22; Hengel, *Die johanneische Frage*, 79; Culpepper, *John*, 110; Norelli, *Papia di Hierapolis*, 42; Furlong, *The Identity*, 8–14; Bauckham, *Jesus*, 16–8. I now lean towards the latter reading (contra Kok, *The Beloved Apostle*, 67–69).

<sup>76</sup> Furlong, *The Identity*, 10. For the view that the Elder John was given this title due to his old age, see Chapman, *John*, 38–39; Deeks, “Papias Revisited”, 297; Kok, *The Beloved Apostle*, 69.

that the first seven disciples had died and the article marks “the elder” out as a title distinguishing the second John from the first.<sup>77</sup>

It is plausible that the Elder John was known to Polycarp and Papias because he resided in Ephesus during the early years of Trajan’s reign. Eusebius restated Dionysius of Alexandria’s inference that both the Apostle John and the Elder John were buried in Ephesus because there were two tombs for two separate Johns there (*Hist. Eccl.* 3.39.6; 7.25.16), but Jerome acknowledged that many regarded both sites as commemorating the same person (*Vir. il.* 9). Perhaps the same person’s remains were relocated from one site to another or two competing memorials were set up.<sup>78</sup> In either scenario, the Elder John may have been the one who was buried in Ephesus. It was Irenaeus’s misidentification of him that led to the legends about the Apostle John’s adventures in Ephesus.<sup>79</sup> Benjamin Bacon counters that Polycarp could have met various apostles and elders in Jerusalem as a child before he arrived in Asia Minor (e.g., Acts 15:2) and proposes that the Elder John was the seventh bishop of Jerusalem (Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 4.5.3; Epiphanius, *Pan.* 66.20.1).<sup>80</sup> However, it is more likely that Papias visited the Elder John in person, which is why Irenaeus referred to him as a “hearer of John” (*Haer.* 5.33.3), and it would be a much shorter trip from Hierapolis to Ephesus.<sup>81</sup>

The Elder John handed down the tradition that “Mark was Peter’s translator, and he wrote down accurately, though not in order, what he

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<sup>77</sup> Munck, “Presbyters”, 238; Schoedel, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 5.99–100; Körtner, *Papias*, 124–27; Hengel, *Die johanneische Frage*, 79; Norelli, *Papia*, 44, 263; Bauckham, *Jesus*, 17; Furlong, *The Identity*, 8–14; Kok, *Tax Collector*, 35.

<sup>78</sup> Gundry, “The Apostolically Johannine Pre-Papian Tradition”, 57; Furlong, *The Identity*, 76.

<sup>79</sup> Kok, *The Beloved Apostle*, 97–101.

<sup>80</sup> Bacon, “The Elder John”, 187, 191–94, 198–200, 201–202.

<sup>81</sup> Kok, *Tax Collector*, 45n.93.

remembered [hearing] about what the Lord had said and done" (Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 3.39.15).<sup>82</sup> Eusebius does not supply any explicit commentary from the Elder John on the Fourth Gospel.<sup>83</sup> The Elder John and Cerinthus likely got a hold of the Second Gospel in Ephesus.<sup>84</sup> Cerinthus's Christology was shaped by its narrative outline, which opens with the announcement of Jesus's divine sonship coinciding with the spirit descending "into" (εἰς) him at his baptism in Mark 1:10–11.<sup>85</sup> Jesus lamented that he had been divinely forsaken before he died in Mark 15:34. Perhaps Cerinthus construed Mark 8:27–29 as intimating that Jesus was inhabited by the Christ aeon rather than the ghost of the Baptizer or a past prophet.<sup>86</sup> Irenaeus conceded that the Second Gospel was preferred by the theologians who divided Jesus from the Christ (*Haer.* 3.11.7).<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> This translation of Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.15 is taken from Schott, *The History*, 166.

<sup>83</sup> Hengel (*Die Johanneische Frage*, 88) and Bauckham (*Jesus*, 424) posit that Eusebius suppressed Papias's statement that the Elder John was the fourth evangelist, because it went against the ascription of the Fourth Gospel to the Apostle John, but this argument cannot be demonstrated from the surviving Papian fragments. For my argument that neither the Elder John nor Papias commented on the Fourth Gospel and that Papias contrasted Mark's "order" with Matthew's rather than John's, see Kok, *Tax Collector*, 105–7.

<sup>84</sup> I will designate the "Gospel According to Mark" as the Second Gospel based on the canonical order, but not based on the historical order in which the Gospels were written since I hold to Markan priority.

<sup>85</sup> Klijn and Reinink, *Patristic Evidence*, 3, 20; Hengel, *Die johanneische Frage*, 181; Myllykowski, "Cerinthus", 235; Michael J. Kok, *The Gospel on the Margins: The Reception of Mark in the Second Century*, Minneapolis: Fortress 2015, 243; Litwa, *Found Christianities*, 41; Taylor, "Cerinthus", 687–89.

<sup>86</sup> Taylor, "Cerinthus", 688.

<sup>87</sup> I scoured Irenaeus's *Against Heresies* for clues that the Basilideans, Carpocratians, and Valentinians exegeted the Second Gospel in Kok, *The Gospel*, 243–47. Joel Kuhlin and Paul Linjamaa ("The 'Heretical' Reception of the Gospel of Mark," *Patristica Nordica Annuario* 36 (2021): 69–88 [77–80, 82–85]) object that the passages that I cited as evidence (e.g., 1.24.4//Mark 15:21//Matt. 27:32; cf. Luke 23:26; 1.25.5//Mark 4:11; cf. Matt 13:11//Luke 8:10; 1.8.2//Mark 15:34; cf. Matt 27:46) draw on shared Synoptic material and that Irenaeus's interlocutors may not have paid much attention to each evangelist's distinct wording.

Whether the dispute between the Elder John and Cerinthus was over conflicting interpretations of the Second Gospel, or some other issue, is impossible to ascertain because Irenaeus has obscured the cause of the conflict. Yet if Irenaeus had not misidentified the John in Polycarp's story as the Apostle John, he would not have then extrapolated that the Apostle John wrote his Gospel against Cerinthus. Irenaeus may have been the first Christian writer to misidentify the Elder John, but he was not the last. Cerinthus may only be named in the *Epistula Apostolorum* because he was wrongly remembered as a contemporary of the Apostle John, just as Simon the magician was remembered as Peter's contemporary in Acts 8:9–24.<sup>88</sup> It is therefore problematic to try to glean Simon's and Cerinthus's theologies through a mirror-reading of this text. Their names may be present in it for no other reason than to supply it with historical verisimilitude since it is purportedly a letter sent by the apostles. Francis Watson argues that this text was written in Ephesus around 170 CE.<sup>89</sup>

It is also methodologically questionable to interpret Polycarp's bath-house story in the light of the much later sources about Cerinthus's purported authorship of one or more of the Johannine writings. Such accusations only begin to surface in sources that post-date Irenaeus. As mentioned above, Irenaeus was familiar with certain Christians who rejected the Fourth Gospel because of its promises about the Paraclete

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Moreover, the Second Gospel hardly surfaces in the primary literature attributed to Basilides or the Valentinians. These are fair objections. Yet they overlook the summary statement in *Against Heresies* 3.11.7 that was probably targeting Cerinthus and Carpocrates, since Irenaeus specified that the Gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John were preferred by the Ebionites, Marcionites, and Valentinians respectively (3.11.7) and described Cerinthus's and Carpocrates's Christologies similarly (cf. 1.25.1). If Polycarp was Irenaeus's source for Cerinthus's Markan Christology, this might answer Jonathan Bernier's objection that my evidence for conflicting interpretations of the Second Gospel comes from late sources (cf. Jonathan Bernier, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus After the Demise of Authenticity: Toward a Critical Realist Philosophy of History in Jesus Studies*, LNTS 540, London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark 2016, 132–33). Bernier ignores my analysis of the redactional and scribal changes to the Second Gospel as part of the evidence for its controversial reception.

<sup>88</sup> Francis Watson, *An Apostolic Gospel: The “Epistula Apolorum” in Literary Context*, SNTSMS 179, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2020, 7.

<sup>89</sup> Watson, *An Apostolic Gospel*, 7–11.

(*Haer.* 3.11.9), but he is silent about whether they rejected Revelation or attributed any of the Johannine writings to Cerinthus.<sup>90</sup>

It is possible that Gaius originated the accusation that Cerinthus forged the Fourth Gospel and Revelation and Hippolytus published an apologetic response defending their apostolic authorship.<sup>91</sup> The problem is that it is unlikely that Eusebius would neglect to mention that Gaius dismissed the Fourth Gospel as a forgery, and express his admiration for him, if he was aware of this fact.<sup>92</sup> Joseph Daniel Smith Jr.'s hypothesis is that Gaius did not actually ascribe any of the Johannine literature to Cerinthus. Gaius's criticisms of the "revelations" (ἀποκαλύψεις) that Cerinthus put forward "as having been written by a great apostle" (ώς ύπὸ ἀποστόλου μεγάλου γεγραμμένων) may only call Revelation's apostolic authorship into question.<sup>93</sup> Hippolytus may have misunderstood Gaius as insinuating that Cerinthus was the real author of not only Revelation, but the Fourth Gospel as well.<sup>94</sup> For Hippolytus, both writings equally belonged in the Johannine corpus. Epiphanius and Dionysius bar Salibi were misled by Hippolytus's mistaken deduction.

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<sup>90</sup> Bludau, *Die ersten Gegner*, 39–40. Because Schwartz ("Über den Tod," 5.90, 106) and Smith Jr. ("Gaius, 164, 167–68) argue that Irenaeus was using the plural "others" (*alii*) to conceal the fact that he was actually targeting Gaius, Schwartz dates Gaius's *Dialogue with Proclus* earlier than Eusebius did to around 160 CE while Smith Jr. proposes that Irenaeus knew Gaius's oral teachings before he had written them down in the early third century CE. However, Irenaeus's use of the plural can be taken straightforwardly as indicating plural opponents and Irenaeus could have easily named Gaius if he was the target of his polemics.

<sup>91</sup> Bludau, *Die ersten Gegner*, 165, 229; Bardy, "Cérinthe," 356–358, 361n.1; Klijn and Reinink, *Patristic Evidence*, 8; Brown, *The Epistles*, 768; Marksches, "Kerinth," 59; Watson, *Gospel Writing*, 486; Furlong, *The Identity*, 76–77.

<sup>92</sup> Brent, *Hippolytus*, 148; Manor, *Epiphanius' Alogi*, 67; Kok, *The Beloved Apostle*, 119. This is why Schwartz ("Über den Tod," 5.107) originally supposed that Eusebius's copy of Gaius's work was incomplete.

<sup>93</sup> Smith Jr., "Gaius," 330–31. Since Smith Jr. believes that Dionysius of Alexandria was directly dependent on Gaius (226), Dionysius may have misread his source. However, Smith Jr. does not think that even Dionysius's wording clearly states that some Christians rejected Revelation because it was authored by Cerinthus (328–29).

<sup>94</sup> Smith Jr., "Gaius," 333.

Alternatively, Allen Brent and T. Scott Manor deny that Gaius was referring to Revelation as the apocalyptic book that Cerinthus expounded upon,<sup>95</sup> since Revelation 20:1–6 does not locate Christ’s millennial reign in Jerusalem nor likens the millennium to a wedding feast. Rather, Dionysius of Alexandria heard a distorted rumour about Cerinthus’s authorship of Revelation that was circulating in Alexandria.<sup>96</sup> On the contrary, Gaius was probably twisting Revelation’s imagery, including its metaphor of the “wedding supper of the Lamb,” and critiquing the identification of its author as the Apostle John.<sup>97</sup> Brent and Manor make a stronger case that Epiphanius, rather than Hippolytus, was the first one to misunderstand Gaius as having ascribed both the Fourth Gospel and Revelation to Cerinthus. Dionysius bar Salibi could have depended on Eusebius’s *Ecclesiastical History* and Epiphanius’s *Panarion* for everything that he divulged about Cerinthus and Gaius. He may have placed Gaius and Hippolytus as interlocutors in a fictional dialogue because Eusebius named them both in the same context (*Hist. Eccl.* 6.20.2–3) and recapped Eusebius’s summaries of Cerinthus’s chiliastic ideas (3.28.2, 4–5; 7.25.3).<sup>98</sup> He portrayed Gaius like Epiphanius’s Alogi and was informed by Epiphanius’s account of Cerinthus’s opinions about angels and circumcision (*Pan.* 28.1.2–3; 2.3–5.3).<sup>99</sup> The Hippolytus statue attests

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<sup>95</sup> Brent, *Hippolytus*, 134; Manor, *Epiphanius’ Alogi*, 76–79.

<sup>96</sup> Manor, *Epiphanius’ Alogi*, 81.

<sup>97</sup> Bludau, *Die ersten Gegner*, 45–48; Bardy, “Cérinthe,” 355; Schwartz, “Johannes,” 5.174; Klijn and Reinink, *Patristic Evidence*, 5; Brown, *The Epistles*, 768; Pétrément, *A Separate God*, 306; Marksches, “Kerinth,” 59; Myllykowski, “Cerinthus,” 237; Hällström and Skarsaune, “Cerinthus,” 492; Watson, *Gospel Writing*, 479–80; DeConick, *The Gnostic New Age*, 159; Kok, *The Beloved Apostle*, 118; Furlong, *The Identity*, 75–76; Litwa, *Found Christianities*, 42; Taylor, “Cerinthus,” 677.

<sup>98</sup> Manor, *Epiphanius’ Alogi*, 103–107.

<sup>99</sup> Manor, *Epiphanius’ Alogi*, 111–12, 118. Epiphanius manufactured the portrait of Cerinthus as the tireless advocate of proselyte circumcision (*Pan.* 28.2.3–5.3). He likely did so because he misread Irenaeus’s comparison of Cerinthus to the Ebionites (cf. *Haer.* 1.26.2). See Bardy, “Cérinthe”, 369–70; Brown, *The Epistles*, 768; Pétrément, *A Separate God*, 307; Hill, “Cerinthus”, 147–48; Myllykowski, “Cerinthus”, 219; Kok, “Classifying”, 44. Alternatively, Taylor (“Cerinthus,” 678) proposes that that Epiphanius stumbled upon a short

that Hippolytus had written something on the Fourth Gospel and Revelation, but it might not have been identical to the work against Gaius attested in the Syriac catalogue. The cataloguer may have imagined that Hippolytus wrote a work against Gaius after reading Dionysius bar Salibi's commentary.<sup>100</sup>

### The Invention of Cerinthus as a Johannine Theologian

The accusation that Cerinthus forged the Fourth Gospel and Revelation cannot be dated before the third century if it goes back to Gaius. There is no evidence that Gaius was relying on a prior source for this allegation. Yet Gaius may have only denied the apostolic authorship of Revelation. The question is whether Hippolytus or Epiphanius was responsible for misreading Gaius and consequently inventing the accusation that Cerinthus forged the Fourth Gospel. It is difficult to come to a firm conclusion on the matter because Gaius's *Dialogue with Proclus*, and the relevant works attested on the Hippolytus statue or in the Syriac catalogue, have not survived. If they were rediscovered, they might clear up exactly what Gaius thought about the authorship of the Johannine writings.

There are no second century sources that suggest that Cerinthus forged the Fourth Gospel. Irenaeus was concerned about the Christians in the late second century who did not believe Jesus's promises about the Paraclete in the Fourth Gospel, but he never claimed that they misattributed this Gospel to Cerinthus. He pictured how the Evangelist John could have been motivated to publish his Gospel to refute Cerinthus's Christology, but he may have arrived at this conclusion because he did not accurately recall the identity of the John who confronted Cerinthus at the bathhouse in Ephesus. It may be problematic to mirror read the Johannine Epistles and the *Epistula Apostolorum* to uncover Cerinthus's supposed exegetical interpretations of the Fourth Gospel.

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notice about the Merinthians in Galatia and, confusing them with the Cerinthians, identified them with the non-Jewish Judaizers who Paul confronted in Galatia (cf. 28.6.4; 8.1–2). Even some scholars who are persuaded that Dionysius bar Salibi had a source from Hippolytus allow that he may have been dependent on the *Panarion* for the portrayal of Cerinthus (cf. Klijn and Reinink, *Patristic Evidence*, 6, 18; Myllykowski, "Cerinthus," 218).

<sup>100</sup> Brent, *Hippolytus*, 171–73; Manor, *Epiphanius' Alogi*, 97, 139.

Cerinthus probably did not ground his demiurgical theology or his separationist Christology in the text of the Fourth Gospel. He might have been a reader of Revelation if it was the source for his millenarian eschatology, but his millenarianism might have also been shaped by other Christian influences in Asia Minor. Cerinthus's Christology seems more Markan than Johannine. It is more likely that Cerinthus was an interpreter of the Second Gospel rather than the Fourth Gospel.