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Review: The Beloved Disciple

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alogy" (7:3; p. 136). Yet Melchizedek is *named*; it is simply that several *other* significant characteristics are not provided in the respective narrative, an omission that enlarges the potential for a given reader to fill in the narrative space with imagination. For this reason a theory that focuses unilaterally on the presence or absence of a name at the exclusion of other identifying traits appears unduly narrow.

Sixth and last, is Beck's thesis correct? I am not certain that it is not, but I have considerable doubt that it is. To begin with, the sample size of only seven significant anonymous characters in the fourth gospel—six if the adulterous woman of chap. 8 is eliminated, and she should be on textual grounds—is very small, which renders a definite verification of Beck's hypothesis precarious. Moreover, in light of the above stated reservations, a more nuanced assessment seems called for. It is *probable* that "the disciple Jesus loved" has ideal aspects encouraging reader identification; it is *possible* that the mother of Jesus, the Samaritan woman, the royal official and the blind man do; but it is *doubtful* whether the infirm man does. Of course, Beck himself is not interested here in the question of how anonymity relates to authorial intention. But for those of us who are, reality turns out to be more complex than Beck's monolithic theory. To be sure, at times John may refrain from naming a given character for the purpose of reader identification; at other times, however, he may do so for other reasons, such as the insignificance of the person's name, his reader's presumed familiarity with it, or his ignorance of it; or a combination of these factors may be at work. And who is to say that John sought to discourage reader identification (positive *or* negative) in the case of *named* characters (such as Jesus or Judas) or unnamed *groups* (such as the disciples or "the Jews")? These questions remain.

If a work is as strong as its thesis, this book falls short of persuading. If a work is as reliable as its methodological foundation, I have serious reservations. If a work has some redeeming value if it is well-written and yields some interesting insights, this book may still benefit those unconvinced by its thesis or skeptical regarding its method.

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*The Beloved Disciple.* By James H. Charlesworth. Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995, xxv + 481 pp., \$30.00.

This work is primarily an attempt to discover the identity of the anonymous "disciple whom Jesus loved" in the gospel of John. Charlesworth discusses 22 different positions held on this question by scholars, and says that experts now generally hold that the Beloved Disciple was one of the following: (1) one of the unnamed disciples mentioned in John 21:2, (2) Lazarus (cf. John 11:3, 5, 36), (3) a narrative fiction or *typos*, or (4) John the son of Zebedee. He quickly disposes of the last two views (even Schnackenburg and Brown no longer accept the traditional Johannine view, he notes), and proceeds to a narrative criticism of the gospel.

First, Charlesworth concludes that three men were involved in creating the gospel: (1) the Beloved Disciple, who provided the oral "witness" to Jesus' words and works (21:24), (2) the evangelist, who wrote the gospel in two editions (adding chaps. 15–17 and references to the Beloved Disciple in the second edition) and (3) an editor who added chap. 21 as an appendix. The gospel is a Jewish composition, written before AD 100 in

western Syria or Palestine. The Johannine community was undergoing three social crises: (1) Johannine Jews were being expelled from the synagogues, (2) the community was divided by a schism, concerning whether Jesus did come in the flesh and (3) the Beloved Disciple, who was a real person and an eyewitness of the Jesus tradition, had recently died, which was unexpected and traumatic to the community (cf. 21:23).

Next, Charlesworth attempts an exegesis of the passages in which the Beloved Disciple appears (in John 13, 19, 20, 21). He must be one of the disciples listed in 21:2; Peter and the sons of Zebedee are immediately ruled out, leaving only Nathanael, Thomas and an anonymous disciple. Since chap. 21 was composed by an editor at least partly to clarify the identity of the Beloved Disciple, he cannot remain anonymous; he must therefore be either Nathanael or Thomas. In addition, chap. 19 depicts the Beloved Disciple as the only male disciple present at Jesus' crucifixion, and the only one to see a soldier pierce Jesus' side with a spear (19:34–35).

On Easter morning when Peter and the Beloved Disciple entered the empty tomb, the latter "saw and believed" (20:8). This cannot represent a belief in Jesus' resurrection (though almost every modern commentator disagrees), for several reasons: the next verses state that neither disciple understood what the Scriptures said about Jesus rising from the dead, they left Mary Magdalene crying at the tomb and went to their own homes (rather than to announce the resurrection to the other disciples), and the Beloved Disciple (who is the "ideal witness") abruptly disappears from the story (excluding the appendix, chap. 21). How can the "leading character" exit the drama without a profession of faith in Jesus' resurrection?

Charlesworth solves this problem by concluding that the Beloved Disciple is none other than Thomas, who makes the final and most profound confession in the book: "My Lord and My God" (20:28). Thomas did not "doubt" Jesus' resurrection; he merely demanded clear evidence on which he could base his future witness. And the fact that he wanted to place his hand into the wounded side of Jesus (20:25) shows that he was present at the cross; the only disciple who saw the wounding of Jesus' side was the Beloved Disciple. Thomas is thus the disciple *par excellence* who could provide a witness to the fact that the precrucifixion Jesus was the same as the post-resurrection Jesus. The entire gospel is tied together by this witness: Jesus, the Word from God, became flesh, died, then rose again with the same flesh, now glorified.

There is a prodigious amount of research and minute exegesis in this book. It will take its place alongside the recent works of Brown, Culpepper, Hengel and Schnackenburg on the Johannine question, but may not garner much support. The author admits that his thesis is novel and that it has not been proposed by any other scholar working purely within the exegesis and context of John's gospel. It is unfortunate that he dismisses the traditional position so easily. He follows probabilities with possibilities, carrying the reader along on waves of very sparse evidence.

The argument focuses so heavily on narrative-critical methodology that only what is stated in the narrative is allowed to influence the exegesis. For example, many of the disciples may have watched Jesus die, so the fact that Thomas knew about the wound in Jesus' side may be insignificant. In fact, even if the Beloved Disciple were the only disciple present, would he not describe the scene to the others later that day? Yet, since the narrative says nothing of these possibilities, Charlesworth makes Thomas' knowledge of this event a key factor in his identification. This separation of narrative exegesis from historical probability severely limits the credibility of his proposal.

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