

Wednesday, May 14, 2025 | Deep Dive: The Gospel According to John | John 21:24-25

Vs. 24 – Given the context, it is evident that "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (vs. 20) and "this is the disciple which testifieth of these things and wrote these things" are referring to the *same* person. The writer is self-identifying himself. He's saying, "The one that Jesus and Peter were talking about and the author of this document are one and the same." And as has been argued throughout this commentary (*see notes 13:23-25; 18:15-18; 19:26-27; 20:3-5; 21:7, 20-21*), "the disciple whom Jesus loved" refers to none other than the apostle John, brother of the apostle James and the son of Zebedee (cf. Mar. 3:17). Like the signature at the bottom of a letter, the Beloved Apostle places himself at the end of his own account of Jesus' life.

If so, why does he say, "We [emphasis added] know that his testimony is true?" Who's the "we"? Going from a third-person point of view ("this is the disciple") to a first-person plural point of view ("we") implies, at least on the surface, that this account has more than one author. Various explanations have been proposed. (1) This is what might be called an editorial or authorial "we." When John said "we," he was still referring to himself. (2) Others assert that "we" refers to the apostolic band. After all, John uses the pronoun in this way in 1 Jn. 1:1-3. (3) According to the Muratorian Fragment, a late-second-century Christian document, John only wrote his account after being urged by his fellow apostles and disciples to do so. This would make the "we" of vs. 24 an ecclesial "we," wherein those closely associated with John—e.g., the Twelve, the church in Ephesus, and elders—are all in view. (4) Another interpretation sees the "we" as an indication that the Gospel of John was written by a scribe (cf. 19:19). Although John was the source of the content, he didn't do any of the actual writing. This is called an amanuensis [uh-man-yoo-en-suhs], and it was common in the ancient world where written composition was a unique skill. For instance, though Paul was known to write his own letters (cf. 2 Thess. 3:17; 1 Cor. 16:21; Col. 4:18; Philem 1:9; Gal. 6:11), the book of Romans was written by Tertius (cf. Rom. 16:22). (5) Still other, more liberal, commentators assert that John had little to nothing to do with this actual composition of this account; it was entirely the product of the Johannine community, likely written after John's death.

Of the options, the last is the least likely. Throughout this account, *firsthand* eyewitness testimony has been a point of significant emphasis (cf. 19:35). As 20:31 indicates, this account is written to show that Jesus is the Messiah and that, by believing this truth, the reader will be granted "life" through Jesus' name. Such an objective is undermined when authorship is credited to anyone but a *credible* witness—i.e., someone who can *personally* attest to the validity of the claims. Hence, asserting that a community is responsible without the help of the individual they're writing about is nonsensical. Also, such an interpretation completely ignores

the first-person *present* tense of the "I" in vs. 25. As Köstenberger explains, "While the convention of an 'authorial we' is well-attested in ancient literature, the converse feature of a 'communal I' is not found."¹ And it would be downright dishonest to place vs. 25 on John's lips when he, according to this view, was already dead.

Better, but still problematic, are options two through four. Admittedly, John holds a central place in these interpretations. However, such an explanation ignores the immediate context. The verse doesn't say "[these are the disciples] which testifieth of these things," but "this is the disciple which testifieth of these things." The author is talking about an *individual*, not individuals. Furthermore, it is impossible to determine if the claims in the Muratorian Fragment are based in fact or if it is merely guesswork informed by the assumption that "we" must refer to some authoritative group.² And while scribes were commonplace in the first century, there's no indication in the text that John used one. This is especially true since the same one who "testifieth of these things" is also the same who "wrote these things."

Thus, the first option seems best. John refers to himself when he says, "We know that his testimony is true." Admittedly, using "we" to refer to oneself is awkward, but it isn't without precedent (cf. 1 Thess. 2:18).³ As Carson points out, individuals in John's account use "we" when it is clear they're referring primarily to themselves (cf. Nicodemus in 3:2; Jesus in 3:11; Mary Magdalene in 20:2).⁴ Furthermore, in the first century, it was common practice for writers to use a plural pronoun as a self-designation since it *intensified* a claim's authenticity (cf. 1 Jn. 1:4).⁵ This is why John doesn't say in 1:14, "I have seen his glory," but "We [emphasis added] have seen his glory." The plural brings a certain *gravitas* to the claim. It stands to reason that if John wanted to instill some solemnity at the *beginning* of his account, he'd likely replicate it at the end.

Vs. 25 – Similar to what he said in 20:30, John says, "There are also many other things which Jesus did." We ought not assume that everything we know about Jesus' life is everything that can be known. John's words are a fitting reminder of our limitations. We are *finite* beings trying to grasp an *infinite* one. But this verse is also a great encouragement, for there is more to discover. Walter Elwell often said, "All theology is approximation and then is followed up with better and better approximations." One cannot help but wonder what more there is to learn or what sort of stories we'll be told when we, at last, bask in the light of our Savior.

¹ Köstenberger (2004), p. 605.

² Carson (1991), p. 683.

³ Morris (1995), p. 775.

⁴ Ibid., 684.

⁵ Klink (2016), p. 923.

If everything were written down, John says, “I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written. Amen.” The phrase “I suppose” is well-attested in ancient histories.⁶ Authors would utilize this phrase whenever they wanted to express an opinion, but humbly so.⁷ Of course, John isn't speaking literally. He's using hyperbole to illustrate the sheer volume of Jesus' work. If everything the Lord said and did were put to paper, there wouldn't be enough space in the world to contain all the volumes.

But considering the Lord's identity, was John's statement truly hyperbolic?⁸ Jesus is the Word incarnate (cf. 1:1). Even by today's standards, there is not enough space, be it on paper or on hard drives, to record everything God has done. John could've been dead serious when he said those words. As Beasley-Murray so aptly puts it, "The greatness of the revelation of God in the Logos-Son is vaster than the cosmos created through him."⁹

Regardless, do not think the account we hold in our hands is, in some way, incomplete. Arguably, if the Synoptics are any indication, John could've said far more. But why rehash what has already been written? While it's true that there are tidbits about Jesus' life that are yet unknown, is an exhaustive account necessary? John could talk about Jesus till the cows come home. But relaying more things doesn't mean his audience would've been more easily persuaded.

Thus, though John could've said more, he said what was necessary. As Irish poet William Allingham once said, “Writing is learning to say nothing more clearly each day.” A carefully curated account is far better than a massive data dump. And while it is true that such an approach may not answer *every* query nor satisfy *every* curiosity, it is effective at achieving a *solitary* objective. John made it abundantly clear that he wanted to elicit faith in his audience (cf. 20:31). At the end of his account, he felt he'd accomplished what he set out to do.¹⁰ And for what it's worth, this writer cannot help but agree.

“A word fitly spoken Is like apples of gold in pictures of silver.”

⁶ Köstenberger (2004), p. 605, gives the following examples: Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca historica* 8.12.15.10; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Antiquitates romanae* 4.74.2; 5.48.1; 6.35.2; *De Thucydide* 49.3; Plutarch, *Mulierum virtutes* [*Bravery of Women*] 243.D7.

⁷ Köstenberger (2004), p. 605.

⁸ Carson (1991), p. 686.

⁹ Beasley-Murray (1999), p. 405; Carson (1991), p. 686, “If all the deeds were described, the world would be a very small and inadequate library indeed;” Klink (2016), p. 923, “There is not enough space in the world to contain the “words” needed to make known the fullness of *the* [author's emphasis] Word.”

¹⁰ Köstenberger (2004), p. 606, “Taken together with the prologue's stress on Jesus' person, the epilogue's reference to his works renders John's Christological portrait not exhaustively comprehensive but sufficiently complete.”

Proverbs 25:11

VIDEO DESCRIPTION

Deep Dive: The Gospel of John | Week 104 | John 21:24-25

SPEAKER: Ben Hyrne, Pastor

Off and on, we've been in the Gospel of John for over six years. But as the saying goes, all good things must come to an end. And so, what began on April 17th, 2019, will close tonight.

In this final passage, though he had written so much, John says he could've said more. In fact, he claims that if the sum of all of Jesus' works were written down, "even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written." We ought not assume that everything we know about Jesus' life is everything that can be known. John's words at the end of his account are a fitting reminder of our limitations. We are finite beings trying to grasp an infinite one. But this verse is also a great encouragement, for there is more to discover. Walter Elwell often said, "All theology is approximation and then is followed up with better and better approximations." One cannot help but wonder what more there is to learn or what sort of stories we'll be told when we, at last, bask in the light of our Savior.

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