

# His Name Is John

## The Beloved Disciple and Author of the Fourth Gospel

**ISSUE:** Is the Apostle John the beloved disciple and author of the fourth Gospel?

**Discussion:** Yes. The Church, which alone has been given the task of interpreting God's written and spoken Word, has consistently taught that Saint John was the beloved disciple and the author of the Gospel "According to John."

Some biblical scholars say that John the Apostle is neither the beloved disciple nor the author of the fourth Gospel. They even question whether we can accept the Gospels, particularly the Gospel of John, as genuinely historical accounts. For example, some question whether the author of the Gospel was really at the Cross during Christ's crucifixion (cf. Jn. 19:35; 21:21-24), or whether this was a later literary embellishment by the evangelist himself or the Christian faithful.

### The Fourth Gospel: Are We Even Dealing with History?

In his 1920 encyclical *Spiritus Paraclitus* (SP), a document on biblical studies which commemorated the 1,500th anniversary of the death of Saint Jerome, Pope Benedict XV addressed those who deny the historicity of the Gospels:

They refuse to allow that the things which Christ said or did have come down to us unchanged and entire through witnesses who carefully committed to writing what they themselves had seen or heard. They maintain—and particularly in their treatment of the *Fourth Gospel*—that much is due of course to the Evangelists—who, however, added much from their own imaginations; but much, too, is due to narratives compiled by the faithful at other periods, the result, of course, being that the twin streams now flowing in the same channel cannot be distinguished from one another (no. 27, original emphasis).

In responding to these critics, Pope Benedict noted that both Saints Augustine and Jerome affirmed the historical reliability of the Gospels: "None can doubt but that what is written took place," wrote Saint Jerome (in *ibid.*). For his part, the Pope himself quotes John 19:35 approvingly: "He who saw it has borne witness, and his witness is true; and he knows that he tells the truth, that you also may believe" (SP 27). The evangelist writes this immediately following his account of the crucifixion of Christ, an account which noted that the "disciple whom he loved" was at the Cross with Jesus' mother Mary (Jn. 19:26).

The Gospel of John elsewhere provides details that indicate a historical, eyewitness account. For example, the author notes that the stone wine jars at the wedding at Cana were filled to the brim (Jn. 2:7); the loaves used in the miraculous multiplication near the Sea of Galilee were made of barley (Jn. 6:9); and the fragrance of the perfume Mary used to anoint Jesus' feet filled the house in which they were staying (Jn. 12:3).

### In Search of the Beloved Disciple

The author of John provides key details in chapter 21 to help us narrow the field of candidates for the "beloved disciple." The evangelist identifies himself as the beloved disciple (Jn. 21:20-24). In this passage, he also notes that Peter is not the beloved disciple, and that the beloved disciple "had lain close to his breast at the [Last Supper] and had said, 'Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?'" (Jn. 21:20; cf. 13:23-25; 20:2). From this account, we know that the beloved disciple was at the Last Supper.

From the Gospels of Mark (14:17-26) and Matthew (26:20-30), we learn that only the twelve apostles were with Jesus at the Last Supper. Even Luke 22:14 notes that it was just "the apostles" who were present with Jesus for the Last Supper, as opposed to a larger gathering of disciples.

With the field narrowed to the apostles, we know we can immediately eliminate not only Peter but also Judas. We could also reasonably conclude that the beloved disciple would have a qualitatively different relationship with Jesus from most of the other disciples. In other words, we would expect closer collaboration between him and the

Lord. In this light, we discover that three apostles—Peter, John, and John’s brother James—spent more time with Christ than did the others. Jesus singles out this trio to accompany Him to the healing of Jairus’ daughter (Mk. 5:22-24, 35-43), the Mount of Transfiguration (Mk. 9:2-10), and the Garden of Gethsemane on Holy Thursday evening (Mk. 14:32-33). In addition, in John 1:14, the Gospel author notes that “we have beheld his glory,” a reference perhaps not just to having seen the resurrected Christ, but also to having witnessed His glorious Transfiguration, something only Peter, James, and John witnessed.

### **James or John?**

Because Peter is distinguished from the beloved disciple, we therefore narrow the field to the “sons of thunder” (Mk. 3:17), James and John. Biblical scholars date the writing of John anywhere from the late 60s to the first decade of the second century. Any year in that time period would necessarily exclude James, whom Herod Agrippa killed (Acts 12:2) during his reign in the early 40s.

This leaves us with John the Apostle as the only plausible choice as the beloved disciple. The Bible does not indicate anyone else, and the early Church only proposed John as the Gospel author and thus the beloved disciple. Saint Irenaeus (d. 202), for example, in writing about the authors of the various Gospels, notes that after Luke wrote his Gospel, “John, the disciple of the Lord who reclined at His bosom, also published a Gospel, while he was residing at Ephesus in Asia.”<sup>1</sup>

Finally, in May 1907, the Pontifical Biblical Commission (PBC) issued a declaration on the matter, affirming that  
prescinding from theological proof, it is demonstrated by such strong historical proof that John the  
Apostle and no other is to be recognized as the author of the fourth Gospel, that the reasons adduced  
by critics in opposition by no means weakens this tradition.<sup>2</sup>

It is important to note that the PBC still had magisterial status<sup>3</sup> at the time of its 1907 response. By affirming the beloved disciple’s eyewitness authorship of the fourth Gospel (Jn. 19:35), Pope Benedict implicitly supports the PBC’s 1907 affirmation of John as the beloved disciple and the author of the fourth Gospel.

Some biblical scholars still say that the beloved disciple could not be John because of the prophecy foretold in Zechariah 13:7: “Strike the shepherd, that the sheep may be scattered....” Following the Last Supper, Jesus told His disciples that this prophecy would be fulfilled that same Holy Thursday evening:

You will all fall away because of me this night; for it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.’ But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee” (Mt. 26:31-32; cf. Mk. 14:27-28; Jn. 16:32).

Some scholars argue that if all the apostles had fallen away or abandoned Jesus to fulfill Zechariah 13:7 (Mt. 26:56), none of them could have been around to stand by Our Lord at the foot of His Cross. However, the disciples’ scattering does not preclude the possibility that some of them could have come back later. Peter is later described as following Christ “at a distance” (Mk. 14:54). In addition, John 18:15 identifies another disciple near Christ after the scattering, one “known to the high priest,” who “entered the court of the high priest along with Jesus, while Peter stood outside the door.” This other disciple was likely the Apostle John.

In his *Ecclesiastical History*, the eminent early Church historian Eusebius noted that John came from a priestly family.<sup>4</sup> This is significant because the author of the fourth Gospel demonstrates an extensive knowledge of Jewish liturgy and Jerusalem, the city in which Jewish liturgy (i.e., the sacrificial aspects) took place. Finally, as we have learned from previous analysis of the Gospels, the beloved disciple was not only at the Cross but also had to be one of the twelve apostles.

### **Testimony of the Church**

When the Bible itself or its particular books and passages are called into question, we turn to the Catholic Church that Jesus Christ founded (Mt. 16:18). He commissioned the Church to teach everything that Christ had commanded (Mt. 28:20), and established the Church as the pillar and foundation of truth (1 Tim. 3:15). Only the teaching office of the Catholic Church—the Pope and the bishops in union with him—have been given authority to authentically interpret the Word of God, whether written down in Scripture or handed down in the form of Tradition (Catechism, no. 85). In submitting to the Church, we demonstrate faithfulness to Christ (cf. Lk. 10:16), who promised to be with His Church until the end of time (Mt. 28:20; cf. Jn. 16:13).

The Church has always identified the Apostle John as the author of the fourth Gospel and the beloved disciple, and this is richly reflected in the Church's liturgy. The universal Church celebrates the Feast of Saint John, Apostle and *Evangelist*, on December 27. The readings and antiphons unmistakably reflect the belief of the Church concerning these issues. For example, one of the antiphons for morning prayer on this feast day states: "John, the apostle and evangelist, a virgin chosen by the Lord, was loved by the Lord above the others."

The Church clearly teaches that the Gospels are historically true (*Dei Verbum* 19) and that the beloved disciple was really at the foot of the Cross during Christ's crucifixion. We should not be surprised that such a beloved disciple would be with Christ in His time of greatest trial. Such is the nature of true love.

<sup>1</sup> Saint Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, 3, 1, 1; as quoted in William A. Jurgens, ed., *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, vol. 1 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1970), 89.

<sup>2</sup> As quoted in Henry Denzinger, ed., *The Sources of Catholic Dogma* (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1957), trans. by Roy J. Deferrari, no. 2110.

<sup>3</sup> Until 1971, the PBC's documents had magisterial authority. In that year, however, Pope Paul VI removed its magisterial status. The PBC is currently only an advisory body that reports to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF). The CDF maintains this magisterial status. See Pope Paul VI, *Motu Proprio* "Biblical Commission: New Regulatory Laws," June 27, 1971 (AAS 63-665), as cited in *Canon Law Digest*, vol. 7 (Chicago: Chicago Province of the Society of Jesus), 184-88.

<sup>4</sup> Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, bk. 3, 31, 3 (New York: Penguin Books, 1965), trans. by G.A. Williamson.

### **Questions for Reflection or Group Discussion**

1. What proof is there that the Apostle John is the "beloved disciple" and the author of the fourth Gospel? How would I explain the authorship of the fourth Gospel to someone who rejects the authority of the Church?
2. Does the questioning of John's authorship by some Catholic scholars build the Catholic faith? Why is it important to affirm the Church's position on this matter?
3. Why did Saint John refer to himself as the "beloved disciple"? What does this say about his relationship with Christ?

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