

GETTING TO KNOW ST JOHN

This is an extract from a Book on the Gospel of St John entitled *The Passion of the Image*. The subsection “Rock” is from the Introduction and explores the person of John as an artist, as someone who suffered through the Crucifixion of his Lord, and, it is believed, spent some years in Ephesus where he reflected upon his time with the Incarnate Son of God in the company of the Mother of God. In particular John’s sensitivity to the images in his memory, from all he had experienced, are able to be identified in the way he arranged his text and the manner of his writing.

ROCK

In 2000 I spent a week in retreat at the monastery adjacent to the shrine of the Last Home of the Virgin at Ephesus, overlooking the Valley of the Virgin. The tradition that John took Christ’s Mother to Ephesus and built a home for her on Bulbul Dag is well founded. The huge Basilica that in the reign of Emperor Justinian was built on Ayosolug Hill over what is believed to be John’s grave replaced the earlier church of the 4th Century. Being there was a numinous encounter with John and the Mother of God. Information from the local people, especially the Orthodox descendants of the early Christians in Ephesus and Izmir (Smyrna) and the Religious who cared for the shrines, is invaluable.

During that week there was a seminar on John the Evangelist and an open-air Mass in the ruins of the Basilica. While praying at the rock of Calvary in Jerusalem, I was aware of John’s extraordinary love and grace strengthening him to watch Our Lord being crucified. But in Ephesus I was conscious of the extraordinary love and insight with which he did what he had been told to do on the walk on the beach of the Lake of Galilee: ‘to wait until I come...’. Looking down the Valley of the Virgin I saw dimly the island of Samos in the Aegean Sea and knew that Patmos was close but beyond it.

Although some scholars take a different position on this, the Church has traditionally held that the author of the Fourth Gospel was the same John who wrote the Apocalypse while he was imprisoned on Patmos. Jerome¹ tells us that *Polycarp* was a disciple of the apostle *John* and ordained by him as presbyter of Smyrna. The tradition of the Church, and Polycarp, holds that John was exiled to the island of Patmos. That is also my position and I believe his time on Patmos was important.

¹ Cf also Papias and Irenaeus on this.

Images of the Passion were embedded in John's memory, and they penetrated everything he said as Evangelist and poet. It could be that while on Patmos forced to quarry stone, his artistic, mystic nature was refined and intensified by the repression of his gifts. Quarrying stone is like an impact medium in art. Dressing stone is one step behind carving it. Chiselling the stone would have resonated with the nailing of Christ on Calvary which was itself a quarry though fallen into disuse. In the Patmos quarry, the other quarry would have been on the edge of his consciousness, calling forth intense images of the Passion on the upstanding rockface of Calvary.

His gifts were probably awakened but repressed as he worked the stone, producing a psychic conflict and stasis paradoxically perfecting his memory. I mean that as expression was inhibited by his circumstances his understanding was being perfected interiorly as he reflected on the Passion. I believe that John transcended the negative impact of imposed confinement to give to the world the magnificent Fourth Gospel.

Ephesus is also surrounded by quarries as archaeologists have discovered, for stone was needed for architecture and art.² It is said that John built Meryem Ana Evi, so he would have needed stone. There is lime in the water which furnished the house, and the whole area is rich in limestone. Did John quarry the stone himself for the Last Home of Christ's Mother?



Fr Tarcy Matthias OFM Cap, centre, with Dr. Andreas Pülz from the Austrian Archaeological Institute, outside the cave of St Paul and Thekla overlooking Ephesus. Photo: Barbara Lesjak circa 2007.

Did John write his gospel in this cave? Or Sütini and Kurudağ Caves, on the road from Selçuk to Şirince? Sütini Cave (known as Panaya Galata) was used as a chapel from the 13th century.

Perhaps Chaim Potok in his semi-autobiographical novel *My Name is Asher Lev* comes close to describing the repressed creative self. Chaim Potok's artistic gift was intensified and developed by the pressure of conflict with his Jewish religious tradition. *The Brooklyn Crucifixion* testifies to this. Another instance of this kind of pressure on the creative self was the Russian poet, Irina Ratushinskaya. She was imprisoned, including some years in solitary confinement, for her poems which were perceived as being anti-Soviet. While in prison she continued to write poetry, writing on soap and then washing the verses away when she had memorised them. *Grey is the Colour of Hope* speaks of this experience. Irina was in England

² Professor Anton Bammer responsible for the archaeological projects around Ephesus. Cf. his paper: *Anatolia Antiqua XXI*. https://www.academia.edu/37787520/Bammer_Moens_Muss_mail_pdf?email_work_card=view-paper (accessed 13.03.2024)

for a few years after her release and spoke to us of a numinous presence at her shoulder while in captivity. Then, of course, there is St John of the Cross who began to write all his major poetic works when he was imprisoned in the monastery by his own monks. Their intense beauty and spiritual wisdom witness to the same creative process emerging in purity under pressure. But when the spiritual context is empathetic to artistic creative energy, the necessity to express and create is present with immense force.

Sometimes there are vivid images dwelling in the creative inner self which find their way into the work of their own volition and by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. It is even possible that the artists themselves may be unaware of their emergence in the work and someone else points it out. They can emerge with force after or during an intense period of suffering, possibly to express it, or in quest of its meaning. I am not suggesting that the creation of John's Gospel is too human, it is not. John was possessed by God as the prophets were, surrendered to the Divine will, and like the prophets the Word streamed through his consciousness. But there are also important differences from the prophetic ecstasy. Rather, I experience John as being serenely awake to the Divine Word, reflecting contemplatively on what seeks expression through his gifts. It seems to be an aspect of John's understanding of what it means to abide. In the years of reflection upon his time with the Incarnate Word, John had the Word of the Father abiding in him.³ The Person of Christ whom he knew intimately from experience, was infusing his insight into the mystery of the Incarnation and Passion. In *The Passion of the Word* I also referred to the important fact that John spent years after the Crucifixion caring for the Mother of God and therefore was able to distil, expand and refine his knowledge of Her Son in conversation with Her.

I believe these artistic processes were part of John's long life, with the Passion experience abiding in his consciousness. The same would be true of Christ's Mother, though her time after the Crucifixion was much shorter than John's. That introduces another aspect to this time on Patmos in the evolution of the Fourth Gospel and it is not mutually exclusive from what I have described above. Could it be that Divine Providence gave this period to John as a gift? It was a space apart from the pressures of Apostolic work. If there, John would have been engaged in repetitive manual labour in the quarry. In the monastic life the deliberate combination of manual labour with retreat enables the mind to be freed for contemplation, as John's would have been on Patmos. John has been associated with the monastic life for centuries as I discovered while visiting Meryem Ana Evi. Local people at Şirince, descended from the early Christians, named Meryemana 'The Monastery' as it was believed to be the first instance of Christian monasticism as lived by the Mother of Christ and John. John's time on Patmos was after the Falling Asleep of the Blessed Virgin, and on some levels perhaps John welcomed the solitary aspect of prison. Any monastic would understand that.

³Cf. The Gospel of John 5 for the discussion between Jesus and the Jews.

It might have served John as a form of monastic enclosure, and I write a little of that in this Introduction. In fact, a huge coenobium is thought to have arisen close to Meryem Ana Evi, numbering several hundred monks, and this witnesses to the tradition of Meryemana as ‘The



Monastery’. As I write I am still in conversation about this possibility with the archaeologists who are working in and around Ephesus after they had taken a break of two to three years. But local people believe that this was so, and archaeologists have not ruled it out. In addition, Sirince was known as ‘Forty Monasteries’⁴ and the local man in this photo referred to this ruin as “Manastir” as does the author in the footnote.⁵ Visionaries such as Anne Catherine Emmerich, and Rosalie Put who built on her visions, have referred to the ruins of a large monastery close to Meryem Ana Evi.

Fr Tarcy Matthias OFM Cap., at what are believed to be the ruins of the monastery near Sirince, with a local man who took him to this ruin. Photo: Margaret Looney.

⁴ <https://turkisharchaeonews.net/city/%C5%9Firince> Accessed 18/04/2024

⁵ ‘Sirince: Once Upon a Time Cirkince’ by Sukru Tul, published by Ege Yayinlari (31 Dec. 2008)