



Narrative Devices of Ego Erasure: Examining the Phrase “the Beloved Disciple” through Narrative Criticism and Grammatical Analysis in the Gospel of John

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Abstract

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The use of the phrase “the beloved disciple” as an anonymous marker in the Gospel of John is often interpreted by some modern critics as a claim of spiritual superiority over other apostles. However, differing interpretations of this narrative motif have created a significant academic gap in understanding the text’s authority. This qualitative study aims to re-examine the theological motive behind the use of this phrase and to demonstrate that the narrative represents humility rather than elitism. The method employed is narrative criticism combined with grammatical analysis of Koine Greek in the Gospel of John. The findings indicate that the author’s anonymity functions as a strategy of ego effacement, transforming a historical figure into the ideal disciple. Textually, the use of the imperfect active indicative verb construction emphasizes that Jesus is the sole active subject in this relationship, meaning that the identity of “the beloved disciple” is entirely grounded in divine initiative rather than personal merit. Furthermore, the comparison with Peter is not intended to assert superiority, but to emphasize that leadership authority should be rooted in relational dynamics rather than mere hierarchy. Thus, the phrase operates as a narrative device of humility, offering an inclusive and service-oriented paradigm of Christian leadership.

INTRODUCTION

The identity of authorship in ancient literary traditions, particularly within Gospel narratives, is often presented through pronounced anonymity. The absence of an explicit authorial name is not a historical oversight, but rather an intrinsic characteristic of canonical texts that prioritize the transmission of theological messages over the promotion of individual identity (Grenier, 2023). Within the landscape of early biblical literature, this writing practice reflects the product of a dynamic communal theological struggle, in which the narrator's identity is intentionally subsumed into the collective consciousness of the community (Thomaskutty, 2023). Among canonical writings, the Gospel of John presents one of the most compelling forms of anonymity, provoking sustained hermeneutical debate through its exclusive use of the phrase "the beloved disciple." This phrase marks a unique rhetorical shift, whereby the author conceals his historical identity behind a relational title that emphasizes a special intimacy with Christ.

The strategy of anonymity in the Gospel of John is ideally designed to facilitate intertextual dialogue and communal reader engagement. The absence of a fixed personal identity allows the text to function as a universal document not confined to the biography of a single individual (Grabau, 2022). Historically and theologically, early interpretive traditions understood this anonymity as an expression of profound humility on the part of the author. Within early Christian tradition, humility is regarded as a fundamental criterion and the primary foundation of authentic spiritual life, where intimacy with God should result in self-emptying rather than self-glorification (Siladi, 2023). Consequently, the title "the beloved disciple" is expected to function as an open invitation for readers across generations to identify with the figure and enter into a transformative experience of divine love.

However, modern biblical scholarship introduces a sharp polarization of perspectives and academic suspicion regarding the use of this exclusive title. Rather than being interpreted as an expression of humility, the claim of being "the most beloved" is often read as a form of spiritual arrogance. Some modern critics argue that the Johannine narrative reflects strong elements of spiritual elitism within its early community. The repeated use of this exclusive designation at critical narrative moments is suspected to be a strategic move to assert superior spiritual authority, deliberately positioning the author above other leading apostles within the narrative (Anderson, 2024). Such skeptical readings shift the evaluation of the text from a spiritual document to a site of contested authority in the early church.

This narrative tension becomes more evident as the Gospel consistently juxtaposes and contrasts the anonymous figure with the Apostle Peter. Interpretive inconsistencies intensify when the unnamed disciple is portrayed as possessing sharper spiritual perception, arriving more quickly at the empty tomb, and occupying a more intimate position during the Last Supper compared to Peter (Lindenlaub, 2024; Mensah, 2022). This dynamic of comparative authority ultimately generates significant hermeneutical uncertainty regarding the primary intent of the Johannine text. The central question dividing theologians is whether the concealment of identity truly represents sincere humility from an eyewitness, or rather a form of sectarian arrogance masked by claims of mystical intimacy to legitimize authority (Siburian, 2022).

Previous studies have attempted to address the complexity of this anonymous figure through various approaches. Within the state of the art, traditional historical-critical methods have largely focused on establishing the figure's historical identity as John, the son of Zebedee, primarily to defend the apostolic authority of the text against modern skepticism (Piter, 2024; Suleman & Budiyan, 2024). In contrast, contemporary narrative studies increasingly interpret the figure as a symbolic representation of the ideal disciple, strategically constructed to mediate communal experience and strengthen the Johannine community in the aftermath of expulsion from the synagogue (Kantohe, 2024; Thomaskutty, 2023b). Some theologians have also explored the tension between the relational authority embodied by the beloved disciple and the institutional authority associated with Peter, concluding that the Gospel of John seeks to redefine the parameters of church leadership as grounded in service (Gharbin, 2023; Jatau, 2023a).

Linguistic studies have further contributed critical insights into the grammatical structure of the Johannine text. Analyses of Koine Greek demonstrate that the grammatical constructions consistently position Jesus as the active subject (Simanjuntak et al., 2022). Specifically, the verbs associated with love emphasize that the narrative focus is not on the disciple's qualities, but rather on the active initiative of the divine subject (Frey, 2024). These structural findings collectively begin to dismantle assumptions of a human-centered elitist narrative. Despite these methodological advancements, a significant research gap remains. Existing literature has yet to fully integrate Greek grammatical analysis with narrative criticism to provide a definitive response to accusations of spiritual arrogance. Interpretive inconsistencies persist due to the absence of a comprehensive textual framework capable of determining whether the narrative architecture was designed to diminish other apostolic authorities or to function as an instrument of ego effacement. Current academic debates leave unresolved how the narrative precisely balances the tension between claims of relational exclusivity and the demand for humility.

In light of this gap, this study aims to uncover the theological motive behind the author's use of the phrase "the beloved disciple" and to demonstrate textually whether it represents humility or arrogance. The novelty of this research lies in integrating Koine Greek grammatical findings with narrative criticism as its primary analytical framework. The hypothesis proposed is that the phrase does not signify arrogance, but rather serves as a carefully constructed narrative device of humility, designed to direct the reader's focus entirely toward the active love of Jesus, rather than toward the apostolic figure itself. This qualitative study is exclusively focused on the textual analysis of the Gospel of John as its primary research material.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design using a textual analysis approach grounded in narrative criticism, viewing the Gospel of John as a coherent and unified narrative with specific theological purposes. The focus is purposively directed toward passages containing the phrase "the beloved disciple" (John 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7; 21:20; 21:24) as the primary corpus of analysis. Within the framework of narrative criticism, the study examines

characterization, narrative point of view, and inter-character relationships, thereby understanding the anonymous figure as a literary construct representing the ideal disciple. This approach is integrated with Koine Greek grammatical analysis to ensure that interpretations are firmly rooted in the original textual structure rather than in translational assumptions.

To ensure validity and reliability, the study applies methodological triangulation between narrative analysis and linguistic evidence, alongside engagement with contemporary biblical scholarship. The analytical process is conducted systematically through stages of text identification, lexical analysis, narrative mapping—particularly in comparative relation to the figure of Peter—and theological synthesis. This multi-layered analysis aims to assess whether the narrative construction reflects elements of elitism or instead functions as a device of humility. Thus, the study seeks to produce conclusions that are both analytically rigorous and academically accountable regarding the motive of anonymity in the Gospel of John.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Anonymity as a Narrative Device and the Representation of the Ideal Disciple

An examination of the narrative architecture of the Gospel of John reveals that the phrase “*the disciple whom Jesus loved*” appears exclusively in the second half of the text, often referred to as the *Book of Glory*. This figure is present at the most crucial moments of Christ’s mission: the Last Supper (John 13:23), the crucifixion at Golgotha (John 19:26), the discovery of the empty tomb (John 20:2), the appearance at the Sea of Tiberias (John 21:7), and the epilogue concerning the disciple’s future (John 21:20; 21:24). The most striking characteristic of these appearances is the complete absence of a fixed historical identity. In contrast to the Synoptic Gospels, which explicitly name the apostles, the Johannine narrator consistently preserves this figure’s anonymity throughout the text. Internal narrative analysis clearly distinguishes this anonymous figure from Saint Peter, given their direct interactions in key scenes, and also rules out James, who had already been martyred during the reign of Herod Agrippa. Although early church tradition—particularly through the testimony of Irenaeus—identified this figure as John the son of Zebedee, the text itself deliberately refrains from explicitly confirming this identification.

This absence of a name is not a historical oversight but a deliberate literary strategy of *self-effacement* or ego-elimination. The author’s consistent refusal to foreground his own identity, despite implicitly claiming eyewitness authority, strongly indicates a posture of humility. Within the framework of narrative criticism, this anonymity transforms the historical figure into a symbolic representation of the ideal disciple. By removing a fixed historical identity, the text creates an intentional “empty space” that allows readers from diverse historical and cultural contexts to identify themselves with this position of spiritual intimacy. This aligns with the view that the narrative architecture of John is designed to enable readers to reflect their own spiritual experience within the text. Consequently, anonymity does not function as a marker of exclusivity or spiritual arrogance; rather, it operates as a narrative device that invites all believers to enter into an equal relationship of divine love with Christ.

Grammatical Construction and the Active Agency of the Divine Subject

The most decisive textual evidence for refuting accusations of spiritual arrogance is found in the lexical and syntactic structure of Koine Greek used in the original text of the Gospel of John. The Greek phrase employed to refer to this figure is *ὃν ἠγάπα ὁ Ἰησοῦς*. Structurally, the phrase consists of the relative pronoun *ὃν*, the verb *ἠγάπα*, and the subject *ὁ Ἰησοῦς*. Grammatical analysis shows that *ἠγάπα* derives from the verb *ἀγαπάω*, meaning to love with deep, self-giving affection. This verb is widely used in the New Testament to describe the love of God, the love of Jesus, and mutual love among believers. Morphologically, *ἠγάπα* is formed from the past marker *η-*, the root *αγαπα-*, and the ending *-ε*, producing a third-person singular imperfect active indicative form.

This grammatical construction carries significant hermeneutical implications. The imperfect tense indicates that the act of loving is not a single, completed event, but a continuous and ongoing action in the past. Thus, the lexicon clearly conveys that Jesus continually loved the disciple. At the same time, the active voice definitively establishes Jesus as the sole acting subject, positioning the disciple purely as the recipient of that love. Accordingly, the literal sense of the Greek phrase is “the one whom Jesus was loving.”

In modern Indonesian translations, such as *Terjemahan Baru* and *Terjemahan Baru 2*, the phrase is typically rendered as “*murid yang dikasihi Yesus*” (“the disciple who was loved by Jesus”). This passive construction is adopted for linguistic naturalness. However, the original Greek syntax is active, and this distinction is crucial because it shapes how readers perceive the figure. A passive construction may subtly shift the narrative focus toward the disciple, as if he possesses inherent qualities or spiritual merit that justify such distinction. In contrast, fidelity to the active syntax of the original text demonstrates that the identity of this figure is entirely grounded in the proactive initiative of Jesus’ love. The disciple’s identity is not defined by apostolic achievement or personal superiority, but is wholly constituted by divine initiative.

This textual dynamic reinforces a broader theological consensus that Christ’s love is an active, initiating force, and that genuine faith is a response to that initiative. Consequently, the grammatical evidence effectively dismantles the hypothesis of spiritual elitism. The foundation of the disciple’s identity lies not in self-exaltation, but in the humility of receiving divine love.

Relational Authority in Contrast with the Apostle Peter

An evaluation of the inter-character dynamics reveals a consistent pattern of close comparison between the anonymous disciple and Saint Peter. This juxtaposition has often raised suspicions of a political agenda aimed at claiming leadership legitimacy within the early church. Narratively, the text does portray the beloved disciple as possessing advantages in spiritual perception and responsiveness. In the resurrection account (John 20:4), he is described as running faster and arriving at the empty tomb before Peter. Likewise, in the appearance at the Sea of Tiberias (John 21:7), it is this disciple who first recognizes the risen Christ and then informs Peter. At a glance, these comparative advantages may appear to support a claim of superiority over Peter.

However, a critical reading of the narrative continuation decisively overturns this assumption. Despite arriving first at the tomb and observing the linen cloths from outside, the disciple deliberately refrains from entering. Instead, he consciously allows Peter to enter first and carry out the primary inspection. This act of restraint serves as a textual demonstration of the absence of any ambition to seize hierarchical leadership. The narrative tension between the two figures is not constructed as a competitive struggle, but rather as a space for reconciling two forms of authority within the church. Peter represents institutional authority, entrusted with formal pastoral leadership, while the anonymous disciple embodies relational authority grounded in personal intimacy with Christ. Thus, the text does not promote spiritual arrogance or seek to undermine Peter's status; instead, it conveys a strong theological message that all forms of institutional authority and ecclesiastical hierarchy must ultimately be rooted in, and subordinated to, the depth of relational love with Christ.

The Construction of Narrative Architecture and Grammatical Structure in the Gospel of John

A comprehensive analysis of the narrative architecture and grammatical structure of the Gospel of John convincingly deconstructs modern scholarly assumptions that interpret the phrase "*the disciple whom Jesus loved*" as an expression of spiritual arrogance. The findings of this study demonstrate that the author intentionally and carefully crafted this anonymity as a functional narrative device of humility. The construction of this unnamed figure does not operate as an instrument of sectarian elitism to claim superiority among the apostles. Rather, it serves as a complex rhetorical strategy that redirects the entire theological weight of the narrative toward the proactive initiative of Christ's love. Through triangulation between textual evidence, theories of ancient literature, and contemporary biblical scholarship, this analysis shows how the Johannine text successfully negotiates the tension between claims of relational intimacy and the absolute demand for self-effacement.

The narrator's disciplined maintenance of anonymity throughout the narrative must be understood within the framework of identity dissolution commonly found in ancient literary traditions. In such traditions, the absence of an authorial name is not a historical oversight, but a deliberate strategy through which individual identity is subsumed into communal identity or the authority of the message itself. As noted by James H. Charlesworth, this practice reflects a rejection of self-promotion, whereby the author refuses to become the center of attention. Although early church tradition—particularly through Irenaeus—sought to identify this figure as John the son of Zebedee in order to secure apostolic authority, the Johannine text itself deliberately leaves this identity unconfirmed. Theologically, this absence undermines accusations of arrogance, since a figure driven by spiritual elitism would logically ensure that his name was permanently recorded to preserve authority.

From the perspective of narrative criticism, this strategy of ego-effacement transforms the historical figure into a typological representation. As suggested by John Drane, the anonymous figure functions as a representation of the ideal disciple. The absence of a fixed name turns the character into a literary "empty

space” intentionally provided for readers. This narrative strategy is particularly significant for the Johannine community, which likely experienced collective trauma due to exclusion from the synagogue. Through this unnamed figure, the author offers pastoral reassurance that intimacy with Christ is not the exclusive privilege of a single apostle. Instead, readers across different historical and cultural contexts are invited to identify themselves with this position of intimacy through faithful response to divine love. In this sense, anonymity becomes a profoundly inclusive narrative instrument, fundamentally opposed to spiritual elitism.

The most decisive refutation of the charge of spiritual arrogance, however, lies in the grammatical structure of Koine Greek. The use of the imperfect active indicative verb form definitively reshapes the interpretive paradigm. Modern translations that employ passive constructions inadvertently distort the theological focus by shifting attention to the disciple as the bearer of worthiness. In contrast, the original syntax—placing Jesus as the sole active subject who continually performs the act of loving—demonstrates that the disciple’s identity is entirely constructed by external divine initiative. This grammatical finding supports the argument of Craig R. Koester that the designation is designed to direct attention exclusively to Jesus’ loving action, rather than to the personal qualities of the disciple.

The theological implications of this active verbal dominance are fundamental in dismantling notions of arrogance. The identity of the disciple is not grounded in spiritual achievement, moral superiority, or hierarchical status, but solely in the ongoing flow of divine grace. Because this identity is entirely a product of grace rather than personal accomplishment, there is no textual basis for self-exaltation. Within this grammatical framework, the claim of being “the one whom Jesus loved” becomes a declaration of radical dependence, affirming that the disciple’s existence and testimony are meaningless apart from Christ’s active love. At the same time, the narrative establishes an ethic of imitation, calling all believers to embody this active love as a response of authentic faith.

Furthermore, the narrative tension created by the juxtaposition of the anonymous disciple with Saint Peter must be interpreted beyond the framework of political competition. While the text portrays the beloved disciple as possessing sharper spiritual perception—arriving first at the empty tomb and recognizing the risen Christ earlier—this does not indicate an attempt to undermine Peter. The critical detail that the disciple deliberately pauses at the tomb entrance and allows Peter to enter first demonstrates the absence of hierarchical ambition. If the narrative were driven by sectarian ego, the author would have depicted the disciple as claiming priority in this pivotal moment.

This restraint reinforces the perspective of Richard Bauckham that the comparison between the two figures is not competitive but complementary. Peter represents institutional authority, entrusted with formal pastoral leadership, while the anonymous disciple embodies relational authority grounded in personal intimacy with Christ. The Johannine text does not seek to invalidate Peter’s role, but rather establishes a theological framework in which all institutional authority must be rooted in a deep relational foundation with Christ. The concluding dialogue by the sea further confirms that Peter’s pastoral authority is legitimate only insofar as it is animated by the same love experienced

by the anonymous disciple. Both theoretically and practically, these findings carry transformative implications.

Academically, the integration of grammatical analysis and narrative criticism frees the Gospel of John from accusations of sectarian arrogance, revealing it instead as a theological masterpiece that responds to identity crises through the centrality of love. Practically, this reinterpretation offers a critical theological foundation for contemporary models of Christian leadership. Leadership must not be exploited to construct rigid hierarchies or elitism, but should be exercised as a form of relational, service-oriented leadership that imitates Christ's initiative. By relinquishing ego and embracing this anonymous identity, both leaders and believers are invited to become ideal disciples who embody active love within a fragmented world.

CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that the theological motive behind the use of the phrase "*the beloved disciple*" in the narrative of the Gospel of John is by no means a manifestation of spiritual arrogance or sectarian elitism. Through a narrative-critical approach integrated with Koine Greek grammatical analysis, the phrase is shown to function as a carefully constructed narrative device of humility. The author's anonymity operates as a deliberate strategy of self-effacement, transforming the apostolic figure into a representation of the ideal disciple. Furthermore, the grammatical evidence—particularly the imperfect active indicative construction—confirms that Jesus Christ is the sole active subject who continuously expresses love, thereby positioning the disciple purely as a passive recipient of divine grace.

The narrative parallel with Peter the Apostle also does not indicate a competitive attempt to undermine institutional authority, but rather serves as a theological framework emphasizing that all forms of leadership must remain grounded in a deep relational love with Christ. Theoretically, these findings help release the Johannine text from accusations of historical arrogance and reaffirm it as an inclusive pastoral document. Practically, this study offers a strong foundation for reconstructing contemporary Christian leadership models rooted in service and humility. Future research is recommended to undertake comparative studies on anonymity within other canonical texts to explore broader theological consistency in early Christian literary traditions.

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