How Might Jesus' Relationship with the Beloved Disciple Affirm LGBTQ+ Christians in the Twenty-First Century?

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Abstract

This study will consider the loving relationship between Jesus and his Beloved Disciple, as portrayed in John's Gospel. It will focus on the various passages in which the Beloved Disciple becomes a major character in the Johannine narrative: his engagement with Jesus at the Last Supper (Jn 13:21-30), the Crucifixion and the Resurrection respectively (Jn 19:25b-27; 20:1-10; 21:1-14), as well as the episode in which the Beloved Disciple is discussed by Jesus and Peter and affirmed as the author(ity) of the Gospel (Jn 21:20-25).

Narrative-critical tools will first be applied to offer an exegetical analysis of the character of the Beloved Disciple and also of the characterization of his relationship with Jesus. Reception-historical perspectives on Jesus and the Beloved Disciple will then be analysed to identify how past 'readers' have interpreted the passages in question and to consider the impact of the Beloved Disciple on later Christian culture. Queer Theory challenges binary preconceptions and encourages the displacement of 'traditional' perspectives so that a reading can be undertaken which avoids non-affirming bias. Following this inter-disciplinary analysis, a gay-affirming 'queer' reading of the Johannine passages will seek to reveal new insights into the character(ization) of the Johannine Jesus, particularly with reference to his loving relationships with a character not attested elsewhere in the New Testament. The intention of the study is to enable an interpretation of Jesus to emerge that supports an inclusive example of LGBTQ+ love and which can affirm LGBTQ+ Christians in their faith.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This study has been undertaken at a time when the Church of England (CofE) has found itself on the cusp of change, having recently completed a long-term project, *Living in Love and Faith,* to explore issues of gender, sexuality and relationships.[1] The results of this exploration have shown that the majority of worshippers want the Church to move forward in the area of same-sex relationships: acceptance, blessings and, for some, marriage.[2] This desire for progress in the inclusion of LGBTQ+ people[3] within the Church has been met with optimism by many. It has, however, been limited, and arguably thwarted, by a non-affirming[4] group within the CofE's General Synod, who argue for the maintenance of a 'biblically orthodox' doctrine of marriage, and are thus seeking to prohibit any move towards the recognition of same-sex relationships.[5]

During the course of my MA programme, my appreciation of the Gospel of John has deepened and I have developed a keen interest in Queer Theology. As a gay Christian priest, I am eager to delve more deeply into the particular characteristics of Jesus, as related by John, which might inspire LGBTQ+ readers in the 21st century to be confident in their faith in Jesus, in spite of prevailing hermeneutics and a Church which can often appear to be unwelcoming to LGBTQ+ people.

It Is hoped that a fresh impression of the Johannine Jesus can be uncovered through an analysis of his loving relationship with his Beloved Disciple,[6] one of two male individuals described as 'loved' by Jesus, the other being Lazarus (Jn 11:3). The intention is to affirm

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[1] CHURCH OF ENGLAND (2024) 'Living in Love and Faith' [Online].

[2] See CHURCH OF ENGLAND *Listening in Love and Faith: Gathered Responses from Churchwide Engagement* [eBook] (London: Church House Publishing, 2022).

[3] *LGBTQ+* is a widely-used acronym referring to people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or any other non-binary or non-heterosexual gender or sexual identity. The use of this form of the acronym is not intended to place a value or judgement on any of these identities, but it is widely accepted as inclusive (hence the '+') and so will be used here. This study will use the word *gay*, in place of LGBTQ+, to describe same-sex attraction / love / relationships where this is appropriate to the discussion. In line with the view of contemporary theologians, *same-sex* will be used in preference to *homosexual*, which is widely perceived as a hostile term. See, for example: T.W. JENNINGS, *The Man Jesus Loved* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2009), p.10; L.M. TONSTAD, *Queer Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018), p.3.

[4] Jonathan Tallon argues for the use of the terms *affirming* and *non-affirming* to denote the theological or ecclesiological positions which seek to include and affirm LGBTQ+ people (often described as liberal, progressive or inclusive) and those which seek to maintain a view of homosexuality as sinful and would restrict the acceptance of LGBTQ+ people within the Church (often described as conservative or traditional) respectively.[4] I find Tallon's perspective on this to be compelling, and so this study will use *affirming / affirmative* and *non-affirming / non-affirmative* accordingly. See: J. TALLON, *Affirmative: Why You Can Say Yes to the Bible and Yes to People Who Are LGBTQI+* (London: Richardson Jones Press, 2023), pp.153-154.

[5] See, for example: 'Letters: Parties and Divisions over Prayers for Gay Couples', in *Church Times* 8391 (12 January 2024), pp. 16, 18.

[6] *Beloved Disciple* is used as the principal epithet for 'the disciple whom Jesus loved' (and similar phrases).

LGBTQ+ Christians in their faith and, further, to affirm the blessing of same-sex relationships under consideration by the CofE.

This study's analysis of the character of the Beloved Disciple will be multi-layered, using tools developed in narrative criticism and reception history, along with the hermeneutic of Queer Theory,[7] which, as will be discussed in Chapter 5, seeks to remove conventional binary interpretations of texts and societal paradigms.[8] A queer-affirming reading of the texts, in line with this study's perspective, will then be undertaken to explore the potential of the Johannine text to support LGBTQ+ Christians in the queer prophetic imagination.

[7] *Queer Theory* and *Queer Theology* are used interchangeably within this study.
[8] P.S. CHENG, *Radical Love: An introduction to Queer Theology* (New York: Seabury Books, 2011), pp. 9-11.

Chapter 2: Methodological Approach

The loving relationship between Jesus and his Beloved Disciple, as depicted in the Gospel of John, is explored in this study using two analytical approaches: a narrative-critical analysis, to explore the characterization of the Beloved Disciple and his interactions with Jesus; and exploration of the reception history of the character, to trace the response of Christian artists to the Beloved Disciple; This analysis will form the basis for an affirming 'queer-imaginative reading' of the passages in question utilising insights from the hermeneutic of Queer Theology and applying queer prophetic imagination. The purpose of this exploration is to analyse the relevant Johannine passages, giving particular attention to the development and characterization of the Beloved Disciple, and the way in which his relationship with Jesus is portrayed; to trace the way in which the Beloved Disciple has been interpreted and imagined in visual art; and, by applying an affirmative lens stripped of traditional binary concerns, to identify how the narrative of Jesus' loving relationships can affirm the contemporary same-sex relationships of gay Christians (and, more widely, can affirm LGBTQ+ Christians in their identities, relationships, and faith).

The first definite mention of the 'Beloved Disciple' is found in John 13, where he engages in conversation with Jesus at the Last Supper (Jn 13:21-30); he is also present at the Crucifixion of Jesus (Jn 19:25b-27), and both at Jesus' Resurrection (Jn 20:1-10) and his post-Resurrection appearance by the Sea of Tiberias (Jn 21:1-14). The Beloved Disciple is then discussed by Jesus and Peter and is identified as the author of, or the authoritative eyewitness behind, the Gospel (Jn 21:20-25). Analysis of these four texts, and other potential appearances of the Beloved Disciple (Jn 1:35-40 and 18:15-16), will be the subject of this study, and this from a variety of perspectives.

Narrative Criticism

A narrative-critical reading will work through each of the Johannine passages to consider a number of factors: the narrative content (considering the world portrayed within the text); characterization and development of the Beloved Disciple and his relationship with Jesus; literary devices and style; and authorial intent, insofar as this can be extrapolated from the text.

Narrative-critical analysis is widely considered to offer a more holistic approach to exegesis than traditional historical criticism, which tends to concentrate on issues of source, form and redaction, with the intention of firmly establishing the historical context of the author and his traditions and sources. In contrast, narrative or literary criticism pays attention to the final form of the text as a 'unified' narrative and, as such, avoids the tendency to dissect the text into smaller and/or self-contained fragments.[1] This difference in approach can be seen as the difference between a 'diachronic' reading, which seeks to identify authorship/redaction and historical context through fragmentation of the text, and a 'synchronic' reading, which considers the text as a completed whole, thus facilitating a focus on the 'subtleties and complexities' of the narrative.[2] The 'world behind the text', that is, the authorship and context of the author, is heavily disputed among Johannine scholars, whereas a synchronic reading allows an exploration of the 'world of the text', thus facilitating a greater understanding of the characterization of the Beloved Disciple and his relationship with Jesus. Narrative criticism thus asks different questions from other exegetical approaches, with its concern for the ways in which the text 'communicates its meaning' to the reader, enabling the ideological perspective of the implied author to become apparent through the development of plot and character, and thus 'deforming familiar narratives so that they are seen in new, fresh ways'.[3] Narrative criticism, as a specific discipline within literary criticism, will therefore be applied in this study to consider both 'the world of the text' and 'the world in front of the text', that is, the literary design with which the reader engages, and so brings meaning to the character of the Beloved Disciple.[4]

Plot, setting and character are primary aspects of narrative storytelling which are intersectional in the construction of any given narrative.[5] In addition to these, narrative criticism examines a number of other narrative features: the narrator's perspective and insight; the implied author (perspective) and implied reader (interpretation); the structure of the narrative and development of plot; setting, in terms of both time and place;

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[1] I. BOXALL, *New Testament Interpretation* (London: SCM Press, 2007), pp.113-115.

[2] J.-A. BRANT, *John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), p.4. R.A. Culpepper describes this distinction as the difference between 'looking at' a text perceptively and 'looking for' historical context; see: R.A. CULPEPPER *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), p.5.

[3] J.L. RESSEGUIE, 'A Narrative-Critical Approach to the Fourth Gospel', in C.W. Skinner (ed.), *Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p.17.

[4] I. BOXALL, *New Testament Interpretation*, pp.115-116.

[5] R. WELLEK and A. WARREN, *Theory of Literature* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1961), pp.224-234, cited by S.A. HUNT, D.F. TOLMIE and R. ZIMMERMANN, 'An Introduction to Character and Characterization in John and Related New Testament Literature', in S.A. Hunt, D.F. Tolmie and R. Zimmermann (eds.), *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Approaches to Seventy Figures in John* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), p.2.

characterization; the literary techniques that are employed, such as symbolism, irony or rhetoric; and narrative time.[6]

The *narrator's perspective* can be either 'objective' (observing the narrative) or 'subjective' (evaluating the narrative).[7] Within John's Gospel, an *ideological point of view* (Resseguie's term for the subjective perspective) is expressed by the implied author in the way that the world within the text is described. The use of first-person narration interspersing the primary third-person narrative is highlighted for the impact it adds, since the Johannine narrator claims to be an eyewitness.[8]

The *implied author* can be described as 'the persona the real author creates' in the telling of a narrative.[9] In this case, the implied author is the Beloved Disciple 'who has testified to these things and has written them' (Jn 21:24); this lends authority to the Gospel. The *implied reader* will necessarily act as an interpreter, drawing on the 'clues of the narrative' which result from the implied author's ideological point of view,[10] but bringing their own contextual and social insights to the narrative. [11] Thus the intended reader-response might not be actualised by a reader separated from the author by almost 2,000 years.

Narrative plot can be described as 'the overarching, universal story that shapes the narrative and its conflicts'.[12] The culmination of John's narrative plot, Jesus' death and resurrection (Jn 19-20), is worked through the telling of the entire story of Jesus as a 'causal logic and necessity'.[13] Thus John's narrative plot is comparable to that in a work of fiction. The overall narrative explores the revelation of Jesus' identity in relation to his Father, presenting the dilemmas that this presents to the other characters; their responses advance the narrative.[14] Characters are therefore portrayed as either coming to recognise Jesus as God's incarnate

[6] I. BOXALL, *New Testament Interpretation*, pp.116-118.
[7] J.L. RESSEGUIE, 'A Narrative-Critical Approach to the Fourth Gospel', pp.3-4.
[8] J.L. RESSEGUIE, 'A Narrative-Critical Approach to the Fourth Gospel', p.4.
[9] J.L. RESSEGUIE, 'A Narrative-Critical Approach to the Fourth Gospel', pp.4-5.
[10] J.L. RESSEGUIE, 'A Narrative-Critical Approach to the Fourth Gospel', p.5.
[11] W. CARTER, 'Ideological Readings of the Fourth Gospel' in J.M. Lieu and M.C. De Boer (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Johannine Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p.203.
[12] J.L. RESSEGUIE, 'A Narrative-Critical Approach to the Fourth Gospel', p.14.
[13] J.-A.A. BRANT, 'The Fourth Gospel as Narrative and Drama', in J.M. Lieu and M.C. de Boer (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Johannine Studies*, p.194.
[14] See: J.L. RESSEGUIE, 'A Narrative-Critical Approach to the Fourth Gospel', p.15; C. BENNEMA, 'A Comprehensive Approach to Understanding Character in the Gospel of John', in C.W. Skinner (ed.), *Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp.55-56.

Word or failing to recognise Jesus in this way. The implied reader is presented with a similar choice while following this narrative plot.

John's Gospel is set within the geographical area of Judea, circa 25-30 CE.[15] However, the *setting* of a narrative can be 'saturated with meaning': the mood, character traits, decisions, structure and conflict can all be influenced by setting.[16] Dualistic motifs, such as darkness and light, can also be drawn into, and from, the setting: for example, the references to the time of day or night can suggest confusion or insight, ignorance or revelation, as when Nicodemus visits Jesus 'by night' (Jn 3:2). Other aspects of setting include topography, architecture, religious festivals, spatial positioning (*above* and *below*), the significance of props (for example, water jars or a charcoal fire), and the use of 'minor characters' (for example, crowds).[17] Each of these aspects of the setting will have been included intentionally to establish the narrative.

Analysis of *characterization* involves consideration of the complexity, development, and inner life of the characters, who are variously depicted as an 'agent', a 'type', a 'personality' or an 'individual' (actual) person.[18] Analysis of the characterization of the Beloved Disciple, his relationship with Jesus, and also whether he belongs to a certain character type, agent or personality, will be of central importance in this study.

Literary techniques can reveal how an author communicates to the implied reader the need to accept or reject interpretations of events or teachings contained within the narrative.[19] The use of irony, metaphor and ambiguity within John's Gospel thus feature prominently as literary techniques to disrupt and subvert the expectations of the implied reader,[20] thereby encouraging the reader to subscribe to the narrator's ideological perspective (that is, recognising Jesus as the Word of God).

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[15] Jesus' public ministry, as conveyed in the Gospels, is widely understood to have commenced when he was around 30 years of age; he is believed to have been born in approximately 4 BCE, giving a date of circa 26 CE, with his death occurring possibly three years later. The geographic locations for the narratives of Jesus' birth, ministry and death are all given with the various Gospel accounts.
[16] J.L. RESSEGUIE, 'A Narrative-Critical Approach to the Fourth Gospel', p.9.
[17] J.L. RESSEGUIE, 'A Narrative-Critical Approach to the Fourth Gospel', p.9.
[18] Cornelis Bennema cites the work of Joseph Ewen to advocate for a 'continuum of degree of characterization'. See: C. BENNEMA, 'A Comprehensive Approach to Understanding Character in the Gospel of John', p.47.
[19] I. BOXALL, *New Testament Interpretation*, p.118.
[20] J.L. RESSEGUIE, 'A Narrative-Critical Approach to the Fourth Gospel', pp.5-8.

Narrative time is of particular significance for the study of John's Gospel, as the horizon of Jesus' *hour* (first mentioned in Jn 2:4, 'My hour has not yet come') looms heavily in the Gospel, and the sweep of time appears to slow down as the reader gets nearer to Jesus' death. Indeed, from Jesus' first sign at the Wedding in Cana (Jn 2), 'time begins to tick, building inexorable momentum toward his glorification'.[21] The use of narrative time in this way focuses attention on the most significant event.[22] Indeed, 'the awesome "hour" of Jesus' glorification' is the central focus of the narrative, and the temporal horizon slows down as this 'hour' approaches.[23] Furthermore, the narrative 'elaborately twists' time, challenging the reader's perspective of linear time and illustrating Jesus' pre-existence and continuing story,[24] a feature that Jo-Ann Brant calls 'atemporal eternity'.[25]

This study will consider the Gospel of John to be a non-fictional, albeit highly stylised and symbolic, account of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and presented as based on an eyewitness account, as claimed in John 21:24. As such, the character of the Beloved Disciple will be assumed to have been based upon a real, historical individual, further discussion of which will take place in Chapter 3.[26]

Reception History

The scholarly discipline of reception history seeks to understand the ways in which a text has been interpreted ('received') once outside of its original context. This is, therefore, quite distinct from historical criticism, which seeks to locate a text within its original context,[27] and also from narrative criticism, which explores the world within the text. Reception history is not limited to the 'history of interpretation', however, as the approach not only contributes to exegesis but also the ways in which a text has been received culturally, through the creative and performing arts, and, in the case of biblical texts in particular, through liturgy, preaching

[21] P.A. RAINBOW, *Johannine Theology: The Gospel, the Epistles and the Apocalypse* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2014), p.204.
[22] I. BOXALL, *New Testament Interpretation*, p.118.
[23] R.A. CULPEPPER, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel,* pp.71-73.
[24] R. ZIMMERMANN, 'Eschatology and Time in the Gospel of John', in J.M. Lieu and M.C. de Boer (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Johannine Studies*, pp.292-293.
[25] J.-A.A. BRANT, 'The Fourth Gospel as Narrative and Drama', p.192.
[26] Judith Redman argues for the non-fictional nature of the Gospel genre, with which Jo-Ann Brant concurs but adds that many details will have been added, augmented or adjusted so as to convey the truth intended by the implied author. See: J.C.S. REDMAN, 'Eyewitness Testimony and the Characters in the Fourth Gospel' in C.W. Skinner (ed.), *Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p.63; J.-A.A. BRANT, *John*, pp.12-13.
[27] B.W. BREED, (2014) *Nomadic Text: A Theory of Biblical Reception History* [Online], p.3.

and hymnody.[28] Reception history therefore considers the ways in which a text has been understood and its wider cultural influence, and it traces how this has changed over time.

'Received meaning' is a concept which describes readers receiving a text in their own context, and bringing contextual meaning to it; the words on the page hence hold no intrinsic meaning of their own. [29] This basic premise of reception history is closely connected to the function of the implied reader in narrative criticism, and similarly anticipates that readers will interpret the meaning based on their own societal constructs. This focus on the 'living relationship' between a text and its readers is a subjectivity in response, which stands in contrast to the objective meaning and function that critical analysis seeks to identify. Reception history focuses on the 'human importance' of a text rather than the more narrow 'foundational meaning' sought by other branches within the discipline of biblical interpretation.[30]

For this present study there is significant value in considering the reception history of the figure of the Beloved Disciple, as well as his relationship with Jesus; analysis of the ways in which the text has been interpreted culturally over time will serve to ground any new observations or conclusions reached. This study will, of necessity, interpret the texts from a 21st-century, Western context to observe any similarities in the portrayal of the Beloved Disciple from previous ages that might affirm any conclusions drawn from the analysis as more widely accepted. It is intended that analysis of these relationships will go beyond conventional interpretation to identify ways in which these figures can affirm LGBTQ+ Christians. The cultural impact of this man and his relationship with Jesus, and the ways in which this might have developed over time, will thus be critical for this study; this will be the subject of analysis in Chapter 4.

[28] I. BOXALL, *New Testament Interpretation*, p.177.
[29] M.C. CALLAWAY, *What's the Use of Reception History?* (Presentation given at the Society of Biblical Literature meeting, San Antonio, Texas, 2004) [Online], p.4.
[30] J. ROBERTS, 'Introduction' in M. Lieb, E. Mason, J. Roberts and C. Rowland (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of The Reception History of the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p.8.

A Queer-Imaginative Reading

Chapter 5 will consider how the hermeneutic of Queer Theology can be applied to the passages under review, enabling a 'queer-imaginative reading' of the relationship between Jesus and the Beloved Disciple to be undertaken.

Queer Theology, by way of a simple definition, is talking about God from a queer perspective, based on Queer Theory, which, as Patrick Cheng asserts, comprises four aspects of 'queerness': 'identity without essence', 'transgression', 'resisting binaries', and 'social construction'.[31] Cheng's strands of Queer Theology, and the distinct contribution that this hermeneutic, which challenges preconceptions, can offer to an affirmative reading of the Beloved Disciple, will be the subject of a more detailed discussion in Chapter 5. The intention is that this discussion, along with the inter-disciplinary analysis of the Johannine 'Beloved Disciple' undertaken in Chapters 3 and 4, will form a basis for the queer-imaginative reading that follows.

Prophetic imagination is a phrase coined by Walter Brueggemann (1978), which presents the need for the voices of those on the margins to speak out, including those from oppressed minority groups and those who are persecuted (generally by 'mainline' Christian congregations, based on non-affirming interpretations of Scripture). The emphasis is on the need for an imagining of a different way of reading the Scriptures: that is, a different way of responding as Christians.[32] For a 'Queer-Imaginative Reading', this means interpreting passages from the Bible in such a way as to highlight the queer-affirming nature of characters within their narratives. For this study, therefore, the reading of the Johannine passages about the Beloved Disciple will imagine that he, and Jesus, are, in whatever way, queer-affirming. As Shore-Goss posits, the queer prophetic imagination can 'liberate Jesus' from his presumed-heteronormative culture, so that Jesus can be revealed to share the inclusive, liberating love of God, encouraging queer people to fight for an inclusive Church.[33] This hermeneutic lens will be significant in addressing the research question posed by this study.

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[31] P.S. CHENG, 'Contributions from Queer Theory' in A. Thatcher (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality and Gender* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp.154-164.
[32] W. BRUEGGEMANN, *The Prophetic Imagination.* 40th anniversary edn. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018), pp. xiv-xvi.
[33] R.E. SHORE-GOSS, 'Queering Jesus: LGBTQI Dangerous Remembering and Imaginative Resistance' in *Journal for Interdisciplinary Biblical Studies* 2.2 (2021): 47-70. [Online], p.66.

Affirmative, or 'queer', readings of Scripture are advocated as being helpful to LGBTQ+ Christians in a number of ways: resisting and subverting cis-heteronormative bias can de-weaponize 'clobber texts'; *troubling* or *queering* the text can enable new connections to be synthesised with biblical characters; and, the queer prophetic imagination can identify 'the dangerous memories of Jesus' which can enable and empower LGBTQ+ readers to connect with Jesus as 'one of us'.[34] The affirmative commentary on John's Gospel, written by Robert Shore-Goss (in *The Queer Bible Commentary*),[35] will be used to support this reading.

The affirmative, queer-imaginative reading will not, therefore, purport to present a neutral, unbiased hermeneutical lens through which to interpret the passages under discussion, but rather an ideological reading that challenges subjectivity by its roots in the context of a contemporary gay Christian.[36] The intention will be to use prophetic imagination to establish a secure and affirmative position in which Jesus' loving relationship with the Beloved Disciple, as described in John's Gospel and in alignment with the perspective adopted by this study, can represent an affirming example of inclusion for LGBTQ+ Christians.

[34] M. WEST and R.E. SHORE-GOSS, 'Preface to the Second Edition', in M. West and R.E. Shore-Goss (eds.), *The Queer Bible Commentary*, 2nd edn. (London: SCM Press, 2022), pp.xv-xvii.
[35] R.E. SHORE-GOSS, 'John', in M. West and R.E. Shore-Goss (eds.), *The Queer Bible Commentary*, pp. 560-583.
[36] W. CARTER, 'Ideological Readings of the Fourth Gospel', pp.203, 216.

Chapter 3 Narrative-Critical Analysis of the Character(ization) of the Beloved Disciple in the Gospel of John

The Gospel's purpose, as set out in John 20:30, is to deepen the faith of its readers in Jesus as the Son of God. For this purpose, the text regularly employs rhetorical devices, specifically in the epideictic rhetorical style identified by Aristotle, and whose function in the Gospel text is to strengthen belief.[1] The overarching narrative plot weaves the crucifixion of Jesus (understood as his exaltation; cf. Jn 3:14; 8:28; 12:32-33) into the entire narrative, so as to subvert the expectations of the reader that Jesus' death would be shameful (and terminal). Johannine language functions in a commemorative way, consoling the followers of Jesus and also stirring solidarity among readers, thereby encouraging them to identify with Jesus.[2] The motif of darkness and light, already established in the Prologue (Jn 1:4-9), runs through the text, as characters are brought out of their darkness (lack of understanding) into the light of insight as they recognise Jesus as the Son of God.[3] The task of the implied reader is therefore to recognise characters' progress on their journey of recognition, and to subscribe to the ideological perspective of the implied author that Jesus is the incarnate Word. Having established some of the underlying narrative concerns and devices employed within the Gospel, attention will now turn to the five passages which make specific reference to the Beloved Disciple.

John 13:21-30 opens with Jesus becoming 'troubled in spirit' (v. 21), the same emotional reaction he felt when he arrived at Lazarus' tomb (Jn 11:33), in spite of his 'sovereign knowledge' of his betrayal and impending arrest.[4] Indeed, in both of these instances, as well as the third occasion when Jesus considers his own death (Jn 12:27), Jesus' 'genuine distress' emerges even though he knows that what is to follow is 'in harmony with God's purposes and the Scriptures'.[5] Jesus is thus portrayed as capable of both feeling and displaying emotional responses. The disciples reflect a degree of Jesus' distress in their uncertainty about whom he was speaking (v. 22); the reason for their difficulty, however, might also result from the absence of any reason offered as to why one of them would betray

[1] J.-A.A. BRANT, *John*, p.12.
[2] J.-A.A. BRANT, *John*, p.12.
[3] P.A. RAINBOW, *Johannine Theology: The Gospel, the Epistles and the Apocalypse*, p.400.
[4] A.T. LINCOLN, *The Gospel According to St John* (London: Continuum, 2005), p.377.
[5] M.M. THOMPSON, *John: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2015), p.293.

him, unlike in the Synoptic accounts which make Judas' disloyalty clear.[6] John's implied reader has, however, already been provided with the insight that it would be Judas who would betray Jesus (Jn 6:71).[7]

It is at this point that the reader is introduced to the disciple 'whom Jesus loved' (v. 23). The identity of the 'Beloved Disciple' is not otherwise specified in the text.[8] The lack of a name (or indeed, any other biographical detail) is significant according to David Beck, who argues persuasively that anonymity enables this disciple, who will later be noted as the eyewitness source for the Gospel (Jn 21:24), to highlight that only one character in the narrative, Jesus, has an identity, a name, which is of importance to the reader, and to draw out the representative character of the Beloved Disciple.[9] The identity of the Beloved Disciple has been the subject of much scholarly debate (discussed in more detail below). It is certainly possible that he might have been known to the implied readers of the Gospel (and so needs no confirmation of identity, which is not offered with any degree of certainty), or that his role in the Gospel is entirely symbolic and representative of 'all disciples whom Jesus loves'.[10] The presentation of the Beloved Disciple in John 21, as a real person whose death requires explanation, would make it difficult to sustain the idea of an entirely symbolic character. The narrative function of the Beloved Disciple can, however, be seen as a 'ficelle'; that is, a character shaped by traits of which anonymity is among the foremost. As a result, the implied reader is more readily able to identify with the character, and so can feel invited to participate in the narrative.[11] This does not impact upon the reader's understanding that the Beloved Disciple is an actual person, nor does it detract from Beck's assertions regarding his anonymity, but it might serve to explain the way in which this character is portrayed in the narrative.

The Beloved Disciple is described as 'reclining next to [Jesus]' (v. 23). The RSV has 'lying close to the breast of Jesus',[12] whilst Jeff Jay renders this as 'reclining in the lap of Jesus',

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[6] M.M. THOMPSON, *John: A Commentary*, p.293.
[7] A.T. LINCOLN, *The Gospel According to St John*, p.377.
[8] See further: D.R. BECK, "Whom Jesus Loved': Anonymity and Identity. Belief and Witness in the Fourth Gospel', in C.W. Skinner (ed.), *Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John*, pp.222-223.
[9] D.R. BECK, 'Whom Jesus Loved', pp.223-225.
[10] A.T. LINCOLN, *The Gospel According to St John*, pp.20-22.
[11] D. TOVEY, 'An Anonymous Disciple: A Type of Discipleship', in S.A. Hunt, D.F. Tolmie and R. Zimmermann (eds.), *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel*, p.135.
[12] *Revised Standard Version Bible, Ignatius Edition*. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006). See also: *The Holy Bible: New King James Version* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1988), which renders the text 'leaning on Jesus' bosom'.

raising the question about the level of physical intimacy between the two men,[13] which is of particular interest for this study. The Beloved Disciple is seated in a position of honour at the table, close enough to be able to touch Jesus' chest and hence to ask his question in a quiet voice.[14] Certainly, the physical proximity of the Beloved Disciple to Jesus places him in a position where he could ask a potentially difficult question, as Simon Peter encourages him to do (v. 24). The Beloved Disciple evidently feels confident not only that Jesus would trust him with an answer, but also that he himself will not be the betrayer.[15] Jesus does indeed answer (v. 26), although it would appear that the Beloved Disciple did not understand Jesus' meaning (if he is included within the assertion of v. 28 that 'no one at the table knew why he said this to [Judas]').[16] This raises an interesting narrative issue: the Beloved Disciple appears to be 'both inside and outside the story line', as he holds privileged knowledge as the narrator, yet does nothing with the information he has been given (either sharing with Simon Peter or seeking to prevent Judas leaving).[17] It is possible that the Beloved Disciple, while 'inside' the narrative plot, simply trusts Jesus implicitly and so takes no action, but also that while 'outside' the story, with the narrator's perspective, he has understood later that the event had to take place without intervention.

The act of dipping bread and handing it to another (v. 26) could be understood as a sign of close friendship, deepening the sense of Judas' betrayal of Jesus, and highlighting the 'cosmic battle' between Jesus and Satan which took place through Judas, as 'Satan entered into him' (v. 27).[18] Through his action, Jesus assigns to Judas the role of betrayer, placing Jesus in 'complete control of the means and the moment'.[19] Indeed, the narrator offers no insight into Judas' personal motivation: Judas has become a 'representative defector', in narrative opposition to the Beloved Disciple.[20] Judas leaves immediately: he is evidently the only one to have understood Jesus' meaning and follows his instruction to act quickly, (v. 30).[21] The passage concludes with the narrator noting that 'it was night' (v. 30). The setting of night places Judas leaving the light of Jesus and entering darkness as he goes out from

[13] J. JAY, 'In the Lap of Jesus'. *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 28.3 (2019): 483-513. [Online], pp.483-485.
[14] C.K. BARRETT, *The Gospel According to St John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (London: SPCK, 1955), pp.372-373.
[15] J.-A.A. BRANT, *John*, p.203.
[16] D.R. BECK, 'Whom Jesus Loved', p.226.
[17] A.T. LINCOLN, *The Gospel According to St John*, p.23.
[18] A.T. LINCOLN, *The Gospel According to St John*, p.379.
[19] J.-A.A. BRANT, *John*, p.203.
[20] R.A. CULPEPPER, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel,* p.124.
[21] J.-A.A. BRANT, *John*, p.204.

his presence; in this way, Judas has defected from Jesus' light and has chosen to 'join the powers of darkness'.[22]

The anonymous disciple 'whom Jesus loved' is noticeably seated in a position of both intimacy and honour, which suggests a close personal relationship between the Beloved Disciple and Jesus, whom the reader understands to be a person comfortable with expressing his emotions. Thus, the Beloved Disciple is able to ask a difficult question, both because of his physical proximity and also because of his personal closeness to Jesus, as recognised by Simon Peter. Jesus offers an insight to the Beloved Disciple that is not shared with the others, further illuminating their bond of intimacy. The Beloved Disciple accepts what Jesus tells him (whether or not he understands it) and does not repeat Jesus' words to the others or take any action to intervene, suggesting an elevated level of trust, acceptance and obedience between the two men.

John 19:25b-27 marks the only appearance of the Beloved Disciple when he is not in the company of Simon Peter.[23] Instead, the reader discovers him with Jesus' mother at the foot of the cross (v. 26). It is highly significant that John's Gospel includes both of these characters in this particular scene, which differs from the Synoptic tradition where only a number of women (which might or might not include Jesus' mother) gather 'at a distance' after the death of Jesus (cf. Mk 15:40; Mt. 27:54-55; Lk. 23:49). Its implied function here is to enable Jesus to speak to these two people with whom he is in a very close relationship, decreeing his 'last will and testament'.[24] Jesus creates a new family, joining his mother and his beloved companion as mother and son (vv. 26-27). In this regard, Jesus is following an ancient Mediterranean tradition of extending family connections beyond biological family units, and, in this case, Jesus 'defines the family, or household, that is created by means of his death'.[25] It also subverts the expectation of the reader by having Jesus announce a 'fictive birth' of his Beloved Disciple as son at a point in which the narrative plot is leading to Jesus' death, creating an Aristotelian comedic ending.[26] This stands in interesting contrast to the Synoptic accounts of Jesus' Passion, which could be interpreted as the implied author seeking to affirm Jesus' position in control of his destiny: the reader should not perceive

[22] J.L. RESSEGUIE, 'A Narrative-Critical Approach to the Fourth Gospel', p.9.
[23] J.-A.A. BRANT, *John*, p.253.
[24] A.T. LINCOLN, *The Gospel According to St John*, p.476.
[25] M.M. THOMPSON, *John: A Commentary*, pp.399-400.
[26] J.-A.A. BRANT, *John*, p.253.

Jesus' death as a tragedy. There is a further theological implication to Jesus' action: Jesus is securing his dynasty, in line with imperial tradition, but also establishing a model for his followers to care for one another in community.[27]

Like the Beloved Disciple, the author does not ascribe a name to Jesus' mother, which is interesting given that her name, Mary, is clearly well-known by the writers of the Synoptic Gospels. This adds weight to Beck's argument regarding the anonymity of the Beloved Disciple discussed with regard to John 13:21-30. Indeed, the epithets used to describe these characters inform the reader of their intimate personal relationships to Jesus: his mother and his beloved.[28]

The narrator further states that 'from that hour the disciple took her into his own home' (v. 27). This is significant in drawing the attention of the implied reader to the concept of Jesus' 'hour', his hour of glorification, which is first mentioned at the wedding at Cana (Jn 2:4). The Cana event is the first, and only other, appearance of Jesus' mother, who uses this opportunity to set in motion Jesus' mission (Jn 2:3-5), but it is also notable that the sign performed by Jesus at Cana was the first time the reader is told that 'his disciples believed in him' (Jn 2:11). The use of narrative time, as discussed in Chapter 2, highlights the significance of each action or speech by Jesus during his hour, as individual phrases, rather than protracted actions or dialogue, are now the subject of each verse. Jesus uses this moment to establish the Beloved Disciple as his 'human successor', having already named the Paraclete as his divine successor in John 14.[29] Having initiated Jesus' mission at Cana, Jesus' mother has no further role in the narrative herself until the arrival of Jesus' hour. This scene provides that role as she is given into the care of the Beloved Disciple. Jesus' concern for his mother's welfare can also be seen to stand in contrast to, perhaps making amends for, his 'gruff words' spoken to her at Cana.[30]

The characterization of Jesus' mother is limited: she shows faith in her son's divine power, by telling others to obey him (Jn 2:3-5), and, ultimately, transitions into a new family unit with

[27] J.-A.A. BRANT, *John*, p.257.
[28] J. ZUMSTEIN, 'The Mother of Jesus and the Beloved Disciple: How a New Family is Established Under the Cross', trans. by S. Buchanan, in S.A. Hunt, D.F. Tolmie and R. Zimmermann (eds.), *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel*, pp.641-642.
[29] A.T. LINCOLN, *The Gospel According to St John*, pp.476-477.
[30] A. REINHARTZ, 'The Gospel According to John' in A.J. Levine and M.Z. Brettler (eds.) *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*. Second edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p.215.

the Beloved Disciple (19:26-27). In a similar way, the Beloved Disciple is portrayed as a person loved by Jesus, who is loyal to Jesus (he is the only male disciple at the foot of the cross), who believes and trusts in Jesus, and who is formed into this new family unit with Jesus' mother. This limited characterization empowers the implied reader to search for the symbolic meanings ascribed to them, which might have been restricted had fuller descriptions and attributes been provided by the author.[31] The new role ascribed to Jesus' mother here is that of disciple, whereby she is on an 'equal footing' with the Beloved Disciple in Jesus' eyes: they stand together at the foot of the cross, and their lives will now be lived together as mother and son.[32] A traditional response to the symbolism presented here is that Jesus' mother and his Beloved Disciple represent Jewish and Gentile Christians respectively, with the one being placed into the care of the other.[33] Whilst this is an interpretation that might be inferred by the implied reader, this seems likely to be a later theological interpretation that draws on potential symbolism. The author is describing specific (known) individuals, engaged in a conversation to which one of them is an eyewitness. It could also be inferred that both Jesus' mother and the Beloved Disciple have borne Jesus to the Church: Jesus' mother gives birth to the incarnate Word, while the Beloved Disciple bears and carries his words to others.[34]

In this passage, Jesus has placed great responsibility on his Beloved Disciple, further highlighting the relationship of trust and intimacy between them. There are various interpretative options: the responsibility to care for Jesus' mother; to become Jesus' successor in sharing the truth of the Gospel; or, to lead a Christian community as the successor to the Jewish faith. The response of the Beloved Disciple, and his presence in this scene as the only follower to have completed the journey with Jesus to his crucifixion, again reveals his obedience and faithfulness to Jesus. A new familial unit has been established, in the context of Jesus' final action before his death, in which Jesus' mother and his beloved become mother and son.

John 20:1-10 begins on 'the first day of the week, while it was still dark' (v. 1). This setting frames the narrative distinctly: 'the first day of the week' recalls God's first act of creation,

[31] R.A. CULPEPPER, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, pp.133-134.
[32] D.R. BECK, 'Whom Jesus Loved', p.228.
[33] A. REINHARTZ, 'The Gospel According to John', p.215.
[34] R.A. CULPEPPER, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, p.134.

bringing light to darkness (Gen. 1:3-5), which thus evokes a new beginning. The remark that 'it was still dark' might allude to the ignorance of Jesus' followers,[35] who understand that he has died but do not yet understand that he will rise to new life (cf. v. 9), at which point they will be enlightened. It might also be used credibly to suggest the metaphorical darkness created by the absence of Jesus, reflecting the Gospel's Prologue (Jn 1:3-5, 9) in which Jesus comes as light into the darkness: without Jesus, there is no light. The scene is set, therefore, for a creative revelation to take place.

Mary Magdalene, first introduced at the foot of the cross as one of the women with Jesus' mother and the Beloved Disciple (Jn 19:25), is the first to discover the empty tomb (v. 1). She will also be the first to meet with Jesus in vv. 14-17, after the two male disciples return home (v. 10). Mary goes to Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple in her distress, rather than to any of the other friends of Jesus; this is appropriate, as these are the last two male disciples seen in the narrative before Jesus' death (Jn 18:15 and 19:26, respectively).[36] Credibility is added to the resurrection account by the witness of the two men, as Jewish tradition required two witnesses to provide acceptable testimony (cf. Deut. 19:15), and male testimony would have been considered more reliable than that of women. Hence, Mary does not enter the tomb until after the male disciples have done so.[37] The implied reader is provided with the insights of the witness of three characters, enabling construction of an understanding of what has happened, akin to a 'detective narrative'.[38]

The two men race to get to the tomb, with the Beloved Disciple arriving first (v. 4), which implies a rivalry between these two disciples, and offers a significant example of the implied superiority of the relationship between Jesus and the Beloved Disciple over the relationship between Jesus and Peter, reflecting the Beloved Disciple's position of intimacy with Jesus at the Last Supper (Jn 13:23), his remaining with Jesus at the foot of the cross (Jn 19:26), his arrival ahead of Peter at the empty tomb (v. 4) and, later, his belief in the risen Jesus (v. 8).[39] This pattern will continue in the passages considered below. This rivalry might reflect a desire by the implied author to promote the status of the posited Johannine Community

[35] A.T. LINCOLN, *The Gospel According to St John*, p.489. Paul Rainbow also discusses the use of the darkness/light motif throughout John's Gospel, and in particular the function of 'night' as 'self-chosen ignorance of God'. See: P.A. RAINBOW *Johannine Theology*, pp.118-119.
[36] M.M. THOMPSON, *John: A Commentary*, p.411.
[37] A.T. LINCOLN, *The Gospel According to St John*, p.490.
[38] J.-A.A. BRANT, *John*, p.267.
[39] M.M. THOMPSON, *John: A Commentary*, pp.409-410.

against the Jerusalem-based Church led by Peter.[40] This is certainly an interesting perspective, but it is possible, however, that the Beloved Disciple was simply younger than Simon Peter, particularly if the early-Church identification of the character as the youthful John is accurate, or implied, hence he would likely be able to run faster. It might also be argued that it is the 'greater love' which the Beloved Disciple has for Jesus that is revealed in his urgency to arrive at the tomb first.[41] The Beloved Disciple is, however, reluctant to go inside (v. 5), which could be interpreted as a grief reaction from the person most close to Jesus, whereas in contrast Simon Peter shows no such hesitation (v. 6). Peter's entry to the tomb first might serve to prepare the way for and heighten the 'climax' of the scene, which comes with the belief of the Beloved Disciple.[42]

Simon Peter notices the wrappings, with the head wrapping separate to that used for Jesus' body (vv. 6-7). The narrator's emphasis on the wrappings might allude to the resurrection of Lazarus, who emerged from his tomb still wrapped in burial cloths (Jn 11:44). If the reader is being encouraged to reflect on Lazarus' resurrection, this might explain the 'belief' of the Beloved Disciple who 'saw and believed' (v. 8). Precisely what the Beloved Disciple came to believe, however, is the subject of much scholarly debate: did he believe Mary that Jesus' body had been taken, did he believe that Jesus was no longer there, or did he believe that Jesus had been brought back to life? Whilst a full discussion of this question is beyond the scope of this study, the Beloved Disciple's belief can certainly be contrasted with Mary's impression that Jesus' body had been stolen (v. 2), as it is unlikely that grave-robbers would go to the effort of removing and neatly folding the burial cloths.[43] This is a conclusion which Simon Peter might also have reached, but apparently does not; the Beloved Disciple is thus shown to have a superior insight.[44] The Beloved Disciple's 'primacy of faith'[45] is therefore emphasised: he believes although he has not yet seen Jesus risen. This potentially makes him one of those blessed by Jesus, following Thomas' recognition of Jesus: 'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe' (Jn 20:29).[46] The Beloved Disciple's capacity to believe was 'because he already believed', resulting from, and highlighting for

[40] A.T. LINCOLN, *The Gospel According to St John*, p.489.
[41] A.T. LINCOLN, *The Gospel According to St John*, p.489.
[42] A.T. LINCOLN, *The Gospel According to St John*, p.489.
[43] D.F. FORD, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), p.397.
[44] A.T. LINCOLN, *The Gospel According to St John*, p.489.
[45] C.K. BARRETT, *The Gospel According to St John*, p.466.
[46] D.F. FORD, *The Gospel of John*, p.397.

the implied reader, the faith and trust between Jesus and the Beloved Disciple.[47] The final verse in this passage has the two disciples returning to their homes (v. 10). The Beloved Disciple appears again both within the narrative and outside it: he has no role in sharing his belief with either Simon Peter or Mary Magdalene, nor does he inform the other disciples. Notably, the insight he has gleaned has been shared only with the implied reader.[48]

In this passage it can be seen that the Beloved Disciple has a stronger desire to reach Jesus' tomb than Simon Peter, although he is hesitant to go inside. The Beloved Disciple 'believes' (v. 8), even though he has yet to see the risen Jesus; a popular, although not universally-accepted interpretation being that he already believes in Jesus' resurrection. Thus, the faith held by the Beloved Disciple is portrayed as stronger than that of the other disciples; he is the first to be enlightened. It has also been made clear that the Beloved Disciple is an eyewitness to the empty tomb.

After appearing to Mary Magdalene (Jn 20:11-18), and then twice to the gathered disciples (Jn 20:19-23 and 26-29), Jesus' final post-resurrection appearance is the subject of **John 21:1-14**. The setting of this scene is 'by the Sea of Tiberias' (v. 1), moving the action away from Jerusalem and back to Galilee.[49] Further, this appearance of Jesus with his disciples is no longer behind the locked doors of the house in Jerusalem (Jn 20:19), but in the open and in the world beyond Jerusalem.

Seven disciples are present (v. 2), a smaller group than the twelve referred to in John 6: this might reflect the perception of seven as a number signifying completeness or fulfilment; the author includes seven 'signs' and seven 'I am' statements in the Gospel. Alternatively, in this case this number might be a device to avoid using eleven (the twelve minus Judas), thus avoiding the need to refer to Jesus' betrayer; or it might be a factual insight reflecting which of the twelve were fishermen local to the region.[50] This list of disciples might offer the reader an opportunity to discover the actual identity of the Beloved Disciple, as discussed below.

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[47] G.R. O'DAY, 'The Gospel of John: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections', in *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary* Vol. VIII (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015), pp.723-724.
[48] A.T. LINCOLN, *The Gospel According to St John*, p.491.
[49] M.M. THOMPSON, *John: A Commentary*, p.431.
[50] J.-A.A. BRANT, *John*, p.279.

Simon Peter had decided to go fishing (v. 3), possibly signalling for the reader that he is restless and seeking to return to his former way of life.[51] This is, however, the first time he has been associated with fishing in John's Gospel (although this is clear in the Synoptics, cf. Mk 1; Lk. 5).[52] It is also notable that this fishing expedition was at night, and that the disciples caught nothing. The motif of night and darkness is again deployed, potentially to signal the disciples' darkness in the absence of Jesus.[53] This is contrasted with Jesus' appearance 'just after daybreak' (v. 4): the light had returned, perhaps also signalling the dawn of a new day as a connection to the resurrection (Jn 20) or creation (Gen. 1).

The disciples do not recognise Jesus (v. 4), but follow his instruction to cast their net to the other side and a miraculous haul of fish is caught (vv. 5-6). The disciples do not question the instruction but simply obey, perhaps evoking the obedience of sheep who follow their shepherd (cf. Jn 10:11).[54] This miraculous sign functions as a reminder to the reader of John 15:5, where Jesus tells his disciples that 'apart from me you can do nothing', and it might serve to symbolise the emergent mission of the disciples.[55]

The Beloved Disciple recognises Jesus, exclaiming to Simon Peter, 'It is the Lord!' (v. 7). This is the second, and only, reported speech for this character after the Last Supper (Jn 13:25), which, if read together would result in the interesting statement: 'Lord, who is it? It is the Lord!', meaning that the entire dialogue of the Beloved Disciple is designed to identity and recognise Jesus as Lord. Being the first to recognise the risen Jesus might add weight to the interpretation that the Beloved Disciple does in fact realise that Jesus has risen from the empty tomb (Jn 20:8). Moreover, it further confirms the Beloved Disciple as a reliable witness, so that the reader might trust his testimony as inscribed in the Gospel, in the same way as Simon Peter trusts him.[56] Indeed, the implicit role of the Beloved Disciple is to recognise the risen Jesus and make him known to others, anticipating his identification as the eyewitness source of the Gospel in John 21:24.[57] The Beloved Disciple has revealed Jesus, prompting others to act,[58] signifying to the reader that this should be their response,

[51] J.-A.A. BRANT, *John*, p.280.
[52] M.M. THOMPSON, *John: A Commentary*, p.431.
[53] A.T. LINCOLN, *The Gospel According to St John*, p.511.
[54] J.-A.A. BRANT, *John*, p.281.
[55] A.T. LINCOLN, *The Gospel According to St John*, p.511.
[56] D.R. BECK, 'Whom Jesus Loved', p.231.
[57] M.M. THOMPSON, *John: A Commentary*, p.433.
[58] A.T. LINCOLN, *The Gospel According to St John*, p.510.

too. Simon Peter's response is to put on clothes (covering his nudity) and jump into the lake (v. 7), while the others bring the boat to shore with the net full of fish (v. 8). Due to a narrative gap, the reader is not told whether this effort causes Simon Peter to arrive first, or whether they all arrive at the beach together.[59]

A charcoal fire is seen on the beach (v. 9), recalling the one shared by Simon Peter in the courtyard of the high priest (Jn 18:18). This reminds the reader of Simon Peter's denial (in contrast to the Beloved Disciple's faithfulness), ahead of his 'rehabilitation' by Jesus.

Jesus asks for some fish, and the narrator notes that the net contained 153 fish, but that the net has not torn (vv. 10-11). It is interesting to observe that the word 'nothing' (*oudeis*), the number of fish the disciples have caught before Jesus tells them to cast the net to the other side, appears 153 times in the Gospel narrative.[60] Whilst it is unlikely that many readers would have noted this, Jesus can be seen as gathering in all of the occasions when humanity has failed and when he can do nothing without his Father. A number of other theories have been posited, among them that 153 is a 'triangular number', or that this is a further example of an eyewitness detail included in the account.[61] This detail thus either affirms the eyewitness account offered by the narrator or reveals a theological insight offered by the implied author, or both.

Jesus invites the disciples to share breakfast with him and they all now recognise him (v. 12). Since the resurrection, there is no longer any need for the disciples (with other background characters) to ask Jesus 'Who are you?', as this question has now been answered decisively for the reader by the Gospel narrative.[62] Jesus has enabled the disciples to catch fish and has provided nourishment for the disciples, having already sent them out with the gift of the Holy Spirit in John 20. This alludes to Jesus' continuing presence with his followers.[63]

This passage demonstrates the ability of the Beloved Disciple to recognise Jesus, again reflecting the closeness of their relationship. Simon Peter's response is somewhat reckless,

[59] J.-A.A. BRANT, *John*, p.282.
[60] J.-A.A. BRANT, *John*, p.280.
[61] See: J.-A.A. BRANT, *John*, p.282; M.M. THOMPSON, *John: A Commentary*, pp.437-439.
[62] J.-A.A. BRANT, *John*, p.283.
[63] M.M. THOMPSON, *John: A Commentary*, p.434.

but perhaps reveals his need to re-establish his own relationship with Jesus following his denial in John 18 and for him to be reconciled with Jesus. The words spoken by the Beloved Disciple underline his belief in Jesus as Lord, a recognition superior to that of his implied rival, Simon Peter, and signifying his role as the one who will bring others to faith.

After Jesus has forgiven Simon Peter for his denial, charged him with tending his sheep, and foretold the way in which Simon Peter would die (Jn 21:15-19), the Gospel closes with a discussion between Simon Peter and Jesus about the Beloved Disciple in **John 21:20-25**.

On seeing the Beloved Disciple following them (v. 20), Simon Peter asks Jesus, 'Lord, what about him?' (v. 21). In a further example of the implied competition between these two disciples, Simon Peter has been told to follow Jesus (v. 19) but sees that the Beloved Disciple is already following him.[64] Simon Peter's path as a martyr has been laid out by Jesus (vv. 18-19), but the Beloved Disciple's mission is, instead, to bring others to faith through evangelism (Jn 20:31), for which a martyr's death would not be necessary. The Beloved Disciple is deliberately singled out from Simon Peter's jurisdiction in Jesus' reply, 'If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? (v. 22).[65] This statement by Jesus might well allude to the 'longevity' of the Beloved Disciple's life and the hope that the Parousia (second coming of Jesus) will occur within his lifetime.[66] What is evident, however, is that Jesus has a particular concern for the Beloved Disciple, distinct from his charge to Simon Peter.

The narrative time then draws up to the implied author's present, as it is stated that a rumour that Jesus had claimed the Beloved Disciple would not die is false (v. 23). The implication here is that the Beloved Disciple had died, at least by the time this chapter was written, and so a clarification to the implied reader is needed: Jesus has not (in v. 22) promised immortality to the Beloved Disciple. This must have developed firmly within the early tradition for it to be stated so clearly here, and confirms the Beloved Disciple as an individual rooted in history, however greatly he is idealised in the narrative.[67]

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[64] R.A. CULPEPPER, *John: The Son of Zebedee, The Life of a Legend* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), p.71.
[65] A.T. LINCOLN, *The Gospel According to St John*, pp.520-521.
[66] R.A. CULPEPPER, *John*, p.70.
[67] A.T. LINCOLN, *The Gospel According to St John*, p.521.

The Beloved Disciple is then identified as 'the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true' (v. 24). The narrator's voice has shifted from a passive retelling to an affirming first-person plural testimony as to the authority of the Gospel. The Beloved Disciple is a trusted eyewitness who has provided his testimony to the implied author. This now means that the implied author (and narrator) is revealed to be someone other than the Beloved Disciple himself, at least for John 21, but one who has drawn on the Beloved Disciple's witness account, perhaps representing the perspective and tradition of a Johannine community.[68] The Gospel concludes that there were many other things done by Jesus: 'if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written' (v. 25). This closing scene draws on a rhetorical convention that certain events are highlighted to exemplify many, further adding to the significance of those which have been included in John's narrative.[69]

This passage, more than any other, highlights the relationship between Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple, and the difference between each man's relationship with Jesus.[70] Jesus has demonstrated a special concern for the Beloved Disciple, who is neither to be under Simon Peter's control or to suffer a martyr's death, but free to testify as a witness for Jesus.

There are two further passages in which, it can be argued, the Beloved Disciple appears but is not explicitly identified, or at least not as 'the disciple whom Jesus loved': **John 1:35-40** and **John 18:15-16**. In the first of these, John [the Baptist] sees Jesus and tells two of his disciples, 'Look, here is the lamb of God!'; the two then follow Jesus (Jn 1:35-37). One of the disciples is Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter (v. 40). It has been speculated that the other disciple could be the Beloved Disciple, as the Gospel later claims that he is an eyewitness to all of the events contained within it (Jn 21:24).[71] This identification would thus be significant because it would place the Beloved Disciple with Jesus from the beginning of his public ministry, thus enabling him to testify to Jesus' signs and teachings as a 'perceptive and "ideal" witness'.[72] The second of these additional passages follows Jesus' arrest when he has been taken to the house of the high priest (Jn 18:12-14). Simon Peter and 'another

[68] A.T. LINCOLN, *The Gospel According to St John*, pp.522-523.
[69] A.T. LINCOLN, *The Gospel According to St John*, pp.523-524.
[70] M.M. THOMPSON, *John: A Commentary*, p.431.
[71] See, for example: R.A. CULPEPPER, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, p.44; A.T. LINCOLN, *The Gospel According to St John*, p.118.
[72] D. TOVEY, 'An Anonymous Disciple: A Type of Discipleship', p.134.

disciple' follow Jesus; the other disciple knows the high priest and so enters the courtyard (v. 15); Simon Peter cannot follow, until the other disciple speaks to the guard and brings Simon Peter in (v. 16). The description 'other disciple' is used explicitly for the Beloved Disciple in John 20:4, hence it is wholly plausible that this character is indeed the Beloved Disciple.[73] The significance of this would be a further appearance of these two disciples together, in which the Beloved Disciple has privileged access (in this case, to the high priest's house) while Simon Peter does not. This compounds the sense of a superior ability to follow Jesus; it also roots the Beloved Disciple firmly as following Jesus throughout his Passion, rather than having him simply appear at the foot of the cross. This adds to his ability to offer reliable testimony to the events he narrates.

A definitive identification of the individual portrayed as the Beloved Disciple within all of these passages is not possible, but the question of the character's identity is interesting. The reader understands that he is male, due to the use of masculine pronouns, and that he is part of the group who sailed with Simon Peter on the Sea of Tiberias (Jn 21:7). This limits his identification to either Thomas, Nathanael, one of the sons of Zebedee (James and John, according to Mark 1:19), or one of the 'two others of his disciples' (Jn 21:2). Thomas can be eliminated from consideration, as his interaction with the risen Jesus is recorded in 20:24-29. Nathanael is called by Jesus in 1:45-50, and so, if the assertion that the Beloved Disciple's first encounter with Jesus occurs in 1:35-37,[74] he can also be ruled out. As Simon Peter's brother, and so understandably close to him, Andrew is a possible identification of one of the 'two others', and has followed Jesus since the beginning of his ministry (Jn 1:40-41), although he is named in that passage (and, as discussed, the Beloved Disciple is perhaps more likely to have been the other of John the Baptist's disciples). Lazarus (Jn 11) is also noted as a possibility, as Lazarus is referred to as 'he whom you love' (Jn 11:3). If Lazarus is the Beloved Disciple, this could account for his belief when he sees the folded grave clothes in the empty tomb (Jn 20:8): 'Lazarus was raised to life again; Jesus was raised to life anew'.[75] The characterization of Lazarus might offer a challenge to this, however, with the implication that he might be 'a creative embellishment of tradition', which would place him in contrast to the historical person upon whom Beloved Disciple is based.[76]

[73] See: R.A. CULPEPPER, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, p.44; R.B. EDWARDS, *Discovering John: Content, Interpretation, Reception.* 2nd edn. (London: SPCK, 2014), pp.118-119.
[74] R.A. CULPEPPER, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, p.44.
[75] M.M. THOMPSON *John: A Commentary*, p.411.
[76] A.T. LINCOLN, *The Gospel According to St John*, pp.20-21.

This argument would not be in alignment with the perspective of this study to treat all of the characters as (at least based upon) real, historical people. This study instead discounts the suggestion that Lazarus is the Beloved Disciple on the basis of Beck's argument around anonymity, as there would seem to be little reason to name Lazarus in John 11 and 12, and later anonymise him in John 13. According to Church tradition,[77] the Beloved Disciple is John, one of the sons of Zebedee (Jn 21:2), but not James who was martyred (Acts 12:2), hence the Gospel bears the name of its presumed author/source.[78] This identification is certainly evident in the reception history of the Beloved Disciple, as discussed in Chapter 4. In each of these cases, however, the man in question is named in the Gospel narrative. And so, if Beck's compelling argument for the anonymity of the Beloved Disciple is correct, on the grounds of his role in revealing that 'there is only One person whose identity matters',[79] then it is unlikely to be either of these characters, or indeed any other named individual. Adele Reinhartz argues that the Beloved Disciple is likely to be a historical, 'if somewhat idealized' character, whose identity was likely to have been known to the original implied readers of the Gospel.[80] Hence, although intense curiosity remains as to the identity of the Beloved Disciple, it is sufficient to note that this man was an historical figure, known to the early followers of Jesus, and a member of Jesus' friendship group, whose anonymity is a narrative device. His presence alongside Jesus throughout his ministry, passion and death, and after his resurrection, serves to qualify him as the eyewitness source of the Gospel, whatever his actual name might have been.

Characterization of the Beloved Disciple emerges most fully when all of the texts in which he appears are read synchronically,[81] as a complete narrative unit. The profile of the character is built up over the course of the narrative, as well as its place within the meta-narrative of the Gospel.[82] The character is developed as Jesus' 'trusted companion' and one whose relationship with Jesus (as the one who will make Jesus known to others) is comparable to Jesus' relationship with the Father as his trusted witness.[83] Indeed, the 'principal trait' of the Beloved Disciple is his intimacy with Jesus, revealed through his

[77] Tom Thatcher discusses the origins of the 'John' tradition, attributing this to the second-century bishop Iraneus. See: T. THATCHER, 'The Beloved Disciple, the Fourth Evangelist, and the Authorship of the Fourth Gospel', in J.M. Lieu and M.C. de Boer (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Johannine Studies*, pp.87-88.
[78] T. THATCHER, 'The Beloved Disciple, the Fourth Evangelist, and the Authorship of the Fourth Gospel', p.83.
[79] D.R. BECK, 'Whom Jesus Loved', p.223.
[80] A. REINHARTZ, 'The Gospel According to John', p.170.
[81] See: J.-A.A. BRANT, *John*, p.266.
[82] D. TOVEY, 'An Anonymous Disciple: A Type of Discipleship', p.136.
[83] J. ZUMSTEIN, 'The Mother of Jesus and the Beloved Disciple: How a New Family is Established Under the Cross', p.643.

physical closeness and 'spiritual perceptivity'. The Beloved Disciple thus serves as both a witness to Jesus and a Christological 'human counterpart' who can 'reveal his nature' through his intimate knowledge and understanding.[84]

Narrative analysis has therefore illustrated that the relationship between the Beloved Disciple and Jesus is one of intimacy. This is not only in respect of physical closeness, as he leans against Jesus' chest at the Last Supper, but also in the mutual trust, obedience and faithfulness demonstrated between the two men. This leads the Beloved Disciple to follow Jesus throughout his Passion, to be the first to believe in Jesus' resurrection, and to be the trusted witness charged by Jesus to share his good news. This in turn results in the writing of the Gospel of John which seeks to encourage the reader in his or her faith through revealing the nature of Jesus.

[84] R.B. EDWARDS, *Discovering John*, p.120.

Chapter 4 Reception History of the Johannine Beloved Disciple

As discussed in Chapter 2, reception history offers an insight into the way in which a text has been received within various cultural contexts over time, not only through (scholarly) interpretation but also within the creative arts, including literature, art and film. Because the character under scrutiny in this study is found in John's Gospel, a core Christian text, it is the *Christian* reception of the Beloved Disciple that will be its principal focus. Christian artwork, in the form of paintings and iconography; church decorations, including statuary and stained glass; lyrical interpretation in hymns; and the depiction of the Beloved Disciple in films centred on the life of Jesus, are all potentially of relevance to this analysis. However, due to the scope of this study, it is necessary to be selective, and hence the decision has been taken to select one piece of artwork to represent each of the five principal passages relating to the Beloved Disciple, as detailed in Table 1, below. The intention is to represent artistic interpretation across a number of historical periods, so as to establish continuity or change in the cultural reception of the Beloved Disciple. Restricting the focus to include only the visual arts should enable a more common frame of reference within which to identify themes (the inclusion of hymnody and film would undoubtedly make this task more challenging). In addition, the selection aims to include artworks with a range of interpretative and theological emphases, from the traditional/classical to the more imaginative/expressive. The final selection of pieces has been chosen after conducting Internet searches of visual representations of the biblical passages.[1] The selection covers a time period of approximately 600 years and, with artworks ranging from classical medieval painting, through church statuary, to illustrations in Bibles and, finally, to a modern, expressionist painting, it should be possible to identify themes from within a number of artistic styles. The websites used to source suitable artworks, *The Visual Commentary on Scripture* and *Christian Art*, were selected due their familiarity, diversity of content and open access; a limitation is the number of pieces available within the sites for each specific biblical passage, which has resulted in a final selection in which all of the artworks are by European artists, which restricts this survey of the reception history of the Beloved Disciple in artwork to only European/Western cultural interpretations.

[1] With the exception of 'The Crucifixion', which is known to this student as it is situated in his curacy parish, the artworks have been identified through online searches of *The Visual Commentary on Scripture* (https://thevcs.org) and *Christian Art* (https://christian.art), conducted 06 February 2024.

Artwork	Artist	Date	Subject
'The Last Supper' [Tempera and gold on panel] Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Sienna	Duccio	1308-11	John 13:21-30 'Jesus Foretells his Betrayal'
'The Crucifixion' [Statuary] St Chad's Church, Stafford	Unknown (Italian origin)	Early C20th	John 19:25b-27 'The Crucifixion of Jesus'
'Saint Peter and Saint John Run to the Sepulchre' [Opaque watercolour over graphite on grey wove paper] The Brooklyn Museum, New York City	J. Tissot	1886-94	John 20:1-10 'The Resurrection of Jesus'
'Jesus appears to his disciples at the Sea of Tiberias' [Coloured chromolithograph] (1853), illustration from *Die Bibel in Bildern*, published 1860.	J. Schnorr von Carolsfeld	1853	John 21:1-14: 'Jesus Appears to Seven Disciples'
'Jealousy' [Oil on canvas] The Munch Museum, Oslo	E. Munch	1907	John 21:20-25 'Jesus and the Beloved Disciple'

Table 1. Christian artwork selected for consideration in this discussion.

John 13:21-36: 'Jesus Foretells his Betrayal'

Figure 1: DUCCIO The Last Supper, from the Maestà [Tempera and gold on panel] (1308-11), Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Sienna. < https://thevcs.org/apostle-judas#condemnation-or-salvation> [Accessed 06 February 2024].

Duccio's fourteenth-century Italian altar reredos panel depicts the Last Supper with Jesus at the centre of the image. Jesus has a piece of bread in his hand, which he is holding out in the direction of Judas (seated front, second from left). This suggests strongly that the image refers to John 13, rather than one of the Synoptic accounts of the Last Supper,

although as the table appears to be set for a Passover meal (which has not yet occurred according to John's Gospel), the gesture of Jesus in holding out the bread can instead be perceived as the institution of the Eucharist (for example, Mk 14:22) as Jesus breaks the bread and 'gave it to them'.[2]

Of particular interest for this study, however, is the figure positioned to the right of Jesus, who is clearly pictured resting his head on Jesus, and who can therefore be identified as the Beloved Disciple. He appears to be reclining on Jesus' knee, as he rests on fabric that is the same colour as Jesus' robe. The closeness and intimacy of the two men is evident: conveying an impression that goes beyond the 'position of honour' posited in the narrative analysis of the passage (pp. 9-11).[3] The Beloved Disciple is one of only three disciples depicted without a beard. This suggests youth, and his features appear similar to those of the disciple seated on the upper-left: if the Beloved Disciple is identified as John, the son of Zebedee, which is the prevailing traditional view, then this other disciple might well represent his brother James. The Beloved Disciple is certainly comfortable, and is possibly even sleeping.

This image reveals that, at least as far back as the early fourteenth century, the youthful Beloved Disciple (presumed to be John, the son of Zebedee)[4] was understood to be sufficiently close to, and intimate with, Jesus that he could be depicted relaxing in an intimate position with Jesus, in the presence of the other disciples.

[2] A.D. CHAPLIN, (2024) 'Condemnation or Salvation?' [Online] Available at: https://thevcs.org/apostle-judas#condemnation-or-salvation [Accessed 08 March 2024].
[3] C.K. BARRETT, *The Gospel According to St John*, pp.372-373.
[4] This is a common portrayal of St John the Evangelist (assumed by Christian artists to be the Beloved Disciple), as a beautiful, beardless youth; the only contrasting depictions show him as an elderly man writing his Revelation. See: P. MURRAY and L. MURRAY, *Oxford Dictionary of Christian Art.* 3rd edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p.272.

John 19:25-27: The Crucifixion

Figure 2: UNKNOWN The Crucifixion [Painted wooden statuary] (19th century), Saint Chad's Church, Stafford (Italian origin). [Photograph: student's own. 23 March 2022]. Inset: detail of the figure of the Beloved Disciple.

This devotional statuary, which stands above the (now removed) rood screen at St Chad's Church, Stafford, depicts the Crucifixion as presented in John 19, with two figures, the mother of Jesus and his Beloved Disciple, standing at the foot of the cross to which Jesus is nailed.[5] Jesus is wearing a gold cloth around his waist, which alludes to the glorification of Jesus at the hour of his Crucifixion. This gold is reflected in the exposed lining of the robes of the other figures: perhaps even in the sadness of the present scene, they understand the glory of Jesus' death. From the angle of Jesus' head, if he opened his eyes, which are shown as closed (he might have already died in this depiction), he would be looking down at his Beloved Disciple, who is shown gazing up at Jesus' face with an expression of adoration. In contrast, Jesus' mother is rather more sombre, and she is looking downwards, either towards the ground or, in this context, towards the congregation.

As one who has celebrated the Eucharist and prayed beneath this statuary on many occasions, the striking impression is of the glory of Jesus' hour and of the love between the adoring Beloved Disciple and Jesus.[6]

[5] The rood screen ('rood' meaning cross) was a common feature in many Churches, although often removed during the English Reformation; this statuary, imported during a Victorian reordering of St Chad's Church, would therefore be a typical depiction of the Crucifixion. See: P. MURRAY and L. MURRAY, *Oxford Dictionary of Christian Art*, p.496.

[6] 'Transcendence' was a motivation for much of the Christian artworks installed in church buildings, encouraging connection between sacramental practice and imagery of Jesus Christ. See G. HOWES, *The Art of the Sacred: An Introduction to the Aesthetics of Art an Belief* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), p.53.

John 20:1-10: 'The Resurrection of Jesus'

Figure 3: JAMES TISSOT Saint Peter and Saint John Run to the Sepulchre
[Opaque watercolour over graphite on grey wove paper] (1886-94), The Brooklyn Museum, New York City.
< https://thevcs.org/beloved-disciple#apostolic-rivals> [Accessed 6 February 2024].

This artwork, one of 365 produced by French artist Tissot, depicts the two disciples running towards Jesus' tomb, with the Beloved Disciple arriving first (Jn 20:3-4). There are a number of notable features that draw attention to the perceived rivalry between the two men: John (and it is taken as read that the Beloved Disciple is John) is eager to arrive at the tomb and faces towards it, whereas Simon Peter is facing back towards the city, perhaps implying that he is looking backwards and unable to comprehend the death of Jesus. John is dressed in white, suggesting an angelic or heavenly appearance, contrasted with Peter in darker robes; John is lit by the light of the angels emanating from the tomb, whereas Peter is in shadowy darkness.[7] The Beloved Disciple is again portrayed as younger, blonde-haired and beardless, classically more attractive than the older, darker-haired and bearded Simon Peter. The posture of the two men (the way they are shown running, position of their hands, and the way their garments are billowing with movement) is very similar, which perhaps serves further to highlight the difference between them: the Beloved Disciple looks towards Jesus and the heavenly, while Simon Peter is concerned with the earthly. The emerging

[7] I. BOXALL, (2024) 'Apostolic Rivals' [Online] Available at: https://thevcs.org/beloved-disciple#apostolic-rivals [Accessed 08 March 2024].

rivalry between the two disciples is evident, with a sense of urgency in arriving at Jesus' tomb: Jesus' beloved is certain to get there first.

John 21:1-10: Jesus Appears to Seven Disciples

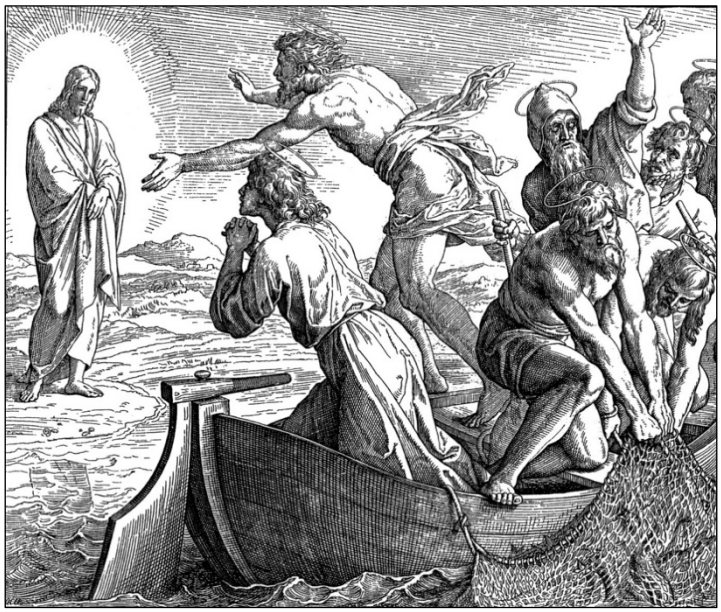

Figure 4: JULIUS SCHNORR VON CAROLSFELD Jesus appears to his disciples at the Sea of Tiberias [Coloured chromolithograph] (1853), illustration from Die Bibel in Bildern, published 1860. < https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/7b/Schnorr_von_Carolsfeld_Bibel_in_Bildern_1860_224.png > [Accessed 06 February 2024].

In this chromolithograph, taken from a nineteenth-century illustrated Bible, Jesus has appeared on the beach while the disciples are fishing on the Sea of Tiberias. Most of the disciples are engaged in hauling the net, which contains the miraculous catch of fish (Jn 21:6). By contrast, two are leaning towards Jesus, who is pictured with nail wounds in his hands and feet, and from whom light is radiating. These two disciples are the Beloved Disciple and Simon Peter, the latter having a cloth roughly wrapped around him and reaching towards Jesus, presumably about to leap into the water. The muscular, ruggedly masculine figures of Simon Peter and the other disciples, possibly a result of their labours as fishermen, is in contrast with both Jesus and the Beloved Disciple. Jesus is portrayed as handsome, serene and dressed in a clean, well-draped robe, while the Beloved Disciple, also fully dressed, is again younger, beardless, and with long flowing hair. The difference in posture between Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple is also notable: both are leaning towards Jesus, but while Simon Peter is lunging forward with his arms outstretched, ready for action, the Beloved Disciple's hands are together in prayer. The distinction drawn

between the two disciples is made clear: while both are drawn to the resurrected Jesus, Simon Peter is a man of action, whereas the Beloved Disciple is a man of faith.

John 21:20-25: Jesus and the Beloved Disciple

Figure 5: EDVARD MUNCH Jealousy [Oil on canvas] (1907), The Munch Museum, Oslo.
< https://www.munchmuseet.no/en/object/MM.M.00447/> [Accessed 06 February 2024].

Whilst Munch's early-twentieth century painting is perhaps the most unusual and contentious of the artworks chosen for this study, this is precisely the reason for its inclusion, offering as it does a contrasting depiction from a more contemporary context.[8] The two disciples ('Simon Peter' to the left and the 'Beloved Disciple' to the right) are dressed in contemporary dinner suits, while the central figure, 'Jesus', appears to be wearing a white evening dress. The portrayal of Jesus might seem overtly feminine (a person with long dark hair wearing a white dress), and might even suggest a bride. However, a typical image of Jesus might well have him with long flowing hair (often dark, although a preference for Aryan features among artists has resulted in many renderings of a blonde Jesus, as unlikely as this is given his Middle Eastern ancestry) and in a robe, often white. With this in mind, it is possible to interpret the figure as representing Jesus, although the figure's posture (arms folded behind his head) would imply seduction. The two disciples are shown with green faces, green being the colour most usually associated with envy. The painting is entitled 'Jealousy', and that is indeed the primary focus of the work. Green is also notable as the complementary colour to red, the colour of love, and in this painting, the colour of Jesus'

[8] This artwork is used by *Christian Art* to illustrate John 21:20-25, thus the figures are interpreted as the three characters in this passage accordingly. See: CHRISTIAN ART NETWORK (2022) 'Peter turned and saw the disciple Jesus loved' [Online] Available at: https://christian.art/daily-gospel-reading/john-21-20-25-2022 [Accessed 08 March 2024].

face.[9] Simon Peter, looking away from Jesus, displays a frown, while the Beloved Disciple, shown in profile, has his head bowed towards Jesus. Again, the Beloved Disciple is shown as beardless, in contrast with Simon Peter. Munch, as an artist within the Expressionist movement, would certainly have used colour and composition to convey emotion. Further, Munch is known for his provocative artworks on the themes of love and emotional relationships. Munch's contribution to art is considered to be the portrayal of 'universal aspects of human experience'.[10] This piece is indeed provocative, and represents a challenging perspective on a familiar emotional experience. The figure of a woman is used by Munch in several works to represent an '"other" with whom union is desperately desired',[11] which, in this case, refers to the desire for Jesus' affection that creates the jealousy between the two men.

The emotional rivalry between the two disciples is dominant: the Beloved Disciple shows a closeness to Jesus while Simon Peter has turned his back on them both. The sexualised, feminine (perhaps 'queer') portrayal of Jesus, towards whom the Beloved Disciple is looking, is initially somewhat shocking, but further study reveals a less alarming depiction of the intimacy between these two characters, to which Simon Peter does not have access.

Conclusions from Reception History of the Johannine Beloved Disciple

For a twenty-first century LGBTQ+ Christian, these works of Christian art might reveal a number of factors about the relationship between Jesus and the Beloved Disciple: whilst the individual pieces are rather different from one another, and they portray different scenes from the Gospel, a number of common impressions emerge, even despite the span of six centuries between the oldest and the most recent artwork, which suggests a firmly established tradition. Firstly, there is a comfortable physical intimacy between the two men, known and noticed by those around them, and secondly, the Beloved Disciple adores Jesus, and looks on him lovingly and faithfully. It is also evident that a rivalry exists between the Beloved Disciple and Simon Peter, who is apparently jealous of the relationship between

[9] CHRISTIAN ART NETWORK (2022) 'Peter turned and saw the disciple Jesus loved' [Online] Available at: https://christian.art/daily-gospel-reading/john-21-20-25-2022 [Accessed 08 March 2024].
[10] G.F. WATSON (2024) 'Edvard Munch: Norwegian Artist' [Online] Available at: https://www.britannica.com/biography/Edvard-Munch [Accessed 22 March 2024].
[11] G.F. WATSON (2024) 'Edvard Munch: Norwegian Artist' [Online] Available at: https://www.britannica.com/biography/Edvard-Munch [Accessed 22 March 2024].

Jesus and the Beloved Disciple, who is portrayed as younger and more attractive. The relationship between Jesus and the Beloved Disciple emerges from these depictions as loving, intimate and faithful, which reflects the characterization of the relationship identified in Chapter 3: an intimate bond of closeness, mutual trust, and the Beloved Disciple's belief in Jesus.

Chapter 5 Jesus' Relationship with the Beloved Disciple: A Queer-Imaginative Reading

Queer Theology

Queer Theology can offer a significant hermeneutical lens through which to interpret the Johannine Beloved Disciple, that is, without the heteronormative preconceptions or the binary distinctions which many other hermeneutics, even those purporting to be neutral, place upon the character. This chapter will consider concepts from Queer Theology from four credible Queer Theologians whose work has informed and indeed shaped much of the relevant discourse in recent years: Patrick S Cheng, Robert E Shore-Goss, Linn Marie Tonstad, and Theodore W Jennings. The intention is to draw out insights that will inform the affirmative, 'queer-imaginative reading' which follows in this chapter.

The first of Patrick Cheng's four Queer Theology strands, as highlighted in Chapter 2, draws on David Halperin's definition of queerness: *identity without essence*.[1] This arises from apophatic or negative theology: because God is beyond human understanding, we cannot know anything about God, and thus it is only possible to know God by what God is not, rendering God as 'above all essence'. It is therefore possible to recognise God as an identity without essence, and hence through this lens God can be said to be queer.[2] It is therefore valid for this study to consider the queer potential of the Gospel, and indeed of Jesus himself.

Transgression refers to the ways in which God's actions, according to Christian belief, can be seen to subvert or undermine conventional paradigms and cross boundaries of human legal and ethical practice. Jesus can be called transgressive because, through his Passion and death, he dared 'to queer, or to challenge, the status quo' of the political and religious elites.[3] Further, Queer Theology 'turns upside down, inside out, and defies hetero-normative and homonormative theologies.'[4] It might be deemed unlikely, therefore, that Jesus would

[1] 'Identity without essence' is a definition of queerness coined by D.M. Halperin, who asserted that 'There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers'. Cited by P.S. CHENG, 'Contributions from Queer Theory', p.155.
[2] P.S. CHENG, 'Contributions from Queer Theory', p.160.
[3] P.S. CHENG, 'Contributions from Queer Theory', p.161.
[4] R.E. GOSS, *Queering Christ: Beyond Jesus Acted Up* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2002), p.225, cited by P.S. CHENG, 'Contributions from Queer Theory', p.161.

have felt constrained by conventional relationships, opening the possibility for a personal, intimate relationship between Jesus and his Beloved Disciple.

Christianity has long held a position of *resisting binaries*, for example in the Church's credal statement that Jesus Christ is both fully divine and fully human. In spite of this, a recent trend by non-affirming churches defines people as 'either/or', referring primarily to the gender identity and sexual orientation of those who are to be either included or excluded.[5] *Resisting binaries* can thus be interpreted as deconstructing binary preconceptions, either through ignoring them or blurring the definitions. It could be described as a focus on 'both/and' rather than 'either/or' thinking. This further suggests that the relationship between Jesus and the Beloved Disciple does not necessarily fit within heteronormative constraints.

The final strand, *social construction*, is based on the Christian notion of 'earthly identities' as being of no 'ultimate significance' to God. With no 'eschatological significance' to socially-constructed identifiers, such as gender or sexual orientation, these identifications are not universally fixed but are rather social categories constructed by the culture of those whom they describe.[6] As Halperin highlights, in ancient Greek and Roman cultures neither the category of heterosexual or homosexual existed; the status of being the active or passive partner in sexual intercourse, regardless of the biological sex of the participants, was deemed to be of cultural significance.[7] Therefore, the concept of same-sex relationships as experienced in contemporary culture is a social construction which did not exist during Jesus' lifetime.

The insights from these four strands are significant, as they cumulatively open up the potential for interrogation of the sexual orientation/identity of Jesus. This could, however, be perceived as an error, as Jesus, even if involved in intimate loving relationships with members of the same sex, cannot be classified as 'gay', or even 'bisexual' according to the socially-constructed categories of the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries.[8] Conversely, the classification of Jesus as cis-gendered and heteronormative is equally challenging, although it has become the accepted position by 'ecclesial and political powers' and fits with the

[5] P.S. CHENG, 'Contributions from Queer Theory', p.162.
[6] P.S. CHENG, 'Contributions from Queer Theory', p.163.
[7] D.M. HALPERIN, cited by P.S. CHENG, 'Contributions from Queer Theory', pp.158-159.
[8] Theodore Jennings arrives at a similar position, concluding that there can be no simple answer to the question 'Was Jesus gay?'. See: T.W. JENNINGS, *The Man Jesus Loved*, p.223.

agendas of 'white, male and heteronormative patriarchal Christianities'.[9] The most it would be possible, or even helpful, to argue, would be for an identification of Jesus as 'queer', insofar as he challenges the societal expectations of his time.

Whilst Cheng explores the queer-theoretical foundations of Queer Theology, Tonstad considers two aspects of the discipline which, for her and her students, are of primary importance: that Queer Theology discusses questions of relevance to LGBTQ+ people, including sexuality and gender; and that Queer Theology should 'affirm, represent, or apologize for' LGBTQ+ people.[10] These two points are of particular significance to this study, as its intention is to affirm LGBTQ+ Christians, and so consider questions of sexuality and gender where these are relevant to the discussion about Jesus' loving relationship with the Beloved Disciple as depicted in John's Gospel. Indeed, the queer-affirmative reading which follows will highlight aspects of the passages that support and affirm LGBTQ+ readers. Theodore Jennings, in this regard, offers a four-part strategy for an affirmative reading: first, to challenge homophobia and homophobic assumptions made in a non-affirming interpretation; second, to counter heterosexism, that is, the 'bias toward finding confirmation of the marriage and family values of heterosexual culture'; third, to approach the text in a 'pro-gay' mindset, seeking characters who can be identified as LGBTQ+; and fourth, to read from a contemporary LGBTQ+ paradigm.[11] Jennings' strategy, which aligns with the approach of this study, will indeed be applied in the queer-imaginative reading which follows.

A Queer-Imaginative Reading

This study now arrives at its ultimate purpose: to read and interpret the relationship between Jesus and the Beloved Disciple in such a way that LGBTQ+ Christians can find an affirmation of same-sex love, an antecedent for queerness, at the heart of the gospel of Jesus. What has been identified in previous chapters is that Jesus and the Beloved Disciple, assumed traditionally to be John, enjoyed an intimate, trusting relationship of mutual love and respect; John has been identified in the artwork selected for analysis as young and handsome, and with a rival for Jesus' affections in Simon Peter.

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[9] R.E. SHORE-GOSS, 'Queering Jesus: LGBTQI Dangerous Remembering and Imaginative Resistance', p.47.
[10] L.M. TONSTAD, *Queer Theology*, p.3.
[11] T.W. JENNINGS, *The Man Jesus Loved*, pp.6-7.

The precise nature of the intimacy between the two men has not been discerned or determined, perhaps because, as Jennings asserts, there has been a 'conspiracy of silence' around this issue.[12] For one to be referred to as 'beloved', however, requires there to be a 'lover'.[13] While contemporary usage of this word would imply a sexual relationship, as discussed earlier in this chapter, the identification of Jesus as involved in a sexually-active gay relationship is neither the intention of this study nor a helpful paradigm given the fairly recent socially-constructed concepts of hetero- and homosexuality. Therefore, while intimacy and love will be assumed in the queer-imaginative reading which follows, this should not be read as implying sex, although a reader might choose to make such an inference.

Following Jennings' strategy, this reading, in the form of a paraphrasistic interpretation, will seek to promote an LGBTQ+ paradigm, in which characters who might be inferred as queer are identified as such, affirming a queer reader in our contemporary context, and building on what has been gleaned about the relationship between Jesus and the Beloved Disciple from both the narrative-critical analysis and the artistic survey of the reception history undertaken.

The Passion, Death and Resurrection of John's Lover [14]

In John 13, Jesus is enjoying a meal with his close friends, likely both men and women, and including John, his beloved disciple. Jesus has stripped off his robe and performed the intimate action of washing the feet of his friends (Jn 13:4-5)*, which would usually have been performed only by a woman or a slave. Returning to the table, John is cuddled close to Jesus, lying on his chest, as supper continues* (v. 23)*. Jesus has become upset* (v. 21) *and has announced that one of his friends will be his betrayer. Confused, Simon Peter, aware (and envious) that John has a special bond with Jesus, gestures to John to ask who the betrayer will be* (v. 24)*; John looks up and asks Jesus, who responds enigmatically that he will pass a piece of bread to the betrayer: it is Judas* (vv. 25-26)*.*

[12] T.W. JENNINGS, *The Man Jesus Loved*, p.19.
[13] T.W. JENNINGS, *The Man Jesus Loved*, p.19.
[14] The identity of the Beloved Disciple has been received as John (Son of Zebedee) by tradition, as demonstrated in Chapter 4; in order to convey the personal relationship between the two men more clearly in this retelling, the name John will be used in place of 'the Beloved Disciple'.

Judas leaves and betrays Jesus to the authorities, who arrest him later that night in the garden where Jesus often socialised with his friends (Jn 18:2-12)*. John had, of course, been with Jesus all evening, and followed him, entering the courtyard of the high priest's house, and arranging for Simon Peter to be admitted, so that Jesus would not be alone* (vv. 15-16)*. While his rival Simon Peter denied Jesus* (v. 17)*, John witnessed Jesus being beaten, taken to the Roman governor's palace, publicly flogged and humiliated, and finally sentenced to death* (Jn 18:19-19:16)*. Still refusing to leave his lover, John remained with a small group of women, including Jesus' mother, who watched as Jesus was stripped and nailed to the cross* (Jn 19:18, 23)*.*

Then, in a final act of love and compassion, Jesus looked down from the cross to his mother and his beloved, the two people to whom he was closest, and gave them to one another, uniting them as members of his family (vv. 26-27)*. Grief-stricken, John and his mother-in-law watched as Jesus died and his body was taken down from the cross by two of his friends, and laid in a tomb nearby* (vv. 30,40-42)*.*

Once the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene came to find John and Simon Peter to share troubling news: she had been to the tomb and discovered that the stone had been removed from the entrance (Jn 20:1-2)*. John immediately ran to the tomb, followed by Simon Peter, to see for himself: Jesus had promised to rise from the dead, and John is desperate to find out if this has indeed happened* (vv. 3-4)*. When he got there, however, he became concerned; arriving at the tomb, grief took hold and overcame the hope – how could he bear to see the body of his deceased lover again? He looked in, far enough to see the linen wrappings, but could not make himself go inside* (v. 5)*. Simon Peter pushed past, keen to witness the scene, and saw the folded grave clothes, including the cloth used to wrap Jesus' head rolled up separately* (vv. 6-7)*. Emboldened by his rival's action, John enters the tomb and he believes:*[15] *his faith in Jesus' promise was justified – Jesus is not there!* (v. 8)*. So, there was no sense to dwell any longer in the place where Jesus' body had lain, a place of such sorrow, John returned home to wait for news of him* (v. 10)*.*

[15] As discussed in Chapter 3, there are several possibilities as to exactly what the Beloved Disciple might have believed. In this reading, it is assumed that John believes what Jesus has promised (as his faith and trust in Jesus is emphasised), rather than what Mary Magdalene had told the Beloved Disciple and Simon Peter: as indicated in Jn 16:16, Jesus enigmatically told the disciples, 'A little while and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me.' For this interpretation, therefore, John believes that he will see Jesus again.

A short while later, Mary Magdalene brought good news: she had met with Jesus, and he had told her to go and tell his friends (v.18)*. They all gathered later that evening, fearful of repercussions, sharing both their grief and their hope* (v. 19)*. There was so much joy when Jesus himself joined them, bringing his gifts of peace and the Holy Spirit* (vv. 19-22)*. A week later, Jesus joined them again, when Thomas was also with them; Thomas was able to see Jesus' wounds and realised fully the faith John had always known in his heart: that Jesus is the Messiah, the Lord, the Son of God* (vv. 26-28)*. In that moment, John knew that he must share this wonderful revelation, that Jesus, the man he has loved, is the Son of God, so that others might come to believe through his witness* (v. 31)*.*

Sometime later, John joined Peter and some of Jesus' other friends on a fishing trip on the Sea of Tiberias (Jn 21:1-3)*. They spent the whole night at sea, but caught nothing* (v. 3)*. As the sun rose, a figure came into view on the beach; he called to them to cast the net over to the right side of the boat, and miraculously they caught a haul of 153 fish, so many that it was difficult to get the net back into the boat* (vv. 4-6, 11)*. Knowing that only his Jesus could possibly have accomplished this wonderful sign, John tells Simon Peter excitedly, 'It is the Lord!'* (v. 7)*. John leans towards the beach, willing the others to hurry with the net and get the boat ashore, but Simon Peter, remembering just in time to cover himself (he had been asleep naked in the boat until this commotion), jumped straight into the sea and swam the short distance to the shore* (vv. 7-8)*. As he had so often before, Jesus was preparing a meal for his friends, and he asked for some fish to cook on the fire* (vv. 9-12)*. The reunited group sat together and shared breakfast* (vv. 12-13)*.*

Jesus took the opportunity to test Simon Peter, who had denied him publicly just a few days earlier, asking him if he truly loved him and, when Simon Peter protested that he did, Jesus told him to take care of his sheep, placing Simon Peter as the shepherd of Jesus' followers (vv. 15-17)*. But Jesus' reward for Simon Peter would come with a high price: Simon Peter would die as a martyr for his faith in Jesus* (vv. 18-19)*. Still, Jesus tells him, 'Follow me'* (v.19)*. John, of course, was already following Jesus, as he had since the beginning* (v. 20)*. Simon Peter, still jealous of the relationship between Jesus and his young, handsome beloved, and stinging from the revelation that he himself would be led out to die, asked Jesus what would happen to John* (v. 21)*. Jesus rebuked Simon Peter, telling him it was none of his business, saying, 'What is that to you?'* (v. 22)*; Jesus' beloved would not suffer*

a similar fate to Simon Peter, as his role would be to bear witness to his faith so that others might believe. John was such an important person in Jesus' life, his beloved, that Jesus did not want him to suffer, but to have a long, fruitful life.

Inspired by Jesus, the man he loved, trusted and in whom he believed, John shared his faith in Jesus as the Son of God with a community, testifying to all that he had witnessed; after he died, many years later, his theological teachings about Jesus were recorded, so that others could indeed come to believe (vv. 23-24; Jn 20:30).

Having undertaken this queer-imaginative reading, it would seem necessary to question both its validity and efficacy. I propose three principal criteria for determining this: first, does the interpretation 'damage' the text; second, does the reading sit comfortably within Church tradition; and third, does the reading affirm LGBTQ+ Christians?

In response to the first of these criteria, I would suggest that no parts of the text of the Johannine passages have had to be altered in order to interpret the relationship between Jesus and the Beloved Disciple in the way this reading has done. There is nothing added in the interpretation which cannot be inferred either directly from John's Gospel, or from its reception history, as explored in Chapters 3 and 4, when read through the hermeneutical lens of Queer Theology as described above. This being the case, the reading offered here can be argued as valid. What has been drawn out in this reading is an affirmation of the loving, intimate relationship between Jesus and the Beloved Disciple, a focus on the trust and familial bond between them, and the faithfulness and loyalty of the Beloved Disciple to Jesus.

With regard to the second criterion, Church tradition is perhaps more complicated. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 'sexuality always seems to have frightened the Church'.[16] Jesus was both fully divine and fully human,[17] and, as fully human Jesus will have had a sexual identity,[18] even if not expressed precisely in the Gospel accounts, beyond what can be inferred from the Johannine account, and not restricted by modern socially-

[16] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Popular and Definitive Edition (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1999), p.774.
[17] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, p.103.
[18] Jennings discusses the significance of the incarnation of Jesus as the 'em-body-ment' of God's Word (Jn 1), and the implication that Jesus would have experienced all that human bodies encounter. See: T.W. JENNINGS, *The Man Jesus Loved*, p.62.

constructed categories. The Christian creeds (the *Apostles' Creed* and the *Nicene Creed*)[19] make no reference to either Jesus' relationships or to the Beloved Disciple, so there is nothing contradictory here either. The *Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion*, which are accepted as forming the only written doctrine of the Church of England, similarly offer nothing which would contradict the reading undertaken here, except for a reference to 'Christ alone without Sin';[20] a loving relationship is not in itself deemed to be sinful, even between two members of the same sex (even if sexual acts outside of heterosexual marriage are considered sinful by some churches), and so this also does not suggest a problem. As identified in Chapter 4, Christian artists have interpreted the intimacy between Jesus and the Beloved Disciple in their work over many centuries; the Beloved Disciple, traditionally accepted as John, has been portrayed as young and handsome. Whilst it might appear unconventional, there is little to suggest, therefore, that the interpretation offered by this imaginative reading is invalid.

Fulfilment of the third criterion is, by contrast, somewhat easier to recognise. Within this reading, drawing as it does on prophetic imagination, the loving relationship between the two central male characters is evident, and recognisable to a contemporary queer reader as that of a same-sex (gay) relationship. That Jesus can be perceived in this way is clearly affirming of LGBTQ+ Christians who can see an antecedent of their own lives in the relationship between Jesus and the Beloved Disciple, as characterised by John's Gospel.

If, as it appears from the analysis offered in this study, the relationship between Jesus and his Beloved Disciple is so evident, it might be reasonable to question why it is not a common feature of biblical exegesis: why is this relationship not discussed when, for this LGBTQ+ interpreter, it appears to be hidden in plain sight? Shore-Goss would explain this dissonance as a result of attempts by the Church to avoid the 'dangerous remembering' of Jesus as not conforming to the heteronormative standards of the governing classes of society: for Jesus to be less than perfect, or in some way 'disordered', would make him less than divine and so undermine Christianity.[21] However, there is a pattern running through John's Gospel of Jesus intentionally breaking social (and scriptural) taboos and conventions: associating with those who were on the margins of society or considered unclean or impure, washing the

[19] A. McGRATH, *Faith and the Creeds* (London: SPCK, 2013), pp.106-108.
[20] S. WELLS, *What Anglicans Believe: An Introduction* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2011), p.127.
[21] R.E. SHORE-GOSS, 'Queering Jesus: LGBTQI Dangerous Remembering and Imaginative Resistance', pp.47-48.

feet of his disciples, speaking of eating his flesh and drinking his blood. It could thus be argued that Jesus engaging in a relationship which would have been frowned upon by the authorities is very much in keeping with this.[22]

An additional argument worthy of consideration is the Church tradition that 'a love that seeks to make itself available to all… is incompatible with a love for just one'.[23] This is the justification used for the mandated celibacy of clergy in some Christian denominations, and might explain a reluctance to acknowledge Jesus as having been a partner in a loving relationship with another person (irrespective of the gender of the other partner). I would counter this, however, drawing reference to a thesis by Bishop Graham Tomlin in his book *The Widening Circle: Priesthood as God's way of blessing the world*. I encountered this text during my own discernment for ministry, and was intrigued by the central idea that God elects an individual within a group (or a sub-group within a larger group) through which to confer blessing on the wider group in an 'ever-widening circle of divine blessing'.[24] For example, a priest is chosen from within a Church community, chosen from wider society, chosen from humanity, chosen from animals, chosen from creation. I would suggest that a similar principle could be seen in Jesus engaging in a personal loving relationship with his Beloved Disciple: a particular love for a chosen one confers blessing to the wider group – the disciples, Christians, humanity, creation. Thus, Jesus' love for the Beloved Disciple does not diminish or limit the love he has for all creation, but confers it on creation. Beck identifies the Beloved Disciple as the 'special recipient of Jesus' love', modelled on the special relationship between Jesus and his Father.[25] Certainly, for LGBTQ+ Christians, the love of Jesus for his Beloved reveals his love for us.

[22] T.W. JENNINGS, *The Man Jesus Loved*, p.67.
[23] T.W. JENNINGS, *The Man Jesus Loved*, p.95.
[24] G. TOMLIN, *The Widening Circle: Priesthood as God's Way of Blessing the World* (London: SPCK, 2014), p.12.
[25] D.R. BECK, 'Whom Jesus Loved', p.225.

Chapter 6: Conclusions

This study has set out to explore the relationship between Jesus and the Johannine Beloved Disciple, with the aim and ambition of finding an affirmative love for contemporary LGBTQ+ Christians in the heart of the Gospel.

The narrative analysis in Chapter 3 has identified a repeated impression of a deep, intimate connection between Jesus and the Beloved Disciple, manifested in their physical closeness and mutual trust, highlighted in Jesus' placing his mother in the care of his beloved one from the cross, and revealed in the faith displayed by the Beloved Disciple in Jesus as the Son of God. Certain limitations were noted, in particular the difficulty in making a positive identification of the Beloved Disciple and that of the author, but whilst perhaps frustrating for biblical exegesis, neither issue impacts on the characterization of the relationship contained within the passages examined in this study. The choice to apply a narrative analysis to the texts was effective in enabling an exploration of characterization and the context provided within the narrative of the Gospel.

A number of further insights were gleaned through the study of the reception history of the Johannine Beloved Disciple in Chapter 4. The physical intimacy, noted by those around them, is evident, including the adoration of Jesus by the Beloved Disciple; and, the rivalry between Simon Peter and the younger, more handsome, John (presumed by tradition to be the Beloved Disciple). That these artworks are consistent in their presentation of the Beloved Disciple, despite the different times and contexts in which they were created, suggests an established and enduring traditional 'afterlife' for this beloved figure. Examination of further works of art, as well as other cultural impressions including hymnody and film, might have offered additional, and perhaps even different, insights and allowed comparison of interpretations of the same Johannine passage. However, the (word) limitations of this investigation, of which the reception-historical aspect represented only one part, has inevitably resulted in the selection of a smaller number of examples. The exploration has, however, concurred with the results of the narrative analysis in Chapter 3, thereby adding weight to the conclusions drawn in Chapter 4, especially its visual details, to enhance the later queer-imaginative reading undertaken in this study.

Insights from Queer Theology have enabled consideration, moreover, of the ways in which LGBTQ+ characters are marginalised or diminished within biblical interpretation, and of the need to raise the profile and queer potential of the figures or characters depicted in the biblical texts. Accepting Cheng's assertion that God, and Jesus, are in their very nature 'queer', allows space to question and challenge the conventional heteronormative paradigm of the interpretation and reception of Jesus by Christians, giving confidence in conducting a queer-imaginative reading.

The queer-imaginative reading itself could have taken more than one form. I had considered focusing on the use of the first person, offering the prophetic voice of John himself, but discounted this due to the difficulty of reading or interpretatively reconstructing the ending of John's Gospel from a first-person perspective, as perhaps the original author might have done (see Jn 21:23-24). I am content with the eventual form, and pleased to note how the loving relationship between Jesus and his Beloved Disciple is clearly evident in the intimacy, devotion, concern, and love portrayed throughout. I conclude that this study's queer-imagintive reading has validity in terms of fidelity to the text, compatibility (albeit surprising) with Church tradition, and the affirmation of Jesus' love which emerges for LGBTQ+ Christians.

This study has demonstrated that, according to John's Gospel and (at least some) of its later interpretation, Jesus and his Beloved Disciple were in a loving relationship, unique within Jesus' circle of friends (and of which Simon Peter was envious), and both understood and accepted by their friends. This relationship is presented as one of mutual trust and respect, and included physical intimacy and a familial bond. If, as posited in Chapter 6, Graham Tomlin's thesis for a widening circle of blessing can be extended beyond the election of priests to include a loving relationship, then the relationship between Jesus and the Beloved Disciple can be inferred as an illustratrion of Jesus sharing his love as a blessing for all of creation. This relationship can be viewed as a queer loving relationship, thus affirming the love of Jesus for LGBTQ+ Christians. Both this love, conferred as a blessing to contemporary readers and the example of Jesus' openness and acceptance of same-sex love, thus offering a clear antecedent for LGBTQ+ relationships, can be seen as offering positive affirmation for LGBTQ+ Christians engaging with John's Gospel in the twenty-first century.

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