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## “What is that to you?”: The Johannine Community’s Beloved Disciple

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#### ABSTRACT:

Considering his significance within the Fourth Gospel, the Beloved Disciple's absence within the synoptic gospels is puzzling. And as modern biblical scholars continue to challenge his traditional identification as John, Son of Zebedee, the question looms ever greater: Who – or, perhaps what – is the Beloved Disciple? Though his name may be lost to history, the character's role within the gospel narrative still informs our understanding of the Christian community that sprung up around his testimony. This paper seeks to articulate how this unnamed disciple influenced the development of the Johannine Community's unique theological identity.

## “What is that to you?”

### The Johannine Community's Beloved Disciple

by Molly Kluever

In the Epilogue of John's Gospel, a newly redeemed Peter asks about the fate of the Beloved Disciple and the role that the unnamed follower of Christ would play in the early Church. His question – “Lord, what about him?”<sup>1</sup> – certainly highlights the competitive tension between Peter and the Beloved Disciple that pervades the Fourth Gospel; however, for an analysis of the narrative purpose of the Beloved Disciple within the Gospel itself and within the Johannine Community as a whole, Jesus' response – “What is that to you?”<sup>2</sup> – proves more significant. What *was* the Beloved Disciple to Peter, the Rock of the Roman Church? And what was he to the Johannine Community? The important nuance in these questions is that the Beloved Disciple is better understood as a *what* than a *who*. Although the *who* of the Beloved Disciple may have been lost to time, his role within the narrative of John's Gospel speaks volumes of his value to the Johannine Community. And by analyzing the narrative character of the Beloved Disciple, we gain not only a clearer understanding of the community who

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1 Jn 21:21 (NRSV).

2 Jn 21:22.

claimed he was beloved but also a picture of *what* this unnamed disciple must have been to warrant that honor.

Few unknowns have plagued biblical scholarship more than the identity of the Beloved Disciple; fewer yet have been so confidently provided an answer. Christian Tradition maintains that John, son of Zebedee, is the unnamed disciple in the Fourth Gospel. However, as R. Alan Culpepper notes in *John, Son of Zebedee*, the brother of James is never explicitly identified as the Beloved Disciple. “Caution dictates,” he writes, “that this identification can no longer merely be assumed.”<sup>3</sup> Tradition, after all, and not Scripture, earned this Apostle his “Beloved” epithet.<sup>4</sup> In fact, John has been traditionally identified as the Beloved Disciple not because of his role within the Gospel but because of his absence. John is only mentioned once in the Fourth Gospel, in chapter 21, and even then, he and his brother James are referred to only as “the sons of Zebedee.”<sup>5</sup> Left without an explicit call to discipleship, John has often been superimposed on the call narrative of Andrew and the unnamed disciple – both of whom were followers of John the Baptist – in chapter 1.<sup>6</sup> This unnamed disciple, who is often conflated with the Beloved Disciple, is thus identified as John, son of Zebedee, in order to “harmonize” John’s Gospel with the synoptics.<sup>7</sup> But John’s Gospel has never been concerned with harmonizing itself with Matthew, Mark, or Luke; its uniqueness as a gospel narrative has been a source of tension within the Church since before the assembly of the Christian canon.<sup>8</sup> Culpepper thus urges that the Fourth Gospel “be left free to tell its own story” without forcing synoptic parallels unnecessarily.<sup>9</sup> Without scriptural corroboration, the case for John as the Beloved Disciple rests on external evidence. However, in *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind*, Raymond E. Brown reports that “Peter is the only member of the Twelve of

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3 R. Alan Culpepper, *John, the Son of Zebedee: The Life of a Legend*. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994), 57.

4 Culpepper, *John*, 85.

5 Jn 21:2.

6 Jn 1:35-39.

7 The first explicit reference to the Beloved Disciple is Jn 13:23. As I will address later in this paper, Raymond Brown assumes the unnamed disciple from chapter 1 and the Beloved Disciple are one and the same. This assumption is not universally accepted. R. Alan Culpepper, for instance, seems more hesitant to confirm that connection; for his discussion of the topic, see Culpepper, *John*, 59.

8 Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 163;

Raymond E. Brown, *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 123.

9 Culpepper, *John*, 59.

whose ecclesiastical career we are substantially informed.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, even if John were the Beloved Disciple, we have no substantial evidence to support his link to the Johannine Community. While a lack of evidence does not imply invention, it does invite skepticism into the conversation of the veracity of John’s identity as the Beloved Disciple.

Of course, doubting John’s claim leaves the position open for other candidates. A strong case can be made for Lazarus, for instance, based on evidence within the Fourth Gospel itself: The message from Mary and Martha when Lazarus falls ill refers to the man as “he whom you [Jesus] love,” and, after Jesus weeps for the loss, bystanders announce, “See how he loved him!”<sup>11</sup> Lazarus then reclines next to Jesus at table in chapter 12, just as the Beloved Disciple does later at the Last Supper.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, Lazarus lived in Bethany, which could be how he (as the Beloved Disciple) would have known the High Priest, a detail referenced during Jesus’ trial.<sup>13</sup> However, as Culpepper notes, there is no “corroborating external evidence” to support the Lazarus theory.<sup>14</sup> Another theory arguing for John Mark, the cousin of Barnabas and companion of Paul in the Acts of the Apostles, also proves promising with the evidence found within Scripture; the strongest evidence is his ostensibly close relationship with Peter, who visits John Mark’s mother’s house immediately after his release from prison in the Acts of the Apostles and who possibly refers to John Mark as his “son” in 1 Peter.<sup>15</sup> But like Lazarus, this evidence is ultimately circumstantial and certainly not conclusive.<sup>16</sup> Other proposed candidates for the Beloved Disciple range from believable but flawed – such as Matthias, the Apostle who replaced Judas – to downright impossible – such as St. Paul himself.<sup>17</sup>

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10 Brown, *Churches*, 14.

11 Jn 11:3; 11:36.

12 Jn 12:2; 13:23.

13 Culpepper, *John*, 76.

14 Culpepper, 76.

15 Acts 12:12-17; 1 Pt 5:13. This relationship between Peter and John Mark led to the assumption that John Mark was Peter’s interpreter and the author of the Gospel of Mark. Interestingly, Culpepper points out that if John Mark were the Beloved Disciple, it would seem more likely for John Mark then to be responsible for the Fourth Gospel, rather than for his eponymous Gospel. See Culpepper, *John*, 78.

16 Culpepper, *John*, 78.

17 Culpepper, *John*, 79-81.

Some scholars have embraced the futility of the endeavor. When biblical scholar Raymond Brown shifted his educated opinion away from John, he became “convinced that the identity of the Disciple ... [is] unknown to us.”<sup>18</sup> However, as I will explore in greater detail below, Brown also came to the conclusion that the Beloved Disciple was not an Apostle but instead another disciple of Christ.<sup>19</sup> Other scholars have argued that we will never find the historical figure of the Beloved Disciple because he never actually existed. Rather, the character is a narrative construction, planted within the Gospel to represent entire groups of people; Culpepper outlines the arguments for the Disciple possibly standing in for the Gentile Christian community or the Johannine community as a whole.<sup>20</sup> Most mainstream scholars dismiss the notion of a purely symbolic Beloved Disciple as “quite implausible,” and indeed, all of my sources maintain the historicity of the character.<sup>21</sup> The other disciples’ concerns in the Epilogue of John’s Gospel about whether the Beloved Disciple will die also complicate theories about a wholly-fictional character; as Culpepper remarks: “[S]ymbolic figures do not die.”<sup>22</sup> This is not to say, of course, that the Beloved Disciple is *not* an idealized character. Attempts to identify the historical Beloved Disciple – John, Lazarus, or otherwise – “fail to take seriously” the narrative role the character plays in the Gospel.<sup>23</sup> Rather than being either historical *or* legendary, Culpepper suggests that the “figure of the Beloved Disciple is both individual and representational.”<sup>24</sup> The search for precisely *who* the Beloved Disciple was proves ultimately futile if it persists without accounting for his representational role as an idealized character produced by the Johannine Community. Once again, the Beloved Disciple is better approached as a *what* than a *who*. Investigating *what* the Beloved Disciple accomplished within the Gospel for his community will not only enhance our understanding of the Johannine Community but will also give us further insight into the man they claimed to be beloved by God.

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18 Brown, *Churches*, 84, note 120.

19 Brown, 34.

20 Culpepper, *John*, 82-83.

21 Brown, *Community*, 31.

22 Culpepper, *John*, 84.

23 Culpepper, 84.

24 Culpepper, *John*, 84.

First and foremost, the Beloved Disciple serves as a witness who testifies to the veracity of the gospel account. In the Epilogue, the narrator states outright that the Beloved Disciple “is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true.”<sup>25</sup> Culpepper points out in his *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* that this separation of the narrator from the implied author – that is, the Beloved Disciple – is “without a parallel in ancient literature” and likely a result of the idealizing of the Beloved Disciple by the Johannine Community.<sup>26</sup> Consider the events that the character must have witnessed in order to give his testimony: the Last Supper, the crucifixion, Easter morning, the resurrection scene of the Epilogue. These are significant events in the life of Christ – not to mention in the lives of his Apostles and disciples – and placing the Beloved Disciple within those narrative events conveys great dignity. Regardless of any modern speculation that this witness must be fictional, the Gospel itself “claims to be a reliable historical account.”<sup>27</sup> That claim is not necessarily proof of historical accuracy, but it does demonstrate the value that the Johannine Community gave to the Beloved Disciple himself.

This is not to say, however, that the Beloved Disciple’s role in the narrative is pure fabrication. Culpepper reports that, “[i]nsofar as there is a consensus among Johannine scholars, it is that there was a real person, who may have been an eyewitness to events in Jesus’ ministry, and who was later the authoritative source of tradition for the Johannine community.”<sup>28</sup> There are tensions that need to be addressed with regards to the significance of the Beloved Disciple in the life and ministry of Jesus, of course. The synoptic gospels’ silence on the character is perhaps the most troubling complication; surely, if he were as important as John’s Gospel suggests, he would have warranted mentioning by the other evangelists. But let’s remember our driving question here: What was the Beloved Disciple to the Johannine Community? The man who would later be called the Beloved Disciple need not have been

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25 Jn 21:24.

26 R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 47.

27 Andrew T. Lincoln, “The Beloved Disciple as Eyewitness and the Fourth Gospel as Witness,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 24, no. 85 (July 2002): 4.

28 Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 47.



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by Katryna Bertucci

recognized during Jesus' ministry as "beloved." For the Johannine Community, however, he had become their eyewitness, their authority, and the "paradigm of authentic faith" to which they aspired.<sup>29</sup>

That eyewitness testimony, once again, is at the heart of the relationship between the Beloved Disciple and the Johannine Community. Scholars can only speculate about the historical accuracy of the events in the Gospel, but the likelihood that the Beloved Disciple was a real, tangible witness must be maintained. As Brown points out, if their chief authority had been fabricated, "the community's self-defense would surely have crumbled."<sup>30</sup> The physical existence of the Disciple also created a direct link with God: "Jesus had seen God; the Beloved Disciple had seen Jesus, and the Johannine school shares in his tradition."<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, when the narrator announces in the Epilogue that "we know that his testimony is true,"<sup>32</sup> it illustrates the Johannine community as "united in accepting that testimony over against outsiders."<sup>33</sup> However, the Beloved Disciple's relationship with Jesus not only established the community's distinctive theological claims but also legitimized those claims with regards to the competing Petrine tradition.<sup>34</sup>

A competitive juxtaposition of the Beloved Disciple with Peter pervades the Fourth Gospel. The two men are together at the Last Supper, in the courtyard during Jesus' trial, at the tomb on Easter Sunday, and in the boat and later on the beach in the Epilogue.<sup>35</sup> In each of these scenes, the Beloved Disciple is presented as a more competent, faithful disciple than Peter: The Beloved Disciple has the honor of sitting next to Jesus during the Last Supper; he does not deny Jesus in the courtyard; he not only reaches the tomb before Peter but is also the first to believe in the Resurrection; finally, from the boat, he is the first to recognize Jesus on the beach. In fact, as Culpepper notes, the only time the Beloved Disciple is not accompanied by Peter is at the foot of the

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29 Culpepper, 226.

30 Brown, *Community*, 32.

31 Brown, 102; see also Culpepper, *John*, 60.

32 Jn 21:24.

33 Brown, *Community*, 103; Brown also explains how the Johannine epistles illustrate the growing tensions within the community over who gets to interpret the Beloved Disciple's testimony. C.f. Culpepper, *John*, 60.

34 Culpepper, *John*, 85.

35 Jn 13:22-28; Jn 18:15-16; Jn 20:1-10; Jn 21.

cross.<sup>36</sup> None of the three other canonical gospels mention any Apostles being present at the Crucifixion, either – only disciples.<sup>37</sup> This contrast between the Beloved Disciple and Peter, the clear Apostolic authority in and out of the Gospel, hints at a polemical undertow. Culpepper warns, however, that any “anti-Petrine polemic” in the Fourth Gospel is “defensive rather than offensive in tone.”<sup>38</sup> After all, Peter’s authority is never challenged in the Gospel; only his superiority as a disciple is called into question.<sup>39</sup> The defensive tone is understandable if, as both Culpepper and Brown maintain, the Beloved Disciple was not one of the Twelve Apostles.<sup>40</sup> If the Beloved Disciple were indeed a mere disciple without official Apostolic authority, the Johannine Community would need to construct a rhetorical argument to defend their tradition’s validity.

Interestingly, the term “apostle” does not appear once in any writings from the Johannine Community, neither the gospel nor the three epistles.<sup>41</sup> Brown clarifies that this ought not be seen as a denial of “the existence of apostles in Christian history.”<sup>42</sup> Additionally, I would argue that this absence, compounded with the exaltation of the Beloved Disciple, is not a case of sour grapes, either. The Johannine Community were not denying the possibility of a “better” authoritative claim – namely, apostolic foundations – but rather lauding the value of discipleship on its own merit. For the Johannine tradition, discipleship was not a consolation prize for a lack of an apostolic commissioning; the enlisted, so to speak, had worth, too. Brown concurs, remarking that discipleship, not apostleship, is “what constitutes prime dignity in Johannine ecclesiology.”<sup>43</sup> The historicity of the Beloved Disciple, in that he was a real, flesh-and-blood companion of Jesus, is significant for anchoring the conversation of the Gospel’s message in particularity. However, his idealization further supports that argument by allowing the Beloved

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36 Culpepper, *John*, 57.

37 See Mk 15:40; Mt 26:56, 27:55; Lk 23:49. With the exception of the Beloved Disciple in John, all of the named witnesses are women; however, I argue there is enough ambiguity to allow for the possibility that other non-Apostolic disciples may have been witnesses in the Synoptic narratives.

38 Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 122.

39 Culpepper, 122.

40 Brown, *Churches*, 34; Culpepper, *John*, 63.

41 Brown, *Churches*, 91.

42 Brown, 91.

43 Brown, 91.

Disciple to exist as a symbolic figure through which the value and the dignity of discipleship are channeled to the Christian church generally and the Johannine Community specifically.

Within the Gospel of John, the Beloved Disciple serves as an idealized embodiment of the Paraclete. Culpepper emphasizes that, while he is obviously not *the* Paraclete promised by Jesus, the Beloved Disciple “shaped [the Johannine community’s] understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit in their midst.”<sup>44</sup> The parallels drawn between the actions of the Paraclete as promised by Jesus and the actions of the Beloved Disciple after Jesus’ Resurrection are striking, as Culpepper outlines: “The Paraclete was to remain with the disciples (14:17), teach them everything (14:26), remind the disciples of all that Jesus had said (14:26), declare what he had heard (16:13), and glorify Jesus because he will ‘receive from me [Jesus] and declare to you’ (16:14). From all indications this is exactly what the Beloved Disciple has done.”<sup>45</sup> This parallel serves the Johannine Community on two different but related levels. First, it implies that the Beloved Disciple’s authority comes directly from Christ; this would have been significant for the Johannine Community’s confidence in the testimony of their leader. Second, because that central authority and thus the “efficacy of his witness” derives from the Paraclete, the Beloved Disciple need not be directly replaced.<sup>46</sup> In other words, the Beloved Disciple’s authority could be transferred to any disciple who lived like the example set by him in the Gospel, as opposed to Apostolic authority, which requires a specific, commissioned successor. The obvious benefit to this understanding of authority is that the death of the Beloved Disciple “cannot weaken the confidence of Johannine Christians in the correctness of their ongoing perceptions.”<sup>47</sup> In the Epilogue, we see the narrator responding to the Beloved Disciple’s mortality with confidence: “So the rumor spread in the community that this disciple would not die. Yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but, ‘If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?’”<sup>48</sup> For the Johannine Community,

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44 Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 123.

45 Culpepper, 122 (his in-text citations).

46 Brown, *Community*, 141, note 271.

47 Brown, *Churches*, 109.

48 Jn 21:23.

therefore, the Beloved Disciple is the means through which the Paraclete entered their community; even after his death, the Paraclete would remain among them through their own work as disciples.

The ecclesiology of the Johannine Community is shaped by this egalitarian approach to discipleship. Brown notes that the Johannine tradition emphasizes “the relation of the individual Christian to Jesus Christ.”<sup>49</sup> This individualism is tempered by a “collective presupposition” of salvation, but the relationship between an “individual believer” and Jesus Christ is uniquely valued in this tradition.<sup>50</sup> We see this throughout the Gospel in the richness of the scenes featuring the Samaritan woman at the well, Lazarus and his sisters, and Nicodemus.<sup>51</sup> Clearly, the Johannine Community valued the ability of individual Christians to enter into a personal relationship with Christ. But the Gospel also goes a step further and seeks to formalize the connection between Jesus and his disciples. During his crucifixion, Jesus presented his mother to the Beloved Disciple, who promptly took her into his home.<sup>52</sup> This forged familial bond answers the question – “Who are my mother and my brothers?”<sup>53</sup> – clearly and definitively: The Beloved Disciple is his brother. Culpepper notes that this act by Jesus and the Beloved Disciple’s response to it “confers ... the authority of succession.”<sup>54</sup> And by extension, the entire Johannine Community inherit that authority through their own discipleship. In light of the clear New Testament struggle over who can claim to be “authorized by Jesus’ family,”<sup>55</sup> this almost legalistic defense prepared by a community founded by a “mere” disciple is certainly understandable.

The presentation of the Beloved Disciple in the Gospel highlights another significant dimension of Johannine ecclesiology – their unique Christological theology. Brown posits a reading of the Fourth Gospel that supposes the unnamed disciple called by Jesus in chapter 1 was the Beloved Disciple, but he was not considered “beloved” until chapter 13.<sup>56</sup> The moment in the

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49 Brown, *Churches*, 84.

50 Brown, 85.

51 Jn 4; Jn 11; Jn 3:1-21.

52 Jn 19:26-7.

53 Mt 12:48; Mk 3:33.

54 Culpepper, *John*, 64.

55 Culpepper, 64.

56 Brown, *Community*, 33.

narrative he became “beloved” is, according to Brown, the eschatological “hour” (13:1) when Jesus, having loved his own, ‘now showed his love for them to the very end.’<sup>57</sup> Thus, it is within a Christological context that the Beloved Disciple “achieved his *identity*.”<sup>58</sup> This understanding is vital to the idea of discipleship in Johannine ecclesiology. As a sectarian group, the Johannine Community strongly believed that the only path to true discipleship, to an intimate relationship with God, was through the Johannine understanding of Christ. Through his experience as a witness, the Beloved Disciple heightened his “Christological perception,” and this perception is the lens through which the Johannine Community both understood Jesus as the Son of God and their founding disciple as beloved.<sup>59</sup> Discipleship – predicated by Johannine Christological belief and modeled by the Beloved Disciple – is the path to being particularly loved by Jesus. In this way, the Fourth Gospel makes an argument for their unique tradition through the character of the Beloved Disciple.

However, while maintaining the Beloved Disciple’s role as the ideal disciple, we must not lose sight of the fact that he was much more than a symbol or model. He served a tangible function within the Johannine Community outside of the Gospel. According to Jeffrey Brickle, the Beloved Disciple represents “an interested, ‘highly motivated’ memorian confronting an intense, multifaceted memory crisis that came to a head during the waning years of the first century CE.”<sup>60</sup> In other words, the Beloved Disciple’s witness – manifest in the Gospel to which he testified – served as an anchor for the community being plagued by a number of external and internal crises. For one, the generational gap between Jesus’s ministry and the present day triggered anxiety over the potential loss of experiential witness.<sup>61</sup> Recent expulsion from the synagogues also meant the loss of the Johannine Christians’ Jewish ideological roots, and this loss was compounded by the shift within the Christian community at large to a primarily “Gentile constituency.”<sup>62</sup>

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57 Brown, 33 (his in-text citation).

58 Brown, 33 (his emphasis).

59 Brown, 33.

60 Brickle, Jeffrey E. “The Memory of the Beloved Disciple: A Poetics of Johannine Memory.” In *Memory and Identity in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity*, edited by Tom Thatcher, 187-208. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2014. 188.

61 Brickle, 188.

62 Brickle 188; Brown, *Community*, 23.

Furthermore, the Johannine conflict with other Christian groups over the community's high Christology, as discussed above, isolated them even further and compounded their sectarian attitude.<sup>63</sup> Even though we may never know exactly *who* the Beloved Disciple was and what his specific role within the Johannine Community was, the community clearly valued him for “restoring a sense of shared identity” through his testimony.<sup>64</sup> The term “Beloved” was a gift from them in appreciation.<sup>65</sup>

The Fourth Gospel's “immediate audience” – the Johannine Community itself – likely would have recognized and interpreted certain allusions within the idealized Beloved Disciple's character that we may lack the context to immediately recognize.<sup>66</sup> For instance, in his essay, “The Beloved Disciple in the Gospel of John: Some Clues and Conjectures,” Paul Minear outlines a typological argument that links the Beloved Disciple to the Old Testament figure of Benjamin, the youngest son of Jacob/Israel. Benjamin himself was the only brother to not betray Joseph; likewise, the Beloved Disciple was the only “named” disciple to not deny his discipleship during Jesus' Passion.<sup>67</sup> More significant to this typology, however, is Moses's farewell discourse in Deuteronomy. Before his death, Moses offers a blessing to each of the twelve tribes of Israel. He says of Benjamin: “Benjamin is the beloved of the Lord, who shelters him all the day, while he abides securely at his breast.”<sup>68</sup> This blessing entails three promises: The tribe of Benjamin would be considered “beloved of the Lord,” would be distinctly under God's protection, and would be afforded a personal intimacy with God. If the Beloved Disciple is seen typologically as Benjamin, then his “tribe” of descendants – the Johannine Community – would likewise inherit the “beloved” title.<sup>69</sup> And just as God would provide Benjamin shelter, so too would He defend the Johannine Community facing

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63 Brown, *Community*, 23.

64 Brickle, “Memory,” 200.

65 Culpepper, *John*, 66.

66 Paul S. Minear, “The Beloved Disciple in the Gospel of John: Some Clues and Conjectures,” *Novum Testamentum* 19, no. 2 (1977): 105.

67 Minear, “Some Clues,” 110.

68 Dt 33:12 (NAB). Different biblical translations interpret the blessings ambiguity in different ways. Minear uses the New American Bible for his essay, so for clarity's sake, I have used that translation for this section. For more information on the variance between translations of the Deuteronomic blessing, see Minear, “Some Clues,” 113.

69 Minear, “Some Clues,” 110.

enemies on all fronts.<sup>70</sup> Finally, Minear notes that the Fourth Gospel uses the phrase “lying close to the breast of Jesus” three times, each in reference to the Beloved Disciple.<sup>71</sup> That specific description of intimacy with God would have reassured the Johannine Community that they were not only under God’s protection but also secure in their “knowledge of the Lord’s will and way.”<sup>72</sup> This typological evidence supporting their founding Disciple’s authority and blessing steeled the Johannine Community against their Christian and Jewish rivals.

The typological resonance of the idealized Beloved Disciple within the narrative complicates the task of ascertaining the historical and symbolic characteristics of the man himself. The degree to which the Beloved Disciple’s character was constructed for the sake of the narrative is difficult to say for certain, but hedging is possible. Brown clarifies that, although a historical person, “the Beloved Disciple functions in the Gospel as the embodiment of Johannine idealism: All Christians are disciples and among them greatness is determined by a loving relationship to Jesus, not by function or office.”<sup>73</sup> As we have discussed at length, this idealism was most-likely modeled on the real, historical attributes of the man known as the Beloved Disciple. In other words, the real man shaped the gospel narrative, and he was then idealized and superimposed onto that narrative.

The idealized Beloved Disciple may ought to be seen as anachronistic to the narrative he inhabits, a superimposition of a revered leader onto the eyewitness testimony he had given “to the believers who had gathered around him.”<sup>74</sup> Brickle suggests that we see the Beloved Disciple as the Johannine Community “vividly projecting a sophisticatedly rendered, temporally oriented vision of the past onto their present.”<sup>75</sup> That is to say, maybe it is more accurate to see the Beloved Disciple within the narrative of the Gospel as a realistic portrait of the man known by the members of the community. That man, that revered leader, would not have been the same man who witnessed the events to which he later testified; if the Gospel of John is to be taken at

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70 Minear, 111.

71 Minear, 113; Jn 13:23, 25; 21:20 (NAB).

72 Minear, “Some Clues,” 113.

73 Brown, *Churches*, 93.

74 Culpepper, *John*, 71.

75 Brickle, “Memory,” 201.

its word, belief changes a person. Things that were once misunderstandings are later understood. Perhaps the Beloved Disciple's "mature reflections" are, as Brickle puts it, merely a part of "a sculpted version of the past that he imposed upon his shifting present,"<sup>76</sup> an idealized narrative constructed to bring unity and authority to a community in crisis. In such a case, the Beloved Disciple would merely be integrating into his testimony all that he knows now but didn't know then. Thus, the "idealized" character of the Beloved Disciple would not be any less real than the historical man on which he is based.

Even if the character of the Beloved Disciple were more severely reconstructed for the sake of the gospel narrative, however, his historical existence and roots must be maintained. The degree to which the Beloved Disciple has been fictionalized is ultimately irrelevant, so long as fictionalization is not mistaken for fabrication. Fictionalization implies a literal existence – a *who* – that has been narratively manipulated into a *what*. Paradoxically, the Beloved Disciple must be tangibly, physically real in order to be a symbol. He needs a past for his memories and testimony to have authority. He needs a present for the Johannine Community to revere him. And he needs a future (or, more accurately, a lack of one following his death) in order for the community to place their trust in what he represented through his very human life – the open call to discipleship and the role of the Paraclete in the survival of a Christian community. Knowing all of this, *who* the Beloved Disciple was doesn't matter. Because his identity is so intrinsically linked to the Johannine Community and its Gospel, asking *what* he was to them tells us all we need to know: He was the embodiment of their past, the ideal they set for their present, and their hope for the future.



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76 Brickle, 190.