THE BELOVED DISCIPLE IN
THE GOSPEL OF JOHN
Some Clues and Conjectures

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Johannine scholars are familiar with the search for the identity of the beloved disciple and no less familiar with the multiple frustrations encountered in that search. The role of this disciple is too important to permit abandoning the search; the evidence is too baffling to permit a confident solution. Each hypothesis leaves us with a series of conjectures, none of which can command consensus. I suggest that there are two lessons to be learned from the fact that every search ends in impasse.

First of all, our inability to grasp the intention of the Evangelist is a measure of the distance between his thought-processes and ours. We must assume that he knew what he was trying to convey by his references to this particular figure. If his intention escapes us, we must conclude that our minds move to different rhythms. We can also assume that his immediate audience understood his references to the beloved disciple better than we do. If so, the author and his first audience must have shared certain attitudes, a definite apperceptive mass, that created a resonance to his intentions which has since been lost. Where we desire to distill from each set of data certain dependable historical inferences, his desire probably moved in a quite different direction. Therefore, in listening in on this conversation we should lay aside our preoccupations and become more alert to what was important to them.

In the second place, we should learn something from the author's curious refusal to name this particular disciple. It is surely not accidental that, in every context where this disciple remains unnamed, other disciples are carefully identified by name. The same silence characterizes John’s references to Jesus’ mother. She appears on several occasions; but though other women are named, she is never named. If we knew only this Gospel, we would never have learned her name. Why this intentional hiding of the name? We
infer that these participants had a "halo" of symbolic meanings for the Evangelist. We infer that in conveying these symbolic meanings he considered the descriptive epithets (e.g., mother, beloved) to be more significant than a name would have been. Presumably those same epithets were more evocative to his readers as well. Their reactions are almost the opposite of those of the modern exegete. We want to identify this disciple in order to solve the problem of the authorship of the Gospel (xxi 24) and thus to establish its precise place in the literary history of the period. In that original dialogue, much greater attention was given to the distinctive nuances of those descriptive phrases. In this essay our goal is to recover some of the nuances in that dialogue 1).

In that endeavor the first essential is to have a clear picture of John's audience.

John's Audience

I will proceed on the assumption that John's audience was composed mainly of Jews and that the major components in that audience were those groups which Professor J. Louis Martyn has called "conversation partners". Some of these partners were believers who, by remaining within the synagogues, had become subject to multiple pressures because of their conviction that they could simultaneously be disciples of both Moses and Jesus. Of these, probably some kept their discipleship to Jesus secret because of the hostility of fellow-Jews (Martyn, History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel, N.Y., Harper and Row, 1968, p. 105) John kept his eye on both the secret and the avowed followers of Jesus. Other partners had already broken away from the synagogue, either on their own volition or by force. John also wished to appeal to rank-and-file members of the synagogue, the common folk who had not yet accepted Jesus as the Messiah (ibid., p. 101). To reach them he had to carry on a debate with the rulers of the synagogues, the "Jamnia-trained loyalists" who sooner or later adopted the policy

1) Among possible nuances which I consider too doubtful to explore in this essay are these two. (1) John may have wished to stress this feature of the disciple's vocation: that, like his Lord, he wanted to come not in his own name, but in that of his Lord (v 43), so that those who believed through his witness might have life in that name alone (xx 31). (2) Or he may have wished to make a point similar to one found in the Apocalypse: i.e., Jesus promised to every faithful witness a name that is hidden, a name tantamount to eternal life and membership in the Holy City (Rev. ii 17; iii 5, 12).