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## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE RESTLESS QUEST FOR THE BELOVED DISCIPLE

HAROLD W. ATTRIDGE

It is a pleasure to contribute this essay to honor François Bovon, who has contributed so much to illuminating the role of the apostolic figures in early Christian literature.

The Fourth Gospel's mysterious Beloved Disciple continues to fascinate. While some commentators are agnostic about his identity,<sup>1</sup> others continue to make new proposals. Among the many recent attempts to wrestle with his identity and function,<sup>2</sup> several merit special attention.

The basic data on the Beloved Disciple as well as the vast spectrum of speculation are ably summarized in recent studies by Allen Culpepper<sup>3</sup> and James Charlesworth.<sup>4</sup> The "one whom Jesus loved," appears explicitly four times: at the last supper (13:23-25), the crucifixion (19:26-27), the empty tomb (20:2-10), and at Jesus' final lakeside appearance in Galilee (21:7-20). Three other passages mention anonymous disciples, who are possibly the Beloved Disciple. The first chapter (1:35-42) reports the initial encounter of Jesus and two disciples of the Baptist, Andrew, and an anonymous companion. When Jesus, under arrest, goes to High Priest's house, Peter and an anonymous "other disciple" follow (18:15). The intriguing note that this anonymous figure was known to the High Priest (18:16) has generated hypotheses about the

<sup>1</sup> For three recent examples, see Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John* (SP 4; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1998), 6-9; R. Alan Culpepper, *The Gospel and Letters of John* (Interpreting Biblical Texts; Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 29-37; and D. Moody Smith, *John* (ANTC; Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 24-27.

<sup>2</sup> Among the more recent works in an ever expanding corpus, see Joachim Kügler, *Der Jünger, der Jesus liebte. Literarische, theologische und historische Untersuchungen zu einer Schlüsselgestalt johanneischer Theologie und Geschichte* (SBB 16; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1988); Kevin Quast, *Peter and the Beloved Disciple: Figures for a Community in Crisis* (JSNTSup 32; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989); Franz Neürnyck, "The Anonymous Disciple in John 1," *ETL* 66 (1990): 5-37, repr. in *Evangelica II 1982-91: Collected Essays* (BETL 99; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1991), 617-49; Eugen Biser, "Was ist mit diesem? Eine theologische Improvisation über das Thema des von Jesus geliebten Jüngers," in *Anfänge der Christologie: FS Ferdinand Hahn* (ed. Cilliers Breytenbach et al.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991), 323-26; Lutz Simon, *Petrus und der Lieblingsjünger im Johannesevangelium: Amt und Autorität* (EHS 23/498; Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, *John the Son of Zebedee: The Life of a Legend* (Studies on Personalities of the New Testament; Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994; repr., Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> James H. Charlesworth, *The Beloved Disciple: Whose Witness Validates the Gospel of John?* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1995).

Beloved Disciple's connections and social status.<sup>5</sup> Finally, the report that Jesus' pierced side poured forth blood and water is attributed to an eyewitness (19:35), whose "witness is true," as is that of the Beloved Disciple in 21:24. Such verbal similarity, coupled with the reported presence of the Disciple at the cross (19:26-27), suggests that here lies another reference to the mystery man.<sup>6</sup>

The final reference (John 21:24) makes the claim that this figure is "the one who wrote these things." Most scholars construe the verse to claim that the Beloved Disciple authored the text, or at least chapters 1-20.<sup>7</sup> Some, however, have argued that the passage merely claims that the Beloved Disciple is the authoritative witness who caused the work to be written,<sup>8</sup> or who perhaps wrote an early account of Jesus on which the final gospel was based.<sup>9</sup> This distinction between evangelist and his authoritative source has most frequently bolstered speculation about the role in the gospel's composition of the "Elder or Presbyter" John, mentioned by Papias.<sup>10</sup> The most recent defender, Martin Hengel, has argued that John the elder is the author, whom later tradition mistook for John the Son of Zebedee.<sup>11</sup>

In all his appearances, both actual and possible, the Beloved Disciple remains anonymous. Anonymity, apparently abhorrent to readers of the gospel, has bred constant speculation, in both traditional and modern scholarship. The main stream of Christian tradition since the second century identified the

<sup>5</sup> E.g., François-Marie Braun, *Jean le Théologien: Les grandes traditions d'Israël et l'accord des Écritures selon le quatrième Évangile* (EBib; Paris: Gabalda, 1964), 93.

<sup>6</sup> Not all agree. Some (J. Ramsey Michaels, "The Centurion's Confession and the Spear Thrust," *CBQ* 29 [1967]: 102-9; Hartwig Thyen, "Johannes und die Synoptiker," in Adelbert Denaux, ed., *John and the Synoptics* [BETL 101; Leuven: Peeters, 1992], 101-4) have argued that it is the soldier who pierced the side of Jesus in v. 34 who testified to what he saw. The demonstrative "that one" (ἐκεῖνος) of 19:35 would then refer to someone else, perhaps the Beloved Disciple, who transmitted the soldier's testimony. So Paul S. Minear, "Diversity and Unity: A Johannine Case-Study," in *Die Mitte des Neuen Testaments: FS E. Schweizer* (ed. Ulrich Luz and H. Weder; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983), 162-75. See also Maurits Sabbe, "The Johannine Account of the Death of Jesus and Its Synoptic Parallels (Jn 19,16b-42)," *ETL* 70 (1994): 49. One might also distinguish the one who saw (i.e., the Beloved Disciple) from "that one," who vouches for the truth of the Disciple's testimony, but understand this second figure as Jesus or the Spirit. So Howard M. Jackson, "Ancient Self-Referential Conventions and Their Implications for the Authorship and Integrity of the Gospel of John," *JTS* 50 (1999): 32, with other references.

<sup>7</sup> For a defense of the integrity of chapter 21 on this point, see Paul Minear, "The Original Functions of John 21," *JBL* 102 (1983): 85-98, and Jackson, "Self-Referential Conventions."

<sup>8</sup> Among many others, see C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (2d ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 115; Charlesworth, *Disciple*, 21-28.

<sup>9</sup> N. E. Johnson, "The Beloved Disciple and the Fourth Gospel," *CQR* 167 (1966): 28-91.

<sup>10</sup> Papias apud Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.4. See Charlesworth, *Disciple*, 215-17, citing as early proponents: F. Uechnitz, *Studien eines Laien über den Ursprung, die Beschaffenheit und Bedeutung des Evangeliums nach Johannes* (Gotha: Perthes, 1876), vi; and B. F. Streeter, *The Four Gospels: A Study of Origins* (London: Macmillan, 1924, 1851), 430-61.

<sup>11</sup> Martin Hengel, *The Johannine Question* (London: SCM Press, 1989). The German expands these lectures: *Die johanneische Frage: Ein Lösungsversuch mit einem Beitrag zur Apokalypse von Jörg Frey* (WUNT 67; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1993).

anonymous figure with John, the Son of Zebedee,<sup>12</sup> but some early church sources entertained other alternatives.<sup>13</sup> Although the identification still has defenders,<sup>14</sup> Johannine scholarship is littered with other possibilities: Lazarus, either as a Judaeon disciple,<sup>15</sup> or as a literary fiction based on Luke 16:19-31,<sup>16</sup> John Mark,<sup>17</sup> Matthias,<sup>18</sup> the rich young ruler,<sup>19</sup> Paul,<sup>20</sup> Apollon,<sup>21</sup> Judas Iscariot,<sup>22</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Charlesworth, *Disciple*, 394-99, usefully compiles patristic testimonies including: Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.22.5; 3.3.1; 3.3.4; Polycrates of Ephesus, apud Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.24.3-4; Origen, apud Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.25.9; Tertullian, *De praescrptione haereticorum* 22; Dionysius of Alexandria, apud Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 7.25.12.

<sup>13</sup> See Charlesworth, *Disciple*, 399-413.

<sup>14</sup> For a history of the position, see Culpepper, *John*, 73-76; Charlesworth, *Disciple*, 197-213. Indicative of a shift in sentiment are the changes of heart by Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (2 vols.; AB 29, 29a; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966-1970), 1.xcviii and c, revised in idem, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (Paramus, N.J.: Paulist/Newman, 1979), and Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John* (3 vols.; trans. Kevin Smyth; London: Burns & Oates; New York: Crossroad, 1968-82), 1.97-104, revised in 3.383-87, see also idem, "Der Jünger, den Jesus liebte," in *Evangelisch-katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament: Vorarbeiten* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1970), 97-117.

<sup>15</sup> First proposed, apparently independently, by J. Kreyenbühl, "Der Verfasser des Evangeliums," in idem, *Das Evangelium der Wahrheit: Neue Lösung der Johanneschen Frage* (Berlin: Schwetschke, 1900), 146-39. K. Kickendraht, "Ist Lazarus der Lieblingsjünger im vierten Evangelium?" *SThZ* 31 (1914): 49-54; and, in English, B. Grey Griffith, "The Disciple Whom Jesus Loved," *ExpTim* 32 (1920-21): 379-81. More recently: Vernard Eller, *The Beloved Disciple, His Name, His Story, His Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), esp. 53-73, and Mark W. G. Stibbe, *John as Storyteller: Narrative Criticism and the Fourth Gospel* (SNTSMS 73; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 154. See further Culpepper, *John*, 76-77, and Charlesworth, *Disciple*, 185-92, particularly thorough on early speculation.

<sup>16</sup> Hartwig Thyen, "Die Erzählung von den bethanischen Geschwistern (Joh 11,1-12,19) als 'Palimpsest' über synoptischen Texten," in *The Four Gospels: Festschrift Frans Neirynck* (ed. Frans Van Segbroeck et al.; BETL 100; Leuven: Peeters, 1992), 3.2021-50, esp. 2043.

<sup>17</sup> Culpepper, *John*, 77-79; Charlesworth, *Disciple*, 192-96. The suggestion appears first in D. Völter, *Die Offenbarung Johannes* (Strassburg: Heitz, 1904) and idem, *Mater Dolorosa und der Lieblingsjünger des Johannesaneweltium* (Strassburg: Heitz, 1907). Julius Wellhausen (*Das Evangelium Johannes* [Berlin: Reimer, 1908], 87-88) championed it. It is clear that John the Son of Zebedee and John Mark were confused. See J. Edgar Bruns, "John Mark: A Riddle within the Johannine Enigma," *Ser* 15 (1963): 91; idem, "The Confusion between John and John Mark in Antiquity," *Ser* 17 (1965): 23-26. Such confusion generated the further suggestion that John Mark wrote the Fourth Gospel and John of Galilee wrote Mark. See Pierson Parker, "John and John Mark," *JBL* 79 (1960): 97-110; idem, "John the Son of Zebedee and the Fourth Gospel," *JBL* 81 (1962): 35-43. An even less plausible option, that Lazarus was the Beloved Disciple, but that John Mark wrote the gospel, is suggested by J. N. Sanders, "St. John on Patmos," *NJS* 9 (1962): 75-85.

<sup>18</sup> See Eric L. Titus, "The Identity of the Beloved Disciple," *JBL* 69 (1950): 323-28, noted by both Culpepper, *John*, 79, and Charlesworth, *Disciple*, 154-56.

<sup>19</sup> Culpepper (*John*, 79-80) notes H. B. Swete, "The Disciple whom Jesus Loved," *JTS* 17 (1916): 371-74. Charlesworth (*Disciple*, 166-70) traces the suggestion to E. G. King, "The Disciple that Jesus Loved—A Suggestion," *The Interpreter* 5 (1909): 167-74.

<sup>20</sup> Culpepper, *John*, 80-81; Charlesworth, *Disciple*, 159-64. See Benjamin W. Bacon, "The Disciple Whom Jesus Loved and His Relation to the Author," *Expositor* 7, 4 (1907): 324-39, repr. in idem, *The Fourth Gospel in Research and Debate* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1910; New York: Moffat, Yard, 1918), 301-31.

Judas, the brother of Jesus,<sup>23</sup> Andrew,<sup>24</sup> Philip,<sup>25</sup> Nathanael,<sup>26</sup> or a character based on a figure from the Old Testament, such as Benjamin<sup>27</sup> or Joseph.<sup>28</sup> Some scholars, though hesitant to identify the Beloved Disciple, yet confidently affirm that, as author of the gospel, he was a Sadducee<sup>29</sup> or Essene.<sup>30</sup> Charlesworth, after his thorough review of scholarship, makes the novel suggestion that the Beloved Disciple was Thomas.<sup>31</sup>

Charlesworth's bold suggestion merits consideration. He has certainly done an enormous service in surveying so comprehensively the whole Johannine problem and in assembling relevant data on John and Thomas in early Christian sources. His argument that there may have been a positive appreciation of the Fourth Gospel among "Thomasine" Christians offers a healthy challenge to those who see tension between Johannine and partisans of Thomas.<sup>32</sup> Nonetheless,

<sup>21</sup> Charlesworth, *Disciple*, 157-59. For early speculation see J. T. Tobler, "Über den Ursprung des vierten Evangeliums," *ZWT* 3 (1860): 169-203; later, Simone Pétrement, "Apollos and the Fourth Gospel," in idem, *A Separate God: The Christian Origins of Gnosticism* (trans. Carol Harrison; San Francisco: Harper, 1990), ET of *Le Dieu Séparé* [1984], 276-97.

<sup>22</sup> Charlesworth, *Disciple*, 170-79. Implausibly suggested by L. Noack, *Die Geschichte Jesu auf Grund freier geschichtlicher Untersuchungen über das Evangelium und die Evangelien* (4 vols.; Mannheim: Schneider, 1876), but defended as a literary possibility by Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 92.

<sup>23</sup> Charlesworth, *Disciple*, 196-97, citing J. J. Gunther, "The Relation of the Beloved Disciple to the Twelve," *TZ* 37 (1981): 129-48.

<sup>24</sup> Charlesworth, *Disciple*, 179-80, noting E. C. J. Lützelberger, *Die kirchliche Tradition über den Apostel Johannes und seine Schriften in ihrer Grundlosigkeit* (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1840).

<sup>25</sup> Charlesworth, *Disciple*, 180-81, noting M. É. Boismard, *Die Bapême à Cana (Jean 1.19-2.11)* (Paris: Cerf, 1956), 72-73.

<sup>26</sup> Charlesworth's quest (*Disciple*, 181-85) for the author of this suggestion uncovered H. Spaeth, "Nathanael: Ein Beitrag zum Verständnis der Composition der Logos-Evangeliums," *ZWT* 11 (1868): 309-43, M. A. N. Rovers, *Nieuw-testamentische Letterkunde* (Hertogenbosch: Muller, 1888), 172, and F. S. Gutzjahr, *Der Glaubwürdigkeit des Irinischen Zeugnisses über die Abfassung des Vierten Kanonischen Evangeliums* (Graz: Leuschner & Lubensky, 1904), 184.

<sup>27</sup> Culpepper, *John*, 81-82, citing Paul S. Minear, "The Beloved Disciple in the Gospel of John: Some Clues and Conjectures," *NovT* 19 (1977): 105-23. See also Charlesworth, *Disciple*, 164-66.

<sup>28</sup> Joseph Grassi, *The Secret Identity of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist, 1992), 47-55.

<sup>29</sup> D. E. H. Whiteley, "Was John Written by a Sadducee?" *ANRW* 2.25.3 (1985): 2481-2505.

<sup>30</sup> Eugen Ruckstuhl, "Der Jünger, den Jesus liebte," *SMTSU* 11 (1986): 131-67, reprinted in idem, *Jesus im Horizont der Evangelien* (SBAB; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1988), 355-95.

<sup>31</sup> Charlesworth, *Disciple*, 225-87, 415-21, followed Philippe de Suarez, *L'Évangile selon Thomas* (Marsanne: Metaoia, 1975), 260, and Hans-Martin Schenke, "The Function and Background of the Beloved Disciple in the Gospel of John," in *Mag Hammadi, Gnosticism, and Early Christianity* (ed. Charles W. Hedrick and Robert Hodgson, Jr.; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1986), 111-25.

<sup>32</sup> Gregory J. Riley, *Resurrection Reconsidered* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); April DeConick, *Seek to See Him: Ascend and Vision Mysticism in the Gospel of Thomas* (VCSup 33; Leiden: Brill, 1996) and idem, *Voices of the Mystics: Early Christian Discourse in the Gospels of John and Thomas and Other Ancient Christian Literature* (JSNTSup 157; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).

his case has one fatal flaw, John 20:8, the report that the Beloved Disciple entered the tomb after Peter, saw the folded burial cloths and believed (εἶδεν καὶ ἐπίστευεν). If the Beloved Disciple is Thomas, his belief is hard to reconcile with the skepticism that is quieted only when confronted with the evidence of Jesus' resurrected body (20:24-29).

Charlesworth confronts the problem squarely. He first reviews the extensive literature on 20:8, and illustrates a diversity of exegetical opinion about the Beloved Disciple's faith.<sup>33</sup> Yet he relies most heavily on the verse that follows the report of the Beloved Disciple's belief. John 20:9 reports "For they did not yet know the scripture that it was necessary for him to rise from the dead" (οὐδὲν γὰρ ᾔδεισαν τὴν γραφήν ὅτι δεῖ αὐτὸν ἐκ νεκρῶν ἀναστῆναι). Charlesworth takes the verse to be a decisive qualification of the "belief" attributed to the Beloved Disciple in the previous verse. Without knowledge of the scriptures, the Disciple could not have had the full resurrection faith. Charlesworth then follows those interpreters who take ἐπίστευεν as inceptive: "he began to believe."

*Faith:* Charlesworth, John 20:9 does not deny the simple meaning of the preceding verse. It does not, that is, suggest that the Beloved Disciple could not have come to belief. Instead of saying something about the non-belief of the Beloved Disciple, the verse explains why Peter, so widely hailed as the first to come to resurrection faith, did not do so when confronted with the witness of the empty tomb. The narrator's comment, that is, makes sense of a differentiated reaction, with the Beloved Disciple coming to belief and Peter remaining confused. The latter could not yet have belief because he did not have the crutch of scriptural testimony. The Beloved Disciple saw for himself, understood, and needed nothing further. Perhaps his vision was aided by what he saw at the crucifixion (19:26-27, 35), a sight that the Gospel had long since promised would be salvific (3:14-15). Despite Charlesworth's ingenuity, the report of the Beloved Disciple's reaction to the empty tomb precludes his identification with Thomas.

Another analysis introduces new data to the quest. Howard M. Jackson brings to bear conventions of documentary papyri to analyze the crucial final reference to the Beloved Disciple and lay the groundwork for a renewed defense of the traditional identification of the figure with the Son of Zebedee.<sup>34</sup> Like Charlesworth's suggestion, Jackson's merits serious consideration, primarily because of the interesting use of non-literary texts as a point of comparison with the Fourth Gospel. Jackson argues that the convention of attesting the identity of the author of a document through a validating clause expressed in the third person is the closest parallel to the conclusion of chapter 21. The intriguing parallels undercut the widespread hypothesis that chapter 21 is an appendix to the gospel, written after the death of the Beloved Disciple. On that more generally accepted reading, the pericope would be taking pains to

<sup>33</sup> Charlesworth, *Disciple*, 68-118.

<sup>34</sup> Jackson, "Self-Referential Conventions," 1-34.

explain away a saying of Jesus, such as Mark 9:1, which had been applied to the Beloved Disciple. No, argues Jackson, the codicil is the Beloved Disciple's own authorial attempt to undercut the application of such a saying to him.

Although Jackson's analysis is intriguing, like Charlesworth's, it remains unconvincing. Its major problem lies precisely at the point of its originality, in the assumption that a non-literary form will have the same function when transferred to a literary environment. Jackson may well be correct that the Fourth Gospel has appropriated the kind of documentary device to which he points, but interpreters should be cautious when they find such generic parallels. Partial instantiations of various literary forms appear throughout the gospel, from miracle stories to passion narratives, from revealer dialogues to parables, yet the gospel's literary strategy constantly transforms those genres, sometimes by internal manipulation, sometimes by juxtaposition with other forms.<sup>35</sup> The gospel that so delights in irony<sup>36</sup> delights also in counter-conventional uses of traditional literary vessels, in its attempt to ponder how words are altered when the Word itself takes on flesh.

If a documentary device for authorial self-attestation concludes John 21, it remains problematic because the self-identity of the author is not, in fact, revealed. The authentication of an anonymous witness is systematically disappointing and constitutes an ironic, almost parodic use of a convention for self-authentication.

Irony may simply conceal the aim of making a pseudepigraphic claim to authorship, as Martin Rese suggests in his analysis of the Beloved Disciple passages generally.<sup>37</sup> Yet the conclusion that the mysterious disciple is to be identified with John the Son of Zebedee is hardly ineluctable. It requires the reader to know the Synoptics and make an elaborate series of inferences, that, for instance, the unnamed disciple of John 1:35-42 is the Beloved Disciple and is the son of Zebedee mentioned in Mark 1:19. This is a slender reed indeed on which to hang a pseudepigraphic claim. The Sons of Zebedee do,

<sup>35</sup> I have explored this feature of Johannine technique in "Genre Bending in the Fourth Gospel" *JBL* 121 (2002): 3-21.

<sup>36</sup> Johannine irony has been much discussed of late. See, e.g., George W. MacRae, "Theology and Irony in the Fourth Gospel," in *The Word in the World: Essays in Honor of F. L. Morarty* (ed. Richard J. Clifford and George W. MacRae; Cambridge, Mass.: Weston College, 1973), 83-96, repr. in Mark W. G. Stibbe, *The Gospel of John as Literature: An Anthology of Twentieth-Century Perspectives* (NITS 17; Leiden: Brill, 1993), 103-13; Paul D. Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985); Gail O'Day, *Revelation in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Mode and Theological Claim* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986); Eugene Botha, "The Case of Johannine Irony Reopened I: The Problematic Current Situation," *Neot* 25.2 (1991): 209-20; idem, "The Case of Johannine Irony Reopened II: Suggestions, Alternative Approaches," *Neot* 25.2 (1991): 221-32; R. Alan Culpepper, "Reading Johannine Irony," *Exploring the Gospel of John: In Honor of D. Moody Smith* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1996), 193-207.

<sup>37</sup> Martin Rese, "Das Selbstzeugnis des Johannesevangeliums über seinen Verfasser," *ETL* 72 (1996): 75-111.

of course, appear in John 21:2, but alongside two other unnamed disciples. The text may invite the reader to find the identity of the man of mystery in one of the named Galilean fisherman, but it immediately sows the seeds of doubt by placing two other anonymous disciples on the shore. Rather than deftly revealing its alleged author, the text solicits an identification, but works overtime to keep the reader doubtful of the reliability of that identification.

While scholars such as Charlesworth and Jackson continue the quest for the identity of the Beloved Disciple, others seek to explore his function. Complicating this analysis is the possibility that redactional activity may have changed the function of the figure.<sup>38</sup>

Some interpreters find that the Beloved Disciple works symbolically. He may be a paradigm of faithful discipleship, intimate with Jesus, faithful to him even in death, quick to believe, and eager to be an active disciple.<sup>39</sup> The figure may serve an ecclesiological purpose. As hero of the Johannine Christians, his virtues contrast with the obtuseness of Peter and thereby exalt the community of the Beloved Disciple over other communities of Christians, some of whom might revere other "anonymous heroes":<sup>40</sup> Peter, the first witness of the resurrection,<sup>41</sup> or James, the brother of the Lord.<sup>42</sup> The strikingly repeated contrast with Peter has been variously interpreted, as a correction or rebuke to Petrine Christians,<sup>43</sup> or, more positively, at least in chapter 21,<sup>44</sup> as Peter's rehabilitation, recommending him and his followers to Johannine Christians.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>38</sup> For claims that redaction, particularly the added chapter 21, altered the function of the Beloved Disciple, see Schenke, "The Function and Background," 124-25, and Charlesworth, *Disciple*, 420, who attributes the references in chapters 13, 19 and 20 to the Evangelist, but chapter 21 to a redactor, whose work obscures the Disciple's identity.

<sup>39</sup> See Grassi, *Secret Identity*, 115-18 for a brief catalogue of the values frequently associated with the Beloved Disciple.

<sup>40</sup> Cf., perhaps, the situation that Paul ridicules in 1 Cor 1:12-13.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. 1 Cor 15:5.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Gal 1:19; 2:12; cf. Acts 15:13. For the suggestion that the Fourth Gospel criticizes the kind of Jewish Christianity epitomized by James, see Christian Dietzfelbinger, "Der ungehebräer Bruder: Der Herrenbruder Jakobus im Johannesevangelium," *ZTK* 89 (1992): 377-403.

<sup>43</sup> B. W. Bacon, *The Fourth Gospel in Research and Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1918), 303-4; Graydon F. Snyder, "John 13.16 and the Anti-Petrinism of the Johannine Tradition," *BR* 16 (1971): 5-15; W. W. Watty, "The Significance of Anonymity in the Fourth Gospel," *ExpTim* 90 (1979): 209-12; J. J. Gunther, "The Relation of the Beloved Disciple to the Twelve," *TZ* 38 (1981): 129-48; Michael Theobald, "Der Jünger, den Jesus liebte: Beobachtungen zum narrativen Konzept der Johannesevangelium," in *Geschichte-Tradition-Reflexion: Festschrift für Martin Hengel zum 70. Geburtstag* (ed. Hubert Cancik, Hermann Lichtenberger, and Peter Schäfer; 3 vols.; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), 3:219-55.

<sup>44</sup> Raymond F. Collins, "Representative Figures of the Fourth Gospel-II," *DRW* 94 (1976): 118-32; A. H. Maynard, "The Role of Peter in the Fourth Gospel," *NTS* 30 (1984): 531-48. Such readings follow the common assumption that chapter 21 is an appendix.

<sup>45</sup> Quast, *Peter*, offers a fine overview.

Other symbolic readings of the Beloved Disciple take him to represent Gentle Christianity<sup>46</sup> or as an embodiment of a principle such as spiritual versus hierarchical authority.<sup>47</sup>

Such readings of the figure, particularly as he appears in tandem with Peter, have a certain plausibility. The gospel is indeed concerned with ecclesial realities and pointedly builds into its narrative about Jesus certain elements of the experience of his followers.<sup>48</sup> The Beloved Disciple, like so many other elements of the Fourth Gospel, no doubt performs more than one duty in the text. Yet the ecclesiastical-political reading of the function of the Beloved Disciple does not do justice to all features of the Beloved Disciple's portrait, particularly the studied anonymity.<sup>49</sup>

The plethora of suggestions about the identity and function of the Beloved Disciple should itself give us pause. Is their number a function of modern curiosity, of now quaint historical-critical exegesis gone awry? Or is their existence a testimony to an effective literary strategy? One might take the collection of solutions to the "problem" of the Beloved Disciple as evidence that the Fourth Evangelist, or at least that hand responsible for the Beloved Disciple passages, was a tease. The text elicits expectations of a reliable witness, especially in 19:35 and 21:24, but systematically defeats any attempt to identify who that witness was. What might be the function of such a game?

Crucial to unraveling the mystery is to recognize the *anonymity* of the Beloved Disciple. There is simply no sure identification of the figure, neither with the Son of Zebedee, nor with Thomas, nor with any of the other figures that have been proposed.<sup>50</sup> Whatever functions the figure exercises as model or polemical cipher, he does so anonymously.

Yet it is equally important to note that, in its final form, the text asserts that the anonymous disciple is a witness to the life and death of Jesus and to the truth being proclaimed throughout the gospel. These affirmations, which seem to be designed to assure, continue only to disturb. In order for the witness's testimony to be fully effective, the reader/hearer desperately wants to know

<sup>46</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John* (Philadelphia: Westminster, Oxford: Blackwell, 1971), 530; Margaret Pamment, "The Fourth Gospel's Beloved Disciple," *ExpTim* 94 (1983): 363-67.

<sup>47</sup> Alv Kragerud, *Der Lieblingjünger im Johannesevangelium: Ein exegetischer Versuch* (Hamburg: Wegner, 1959); Raymond Brown, *Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist, 1979).

<sup>48</sup> This dimension of the Gospel has been noted since J. Louis Martyn, *The Gospel of John in Christian History: Essays for Interpreters* (New York: Paulist, 1978), and *idem*, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (rev. ed.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1979).

<sup>49</sup> Whatever they make of the Disciple's function, many contemporaries recognize his unavoidable anonymity. So, e.g., Quast, *Peter*, 12; Franz Neiryack, "John 21," *MJS* 36 (1990): 321-36, esp. 335 (= *idem*, *Evangelica II 1982-91: Collected Essays* [BEITL 99; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1991], 601-16); Patrick Chatellon Counet, *John, A Postmodern Gospel: Introduction to Deconstructive Exegesis Applied to the Fourth Gospel* (Biblical Interpretation Series 44; Leiden: Brill, 2000).

<sup>50</sup> Chartesworth's review offers apt criticism of alternative possibilities.

who this witness is. This is not an *a priori* judgment about implied readers. The lengthy history of intense speculation on the figure offers empirical evidence that the text has worked in this way. Jackson's form-critical observations here potentially illuminate this effect. If Jackson is correct that the style of the concluding remarks mimics the authenticating codicils of documentary papyri, they reinforce the expectation that the identity of the witness will be clear. But if there is anything that the history of investigation of the Johannine problem also shows, it is that such expectations are doomed to disappointment.

In the tension generated by the evanescent witness lies an answer to the problem of the Beloved Disciple. As the brief review of scholarship indicates, the mystery of this character's identity has constantly enticed readers back into the text that they have finished reading.<sup>51</sup> The Disciple stands as a witness, who "writes" much, but immediately fades into the background. Who is it, the reader asks, who bears such testimony? The only way to answer that question is to return to the text, to engage in a quest for the Disciple's identity. Every attempt to pursue that quest runs into a dead end. Such dead ends have not discouraged the pursuit but only whetted appetites for another try.

With every plunge back into the sea of the gospel, the quester finds a new bit of evidence, a new hint about the source of the quest, but if she is attentive to the process of re-engaging the text, she will notice another feature of the work. The search for a witness, a sure foundation for belief in the incarnate Word, keeps pointing beyond that witness to the One Witness whose testimony is compelling, the Word incarnate.

The motif of testimony runs through the Gospel,<sup>52</sup> although it is particularly prominent in certain key episodes, such as John 5. Jesus' lengthy discourse, which responds to charges stemming from his healing of the paralytic, finally poses a challenge that dominates the gospel as a whole. Other witnesses, John the Baptist, the scriptures, the Father,<sup>53</sup> may be brought to bear to support claims about Jesus. Nonetheless, in order to hear and accept those witnesses, the hearer/reader must accept the testimony of Jesus himself that the scriptures speak of him and that the Father testifies to him. The theme of witness in the Gospel is a vortex that draws its audience into a process that strips away ordinary presuppositions about intellectual warrants, and offers a confrontation with the stark challenge of the Word enfleshed, nailed to a cross. If one can see and understand that witness, then everything else will make sense. No other witness will count for ought.

<sup>51</sup> Or, as my colleague Allen Hilton suggests, "hearing," if their primary mode of encounter with the text was oral.

<sup>52</sup> As noted decades ago by Johannes Beutler, *Marynia: Traditionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zum Zeugnisthema bei Johannes* (Frankfurter theologische Studien 10; Frankfurt-am-Main: Joseph Knecht, 1972).

<sup>53</sup> John 5:36-39.

The Beloved Disciple's anonymity, *qua* witness, *qua* author of this story, performs primarily a *literary* role, re-engaging the reader, drawing her back time and again to a potential encounter with the one Witness sent by the Father.

*Conclusion: Techniques of Reader-Engagement*

The Fourth Gospel concludes with a tantalizing but ultimately self-defeating identification of its author. This conclusion parallels, in a curious way, the famously ambiguous ending of Mark 16:8. The stunned silence of the women at the tomb invites the reader to wonder how news of the resurrection spread. He is also invited to make a decision, to go with those women into fear-filled quiet, or to go forth and proclaim the news of the resurrection.

The ending of the Fourth Gospel engages the reader differently. It does not implicitly urge the reader to hopeful proclamation. Instead, it draws the reader back into the world of the story in a quest for evidentiary confirmation and certitude. The quest is doomed to failure if it is pursued on its own terms. Only if the quester learns to see beyond the presuppositions of the investigation to abandon external witnesses, and to confront directly the witness of the Word, the witness that speaks most forcefully from the Cross, will the quest have any hope of success. If the reader encounters and hears that Witness, then the identity of the Beloved Disciple will not matter.

That the figure of the Beloved Disciple works in such a fashion is not surprising, given other examples of Johannine characterization. Like Nicodemus or the Samaritan Woman, the Beloved Disciple has a first-order function to display some aspects of what it is to encounter Jesus. The Disciple models intimacy and fidelity, by displaying a faith that eschews empirical verification and by remaining faithful to Jesus through and beyond death. Yet, like Nicodemus and all the women who encounter Jesus, he fades into the background, disappearing behind the whispered claim that he is a witness. As each of the other witnesses made way for Jesus, so too does the Beloved Disciple, in his invitation to pursue the only One whose testimony is Truth.