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Who Is the “Beloved Disciple” in the Gospel of John? - *Hypothesis or Solution for the Johannine Paternity of the Gospel?* –

Stelian TOFANĂ

Stelian TOFANĂ

“Babeş-Bolyai” University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Email: s_tofana@yahoo.com

Abstract

The present study deals with a delicate problem among the New Testament biblical scholars, namely, that of identifying the person who hides himself behind the phrase “The disciple whom Jesus loved”. In the examination of the hypotheses launched to solve the problem, we analysed, in particular, the so-called “Petrine circle” of Disciples, which appears in the Synoptic Gospels, the Acts and the Fourth Gospel. By comparing some episodes from John’s Gospel in which an Apostle appears in Peter’s entourage under the phrase “The Disciple whom Jesus loved”, with others recorded in the Synoptic Gospels and the Acts, in which Peter appears having around him the Apostle John, I tried to identify the one who in the Gospel according to John is defined as the “Beloved Disciple”. The importance of this possible identification for the authorship of the Fourth Gospel can be seen from the analysis offered by the present study.

Keywords:

Beloved Disciple, Jesus, Apostle John, Paternity, Gospel, Hypothesis, “Peter Circle”

Among the four canonical Gospels of the New Testament, the Gospel according to John occupies a special place. The way in which this writing reveals the mystery of Jesus’ Person, as well as the way in which the author

arranges the material from a theological perspective, gave it a unique status among the four New Testament writings called Gospels.

This was the reason why the authorship of the Fourth Gospel constituted for specialists a subject of analysis and research, thoroughly discussed, so that today it is not easy to make a summary of the various hypotheses that have been proposed¹ to identify its author and to let the problem be approached without prejudice.

In the present study we will deal with this very problem analysing the mysterious phrase “the Beloved Disciple” (Joh 13, 23; 19, 26; 20,2 ; 21,7.20), in the context of some hypotheses launched in order to resolve the paternity of the Gospel which in the canon of the New Testament appears under the title “KATA IWANNHN”.

I. Allusions in the Gospel with regard to the author

In the Fourth Gospel, the author doesn’t reveal his name anywhere, but, nevertheless, he did not leave his work without any indications in this regard. This way of referring the author to his writing must be understood only in the light of his obvious intention not to reveal his identity at all.

The clues regarding the author of the writing, as many as there are, begin with the Prologue of the Gospel, where it is stated: “*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His Glory* (ἑθεασάμεθα τὴν δόξαν αὐτοῦ)...” (Joh1,14) . The expression ἑθεασάμεθα allows the assumption that the author of the book could be among the eyewitnesses of the contemplation of the divine glory of the Incarnate Word. This assumption can also be confirmed by the text of the first Epistle of Saint

¹ In connection with the strict question regarding the author of the Fourth Gospel, see, L. L. MORRIS, *Studies in the Fourth Gospel*, London 1969; E. MALATESTA, *St. John's Gospel*, Roma, 1967; R. KYSDAN, *The Fourth Evangelist and his Gospel*, Augsburg Fortress Pub, 1975; Donald GUTHRIE, *New Testament Introduction*, Downers Grove, Illinois, SUA, 1992, pp. 252-283; Rudolf SCHNACKENBURG, *Das Johannesevangelium*, I Teil (Herder), Freiburg-Basel-Wien, 1965, pp. 60-101; William HENDRIKSEN, *John* (NTC), Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2007, pp. 3-31; Jean ZUMSTEIN, *L'Évangile selon Saint Jean (1-12)*, Labor et Fides, Genève, 2014, pp. 30-40; Raymond BROWN, *The Gospel according to John, 1-12*, (Anchor Bible), New York, 1966, pp. LXXXVII-CV.

John where we find the same expression regarding the possible author of the writing: “*What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes (ὃ ἑθεασάμεθα), what we have looked at and what our hands have handled about the Word of Life ... these things we write to you so that our joy may be complete*” (I Joh1,1-4). It seems that the first person plural (we saw - ὃ ἑθεασάμεθα) fulfils here the same function as in the Prologue of the Gospel.

Referring to this text, some biblical scholars have interpreted the pronoun “we” in the Gospel as referring to Christians in general². But the Gospel statement quoted above would lose its meaning if it were not understood as coming from the perspective of an eyewitness. The author does not state that the Word became flesh in a general sense, but speaks about the Word that dwelt among “us”, that is, among his Disciples. There is no doubt that the expression ἐν ἡμῖν in the contents of the fourth Gospel refers to all mankind, but the following verb ἑθεασάμεθα³ which appears in Joh1,14, associated with the personal pronoun “we”, refers only to the eyewitnesses of the contemplation of Jesus’ Person.

Despite the fact that this verb has been interpreted by some exegetes as referring to a more spiritual sight⁴, however, the New Testament use of this verb suggests that the “sight” is primarily a physical one as in the text of Joh 1,14⁵.

Regardless of the conclusion reached regarding the meaning of the phrase “We saw His glory”, one thing seems certain, namely, that the author

² See Donald GUTHRIE, *New Testament Introduction*, Downers Grove, Illinois, SUA, 1992, p. 253. See also C. H. DODD, *The Johannine Epistles*, Harper, New York, 1946, p. 12.

³ Regarding the semantic meaning of the verb θεάομαι (ἑθεασάμεθα), G. Zevini states: “L’emploi du verbe θεάομαι contient l’idée d’un regard prolongé, qui s’ouvre à la contemplation et à l’intériorité. L’homme devant le Jésus terrestre est invité à contempler le mystère” (cf. Georges ZEVINI, *Commentaire spirituel de l’Evangile de Jean*, I, Paris 1995, p. 33).

⁴ C. K. BARRETT, *The Gospel according to St. John*, London 1978, p. 166, categorically states that in Joh 1,14 is not about an eyewitness, but about the apostolic Church. But his reason for excluding an apostolic witness is that he has already concluded that the author was not an Apostle, thus leaving it to be understood that the author is speaking in the name of the apostolic Church.

⁵ See details in this regard, J. H. BERNARD, *Gospel according to St. John*, I (ICC), Edinburgh, 1928, p. 19 ff.

intended the readers of his writing to understand the related evangelical facts as having been testified by eyewitnesses, many of them being seen and contemplated by himself.

Referring to the same meaning of the text Joh1,14 regarding the author as being an eyewitness of what was contemplated, Saint Cyril of Alexandria wrote:

“The wise Evangelist continues his statements, feeling obliged to explain through them the previous ones. For, having said about the Son of God «we saw his glory...», so that it does not appear that he alone says this, the plural «we saw» not fitting a single person, joins with himself a witness with the same name who has the same righteous faith as him, and says: «John testified about Him and cried out» (Joh 1,15)”⁶.

Another episode that refers to the problem of the author of the Gospel is the one that happened in the context of Jesus’ crucifixion on the Cross. This is what the Evangelist writes: “*And he who has seen has borne witness, and his witness is true; and he (ἐκεῖνος) knows that he is telling the truth, so that you also may believe*” (Joh 19, 35). The previously event evoked by the Evangelist is that of the piercing of the Lord’s rib with a spear by one of the soldiers charged with the execution of the Saviour, so the text quoted above can only refer to this event.

But since in the expression of the author in the following verse appears the plural ταῦτα (Joh 19, 36), it means that the eyewitness must have considered and spoken about the entire activity of Christ, which has as culminating point the death on the cross: “*For these things (ταῦτα) were done, that the scripture should be fulfilled...*”. The question is, if the writer is referring to him or to someone else who bears witness? If the author intends that his readers does not consider him a witness of the narrated events, then the statement should be understood as highlighting only the fact that the source of the description was an eyewitness⁷.

⁶ St. CHIRIL AL ALEXANDRIEI, *Comentariu la Evanghelia Sfântului Ioan*, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești* 41, București, 2000, p. 117. Of course, the Evangelist’s reference was to Saint John the Baptist.

⁷ See details, Donald GUTHRIE, *New Testament Introduction*, p. 254.

Indeed, the meaning of the term ἐκείνος appears in the text to be quite ambiguous, being able to designate either a witness different from the author, or a witness identical to the author. But, although it cannot be stated with certainty it seems that the author, nevertheless, will have intended to refer first of all to himself as an eyewitness of the related events, and then to other possible witnesses of what happened. So, the text in Joh 19, 35 can be interpreted as a direct reference to the author of the Gospel, who is none other than one of the eyewitnesses of the drama on Golgotha.

The passage Joh 21, 24-25 is equally problematic to interpret in the sense of an argument in supporting the Johannine apostolic authorship of the Gospel, since a question can be raised if these words belong to the author of the Gospel or to a scribe?⁸ This is what the author says in verse 24: “*This (Οὗτός) is the disciple who bears witness (ὁ μαρτυρῶν) of these things, and wrote these things (ὁ γράψας ταῦτα); and we know that his witness is true...*”.

As for the relevance of the demonstrative pronoun “Οὗτός” (v. 24) it should be understood as referring to the subject of the previous statement, i.e. the “beloved disciple”, the one who rested his head on Jesus’ chest at the last Supper, asking him about the Betrayer: “*Peter, turning around, saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them; the one who also had leaned back on His breast at the supper, and said, «Lord, who is the one who betrays You?»*” (Joh 21, 20). If this conclusion is correct, then the statement in Joh 21, 24 proves that this disciple was not only a witness to the work of the Saviour Christ, but also the author of what was written, that is, of the Gospel⁹.

⁸ Regarding the authenticity of these last two verses (21, 24-25) the opinions of specialists are divided: Some believe that they were added either by other disciples of Jesus, still alive, or - even more likely - by direct Disciples of the Apostle John, who wanted to bear witness to the authenticity of the writing. But, since there is no clear evidence that this statement was not part of the original material of the Gospel, it can, nevertheless, be regarded as a valuable testimony in the matter of identifying the author as the Apostle John, an eyewitness of the last moments of Jesus’ life (See details, C. H. DODD, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel*, p. 12 ff; J. ZUMSTEIN, *L’Évangile selon Saint Jean (13-21)*, Labor et Fides, Genève, 2007, p. 314).

⁹ Some biblical Scholars have avoided adopting this conclusion, stressing that the witnesses were mentioned before this statement, so that it could be assumed that the author of the last chapter was not sure of the authorship of the writing. The order of the

But, it is no less true that the Gospel could have come from another author. However, such an interpretation is forced, since if ὁ μαρτυρῶν refers to personal testimony, then γράψας must be understood in the same way, that is, referring to a personal work of the one who testifies. In this case, verse 24 mentioned above would state that “the disciple whom Jesus loved” would also be the author of the Gospel¹⁰.

II. The “beloved disciple” in the “Petrine entourage”. The problem of his identification

But for a clearer identification of the person who could hide behind the expression “the disciple whom Jesus loved” and to refer it to the possibility of understanding him as being the author of the Gospel, we should stop a little at the history of the appearance of the Risen Lord at the Sea of Tiberias to some of His Disciples. Here is what the text says: “*After this things, Jesus appeared Himself again to the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias and He manifested Himself in this way. Here were together Simon Peter, and Thomas called Didymus, and Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, and the sons of Zebedee, and two others of His disciples*” (Joh 21,1-2). What can be observed is the fact that among those mentioned, namely, the Apostles Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, *the sons of Zebedee and two others*, the “Beloved Disciple” is not mentioned. However, this one must have been part of the last four. Chapter 21 provides, in this sense, two significant details for identifying his person:

- a. First of all, it is stated that he leaned towards Jesus at the Last Supper, and asked Him who would betray him: “...*Lord, who is the one who will sell You?*” (21,20)

words, however, expresses the idea that the writing is based on a personal testimony existing before the writing (See details, D. GUTHRIE, *New Testament Introduction*, p. 253).

¹⁰ As A. C. HEADLAM points out (*The Fourth Gospel as History*, Oxford 1948, p. 44), the Gospel claims an author close to the Saviour, and John A. T. ROBINSON (*Redating the New Testament*, SCM Press, London, 1976, p. 279) believes that the present participle suggests that the disciple mentioned in the text was still alive.

- b. Secondly, it is recorded that he appears in the **immediate entourage of the Apostle Peter**. In the same verse 20, it is stated: “*Peter, turning around, saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them; the one who also had leaned back on His breast at the supper...*”¹¹.

Both actions described in 21, 20 are related to the facts mentioned in Joh 13, 23-24 during the last Easter Supper taken by Jesus with His Apostles before His Passion. This is the first episode in which this disciple is mentioned. Here is what the text says: “*There was reclining on Jesus’ breast one of His disciples, whom Jesus loved. Simon Peter therefore gestured to him, and said to him, «Tell us who it is of whom He is speaking»*” (Joh 13, 23-24). Everything recorded in this episode, and repeated in chapter 21, shows how vivid was in the memory of the narrator the commemoration of the facts to which he must have been an eyewitness. In this context, one can come to the **conclusion that the author of what is reported both in Joh 13, 23-24 as well as in Joh 21, 20.24 must have been the “Beloved Disciple” himself**¹².

In another context, related by the same chapter 21, but in the same entourage of Peter, “*the disciple whom Jesus loved*” addresses the venerable Apostle Simon announcing the surprising presence of the resurrected Lord: “*Then that disciple whom he loved Jesus said to Peter: It is the Lord!*” (Joh 21,7a). The context of what has been narrated has in the foreground the event of the wonderful fishing (cf. Joh 21,1-8), a symbol of the kingdom of heaven (cf. Matt 13, 47-48).

The miracle of an abundance of fish after a night of unsuccessful toil, described by John (21,11) and which the disciples had experienced once before in exactly the same reference conditions, i.e. without result (cf. Lk 5,1-11), flashily brings back to the mind of the “Beloved Disciple” the image of Jesus from that time. Here is what St. Luke writes in this sense: “*And when He had finished speaking, He said to Simon, «Put out into*

¹¹ See, Stelian TOFANĂ, *Introducere în Studiul Noului Testament* (Vol III). *Evangeliiile după Luca și Ioan. Problema sinoptică*, Ed. “Presa Universitară Clujeană”, Cluj-Napoca, 2001, p. 149.

¹² W. MICHAELIS, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, Gütersloh, 1964, p. 98, categorically affirms the identification of the beloved disciple with John, the son of Zebedee, especially on the basis of the evidence from Joh 21, 2.

*the deep water and let down your nets for a catch». And Simon answered and said, «Master, we worked hard all night and caught nothing, but at Your bidding I will let down the nets». And when they had done this, they enclosed a great quantity of fish; and their nets began to break; and they signalled to their partners in the other boat, for them to come and help them. And they came, and filled both of the boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw that, he fell down at Jesus' feet, saying, «Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O, Lord!» For he was astonished, and all that were with him, at the draught of the fishes which they had taken: and so also James and **John**, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, «Do not fear, from now on you will be catching men»” (Lk 5, 4-10).*

Therefore, no one could be other in the account of the author of the fourth Gospel under the mask of this name than the one who had experienced, at least once, this event as an eyewitness and who in the Lukan account is given the name, John the Apostle. From this whole context, we learn, therefore, that one of Zebedee's sons, John, used to be in *Peter's entourage* and in which he will remain, it seems, even after the Lord's resurrection. The “*Petrine entourage*” thus becomes important for identifying the person behind the expression “Beloved Disciple” and, implicitly, the author of the fourth Gospel.

Thus, the two Apostles, Peter and John, are found together again, mentioned under the same formula “Peter and the other disciple whom Jesus loved” at the moment when Mary Magdalene was hurrying to bring them the news of the disappearance of Jesus' body from tomb: “*And so she ran and came to Simon Peter, and to the other disciple whom Jesus loved, and said to them, «They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him»”* (Joh 20, 2). The author of the story remarks that the “Beloved Disciple” believed when he saw the empty tomb (cf. Joh 20, 8)¹³. And from this circumstance we can deduce the fact that the “Beloved Disciple” could not be other one than the author of what

¹³ For a development of the idea that the belief in the resurrection first arises from the empty tomb, see Stelian TOFANĂ, “De la mormântul gol la credința pascală. O viziune ioaneică (In. 20,1-10)”, in: *Renașterea*, 4, Cluj-Napoca, 2007, pp. 4-6.

is recorded in the pages of the Gospel and who did not easily forget the moment when faith filled his heart¹⁴.

Another reference to the “Beloved Disciple” is in the episode of the crucifixion, where it is recorded that Jesus left His mother in the care of him, who from that moment took her to his home: “*Then Jesus, seeing his mother and the disciple whom he loved sitting next to him, said to his mother: Woman, here is your son! Then he said to the disciple: Behold, your mother! And from that hour the disciple took her to himself*” (Joh 19, 26). There must have been a special reason why the “Beloved Disciple” was included in the Passion account! We believe that this could not be other than the more special place he had in the heart of Jesus. This affectivity of Jesus for him, the disciple will have felt and will be expected to leave it in the anonymity and modesty in which the secret of true love is hidden¹⁵.

The Apostles Peter and John also belonged to the “limited circle” of Disciples who were present by Jesus, together with Jacob, in three circumstances in which the other Apostles were absent: *the Resurrection of Jairus’ daughter* (Mk 5, 37 and parallel loc.); *the Transfiguration* (Matt 17,1 and parallel places) and the episode of the *Prayer in the Gethsemane Garden* (Mk 14, 33 and parallel loc.). The same Apostles Peter and John were chosen by the Saviour Christ to prepare the Passover for Him and His disciples: “*And He sent Peter and John, saying: “Go and prepare the Passover for us, that we may eat it”* (cf. Lk 22, 8).

After the Lord’s Resurrection and after the Pentecost the two Apostles are also presented by the author of the Book of Acts as forming the restricted “**Petrine circle**”:

- Peter and John go up to the Temple together for the ninth hour prayer: “*Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the ninth hour, the hour of prayer*” (Acts 3,1).

¹⁴ It is true that this detail could have been transmitted to the person who recorded these events in writing by another person, in which case the author of the writing would be someone different from the one named “the Beloved Disciple”. But the narrative unfolds so natural that such an interpretation is almost excluded. Therefore, the first interpretation is preferable: the identification of the “Beloved Disciple” with the Apostle John.

¹⁵ Cf. Stelian TOFANĂ, *Introducere în Studiul Noului Testament* (Vol III). *Evangeliiile după Luca și Ioan*, p. 151. This is the only episode recorded by the Evangelist in which the “Beloved Disciple” is not present with Peter.

- Peter and John, in front of the Sanhedrin, amaze its members with their boldness and courage in preaching the resurrected Lord: “Now as they observed the confidence of Peter and John, and understood that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were marvelling, and began to recognize them as having been with Jesus” (Acts 4, 13).
- Peter and John are also sent from Jerusalem to Samaria to preach the Gospel: “Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent them Peter and John who came down and prayed for them, that they might receive the Holy Spirit” (Acts 8, 14-15).

The two Apostles are also presented as being together in Saint Paul’s reference to the “Pillar Apostles” of the Church in Jerusalem: Jacob, Cephas and John (cf. Gal 2, 9).

All this evidence suggests the probability that the “Disciple whom Jesus loved” mentioned in the texts in which he is revealed only by this name was the Apostle of the Lord, John, the son of Zebedee¹⁶.

Therefore, the fact that in “*Peter’s entourage*” after the Resurrection the name of the Apostle John is mentioned, allows us to assume that even before the Resurrection in the mentioned episodes with regard to the same close circle of the Apostle Peter couldn’t be another person than the same Apostle John.

This supposition is also strengthened by the fact that nowhere in the fourth Gospel the Apostle John is recorded by name, although he is mentioned twenty times in the Synoptic Gospels.

To all these aspects is also added the detail that Saint John the Baptist is called in the Fourth Gospel simply “John”, without other designations. This is unlikely to be a coincidence! We believe that the author of the Gospel would have wanted the Apostle John to be recognized under another name, leaving himself, in this case, in the anonymity of modesty and respect due to the “magisters”, John, the son of Zebedee, being also a

¹⁶ It is significant that this identity was accepted without doubt by the Patristic Writers who saw in the Apostle John the author of the Gospel that bears his name. Origen and St. John Chrysostom view the description of the “Beloved Disciple” as providing the key to the evangelical purpose (See details, ORIGEN, *Comentar la Evangelhia după Ioan*, Oradea 1995, p. 24; Sfântul IOAN GURĂ DE AUR, *Comentar la Evangelhia de la Ioan*, Oradea, 1998, pp. 11-12).

disciple of St. John the Baptist. Therefore, precisely this lack of specific references to the author of the Gospel creates an inclination towards a Johannine authorship of it, and the alternative hypotheses must recognize this particularity and offer an adequate explanation as well.

A detail not without significance and which deserves special attention is the late appearance of the “Disciple whom Jesus loved” in the account of the fourth Gospel. In this sense, we ask the question: Why does he not appear before the Paschal Supper as he is mentioned by the Synoptic Evangelists?

Examining the references to the Apostle John in the Gospel according to Mark, for instance, one can be seen that he appears in the following episodes:

- In the story of the calling of the Apostles by the Saviour, where his name is found among the Twelve: “*And He appointed the twelve: Simon (to whom He gave the name Peter), and James, the son of Zebedee, and John the brother of James (to them He gave the name Boanerges, which means, «Sons of Thunder»)*” (Mk 3, 16-17).
- In the episode of the Transfiguration: “*And six days later, Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John, and brought them up to a high mountain and He was transfigured before them*” (Mk 9, 2).
- In the episode of the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law: “*And immediately after they had come out of the synagogue, they came into the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon’s mother-in-law was lying sick with a fever; and immediately they spoke to Him about her*” (Mk 1, 29-30).
- In the house of Jairus, together with Peter and Jacob: “*And He allowed no one to follow with Him, except Peter and James and John the brother of James*” (Mk 5, 37).
- In the description of the episode in which John is the one who forbids an exorcist to drive out demons in the name of Jesus: “*And John said to him: «Teacher, I saw someone, who does not go with us, casting out demons in your name; and I stopped him, because he does not go with us»*” (Mk 9, 38).
- In the request for a leading place in the kingdom of heaven, together with his brother, Jacob: “*And James and John, the two sons of Zebe-*

dee, came up to Him, saying to Him: «Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask of You»” (Mk 10, 35).

- In the small group of disciples who asked for a sign about the end of the world: “And as He was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter and James and John and Andrew were questioning Him privately, «Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are going to be fulfilled»” (Mk 13, 3-4).
- In the episode of Jesus’ prayer in the Gethsemane Garden, before His Passion: “And they came to a place named Gethsemane; and He said to His disciples, «Sit here until I have prayed». And He took with Him Peter and James and John, and began to be very distressed and troubled” (Mk 14, 32-33).

What we can observe from these texts is the fact that the presentation made by the Evangelist Mark does not cast a very favourable light on the image of the Apostle John¹⁷. From the analysis of these episodes one can be easily observed that he quite often finds himself in situations which are not exactly “suitable” to his quality as an Apostle of the divine Teacher.

Saint Luke also presents him in two episodes that are not recorded in the other Synoptic accounts:

- His involvement in the preparation of the Easter: Matthew refers to the “disciples”; Mark to “two of the Apostles”; only Luke mentions John by name: “And he sent Peter and John, saying: «Go and prepare the Passover for us, that we may eat»” (Lk 22, 8).
- The expression of the desire of John and James to come down fire from heaven on an unbelieving Samaritan village: “And when His disciples James and John saw this, they said, «Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, as Elijah also did?»” (Lk 9, 54).

Referring to all these texts, Donald Guthrie asked himself, not without meaning:

“Supposing John to have been the beloved disciple and the writer of the Gospel, which of these synoptic incidents would we

¹⁷ In this respect, D. Guthrie affirms: “On the whole Mark’s picture does not flatter John” (Donald GUTHRIE, *New Testament Introduction*, p. 257).

have expected him to relate?”¹⁸ And he answered: “Those which illustrated his fiery nature? Since the stories of his weakness were no doubt already well known and his triumph over these weakness was abundantly manifest in his life, he would reserve his personal appearances in his own story of Jesus for those hours during which he had learned in a special measure to draw closer to the heart and mind of Jesus than others had done”¹⁹.

However, in this situation arises a problem: Can a man describe himself as “the disciple whom Jesus loved”? Some specialists are convinced that such a concept is improbable, so, despite the strength of the cited evidence, they find another identity for the “Beloved Disciple”²⁰ or distinguish between him and the author of the Gospel²¹.

But, is it, however, so unlikely that John would call himself the disciple ὁν ἠγάπα²² ὁ Ἰησοῦς? (Joh 21,7). If the phrase indicated a preferential love of Jesus towards this disciple to the detriment of the others, then it would

¹⁸ D. GUTHRIE, *New Testament Introduction*, p. 258.

¹⁹ D. GUTHRIE, *New Testament Introduction*, p. 258. See also details in this regard, J. J. GUNTHER, “The Relation of the Beloved Disciple to the Twelve”, in: *Theologische Zeitschrift* 37 (1981), pp. 129-148; Eric L. TITUS, “The Identity of the Beloved Disciple”, in: *Journal of Biblical Literature* 69 (1950), pp. 323-328.

²⁰ For a multitude of hypotheses launched for the identification of the Beloved Disciple, see, T. LORENZEN, *Der Lieblingjünger im Johannesevangelium. Eine redaktionsgeschichtlicher Studie*, Zürich, 1971; P. S. MINEAR, “The Beloved Disciple in the Gospel of John. Some Clues and Conjectures”, in: *Novum Testamentum* 19 (1977), pp. 105-123; E. KÄSEMANN, *Exegetische Versuche und Besinnungen I*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1960, p. 180, believes that the Beloved Disciple was the ideal bearer of the apostolic witness.

²¹ R. H. STRACHAN, *The Fourth Evangelist: Dramatist or Historian*, London, 1925, is one of the biblical scholars of an older generation, who accepted the identification of the “Beloved Disciple” with John, the son of Zebedee, and believes that the Evangelist was one of the close disciples of the Lord, who received the spiritual experience of his Teacher so that he made it his own.

²² The expression is the same like in Joh 13, 23; 19, 26; 21, 7.20, but in 20, 2 the verb ἐφίλει is substituted for ἠγάπα, a verb with a slightly different meaning (See, William HENDRIKSEN, *John*, p. 487). Referring to the meaning of this phrase, J. Zumstein states: “Une relation d’amour unit ce disciple à Jésus, étant entendu que l’amour est la condition nécessaire de la connaissance authentique du Christ (cf. les discours d’adieu)” (Jean ZUMSTEIN, *L’Évangile selon Saint Jean (13-21)*, p. 271).

be difficult to understand such an attitude. But, as his first Epistle shows, the Apostle John understood, in the most profound way, the meaning of God’s love in Christ, so that the quoted expression only reveals in his Gospel his amazement and overwhelm by the love that Jesus manifested it in his person²³.

Nor should we overlook the fact that it would have been extremely difficult for a third person to dare to choose and name one of the Apostles of the Lord as the recipient, par excellence, of Jesus’ love.

Far from being a sign of pride, as has often been suggested, the phrase “the Beloved Disciple” can be seen as a *sign of modesty*: The Apostle does not mention his name, but draws attention to what he owed to Jesus for the love showed to him. Therefore, John could call himself “the Disciple whom Jesus loved”²⁴.

As final conclusion, one can affirm that the *Johannine-apostolic authorship* of the Fourth Gospel should remain the point of reference in the biblical literature when is tried to define its author.

²³ See, Donald GUTHRIE, *New Testament Introduction*, p. 258.

²⁴ Cf. Stelian TOFANĂ, *Introducere în Studiul Noului Testament* (Vol III). *Evangheliile după Luca și Ioan*, p. 155.