

Identifying the Mysterious Disciple Whom Jesus Loved

1) John 13:23-25: *One of his disciples, whom Jesus loved*, was lying close to the breast of Jesus; so Simon Peter beckoned to him and said, “Tell us who it is of whom he speaking.” So lying thus, close to the breast of Jesus, he said to him, “Lord, who is it?”

2) John 19:26-27, 34-35: When Jesus saw his mother, and the *disciple whom he loved* standing near, he said to his mother, “Woman, behold, your son!” Then he said to the disciple, “Behold, your mother!” And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home...But one of the soldiers pieced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water. He who saw it has borne witness — his testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth — that you also may believe.

3) John 20:2-8 So she [Mary Magdalene] ran, and went to Simon Peter and *the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved*, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” Peter then came out with the other disciple, and they went toward the tomb. They both ran, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first; and stooping to look in he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. . . Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in. . .

4) John 21: 1. After this Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he revealed himself in this way. 2. Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples were together...7. *That disciple whom Jesus loved* said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his clothes, for he was stripped for work, and sprang into the sea...20. Peter turned and saw following them the disciple whom Jesus loved, who had lain close to his breast at the supper and had said, “Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?” When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, “Lord, what about this man?” Jesus said to him, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!” The saying spread abroad among the brethren that this disciple was not to die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he was not to die, but, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?” *This is the disciple who is bearing witness to these things, and who has written these things; and we know that his testimony is true.*

It is also possible that the Beloved Disciple is mentioned in John 18:15 though he is not given that designation: “Simon Peter followed Jesus, and so did *another disciple*. As this disciple was known to the high priest, he entered the court of the high priest along with Jesus, while Peter stood outside at the door. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out and spoke to the maid who kept the door, and brought Peter in.”

Based on these texts I make the following points:

1. The Beloved Disciple is a male, not a woman, and since Mary Magdalene arrives at the tomb and then runs to tell Peter and this “other disciple” whom Jesus loved, the news of the empty tomb, “he” cannot be Mary Magdalene.

2. Anyone mentioned by name in the Gospel of John, and especially in these latter chapters, 13-21, is likely not the Beloved Disciple, on the grounds that his identity is being veiled not revealed with a name. That means we can eliminate those mentioned in John 21:1-2, as well Philip, Andrew, and Judas Iscariot of the Twelve, but also Lazarus I think.

3. If we accept the reference in John 18:15 as referring to our figure, the Beloved Disciple seems to have *priestly connections* in that he is able to get Peter into the courtyard of the High Priest’s house, knowing the woman at the door.

4. The Beloved Disciple takes Jesus’ mother Mary into his care, when Jesus as the oldest son of the family was formerly responsible for the family as function “head of the house.” He is officially designated as the “son” meaning that he is now to carry on the caretaker function for the household that Jesus no longer could do. Whether this scene at the cross is to be taken as historical fact or not, I think it nonetheless reflects a tradition that Jesus’ mother was passed into the care of one who became the “son” in charge of the family, including his mother. Obviously he is gone from the scene and someone has to take over in terms of leadership in the family and care for his mother.

5. The Beloved Disciple is present at the last supper, and thus, based on Mark at least, possibly one of the Twelve, though John does not specify this, i.e., that the meal was with Jesus and the Twelve alone. The description of this disciple “lying close to Jesus’ breast” at the Last Supper indicates an honored place of proximity and intimacy. Jesus loves all his disciples but this particular one has a special place.

I am convinced that these traditions in the Gospel of John refer to a real person, not a symbolic figure. He should be known to us in other texts and in early Christian tradition by name. If we eliminate characters who are named in these latter sections of the Gospel, particularly Lazarus, Simon Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, Philip, Andrew, and James and John, the two sons of Zebedee, and Judas Iscariot, who is left?