

INTERNAL EVIDENCE FOR THE AUTHORSHIP OF JOHN'S GOSPEL

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Determining from internal evidence the authorship of John's gospel requires establishing the identity of "*the disciple whom Jesus loved*": "*This [disciple that Jesus loved] is the disciple that bears witness of these things and wrote them, and we know his testimony is true*" (21:24 + 20). A similar comment appears in the account of the spear thrust: "*He that has seen has borne witness, and his witness is true; and he knows he says true things that you may believe*" (19:35; cp. 20:30-31). The characteristic description appears five times in the gospel beginning with the night before Christ's death: 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7, and 21:20.¹ Other more vague references to unnamed men include the second of "two disciples" of John that heard Jesus speak (1:35-39), the first being Andrew (1:40); and "another disciple," known by the high priest (18:15).

Since 13:23 appears during the account of events in the upper room on the eve of the crucifixion, we surmise that (a) the writer was one of the twelve. Jesus ate the Passover meal with his apostles (Matthew 26:17-30 = Mark 14:12-26 = Luke 22:7-39).

So it is virtually certain that (b) no apostle that accompanies "*the disciple Jesus loved*" is the author. That observation eliminates Simon Peter (13:8, *etc.*; 21:2, *etc.*), Thomas Didymus (14:5, *etc.*; 21:2, *etc.*), Philip (14:8, *etc.*), Nathanael (21:2), and, of course, Judas Iscariot (13:2, *etc.*). We assume that the writer consistently used this self-description and did not also name himself in these accounts. Although he could have done both, one of the three most prominent apostles is not named in the fourth gospel.

Another assumption is that only the Twelve attended the Last Supper. Mark 14:51-52 mentions a "young man" that accompanied Jesus and the apostles to the Garden after the Passover meal. The unidentified person may have been John Mark since the incident is only in his gospel. Instead of being present in the upper room, however, he may have lived in the house where the Supper was held; when he heard the company leave for Gethsemane, he followed them (Mark 14:52). Later, when the angel released Peter from prison, he went to Mark's mother's² house, where many had gathered to pray (Acts 12:12). Several later incidents may have occurred in this same place, including some of the appearances (Mark 16:14 = Luke 24:33-43 = John 20:19-29) and the proceedings that led to Pentecost ("*the upper chamber*" of Acts 1:12-2:4).

(c) No one specifically named in the gospel is the author. The reason for substituting a description for his name would apply anywhere his name would otherwise have appeared. On that basis, we can set aside Andrew (1:40, *etc.*); "*Judas, not Iscariot*" (14:22), whom we identify with Judas, son of James (Luke 6:16; Acts 1:13); and Thaddaeus Libbaeus (Matthew 10:3; Mark 3:18; see elsewhere *Critical Introduction to the New Testament* document "Comparing Listings of Apostles").

(d) Matthew has his own gospel, and (e) James, the brother of John, is not likely because he was martyred so early—by A.D. 44 (Acts 12:2).

These observations remove eight apostles as authors of the fourth gospel, which leaves John, the son of Zebedee; Bartholomew; James, the son of Alphaeus; and Simon, the Cananaean/Zelotes. Nathanael evidently equals either Bartholomew; James, the son of Alphaeus; or Simon the Cananaean. Since Simon already has a second designation, Nathanael must be one of the first two. In that case, the other is a possible author. On the basis of the synoptics,

however, the apostle John was by far the most prominent of these four, being referred to the most often,² being one of the inner circle of three—Peter, James, and John (Mark 5:37 = Luke 8:51; Matthew 17:1 = Mark 9:2 = Luke 9:28; Matthew 26:37 = Mark 14:33), and becoming later a pillar of the Jerusalem church (Galatians 2:9). His absence from John’s narrative is conspicuous. Johannine authorship is affirmed by consistent external testimony of early Christian writers.

Why did John choose that description for himself? His reticence at naming himself looks away from supposing it implies favoritism. James and John were not promised the right- and left-hand seats in the kingdom (Matthew 20:20-28; Mark 10:35-45). (1) It may be an understatement chosen for a name. After all, he notes that Jesus loved his disciples to the end (17:2). (2) It may have been a fact that impressed him, being one of the two “*sons of thunder*” (Mark 3:17). That designation for him and his brother makes an interesting contrast to the emphasis on love found in Johannine literature. Sometimes what strikes people is what they lack in themselves. The descriptor reflects his response to Jesus’ love more than an objective difference in the way Jesus related to him. It would not imply favoritism; it would be a positive statement rather than a contrastive one. There may have been a special closeness between John and Jesus as perhaps implied by John’s being next to Jesus and leaning his head back on the Master’s chest during the Passover meal (13:25). John seems to have been younger than some of the other apostles since he was apparently the last apostle to die; he outran Peter to the tomb of Jesus (20:3-4). Because of his youth, Jesus may have taken special interest in him.

Since at the time of writing, John was probably the only apostle alive, the point may be that (3) in contrast to his readers and everyone else at that time, John’s life touched the life of the Lord himself. He had “tangibly” experienced the love of Jesus. That slant fits with his stress on the direct knowledge of the events he records and on the accuracy of his record (19:35; 20:30-31; 21:24-25; 1 John 1:1-4). From his contemporary perspective, he was the disciple whom Jesus loved. His readers should be sure that the love of Jesus was real, and that it would be important to them in the persecutions that lay ahead for them.

Finally, in contrast to the Gnostic’s secret knowledge for gaining salvation from hypostatic dualism, (4) the interpersonal love of Christ for his people defines the medium of Christian truth in this life and the next (cp. 1 John 3:1-2; cp. 1 Corinthians 13:8). The readers of the fourth gospel should center their understanding and experience of the faith on the same thing the writer did; they should be “*disciples whom Jesus loves.*”

¹The first two and last two references use ἀγαπάω (*agapaō*) for “love,” but 20:2 uses φιλέω (*phileō*). We doubt that much significance belongs to the difference. The two terms together offer a more complete description of the relationship between Jesus and his disciples.

²That may mean that the Last Supper was in the upper room of Mark’s mother’s house (Acts 12:12). In preparation for the Supper, Jesus sent Peter and John to τὸν δεῖνα, *such and such a person* (mas; Matthew 26:18). Mark 14:14 has his two disciples address the τῷ οἰκοδεσπότῃ, *the homeowner*, or perhaps *house manager* (mas; later called αὐτός [mas]; Mark 14:14-15; Mark equals Luke 22:11). John says nothing about the location of the Supper. In the end, these speculations get us no closer to additional persons at the Supper and as candidates for authoring the fourth gospel: Mark has his own gospel.

³Besides the many times he appears unnamed among the “disciples,” John specifically takes part in twelve different episodes: (1) 4:18-22* = Mark 1:16-21* = Luke 5:1-11*; (2) Mark 1:21-34*;

- (3) Mark **3:13-19*** = Luke **6:12-16***;
- (4) Mark **5:21-43*** = Luke **8:40-56***;
- (5) Matthew **9:35-11:1*** = Mark **6:7-13** = Luke **9:1-6**;
- (6) Matthew **17:1-8*** = Mark **9:2-8*** = **9:28-36***;
- (7) Mark **9:38-41*** = Luke **9:49-50***;
- (8) Luke **9:51-54***;
- (9) Mark **10:35-45***;
- (10) Matthew **24:1-51** = Mark **13:1-37*** = Luke **21:5-36**;
- (11) Matthew **26:17-19** = Mark **14:12-16** = Luke **22:7-13***;
- (12) Mark **14:32-34***.

Asterisks indicate the actual appearance of John's name in the synoptics.

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