

JOHN AND THE BOOK OF SIGNS (12) THE BELOVED DISCIPLE

John 21:20-25

Jeffrey S. Carlson

April 15, 2018

SCRIPTURE

²⁰Peter turned around and saw behind them the disciple Jesus loved—the one who had leaned over to Jesus during supper and asked, “Lord, who will betray you?”

²¹Peter asked Jesus, “What about him, Lord?” ²²Jesus replied, “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? As for you, follow me.” ²³So the rumor spread among the community of believers that this disciple wouldn’t die. But that isn’t what Jesus said at all. He only said, “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?”

²⁴This disciple is the one who testifies to these events and has recorded them here. And we know that his account of these things is accurate. ²⁵Jesus also did many other things. If they were all written down, I suppose the whole world could not contain the books that would be written (John 21:20-25 NLT).

INTRODUCTION

The final scene in John takes place on a beach with the resurrected Jesus. An unnamed disciple is described as “the disciple Jesus loved.” Some translations say, “the disciple beloved of Jesus” and so the shorthand, “Beloved Disciple,” is often used. The reference to the Beloved Disciple in this final chapter not only raises questions about how and why this gospel was published, but it also triggers three different concerns that have an impact on how we view our calling, how we view community, and how we view Christ.

1. HOW WE VIEW OUR CALLING

Peter turned around and saw behind them the disciple Jesus loved—the one who had leaned over to Jesus during supper and asked, “Lord, who will betray you?” Peter asked Jesus, “What about him, Lord?” (20,21).

Sibling rivalry has existed for as long as there have been siblings. Think back to Biblical times with Cain and Abel or Joseph and his jealous brothers. Or think of fairy tales like the story of Cinderella and the dreadful time she had with her stepsisters! During the 1960s there was a comedy show called, The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour, starring Tommy Smothers and Dick Smothers—playing themselves. Their “rivalry” produced the classic line, “Mom always liked you best.”

Did sibling rivalry, or something close to it, exist among Christ’s apostles? One of them was actually referred to as “the disciple Jesus loved.” Do you think this fostered any

resentment among the other disciples? How did he get to be called “the disciple Jesus loved?” Didn’t Jesus love the other disciples, too?

Peter looks back and sees the Beloved Disciple and asks, “What about that guy?” What we don’t know is *how* Peter asks the question. Was it out of concern for a fellow Christ-follower? Perhaps. But most believe that Peter inquires out of envy and even some irritation.

After all, the Beloved Disciple had been “one up” on Peter at least five different times in recent days. He was closer to Jesus at the Last Supper. He got a better view of the trial. He outran Peter to the tomb. He was quicker to catch on to the fact that the stranger on shore was Jesus. And now, apparently, he gets to have a non-stop beach party while Peter has to go off and suffer some horrible martyrdom. It’s not fair! One can almost imagine that at some point Peter would put on his best Tommy Smothers impersonation and shout, “Jesus always liked you best!”

But whatever Peter had in mind, Jesus makes it clear that Peter is not to be concerned about the Beloved Disciple’s calling. Instead, he is to focus on his own calling – Peter’s own calling to follow Jesus. More to the point, he is not to compare himself to the Beloved Disciple or anyone else for that matter. It is a crippling temptation to compare ourselves with other Christians and thereby fill ourselves with envy and resentment. We each have different gifts and different ways of serving. One is not better than the other.

Charles Spurgeon is widely regarded as the greatest preacher of the 19th century, and one of the greatest of all time. I knew a young pastor whose fervent prayer was to become the next Charles Spurgeon. But one day he felt like God was interrupting the prayer with a different name. John. John Spurgeon. Who was John Spurgeon? John was the loving and godly father of Charles Spurgeon. If John Spurgeon had not had a famous son, he would have gone to his grave and no one would even recognize his name. Who’d want to be like John Spurgeon?

Now it can be exciting to have a “Charles Spurgeon” in our midst. But what the world needs is more John Spurgeons. Steven J. Cole sums it up well:

The Lord never says, “Well done, good and famous servant,” but He does say, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” My job is to be as faithful as John Spurgeon and to let God take care of the rest.

There was a rumor that Jesus had said that the Beloved Disciple would not die before Jesus returned in glory. Well, he did die and that was problematic for many Christians at

the time. The end of chapter 21 indicates that this was based on a misunderstanding. The point is that no one knows and no one is supposed to know (including conspiracy theorist David Meade who claims the end is coming April 23, 2018) when Christ will return. Jesus says:

“No one knows the day or hour when these things will happen, not even the angels in heaven or the Son himself. Only the Father knows (Matt 24:36 NLT).

Our job is to remain faithful here and now. That is our calling.

2. HOW WE VIEW THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

This disciple is the one who testifies to these events and has recorded them here. And we know that his account of these things is accurate (24).

The origin of the book we call, “The Gospel According to John,” is connected in some way with the Beloved Disciple. Bear in mind that this gospel was first distributed without a title and without a listed author. We now call it the Gospel of John. But are we correct in doing so? Who wrote this gospel? Was it John? Or the Beloved Disciple? Someone else? And who was the Beloved Disciple, anyway?

There have been many intriguing theories about the Beloved Disciple. Some say it was Lazarus because this gospel says that Jesus loved Lazarus (11:3,36). But if he was the Beloved Disciple then why is he only named in chapters 11 and 12 and not elsewhere. More damaging is the fact that Lazarus was not at the Last Supper but the Beloved Disciple was.

Some say it was James the Lord’s brother. This would make the scene at the cross quite literal:

When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, “Woman, here is your son” (19:26).

James was literally Mary’s son. So that part fits. However, we know from other sources that this James (a very common name) did not believe in Jesus until after the resurrection.

There have been some recent suggestions that point to Thomas as the Beloved Disciple. He was the one who requested to see the wound in Jesus’s side – something the Beloved Disciple would have known about. But he is specifically named in our final scene and his nickname is revealed as the “Twin.” Whose twin he was is unknown.

The strongest and nearly unanimous interpretation throughout church history is that the Beloved Disciple was John, son of Zebedee. The internal evidence points to this. John is mentioned many times in Matthew, Mark, and Luke but never once in the Gospel of John. However, the

Beloved Disciple is mentioned five different times (13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7, 20) in addition to being associated with the writing of this gospel (21:24). The writer had to have been one of the Twelve and part of the inner circle together with Peter and James. In Acts John and Peter are frequent companions. The internal evidence points to John being the Beloved Disciple.

The external evidence is also quite strong. Irenaeus, writing at about A.D. 200, says that the Beloved Disciple was John, the disciple of Jesus, and that John originated the Gospel at Ephesus. Irenaeus says that when he was younger, he was the student of Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna (c. A.D. 69 – 155), who claimed to have been tutored by John himself. The church historian Eusebius (c. A.D. 300) also confirms this connection.

John was the Beloved Disciple and the Beloved Disciple is associated with the origin of the Fourth Gospel. But there may be more to the story. Look again at verse 24:

This disciple is the one who testifies to these events and has recorded them here.
And we know that his account of these things is accurate (24).

This verse is one sentence in Greek with three clauses. The first clause refers to someone responsible for the content of the book. The second clause refers to someone responsible for the mechanics of writing the book. The third clause refers to a group of people (notice the shift to first person plural – “we”), a group of people responsible for the trustworthiness of the book.

The person responsible for the content of this gospel is clearly John, the Beloved Disciple who gives us the account of an eyewitness coupled with the benefit of many years of penetrating reflection. He may also have written the gospel but that could have been done by an amanuensis.

An amanuensis was like a combined secretary and copy editor. We know Paul and Peter used them (see 1 Pet 5:12; Gal 6:11) so it entirely possible so did John. This would also solve a mystery. Why would John refer to himself as the “Disciple Jesus loved.” This would come across as incredible self-conceit. It would be like someone today saying, “Mom liked me best.”

But if most of the actual writing was done by someone else, then the mystery is solved. John may not have referred to himself as the Beloved Disciple but his friends did.

But who are the “we” in verse 24? Irenaeus may hold the answer:

John, the disciple of the Lord, who also leant upon his breast, himself also published the gospel in Ephesus.”

Irenaeus tells us the John did not merely write this gospel but that he published it. This implies something more than a personal memoir. This was meant to be a public document. Clement of

Alexandria (c A.D. 230 writes:

Last of all, John perceiving that the bodily facts had been made plain in the gospel, being urged by his friends, composed a spiritual gospel.

Then in the Codex Toletanus (10th century) we find:

The Apostle John whom the Lord loved most, last of all wrote this gospel, at the request of the bishops of Asia.

Asia refers to the Roman province of Asia which today is Turkey. Ephesus was on the SW coast. The word “bishop” in the first century was synonymous with “elder” rather than a reference to an official who supervised multiple congregations. These elders wanted John to put down his thoughts and memories before it was too late.

The Fourth Gospel contains the mind and heart of John. Behind John was the support of a particular Christian community. Behind that community was the influence of the Holy Spirit who supervised everything John and his “we” community preserved, interpreted and wrote down.

This underscores the importance of community when we seek to understand and apply the teachings of the Bible today. Personal study is fine but there are benefits we cannot gain and applications we cannot make without the help of the Christian community. Paul stresses this when he instructs Timothy:

Focus on reading the Scriptures to the church, encouraging the believers, and teaching them (1 Tim 4:13 NLT).

When we speak of the Holy Spirit we are speaking of God. It is God the Holy Spirit who regenerates us, that is, makes us alive to Christ. It is the same Holy Spirit who incorporates us, that is, joins us to the body of Christ which is the church.

The word “incorporate” means to be united into a body. It is taken from the Latin word *corpus* which means “body.” Incorporation is the technical term for the Holy Spirit uniting believers to the universal body of Christ which is the church. This is not the same as being put on the membership roll of a particular congregation although we would hope that the latter represents the former.

The Holy Spirit works through individuals and especially a community of believers. The Holy Spirit helps us to understand Scripture. Jesus said:

When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth (John 16:13 NRSV).

If you want to understand a book the best person to consult is the author. If you want to understand Scripture, ask for the help of the Holy Spirit. The greatest help comes when we recognize that the Holy Spirit works through our brothers and sisters in Christ so that together we can discern the will of God. Participation in the Christian community is essential.

3. HOW WE VIEW CHRIST

Jesus also did many other things. If they were all written down, I suppose the whole world could not contain the books that would be written (25).

The last verse in the Gospel of John looks like it doesn't belong there. It's almost a childish boast. And it's not all that unique. Greek, Jewish and Samaritan writers included statements like this one as well, sometimes speaking of how the world could not contain the knowledge that a particular teacher or philosopher possessed.

But it's the humanness of this awkward postscript that may be its most endearing quality. The Word became flesh – that's how we started, remember – the Word became flesh (1:14). Our Lord did not disdain becoming a human being. Nor did he disdain calling and using very earthly disciples like John.

John in his youth had great anger. Jesus called him and his brother the “sons of thunder” (Mk 3:17). He wanted Jesus to destroy a Samaritan village with fire and brimstone because they (Lk 9:49) were less than hospitable. John was also quite ambitious. He convinced his mother to request of Jesus that John and his brother be the principle magistrates when Jesus came into his kingdom (Mk 10:35).

After the resurrection he became quite bold. He did not shirk from helping people experience the redemptive and healing power of God (Acts 3:1ff). He stood up to the Sanhedrin after he and Peter were arrested (Acts 4:1-13).

When John was quite old he had trouble walking and had to be carried from place to place. Near the end he was asked to give a final message. He said, “Little children, love one another.” They requested more and he said, “Little children, love one another.” They asked, “Is that all?” He replied, “It is enough.”

So this was John, the Beloved Disciple. He taught us to trust the calling of God, cherish the community of faith and lay hold of the claims of Christ.

He was a man of fiery temper and naked ambition. A man of boldness and courage. A man of great insight and gentle love. A man who unintentionally became the final sign in his Book of Signs – Pointing us to who Jesus really is, the kind of life Jesus offers us, and the gracious invitation extended to flawed and frail human beings to follow him all of our days.