

John

The Disciple Whom Jesus Loved

The New Testament writings associated with John the Beloved present him as both a teacher and a model for our own discipleship.

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After Peter, John is perhaps the best known of Jesus’s original Twelve Apostles. He and his brother, James, were with Peter at some of the most important moments of the Savior’s mortal ministry, and he has been traditionally associated with five different books in the New Testament.¹ His personal closeness to the Lord is suggested by John 13:23: “Now there was leaning on Jesus’ bosom one of his disciples, whom Jesus loved.” Throughout the ages, Christian art has reflected this image, picturing John as a young man, often resting in the Savior’s arms. This is the origin of his unique title, John the Beloved, but his witness and mission reveal aspects of discipleship that we can all share.

John, Son of Zebedee

John’s Hebrew name, *Yohanan*, means “God has been gracious.” Most of the details we know about him come from the first three Gospels, which tell the story of the Savior’s mortal ministry largely from the same perspective. They all agree that John was the son of a prosperous Galilean fisherman named Zebedee, who owned his own boat and was able to hire day laborers to assist him and his sons in their work. John and his brother, James, also had a partnership with brothers Peter and Andrew, and all four left their fishing business when Jesus called them to follow Him in full-time discipleship.²





Responding to Jesus's call, John and James "left their father Zebedee in the ship with the hired servants, and went after him" (Mark 1:20).

While the Gospels do not mention Zebedee again, the mother of James and John became a follower of Jesus, interceding with Jesus on behalf of her sons and being present at the Crucifixion.³ Usually identified by the name Salome, the mother of James and John may also have been a sister of Mary, the mother of Jesus, making them first cousins of Jesus and relatives of John the Baptist.⁴

Soon after his initial call, John witnessed many of the Lord's early miracles and teachings.⁵ Seeing these miracles and listening to discourses such as the Sermon on the Mount no doubt prepared John for the moment when Jesus called him to be one of His Twelve Apostles.⁶ Of these special witnesses, Peter, James, and John formed an inner circle of close disciples who were present at significant moments of Jesus's earthly ministry:

- At the raising of the daughter of Jairus, seeing firsthand the Lord's power over death.⁷
- On the Mount of Transfiguration, where they saw Jesus revealed in His glory and

heard the voice of the Father testify that Jesus was His Son in whom He was well pleased.⁸

- On the Mount of Olives for His final prophecy about the last days.⁹
- In the Garden of Gethsemane, where they were nearby as the Savior began His great work of Atonement.¹⁰

Just as Jesus Christ gave Simon the additional name *Cephas* or Peter, which means "rock," He also gave James and John the title *Boanerges*, or "sons of thunder."¹¹ Because they asked Jesus whether they should call down fire upon a village of Samaritans who had rejected Him (see Luke 9:51–56), this nickname might suggest that they were hot-tempered or at least very strong-willed. However, it is just as likely that the name was in anticipation of the powerful witnesses that they might become, much as Peter's name probably reflected not so much his earlier devoted but impulsive nature as it did his firmness and

strength after Jesus's Resurrection.¹²

In John's appearances in the book of Acts, he is portrayed as a strong, steady companion of Peter. John was with Peter when he healed the lame man in the temple, and together they boldly preached before the Jewish leaders of Jerusalem. Together, the two Apostles traveled to Samaria to confer the gift of the Holy Ghost upon the Samaritans whom Philip had taught and baptized.¹³

Yet it is in the writings that are associated with John that he is best seen as a powerful witness of the divinity of his master and friend, Jesus Christ. These New Testament books present John as both a teacher and a model for us in our own discipleship.

Beloved Disciple

Interestingly, John is never named in the Gospel that has traditionally been attributed to him. The Gospel of John mentions the two sons of Zebedee only once, in the last chapter, where they were two of the seven disciples who met the risen Lord by the Sea of Galilee. Even there, however, they are not mentioned by name. Instead, tradition, supported by references in Restoration scripture,¹⁴ has identified John as being the anonymous "disciple whom Jesus loved" who was present at the Last Supper, the Crucifixion, the empty tomb, and in Jesus's final Sea of Galilee appearance.¹⁵

He may also have been the "other disciple" who, along with Andrew, had been a follower of John the Baptist and heard him testify that Jesus was the Lamb of God (see John 1:35–40), and it is likely that he was the disciple who accompanied Peter after Jesus's arrest and helped Peter gain access to the court of the high priest (see John 18:15–16).

In the Gospel of John, the beloved disciple

emerges as a close, personal friend of the Lord. Along with Martha, Lazarus, and Mary, John is described explicitly in this Gospel as one whom Jesus loved (see John 11:3, 5). His position at the table during the Last Supper reflected not only honor but also closeness.

Beyond his friendship with the Savior, other passages reveal him as a powerful witness of the most important events of Jesus's mission: he stood at the foot of the cross to witness the Lord's death as a sacrifice for sin, ran to the tomb after the Resurrection to confirm that it was empty, and saw the resurrected Savior.

Twice the Gospel of John mentions that it is based upon the eyewitness of the beloved disciple and emphasizes that his witness is true,¹⁶ something which echoes Joseph Smith's retitling of the Gospel as "The

Testimony of John."¹⁷

While scholars still debate the identity of the beloved disciple, if he were the Apostle John, then he was the source of the material in the Gospel, if not its original author.¹⁸ Why then did he remain unnamed, never being directly identified as the Apostle John? The answer might partly be because he intended his own experi-

ences to be types for believers and disciples in every age. By remaining anonymous, he could allow us to project ourselves into his experiences, learning how to love and be loved by the Lord and then gaining our own witnesses, which we are then called upon to share with others.

The Epistles: 1, 2, and 3 John

Like the Gospel of John, none of the three letters attributed to John ever directly name him. Nevertheless, 1 John, which is more of a doctrinal treatise than an actual letter, is closely associated with the Gospel in its style and topics, which include the importance of love and obedience, themes that the Savior taught in John's account of the Last Supper.

Written after the Gospel, 1 John begins by declaring the author's witness of the Lord Jesus Christ, "which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked

"This is the disciple which testifieth of these things, and wrote these things: and we know that his testimony is true" (John 21:24).

upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life” (1 John 1:1; emphasis added). Besides restating the opening lines of the Gospel of John, the author stresses his powerful, personal, physical witness of Jesus Christ, who was the Word of God literally made flesh.

The early Christians, who were the book’s original audience, had apparently suffered internal division with a group who espoused incorrect beliefs about Jesus having left the Church.¹⁹ In 1 John, the author is not only a witness; he is an authority called upon to correct false doctrine and counter threats to faith from anti-Christians and false spirits (see 1 John 2:18–27; 4:1–6). His mission was also to encourage those who remained faithful by sharing meaningful truths about God and Christ and the importance of continued faith and righteousness.

In 2 John and 3 John, he identifies himself simply as “the elder” and continues to stress the importance of love and obedience and the dangers of false teachers and those who reject proper Church authority.²⁰

All three of these books teach us the importance of continued devotion to the revealed Jesus Christ.

The Revelator

Of the five books attributed to him, only Revelation actually uses the name John, identifying its author three times by that name in its opening verses (see Revelation 1:1, 4, 9). Other than identifying himself as the servant of God, the author gives no other indication of his position or calling, but most early Christian authorities believed that he was John, son of Zebedee.

The Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants confirm that the Apostle John had been given a special commission to receive and write the visions that he received.²¹ A complex and heavily symbolic book, Revelation was intended to comfort and reassure Christians suffering persecution or trials in every age while at the same time revealing the role of Jesus Christ throughout history.

Although two different dates have been proposed for when John wrote Revelation—an early date in the AD 60s during the reign of the emperor Nero and a later date in the AD 90s during that of the emperor Domitian—both would have been after the martyrdom of Peter, making John the senior Apostle left living.

His calling, however, was not only to receive and record the visions contained in the book. In one of his visions, an angel told John the Revelator to take a small book, or scroll, and to eat it. Sweet at first in his mouth, it made his belly bitter, which Joseph Smith interpreted as

representing his mission to help gather Israel as part of the restoration of all things (see Revelation 10:9–11; Doctrine and Covenants 77:14). This mission was possible because of John’s continuing ministry after he was translated. While commentators, ancient and modern, have been divided regarding the meaning of Jesus’s statement to Peter about John’s fate at the end of the Gospel (see John 21:20–23), Joseph Smith received a revelation confirming that John’s mission will continue as a translated being until the Savior’s return (see Doctrine and Covenants 7:1–6). In

*“By this we know that we
love the children of God,
when we love God, and
keep his commandments”
(1 John 5:2).*

other words, he not only prophesied of the end times, but his mission includes helping fulfill these prophecies as well as witnessing the fulfillment of the things that were revealed to him.

Although our own missions may not be as grand, John’s example teaches us that our love for Jesus Christ leads us to accept our own calls and challenges in life, no matter how bittersweet they at times may seem.

Becoming Beloved Disciples Ourselves

John was a leading member of Jesus’s original Twelve Apostles, one who had a close personal relationship with the Savior and served important

roles as His witness, as a leader of the Church, and as a revelator. Yet the way he chose to portray himself as the beloved disciple in the Gospel that bears his name allows him to serve as a model for all of us in our own discipleship. From him we learn that as followers of Jesus Christ, we can all rest in the arms of His love, which love we realize most fully through ordinances such as that which He established at the Last Supper. We too can symbolically stand at the foot of the cross, testifying that Jesus died for us, and run with hope to learn for ourselves that the Lord lives. Like John, as beloved disciples our call is to share that witness with others, testifying of the truth and fulfilling whatever calls come our way until the Lord comes again. ■

NOTES

1. Interestingly, only the book of Revelation directly states that its author was John (see Revelation 1:1, 4). None of the Gospels, including John, identifies its author. Early Christian tradition, however, identified the figure of the beloved disciple in the Gospel of John with the Apostle of that name. For a discussion of the evidence, scholarly discussion, and Restoration insights regarding this identification, see note 18. The book of 1 John similarly never identifies its author, but its style and subject matter connects it closely with the Gospel of John. The books of 2 and 3 John are attributed only to “the elder,” but early Christian tradition connected them with the author of John and 1 John.
2. See Mark 1:19–20; see also Matthew 4:21–22; Luke 5:10–11. Most scholars agree that Mark was written first, sometime in the mid-60s AD, with Matthew and Luke being written sometime in the AD 70s or early AD 80s. As a result, reading references from Mark first allows us to see how Matthew and Luke added to or adapted the earliest account.
3. While Mark 10:35–37 records that James and John asked to sit at the right and left sides of Jesus in His kingdom, Matthew 20:20–21 adds that this request actually came from their mother. For her presence at the Crucifixion and later at the empty tomb, see Mark 15:40; 16:1–8; see also Matthew 27:55–56; Luke 23:49, 55; 24:1–10; and John 19:25.
4. For further discussion of these possible connections of Salome, as well as more background on the family and fishing business of Zebedee, see R. Alan Culpepper, *John, the Son of Zebedee: The Life of a Legend* (2000), 7–23.
5. See Mark 1:21–31, 40–45; 2:1–12; 3:1–6; see also Matthew 8:1–4; 9:1–8; 12:9–14; Luke 4:33–39; 5:12–15, 17–26; 6:6–11.
6. For the Sermon on the Mount, see Matthew 5–7. For the call of John and the other original Apostles, see Mark 3:13–19; see also Matthew 10:2–4; Luke 6:13–16.
7. See Mark 5:37; see also Matthew 9:23–26; Luke 8:51, though Matthew does not name Peter, James, and John.



8. See Mark 9:2–10; see also Matthew 17:1–8; Luke 9:28–36.
9. See Mark 13:3–37.
10. See Mark 14:32–34; see also Matthew 26:36–38.
11. See Mark 3:17. *Boanerges* is apparently a rough Greek transliteration of the Aramaic *bene reghesh* or *r'm*, meaning “sons of commotion or thunder.”
12. See Culpepper, *John, the Son of Zebedee*, 38–40, 50.
13. See Acts 3:1–11; 4:1–21; 8:14–17.
14. See Doctrine and Covenants 7; 77; 88:141.
15. See John 13:23; 19:26, 34–35; 20:2–10; 21:1–14, 20–25; see also Culpepper, *John, the Son of Zebedee*, 57–69.
16. See John 19:35; 21:24–25; see also John 20:30–31.
17. See *Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts*, edited by Scott H. Faulring, Kent P. Jackson, and Robert J. Matthews (2004), 234.
18. For examples of the scholarly discussions about the identity of the beloved disciple, see Culpepper, *John, the Son of Zebedee*, 72–85, and Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the Gospel of John*, edited by Francis J. Moloney (2003), 189–99. For the Apostle John as either the source or author of the Gospel of John, see Richard Neitzel Holzzapfel, Eric D. Huntsman, and Thomas A. Wayment, *Jesus Christ and the World of the New Testament* (2006), 126–27, and my own recent treatment in “The Gospel of John” in *New Testament History, Culture, and Society* (2019), ed. Lincoln Blumell.
19. See Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John* (The Anchor Bible, vol. 30 [1982]), 49–55, 71.
20. See Culpepper, *John, the Son of Zebedee*, 90–95, and Holzzapfel, Huntsman, and Wayment, *Jesus Christ and the World of the New Testament*, 274–77.
21. See Holzzapfel, Huntsman, and Wayment, *Jesus Christ and the World of the New Testament*, 281–82, and especially 1 Nephi 14:18–27; Ether 4:16; and Doctrine and Covenants 7:1–3; 77.

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