

Charlesworth, James H 1995 — The beloved disciple: Whose witness validates the Gospel of John?

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In this thought-provoking book James Charlesworth revisits the classical quest of many centuries for the identity, role and status of the mysterious figure known in the Fourth Gospel as the 'beloved disciple' (hereafter: BD). This role and status of the BD have essentially everything to do with the formation in some stages of editing of the Fourth Gospel under the name of one 'John'. Since at least Irenaeus until modern times this BD had been taken as John the son of Zebedee, who allegedly was the author of the Fourth Gospel. Charlesworth contests this hypothesis and joins hands and heads with P Parker (1962), R Schnackenburg (1970) and E Haenchen ([1980] 1984) who raised 21 firm and sound arguments against the identification of the BD with John of Zebedee and against the viewpoint that he had written the Fourth Gospel (pp xff).

Any identification of who the BD might have been must fulfil eight crucial requisites, namely those of love as *the* characteristic of the BD, anonymity, closeness to the Lord, the late stage the BD is mentioned in the gospel, his presence at the crucifixion event, his commendation by the risen Lord, fear by others at the death of the BD, and his close link to Peter (pp xiv-xviii). Charlesworth maintains that the references to the BD were not part of the first edition of the gospel narrative, since they were added by the author/editor when he edited his own work. Furthermore, he contends that the BD was the founder of the Johannine community/church in which a school was incorporated (p 4).

This BD was a real historical person, an ideal disciple of Jesus, and a special eyewitness who alone guarantees, together and on a par with the Synoptics, authentic access to the historical Jesus. After having stated seven good and valid reasons why his specific hypothesis on who the BD has not as yet come to the surface (pp 6-10), together with eight quite acceptable reasons for revisiting the whole quest (pp 14-21), Charlesworth postulates the hypothesis that the available evidence from the Fourth Gospel justifies the assumption that the author/editor knew the identity of the BD quite well and that during the formation period of the gospel he gradually unveiled his identity by his rhetoric and by the profound symbolic language used (p 21).

After his critical but cautious analyses of the words of the author/editor of the fourth gospel, *but* especially without being influenced and biased by what the Synoptics have to say, Charlesworth postulates his innovative (and for some people even *alarming!*) hypothesis, namely that *the BD is none other than Thomas, called the Twin (Didymus), and who was one of the twelve disciples of Jesus* — the one on whom the fourth evangelist focuses the spotlight in the final concluding scene of the Fourth Gospel narrative as depicted in Jn 21:24 (p 48, 388f, 413 passim; final conclusion on pp 422-37). Consequently, Charlesworth brilliantly analyses the six passages in John's gospel where the BD appears, namely, 13:23-6; 19:25-27; 20:2-10; 21:7, 20-23, 24 (pp 29-126). Throughout, he keeps in close contact and enters into discussion with 142 scholars and exponents of hypotheses, some of which concur to a degree although the vast majority radically disagree with his own hypothesis. He shows that only someone such as Thomas who had been positional so singularly in the spotlight and at the centre of the final scene of the Johannine narrative in 21:24-8, and who made the appealing and surrendering witness of, *My Lord, and my God!*, could be designated as the BD. The crucifixion scene in John 19 depicts the BD as stand-

ing near the cross together with the women and as seeing how the lance pierced Jesus' side; this corresponds and harmonises well with Thomas' declared willingness to die with Jesus (see 11:16). Moreover, the entire gospel and its message, especially the resurrection belief, are based on and substantiated by the trustworthy eye-witness of one like Thomas who, as the classical and master inquisitor, refused to believe any story about the rising of Jesus from the death, since he insisted and relied exclusively only on his *personal encounter* with the resurrected Lord Jesus (pp 118-121). Hence, the uncontested principal credibility and authority of the BD's witness for the Jesus tradition in the Fourth Gospel could be established (pp 120 *passim*).

Charlesworth asserts with confidence that his identification of the BD with Thomas, one of the twelve disciples, validly fits into and is in easy harmony with his postulated eight requisites for any such identification. None of the other eleven disciples qualifies in terms of these requisites (see Chapter 3, pp 127-224, especially pp 223f). As a matter of fact, according to Charlesworth, there are as many as *twelve* insights gathered from in-depth exegesis of the six passages where the BD figures and which confirm that the most likely candidate for the role and status of the BD is Thomas (see pp 225f). This conviction is additionally strengthened by another *eleven* 'narrative windows' (p 287) which form exegetical indications throughout the whole gospel narrative and which pertain to Thomas' role, character and conduct as compared and collated by that of the BD (see §§4.1-4.11, pp 225-87). Ultimately, Charlesworth substantiates his innovative hypothesis on the identity of the BD by sustaining evidence from extra-biblical sources such as the earliest Thomas traditions as, for example, represented by the *Gospel of Thomas* (Nag Hammadi Library). In all these biblical and extra-biblical sources a strong element of rivalry between the churches/theologians of East (Jerusalem) and West (Rome) must be detected, which means a rivalry between Thomas and Peter respectively. This factor vindicates the downgrading of Thomas for the sake of Peter by, *inter alia*, Irenaeus (see Chapter 8, esp. pp 408-410). This seems to be a fairly sound perspective on and a valid judgment of the true state of affairs at that point in the developing church polity and of the then general theological perceptions/sentiments.

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