

JESUS, King of Israel

*Toward a Final Quest
for the Historical Jesus*

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Chapter Five

John, the Beloved Disciple

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John, the Beloved Disciple

The identity of the Beloved Disciple (BD) in the *Gospel of John* has been the subject of endless debate. Despite centuries of speculation, there is today no academic consensus on who this enigmatic character might have been. Patristic tradition maintains overwhelmingly that the apostle John was the author of the gospel and the Beloved Disciple. Those recognizing him as such include Irenaeus, Polycrates, Tertullian, Hippolytus, Dionysus of Alexandria, and Origen.¹ Despite this overwhelming second century consensus, modern scholarship routinely dismisses the possibility that the apostle John could have written the gospel (and thus, that he could have been the BD/author per the attribution in 21.24), in part on the grounds that a gospel composed at the end of the first century is not likely to have been written by a contemporary of Jesus. Many are also skeptical that a disciple of Jesus would have had the literary skills to produce such a document—since the Synoptic gospels portray the disciples as fishermen by trade, they are commonly presumed to have been illiterate. Acts 4.13 suggests that Peter and John were “unschooled.” Accordingly, the academy’s conclusion that the apostle John could not possibly have been the author of the gospel is a matter of settled scholarship, as James Charlesworth declares:

After more than one hundred years of research, scholars concur that the Gospel of John was not composed by the apostle John, as so many of the early scholars of the church had contended.²

Nevertheless, once one considers the possibility that a primitive edition of John appeared prior to the death of Peter such that the question of authorship pertains just to this early text, the temporal objection is eliminated; a disciple could indeed have written or overseen the writing of such a primitive piece. And a prominent disciple in a position of authority, if indeed he was illiterate, would likely have been able to engage the services of a literate associate or slave and produced the gospel with reliance on such assistance.

¹ Charlesworth, *The Beloved Disciple*, pp.394-398

² Charlesworth, p.14

It is also conceivable that the leading disciples were more educated than we typically imagine. There is a reference in Mark 1.20 that the Zebedee family had hired servants, suggesting they may have been more well off than typical peasant class fishermen. If so, it is not inconceivable that John may not have been as illiterate as we typically assume.

We might also note that there is no indication in Ur-John that any of the disciples were fishermen. We know nothing of their backgrounds or educational levels from this text. Since there is a significant degree of fabrication in the *Gospel of Mark*, we should not preclude the possibility that the “disciples as fishermen” motif could have been a literary device created by the author of Mark to appeal to an uneducated peasant audience, and to support the “fishers of men” metaphor. Acts 4.13 indicates that Peter and John were perceived as uneducated and unskilled, but this interpretation may be informed by the Markan tradition that they were fishermen by trade.

There is therefore no reason to preclude the possibility of authorship or supervision of a primitive Ur-John by a contemporary disciple of Jesus. Since the narrative elements in John 1–20 that pertain to Peter reflect authorship by someone who nursed an abiding animosity toward Peter, one may reasonably infer authorship by a rival of Peter. Furthermore, this rival of Peter must have garnered significant support for his challenge to Peter’s authority in order for an unsavory conflict of this nature to have been retained as a formative influence in the surviving gospel traditions. Thus, the BD was an influential character of no limited standing, and a rival apostle would make coherent sense. To this extent, patristic memories that the *Gospel of John* was written by the apostle John could well be accurate, insofar as the tradition may relate to authorship of the *primitive edition of the gospel* and not the final canonical text. The latent hostility between the BD/ author and Peter, as well as the BD/author’s aggressive attempt to promote himself over Peter as the rightful heir to leadership, tilts the needle toward the apostle John as the BD. For this competitive hostility is difficult to explain with each of the other candidates who have been proposed as the BD.

The Apostle John in the NT

In the NT overall, the apostle John is routinely presented as the most visible subordinate disciple to Peter. By the early 50s, Paul appears to recognize James, Peter (Cephas), and John, as the three prominent figures in the Jerusalem church (Gal 2.9). John is mentioned by Paul third in sequence,

perhaps by no accident. Paul meets with James, the Lord's brother, as well as Peter; he deals with emissaries from James and has direct conflict with Peter, but he has no reported interaction with John. Nevertheless, for some unknown reason, Paul is aware enough of John's elevated status to cite him as a third leading figure in Jerusalem, one in an elite position of authority commensurate with James and Peter. Galatians is dated by most scholars no later than the mid-50s, so in Paul's view, James, Peter, and John had risen to positions of preeminence in the Jerusalem church by this time. Thus, John is an obvious candidate as a potential competitive rival.

In a similar vein, the author of Acts routinely depicts the two leading apostles (of the twelve) to be Peter and John (1.13, 3.1–11, 4.19, 8.14). Yet in Acts, Peter always has the active role, speaking on behalf of them both, while the apostle John has been reduced to a two-dimensional stick figure, a silent sidekick to Peter who never speaks on his own. The author of Acts appears to believe it is appropriate to portray John as a figure of equal leadership standing with Peter, despite his secondary and almost invisible role. Note that if one were to remove every reference to the apostle John in Acts, there would be no material change to any dialogue or action. Thus, John is acknowledged in Acts as superficially prominent, in standing on par with Peter, but he plays no active role of consequence. He has been muted.

The Synoptic gospels also recognize James and John, the sons of Zebedee, as prominent figures who are nevertheless subordinate to Peter. In the Synoptics, Peter and his brother Andrew are called first by Jesus before James and John. Peter is then always mentioned first, followed by James and John. In Matthew and Mark, "Peter, James, and John" are always cited in this order. Matthew and Mark further underscore John's third rank status by identifying John as the brother of James (Mk 3.17, 5.37, Mt 4.21, 10.2). Quite notably, Luke diverges on this point. In Luke, while Peter is always the first of the three, on two occasions the author of Luke elevates John to second rank by citing the three as *Peter, John, and James* (8.51, 9.28). This also occurs in Acts 1.13. Furthermore, Luke never refers to John as the "brother of James." And in an intriguing departure from Mark, Luke identifies the two disciples sent by Jesus to prepare the Passover meal as Peter and John (22.8), while Mark 14.13 declines to name the two. (Matthew does not call out two specific disciples as having been sent.) One can therefore detect in Luke a deference to John that does not exist in Mark or Matthew. Nevertheless, James and John only speak once in the *Gospel of Luke*, where they suggest calling down fire from heaven to consume the Samaritans (9.54). Jesus rebukes them, and this

is the end of it—not a particularly flattering portrait. Yet while Luke is in harmony with Mark and Matthew in subordinating the sons of Zebedee to Peter, he has resisted their implication that John was the least of the three. For whatever reason, Luke sees the apostle John as a figure of more noteworthy status than do Matthew and Mark.

Thus, there is agreement between Paul in Galatians, the Synoptic gospels, and Acts, that Peter is the most formidable of the apostles. In each of these works the apostle John is well-recognized, reputed to be a pillar in Paul's assessment, and distinctly prominent in the Synoptics and Acts, but in all cases portrayed as secondary to Peter. Though John's presence is frequently acknowledged in these texts he plays little to no active role. He is, therefore, presented by several NT authors as a prominent figurehead in the movement without any meaningful contributions worthy of mention.

The *Gospel of Mark's* treatment of the apostle John is particularly intriguing. He only speaks twice in Mark. In the first instance John declares that he has forbidden someone from conducting exorcisms in Jesus' name "*because he was not following us*" (Mark 9.38–40). The offense is not just that he was conducting exorcisms in Jesus' name, but that he was doing so in non-conformance with the teachings of John's undefined "us." Jesus promptly rebukes him and states that anyone who does a work in his name is favoring his cause. Mark, of course, routinely portrays Jesus as conducting exorcisms. Thus, the conflict over exorcism in Mark that pertains specifically to John suggests that there was some disagreement as to whether exorcism was a legitimate practice, or that it should be attributed to or associated with Jesus. Accordingly, it is most curious that in the Fourth Gospel, a work traditionally attributed to the apostle John, Jesus never encounters or casts out demons or unclean spirits. So it appears that exorcism may not have been practiced or condoned by the Johannine faction of believers. Conversely, Jesus frequently casts out demons in Mark, and the apostles are given authority to cast out demons (3.15, 6.13). Thus, in context, Mark's story regarding John's prohibition of the exorcist who was not following "us" reads as a corrective rebuke of the apostle John, asserting that exorcism, though perhaps not preached or practiced by Johannine believers, was valid in other communities. It is an important component in Mark's argument that Jesus was engaged primarily in spiritual, not political, conflict.

On the second occasion that the apostle John speaks in Mark, he along with his brother are petitioning Jesus to grant them exalted status above the other apostles (10.35–41). Jesus declines, but the author of Mark pointedly

observes that the other ten apostles took umbrage at the self-promoting proclivities of James and John. In light of the alleged tension between James and John versus the other ten apostles in this passage, it is noteworthy that the author of Ur-John is dismissive of the twelve. The gospel acknowledges the existence of the twelve only twice, and not in a favorable light (6.67–71, 20.24). It is not surprising that an author promoting himself in his own gospel as a uniquely “beloved disciple” would not want to draw unnecessary attention to the fact that Jesus had chosen twelve of them. And the author of John’s boastful representation of himself as a uniquely “beloved” disciple (John 21.24) is consistent with the self-promoting behavior of James and John that the author of Mark is condemning in 10.35–41. Therefore, Mark’s two specific critiques of the apostle John are in remarkable harmony with the identification of John as both the self-promoting “disciple whom Jesus loved” and the author of a primitive edition of the *Gospel of John*.

A Common Problem for all BD Candidates who are not John

Before turning to a review of other figures who have been proposed as the BD, we must address one key issue that applies universally to them all: *If the BD was not the apostle John, then where is the apostle John in the Gospel of John?* Given that John is recognized as a leading figure in Matthew and Mark, and even more prominent in Luke and Acts, and given Paul’s recognition of him as a key figure by the mid-50s, what could account for the fact that the apostle John is not mentioned at all in the gospel that bears his name? One of two possibilities exist: either the apostle John is the BD/author, or the BD/author of John 1–20 has deliberately eliminated all reference to James and John, the sons of Zebedee, as key figures in the early movement.

One immediate question, of course, would be if the apostle John was indeed the BD, why has he eliminated his brother James from the story? One possibility comes immediately to mind—his brother may have already been put to death for his involvement in the movement, per Acts 12.1–2. If so, John would have had good reason to imagine that he was at a similar risk. It would be no surprise if this had motivated him to cloak his own identity as a leading figure in the movement. Thus, a simple instinct toward self-preservation may underlie the surreptitious reference to himself in the third person as the disciple whom Jesus loved. With his brother gone, there was no particular reason to call attention to him, and doing so in a sympathetic manner might have been perceived as a risk of revealing his own identity. It might also have

complicated his claim to have been a uniquely beloved disciple. Accordingly, if the BD was the apostle John, the failure to mention the sons of Zebedee by name in John 1–20 can be understood without much difficulty. Conversely, if the BD were anyone other than John, it is a puzzle why the author would have wanted to avoid mention of their existence despite their prominence in many other NT traditions as well as patristic memory. In short, the existence of a primitive Ur-John narrative brings the apostle John into focus as the one who was identifying/promoting himself as the BD, in conformance with the perceptions of the second century church fathers.

A Review of the Potential Candidates

Numerous NT characters other than the apostle John have been proposed by scholars as the BD. Lazarus, the apostle Thomas, Mary Magdalene, and Jesus' brother James have been popular suggestions. Papias' John the Elder, the presumed author of the Johannine epistles, has been argued as the BD by prominent scholars such as Urban von Wahlde,³ Dennis MacDonald, and Martin Hengel. This inference is easy to understand since the author of the epistles was certainly responsible for the writing/editing of at least some portions of the canonical gospel. On the other hand, some scholars have imagined that the BD was in fact an unnamed and otherwise unknown disciple, just as he appears to be in the gospel; under this theory, since the author apparently did not intend to disclose his identity, it is assumed that his identity cannot be known. Beyond this, a popular academic thesis in recent decades has maintained that the figure of the BD was not an individual at all, but rather a literary symbol, a cypher intended to represent either the "ideal disciple," or the community of all faithful believers. Thus, in academic debate, the possibilities seem endless. Since modern scholarship has never approached even a minimal consensus as to who the BD might have been, and since this field has been extensively plowed, it is often assumed that the search for the identity of the BD is futile, and an academic consensus is beyond reach.

However, the study thus far has brought the character of the Beloved Disciple into a different light. No longer is the BD to be regarded as a simple

³ Urban C. von Wahlde, *The Gospel and Letters of John*, Eerdmans Publishing, 2010, Vol. 3, Appendix 9, p. 434. Evidence for John the Elder includes the assertion in John 21.24 that the BD was the author of the book being appended, and the fact that this author of the epistles is certain to have contributed at least some portions of the gospel.

two-dimensional caricature of a fawning, relentlessly steadfast disciple who was uniquely beloved by Jesus. He emerges as a complex, quite human figure who harbored an intense disregard for the apostle Peter. He appears to have attracted enough of a following in the primitive movement to mount a challenge to the authority of Peter. The fact that he was able to marshal the resources required to produce a substantive written narrative of Jesus that has survived in edited form for two thousand years suggests that he must have been regarded by a significant group of followers within the movement as a formidable authority. That the *Gospel of John* contains a premeditated attack on the integrity of Peter, and that a pro-Petrine editor was motivated to append John 21 to reverse its political implications, is further evidence that the BD/author was recognized as a leading adversary of Peter by the pro-Petrine faction of the movement. That the BD was in a position to claim that he and not Peter was the rightful heir to leadership indicates that he must have been regarded by many as a well-respected figure in the movement.

The political infighting that is visible in the surviving *Gospel of John* is typically not recognized or considered in the various academic attempts to identify the Beloved Disciple. In fact, scholars often appear to be unaware of the contentious political dynamics in the texts. Charlesworth writes:

I conclude that chapter 21 was written after 1–20 by another member of the Johannine Community.⁴

Peter and the Beloved Disciple are not portrayed in the Gospel of John as adversaries, although they do mirror some rivalry. The editor who added John 21 intends to elevate Peter, but also to continue the portrayal of the Beloved Disciple as exalted above him.⁵

This assessment of John and ch. 21 is, in my view, indefensible. Yet it is this failure to recognize the contentious subtexts in the *Gospel of John* that is responsible for the academy's inability to identify the Beloved Disciple. As reviewed in Chapter Two, the methodical denigration of Peter by the author of the material preserved in John 1–20 is unrelenting. The author's persistent attempt to demean Peter indicates that the creator of this material viewed Peter as a threatening adversary for some reason. Furthermore, contrary to Charlesworth's assertion, the editor of John 21 clearly had no intent to portray the BD as "exalted" above Peter. For in John 21, it is Peter who hauls the net

⁴ Charlesworth, *Ibid*, 33

⁵ Charlesworth, *ibid*, 42

of 153 fish representing the church ashore (21.11). It is Peter who is designated as the sole shepherd to feed the flock (21.15–17). It is Peter who is to die a martyr's death to the glory of God, while the death of the BD is to be of no consequence (21.19). In 21.20, the BD follows along behind Jesus and Peter as they discuss his future between themselves; it is difficult to envision a more demeaning way to illustrate the BD's subordinate status. And the editor then repeats the question, which might candidly be paraphrased as "*Who indeed will be the true betrayer of Jesus?*" In context, as a quite unnecessary reference back to John 13.25, this line is dripping with sarcasm and irony—in this editor's view it is the BD who has compromised the movement through his own sordid self-promotion and his unsavory attacks on Peter. And in the end, while the editor dutifully (and perhaps sarcastically) acknowledges the BD's testimony to be "true," he chooses to end by stating that Jesus had done many other things not reported in this book, and were they all to be written, the world could not contain the books that would be written. Thus, he concludes with an alert to readers that the book he is appending is not the last word or even the most relevant word on Jesus and his movement.

Who was the Beloved Disciple?

Once the intensity of the conflict between Peter and the Beloved Disciple is recognized, the quest for the identity of the BD takes a new turn. For when the BD is seen in the light of a hostile rivalry with Peter, the field of viable candidates narrows considerably, and the evidence tilts decisively toward the apostle John. For once the BD is recognized as a formidable adversary of Peter, it is difficult to imagine the other BD candidates as fitting this role.

Lazarus as the Beloved Disciple

Lazarus has traditionally appeared to be a viable candidate as an alternative to the apostle John, and many scholars have argued in his favor. Those who believe Lazarus was the BD have marshalled several arguments in his favor. Among them are the fact that *John's Gospel* states explicitly that Jesus loved Martha, her sister, and Lazarus (11.5). When the sisters notify Jesus of the illness of Lazarus, they say in candid terms, "He whom you love is ill" (11.3). Jesus then arrives at the tomb and weeps, and bystanders exclaim,

“See how he loved him.” (11.35–36). Therefore, there are explicit declarations in John that Jesus loved Lazarus that are unlike any other indications of his love for a specific individual. Furthermore, references to the “disciple whom Jesus loved” do not appear in John until after the raising of Lazarus in ch. 11, and this language cannot help but bring Lazarus to mind.

Another argument advanced for Lazarus as the BD is more speculative but worthy of mention—Mary, the sister of Lazarus, anoints Jesus with an ointment said to be worth 300 denarii, from which we might infer that the family was quite wealthy. They live in Bethany, just outside Jerusalem. In John 18.15, an unnamed disciple said to be known to the high priest accompanies Jesus into the interrogation. This is presumed to be a furtive reference to the Beloved Disciple. If this individual was indeed the BD, and if he was in fact known to the high priest and had such favored access, one might assume he was a man of no limited means living in the community, and a wealthy Lazarus from Bethany could fit this profile.

Though the theory that Lazarus was the BD seems coherent and well-founded, it comes with a host of problematic corollaries related to the political tensions visible in the gospel and ch. 21. Prior to examining these we should note that there is no indication in the *Gospel of John* that Lazarus was a disciple. He does not travel with Jesus. Jesus encounters Lazarus only twice in John, and on both occasions, Jesus goes to see him at his home. This does not suggest a teacher/disciple relationship. In addition, the sisters of Lazarus notify Jesus when he falls ill, so Jesus appears to be a friend of the family. Jesus refers to him explicitly as a *friend (philos)* that he must go awaken (11.11). When Jesus hears of the illness of Lazarus, the disciples are with Jesus and traveling with him, so Lazarus is not among them. Related to this is the fact that there is no tradition that Lazarus was one of the twelve, and no mention of the existence of Lazarus in the Synoptics, either as a disciple or otherwise. And there is no mention of Lazarus in the second century patristic writings as either the BD or the author of the gospel.

The issue gets more problematic with the assertion of the redactor of ch. 21 that the BD was the author of the primitive “book” that he was appending. Since this redactor has little evident respect for the BD and thus no apparent motive to promote him insincerely, the attribution of authorship appears genuine. If this is true, and if we are to assume that Lazarus was the BD, it follows that Lazarus must have been responsible for the gospel’s defamatory attack on the character of Peter. We must also suppose that Lazarus was promoting himself over Peter as the rightful leading authority

and heir to leadership. Yet Lazarus himself appears only twice in John, once in 11.44 where he appears as a resuscitated corpse in need of assistance with the removal of burial clothes, and again in 12.2, where he quietly joins others at table for supper and says nothing. The author renders Lazarus mute in both cases. If this author is Lazarus promoting himself in the form of the BD as the compelling choice for leadership over Peter, it is odd that he undermines his agenda with explicit depictions of himself as inert and unengaging.

Moreover, the “book” that he had written had evidently gained enough traction that Petrine editors recognized it as a liability requiring political neutralization with ch. 21. Thus, it must have been well-enough established and recognized as authoritative that Petrine redactors opted to edit it rather than suppress it entirely, which in turn suggests that Lazarus must have had more than an insignificant following. The questions then are, if Lazarus had written an early edition of John and mounted a substantial challenge to Peter’s authority, why does he not appear in any other NT text, even as a prominent but muted figure like the apostle John? If he was an influential disciple who had a favored relationship with Jesus, why is he not included in Synoptic lists of the twelve? How did Lazarus produce a gospel that has survived in expanded form for two millennia without meriting a mention in Acts or in any of the patristic writings? In short, how did a formidable political rival to Peter manage to disappear from every early tradition other than the *Gospel of John*?

Since none of this makes intuitive sense, we might then revisit our presuppositions and suppose that the redactor of ch. 21 was wrong—that his attribution of authorship by the BD was in error. Under this scenario, if Lazarus was indeed the BD, it then appears that an unknown author was promoting Lazarus in the guise of the BD as the superior alternative to Peter, and arguing that the faithful should follow Lazarus rather than Peter. Yet again, the depiction of Lazarus as a revived corpse and silent dinner attendee does nothing to inspire confidence in Lazarus as a candidate for leadership. In the end, we must still wonder, if there was indeed a faction of the Jesus movement promoting the leadership of Lazarus over Peter, and if there was an early gospel promoting Lazarus that pro-Petrine allies took seriously, why is there no awareness of Lazarus as even a marginal figure in Matthew, Mark, Luke, Acts, Paul, or the patristic tradition?

Yet another puzzle exists under the “Lazarus as BD” theory, already noted. Not only is Lazarus absent from every NT document other than John, but the apostle John is entirely absent from the Fourth Gospel. If Lazarus was

the BD, where is the apostle John in the *Gospel of John*? Why would the author of John's Gospel have chosen to eliminate John from the narrative?

In the end, there is no surviving hint in the early Christian writings that Lazarus could have mounted a contentious challenge to the authority of Peter so formidable that it warranted suppression by the addition of John 21. If this figure had commanded the allegiance of a significant anti-Petrine faction, we would expect at least incidental evidence of this to have survived in writings other than John. Given that all other NT authors appear to be unaware of Lazarus as a figure of consequence, and even the author of John himself portrays him as a silent character of no apparent substance, it is difficult to accept the notion that Lazarus could have been the Beloved Disciple.

Thomas as the Beloved Disciple

James Charlesworth produced a substantial monograph supporting the proposition that the apostle Thomas was the BD. Evidence offered in favor of this theory includes the fact that Thomas appears as a figure taking a leading role in John 11:

11.14 Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead; 15 and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." 16 Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

Thomas is also mentioned in 14.5 as one who asks Jesus "how can we know the way?" In this context he is the second of four apostles who pose questions to Jesus, including Peter, Thomas, Philip, and Judas (not Iscariot). In this passage, none of the disciples appear to have any leadership role. They are simply used as convenient foils to pose questions intended to give Jesus the opportunity to utter a series of advanced theological proclamations. Charlesworth sees the fact that Thomas is the second of the four in this passage as lending him some incremental gravitas, but the fact that all four disciples appear to be simply seeking enlightenment from Jesus makes it difficult to interpret any special role of Thomas in this passage.

Thomas of course does play a dramatic and highly visible role in John 20.24–29, with the doubting scenario culminating with Thomas declaring "My Lord and my God." The author has chosen Thomas to play this unique role for some reason, and it is not unreasonable to suspect that the author is suggesting some particularly intimate association between Jesus and Thomas

that would be consistent with him as the BD. When this is coupled with the reference in 11.16 that Thomas was taking a leading role in encouraging the disciples to follow Jesus that they may all die with him, we find at least reasonable grounds to surmise that Thomas could have been the BD.

Charlesworth does offer sixteen points in possible opposition to the theory that Thomas was the BD. I will not rehearse these points as none of them address what I regard as the most potent argument against the thesis, which is as discussed thus far: If Thomas was the BD, we must assume that Thomas regarded himself as the leading rival to Peter. Thomas would be the one who authored the attack on the integrity of Peter that has been retained in the canonical gospel. By implication, Thomas must have had a significant cadre of followers who were recognizing and promoting his authority over Peter, and the pro-Petrine faction of the movement must have recognized Thomas as a viable threat to Peter's leadership, so much so that the gospel that he wrote needed to be appended rather than suppressed entirely.

The question then is this: If Thomas was, historically, the most formidable political adversary of Peter, why is he listed as the eighth disciple of the Twelve in Mark 3.16 and Luke 6.15, then never mentioned again in these gospels? Matthew 10.3 lists Thomas as the seventh of Twelve, then never mentions him again. Acts mentions him once in the list of eleven in 1.13, then Thomas disappears in Acts, never to be heard from again. Thus, the Synoptics and Acts are aware of Thomas as a minor figure but do not recognize him as functioning in an active leadership role in a manner similar to the apostle John. Paul never mentions Thomas in any of his letters.

Moreover, if the author of the book being appended by John 21 was the BD, per 21.24, and this BD was the apostle Thomas, what would account for the entire patristic tradition recognizing the apostle John as the author rather than Thomas? And as noted, the persistent question, if Thomas was the BD in the *Gospel of John*, then where is the apostle John in the gospel?

Mary Magdalene as the Beloved Disciple

Some have proposed that Mary Magdalene may have been the BD. She appears to play a uniquely intimate role as the only woman who goes to the tomb in John 20, and she is the first person to whom the risen Lord appears. The *Gospel of Mary* (presumed second century) promotes Mary as one whom Jesus loved more than any of the other disciples. She is also represented in this later gospel as possessing unique insights that the male

disciples did not possess, and she functions as an oracle dispensing new wisdom from the Lord to the disciples. She and Peter have a somewhat contentious relationship in this work. Thus, the notion that Mary Magdalene could be the BD is not entirely unfounded.

Among the most compelling arguments against the theory that Mary Magdalene was the BD is that throughout the *Gospel of John* the BD is characterized as a male figure. The redactor of John 21 clearly recognizes the BD as male: “*Lord, what about **this man?***” (*houtos*—nominative masculine pronoun, 21.21,24). The BD is one of the male disciples on the fishing boat when Jesus appears, where masculine forms of the noun *disciple* are used twice (21.7–8). Moreover, the references to the BD in John 1–20 (e.g., 13.23–25, 19.27, 20.1–8) are in masculine forms as well.

In addition, Mary and the BD appear together in the same scene in 20.1–3, in which Mary is alerting the BD to the fact that the Lord’s body is missing. One must imagine some exceptional textual confusion or corruption to get around the fact that the author regards Mary and the BD as two different persons in this passage.

Finally, there is the intuitively problematic corollary that if Mary was the BD and thus the author of the primitive edition behind John 1–20 (per 21.24), she would have been responsible for the gospel’s vitriolic denigration of Peter; she would have been promoting herself as the rightful heir to authority in the movement in light of Peter’s disqualifying behavior. And we must infer from the existence of a formal “book” itself that some significant contingent in the movement had aligned behind her leadership. Yet in the patriarchal social context of first century Judaism, it seems difficult to imagine that Jewish adherents of the Jesus movement would believe that responsibility for carrying the movement forward should fall to a woman. Under this scenario we must also infer that the pro-Petrine faction of the movement took Mary’s challenge to Peter’s leadership seriously enough to edit her book in an attempt to neutralize her claim.

Other questions remain unanswered as well—if Mary Magdalene was a contentious archrival of Peter, why is she treated with modest deference as one of the women who attended the tomb in the pro-Petrine Synoptics? If she was influential enough in the movement to produce an anti-Petrine gospel, why did she not merit even a single reference in the book of Acts? Why is there no discussion of Mary’s controversial bid for authority in the patristic traditions? In my view, once one recognizes the harsh discord between Peter and the BD, the pieces of the puzzle do not fit well enough to imagine Mary

Magdalene as a political archrival formidable enough to have mounted a challenge to Peter.

John the Elder as the Beloved Disciple

There is little doubt that John the Elder, the presumed author of the Johannine epistles, was a significant contributing editor to what we have inherited as canonical John. He is surely responsible for the insertions that comprise chs. 14–16 and, we may surmise, he was likely responsible for the many parallel interpolations of similar material throughout the gospel that routinely compromise the logical coherence of the original narrative. It is most probable that the author of the epistles was responsible for the authorship of at least one-third of the canonical gospel.

Since the editor of John 21 attributes the authorship of the “book” he is appending to the BD, and it is apparent that John the Elder was a contributing author, it is not a surprise that many scholars have inferred that John the Elder must be the BD. The scenario fits temporally in that he is viewed as a late first century author who would have had opportunity to write a more theologically advanced gospel, and his intense preoccupation with the notion that the disciples must love one another is of a kind with the traditional image of the faithful Beloved Disciple.

The fatal flaw in the theory that John the Elder was the BD rests in the fact that John the Elder is the author who inserted the New Commandment into the gospel, with the insistence that the faithful are to love one another. This appears in 15.12, 15.17, the interpolation in 13.34–35, as well as the Johannine epistles. This author is desperately committed to suppressing discord within the movement, and the most tangible evidence of discord is of that between the followers of John and Peter. He wants to sweep evidence of this conflict under the rug. And he is in a commanding role of ideological influence in the late first century church. It is therefore difficult to imagine that he was the BD/author referred to by the editor of John 21.24 who had constructed the original invective against the apostle Peter, or the one who had promoted himself over Peter as the rightful heir to leadership.

James as the Beloved Disciple

Was James, the brother of Jesus, the BD? He appears to be recognized by Paul in Gal. 2.9,12 and the author of Acts in 15.13–21 as the leader of the Jerusalem church. Yet his leadership role is not anticipated by the gospels, for he plays no visible role in the gospels either as a disciple or an advocate of Jesus and his mission. John 7.5 states explicitly that the brothers of Jesus did not believe in him; this would be a strange statement indeed if the author was either James, or someone else who believed James to have been the BD. It has been noted that if John 19.26–27 (“woman, behold your son” // “behold your mother”) is read literally that these verses could be identifying one of Jesus’ brothers as the BD, but such an interpretation is not in harmony with John 7.5. In Mark 3.31–35 Jesus appears to reject his mother and brothers as they are attempting an intervention for his mental health, so here again there is no indication of a unique or special “disciple” relationship. The fact that James emerges in the mid-first century as a central figure in the Jerusalem group suggests that he underwent a conversion at some point after Jesus’ death. The Talmudic scholar Hyam Maccoby points out that Jesus’ aspiration to Messianic status had royal implications, and in Jesus’ absence the next in succession to the royal throne would have been his younger brother James. It is conceivable that this may have contributed to the ascendance of James to a position of apparent authority in the Jerusalem church.

Arguments against James as the BD are similar to those cited for Lazarus and Mary Magdalene. How likely is it that the pro-Petrine editor of John 21 would be insinuating in 21.20 that the brother of Jesus was the ultimate betrayer of Jesus, especially light of the fact that James was by then a recognized authority in the Jerusalem group? How likely would it be that he would be dismissing a book written by the brother of Jesus as just one of a world of books that could be written? How likely, indeed, would it be that the patristic tradition would have no knowledge of a gospel written by the brother of Jesus, and instead attribute it to the apostle John? And once again, if the BD was James, why would he have written the apostle John out of the story entirely?

Was the Beloved Disciple a Literary Symbol?

Over the decades various scholars have suggested that the BD may not have been an individual at all, but rather a symbolic figure intended to

represent either the “ideal faithful disciple,” or perhaps the community of believers at large. One might point to John 13.1 as evidence that Jesus had expressed love for all believers: “*Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.*” The fact that scholars have not been able to arrive at any consensus as to who the BD might have been appears to lend tacit credence to the notion that he might have been a symbolic figure. And he is in fact portrayed as a uniquely faithful disciple in that he is the only disciple at the foot of the cross (19.26), and (by inference) he is the dedicated disciple who accompanies Jesus at the interrogation by Annas (18.15). So he is an idealized figure in these respects.

One difficulty with the “symbolic figure” theory is that it does not address the evident hostile adversarial roles of the BD vs. Peter in John 1–20. And the redactor of John 21 views the BD as one who must be subordinated to Peter. The intent of the appendix is to establish that Peter is the one true authority anointed by Jesus and the BD is not. Peter is the one designated by Jesus to be the shepherd of the flock while the BD is clearly present and witnessing the conversation (21.7, 15). Though the BD is the first to recognize Jesus on the shore, it is Peter who hauls ashore the net of 153 fish symbolizing the church (21.11). Peter walks with Jesus as they discuss the fate of the BD while he follows along behind them in a subservient position (21.20). Peter will suffer the extreme penalty of martyrdom, while the BD will not. In these respects, the redactor of the appendix does not appear to view the BD as an idealized symbol of discipleship. Rather, he interprets the BD as one who has unjustly challenged and attempted to undermine Peter’s authority. The fact that this redactor cites the BD as the author of the “book” that he is appending indicates that he regards the BD as an individual, not a symbolic figure.

In my view, interpretive confusion over the identity of the BD stems from the common erroneous assumption that John 21 is a late addition to a gospel that was otherwise largely complete in canonical form. The implication is that ch. 21 may be an early second century text which makes it difficult to recognize as a politically motivated response between actual adversaries in the heat of a primitive competitive conflict. Yet it is the recognition of the BD as an influential male rival who was mounting a challenge to the authority of Peter that tilts the needle in favor of identifying him as an individual rather than a symbolic literary cypher.

Conclusion

The redactor of ch. 21 states unequivocally that the author of the book he was appending was the Beloved Disciple. If an early Johannine narrative was composed prior to the death of Peter with an objective of calling Peter's moral integrity into question, its authorship by a rival apostle is most likely. That this would have been the apostle John is consistent with the numerous NT references to John as a prominent figure who was nevertheless subordinate to Peter. The fact that John plays the role of silent sidekick to Peter in Acts suggests that John was being treated as a historically significant figure whose voice was being suppressed; he appears to have been regarded by the author of Acts as a *de facto* nonentity by the time Acts was composed. In a strikingly similar fashion, Paul Anderson observes that the apostle John is the NT figure most frequently *mentioned* but rarely *quoted* in the second century patristic writings.⁶ John is prominent but secondary to Peter in all three Synoptic gospels, which is consistent with the editor of John 21 elevating Peter and demoting the BD to secondary status. Collectively, then, we find consistent indications that the pro-Petrine faction of the movement, represented by the Synoptics, Acts, and John 21, was acknowledging the presence of the apostle John as a leading figure, but relegating him to secondary status. Paul's incidental recollection that John had attained "pillar" status (Gal 2.9) is unexpected independent evidence that John was a recognized figure of influence in the movement, on par with James and Peter.

If the apostle John had indeed written or supervised the production of the first primitive gospel, it surely would have cemented his legacy. Even begrudging respect for apostolic authority would explain the survival of the anti-Petrine invective found in John 1–20, as well as its retention by the pro-Petrine church. Yet from the way the apostle John is consistently relegated to secondary figurehead status in Matthew, Mark, Luke, Acts, and John 21, we may infer that those who gained control of the evolving movement regarded him as a loose cannon whose voice needed to be stifled. Once the political dynamics of these texts are brought into focus, it is not difficult to infer that the apostle John was (a) Peter's political archrival, (b) the author or overseer of the primitive narrative embedded within John's Gospel, and (c) the aggressively self-promoting Beloved Disciple.

⁶ Anderson, Paul, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AQ0OATEdesM>, 1:28:30