

SIMON PETER IN THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN: HIS HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE ACCORDING TO THE JOHANNINE COMMUNITY'S NARRATIVE

CHRISTOS KARAKOLIS

*Professor, Department of Theology, National and Kapodistrian
University of Athens, Greece*

In the interconfessional theological dialogue between the Orthodox and the Roman-Catholic Church, there has been much discussion about the famous passage 16:16–19 of Matthew's Gospel. However, not much attention has been paid to the testimonies of other New Testament books about the Apostle Peter's person, work, and historical impact. This paper examines the narrative character of Simon Peter in John's Gospel to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the great apostle's historical significance in early Christianity. In our analysis, we make use of the narrative-critical method focusing on the comparison between Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple. This approach opens a window to how the Johannine community evaluated Peter's person and significance at the time of the composition of the Fourth Gospel, and, thus, helps us better understand the biblical foundations of the theological debate on the papal office.

1. Introductory Remarks

Although the New Testament does not play an essential role in Orthodox-Catholic theological dialogue, it has been often used in Roman-Catholic discourse to support the papal office as it is understood in the modern-day Roman-Catholic Church. The *locus classicus* is, of course, Christ's praise of Peter for his christological confession, as well as his giving him the keys to the Kingdom of God in Matthew 16:16–19.¹ This reference is usually combined with Christ's triple command to Peter to shepherd his sheep in John 21,² as well as with the legend of Peter having been the first bishop of the Church of Rome.³

¹ See the relevant discussion and bibliography in A. Edward Sicienski, *The Papacy and the Orthodox: Sources and History of a Debate*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 24–28.

² *Ibid.*, 86–89; cf. also the analysis of Jean Zumstein, *Das Johannesevangelium*, Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament 2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016), 788.

³ Sicienski, *Papacy*, 3–44.

Of course, in the contemporary academic community of New Testament scholars, such arguments are usually considered plain ideological products and are rejected as being devoid of any solid scholarly basis.⁴ We have long ago reached the conclusion that the Gospel of Mark, which provides a very different account (8:27–29) of the above mentioned Matthean narrative, is older than the Gospel of Matthew, thus functioning as its source that the first evangelist often completes, corrects, and adapts to his authorial strategy.⁵ In any case, we have to call into question that Mt 16 indeed reflects the very historical words that Jesus Christ himself addressed to Peter. On the contrary, we should rather assume that these words are most probably *Gemeindebildung*.⁶ In this sense, the relevant traditional arguments on the Orthodox side, claiming that the stone (πέτρα) upon which Christ will build his Church means Peter's confession and not Peter himself as a person, are beside the point.⁷

However, the New Testament contains many more pieces of information about Peter in a variety of texts, the study of which enables us to capture the image and evaluate the impact of the great apostle in various early Church communities. In the present paper, I will attempt to examine the narrative character of Simon Peter in the Gospel of John as a whole by utilizing the narrative-critical method.⁸

On this basis, I will not be raising the question about whether the Gospel's references to Peter are indeed historical or not. Here, I am not primarily concerned with history but with the narrative, because in and through each narrative, ideologies, imageries, authorial intentions, and strategies open windows to the historical reality that gives birth to it. Simply put, I will not deal with the historical, or even the remembered Peter⁹ but with the narrative character of Peter in John's Gospel. The latter reflects Peter's perception by both the fourth evangelist and the recipients of his Gospel, which in research are usually referred to as the Johannine community or communities.¹⁰

⁴ See already Franz Mussner, *Petrus und Paulus — Pole der Einheit: Eine Hilfe für Kirchen* (Freiburg: Herder, 1976), mainly 69–73, who as a Catholic New Testament scholar offers a very balanced view of the New Testament references to Peter; see also the relevant discussion in Tanja Schultheiss, *Das Petrusbild im Johannesevangelium*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2/329 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 314–22.

⁵ See J. Andrew Doole, *What Was Mark for Matthew? An Examination of Matthew's Relationship and Attitude to His Primary Source*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2/344 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), mainly 195–96.

⁶ See among others Ulrich Luz, 'The 'Primacy Saying of Matthew 16:17–19 from the Perspective of Its Effective History', in *Studies in Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 165–82, at 173–75.

⁷ See on the relevant discussion Siecienski, *Papacy*, 70–73.

⁸ See on the application of narrative criticism on New Testament texts James L. Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism of the New Testament: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005).

⁹ Cf. the approaches of William Thomas Kessler, *Peter as the First Witness of the Risen Lord: An Historical and Theological Investigation*, Tesi Gregoriana: Serie Teologica 37 (Roma: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1998); Helen K. Bond and Larry W. Hurtado, eds, *Peter in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 19–95; Markus Bockmuehl, *The Remembered Peter in Ancient Reception and Modern Debate*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 262 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010).

¹⁰ See, for instance, M. Eugene Boring, *An Introduction to the New Testament: History, Literature,*

In the context of this paper, I take it for granted that the Gospel's author is closely connected or perhaps even identical with the Beloved Disciple, namely John, the son of Zebedee and a disciple of Jesus, although this is a disputed subject in research.¹¹ Consequently, the recipients of the Gospel appear to be a 'Johannine church', which may extend to several local communities, probably somewhere in Asia Minor, perhaps in the area of Ephesus.¹² The recipients are also connected with John's person since, in the text of the Gospel, the authority of the Beloved Disciple seems to be immense.¹³ John of Zebedee a.k.a. the Beloved Disciple is, then, the patriarch of the community, as is evidenced by the indirect justification of his death at the end of the Gospel, which betrays the erroneous belief of the Johannine Christians that their master would not die until the Lord's Parousia (21:23).¹⁴

While analyzing Peter as a narrative character, I will also draw some comparisons both intertextually with corresponding synoptic narratives and intratextually with the narrative characters of other disciples and particularly of the 'beloved' one. Given the fourth evangelist's knowledge of at least Mark's Gospel,¹⁵ our analysis should reveal the Johannine community's perception of Peter, at least in broad lines.

2. Simon Peter as a Narrative Character in the Gospel of John.

In the Gospel of John, Peter does not appear as the first disciple called by Jesus to follow him, as opposed to the synoptic Gospels (Matthew 4:18–20; Mark 1:16–18; Lk 5:3–10). Quite differently, it is Peter's brother Andrew who, alongside an unnamed disciple, firstly believes in Jesus and subsequently brings him to Jesus.¹⁶ However, Peter's special significance is apparent from the fact that elsewhere, Andrew is referred to as Peter's brother and not as the son of John (cf. 1:42), as he should have been according to Jewish practice (6,8).¹⁷ On the other hand, Jesus predicts that in

Theology (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 626–27.

¹¹ See R. Alan Culpepper, *John, the Son of Zebedee: The Life of a Legend*, Studies on Personalities of the New Testament (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994). See also my analysis in Christos Karakolis, 'The Sons of Zebedee and Two Other Disciples: Two Pairs of Puzzling Acquaintances in the Johannine Dénouement', in *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Approaches to Seventy Figures in John*, eds Steven A. Hunt, D. Francois Tolmie, and Ruben Zimmermann, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 314 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 663–76, at 671–72.

¹² See Martin Hengel, *Die johanneische Frage: Ein Lösungsversuch*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 67 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1993), 219–25.

¹³ See James L. Resseguie, 'The Beloved Disciple: The Ideal Point of View', in *Studies*, eds Hunt, Tolmie, and Zimmermann, 537–49.

¹⁴ Cf. Zumstein, *Johannesevangelium*, 791–92.

¹⁵ See the presentation of the relevant research in Ian D. Mackay, *John's Relationship with Mark: An Analysis of John 6 in the Light of Mark 6–8*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 182 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 9–54.

¹⁶ Cf. Arthur H. Maynard, 'The Role of Peter in the Fourth Gospel', *New Testament Studies* 30 (1984): 531–48, at 532–33.

¹⁷ See Michael Theobald, *Das Evangelium des Johannes: Kapitel 1 – 12*, Regensburger Neues Testament (Regensburg: Pustet, 2009), 181; cf. also the analogous usage in Matt. 4:18.21; 10:2; 17:1; Mark 1:16.19; 3:17; 5:37; Luke 6:14; John 6:8; Jude 1.

the future, Simon will be called Peter, probably meaning that Jesus himself never attributes that name to him during his earthly ministry. John could be implying here that the name Peter was assigned to Simon post-easterly by the Palestinian Aramaic-speaking Christian community.¹⁸ This fact is of particular importance if we compare it with the corresponding references of the synoptic Gospels, in which it is Jesus himself who attributes to Simon the name of Peter (Matt. 16:18; Mark 3:16; Luke 6:14). This is a subtle but significant differentiation between the synoptic and the Johannine traditions.

In John's sixth chapter, after Jesus' sermon on the bread of life (6:32–59), many disciples are scandalized and cease following him (6:60–66). At this point, Jesus turns to the Twelve and asks them if they too want to leave him (6:67). Peter then speaks on their behalf, expressing their loyalty and faithfulness to him (6:68–69). Specifically, although he has not understood the content of Jesus' previous sermon, he states that they do not have anyone else to go to because Jesus is the one who has words of eternal life and because they know and have firmly believed that he is the holy one of God. Here, Peter utters a christological confession, which in essence, bears the same meaning as his corresponding synoptic ones (Matt. 16:16; Mark 8:29; Luke 9:20), despite their different terminology.¹⁹ The disciples share the belief that Jesus is indeed the expected Messiah of Israel, as is evident by their confessions of faith in the first chapter of the Gospel (1:41,45,49), not however the Messiah according to later Christian understanding. At this point, Peter trusts Jesus because he firmly believes him to be the expected Messiah and not because he understands the content of his teaching or the spiritual character of his work (cf. 13:7).

Peter appears again in the thirteenth chapter of the Gospel at the scene of the Footwashing (13:3–17). Jesus reaches Peter after having washed the feet of a few other disciples. However, Peter appears to be the only one to protest against this initiative of Jesus by saying to him: 'Lord, you are the one washing my feet?' (13:6). Under normal circumstances, in ancient Judaism, the washing of feet was to be carried out either by slaves or servants.²⁰ By washing his disciples' feet, Jesus gives them an example of humility, service, and love towards each other. However, Peter not only fails to understand the deeper meaning of Jesus' act of service but also to accept it.²¹ Thus, while at first sight, in John 13, Peter seems to exceed all other disciples in humility and respect towards Jesus, the fact that he does not accept Jesus'

¹⁸ Cf. Udo Schnelle, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes*, 5th ed., Theologischer Handkommentar zum Neuen Testament 4 (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2016), 83.

¹⁹ Cf. Maynard, 'Peter', 534; Hartwig Thyen, *Das Johannesevangelium* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 381.

²⁰ See the relevant conclusions of Bincy Mathew, *The Johannine Footwashing as the Sign of Perfect Love: An Exegetical Study of John 13:1–20*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2/464 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 125–27.

²¹ At this point, Peter's attitude resembles his corresponding stance in the synoptic Gospels when, after Jesus' first prediction of his upcoming Passion, he attempts to prevent him from going to Jerusalem (Matt. 16:22; Mark 8:32); cf. Maynard, 'Peter', 534–35.

act of service separates him from his master. This is why Jesus answers to him: 'If I do not wash you, you have no part with me' (13:8). This causes Peter to ask Jesus to not only wash his feet but also his hands and head (13:9). As a result, after all, Peter's position among the disciples is not compromised. Despite Peter's inclination to stand out from the other disciples, Jesus brings him back to order. Any separation from the other disciples is also a separation from Jesus himself, which is precisely what happened in the case of Judas (cf. 13:25–30).

A little later during the last supper, Jesus predicts his betrayal by Judas (13:21). Peter himself does not dare ask Jesus about the traitor's identity (13:24). This is a task for the Beloved Disciple who sits right next to Jesus, the most honorary position (13:23, 25).²² While it is the first time in the Fourth Gospel that this disciple is explicitly mentioned, yet an anonymous disciple, the first to follow Jesus along with Andrew, has already been mentioned in the Gospel's first chapter (1:37–40). I have argued elsewhere in favour of this anonymous disciple's identification with the Beloved Disciple of chapters 13 onwards.²³ On this basis, it is significant that the Beloved Disciple follows Jesus and believes in him before Peter does, as well as that he is the only disciple of whom it is expressly stated that Jesus loved him.²⁴ To return to the last supper, the Beloved Disciple lies beside Jesus in an intimate position, close to his bosom (13:23). When Peter requires him to ask their master about the traitor's identity, he bends his head onto Jesus' chest to transfer Peter's question (13:25). This scene overturns the hierarchical order of the disciples as we find it in the synoptic Gospels. Thus, while in the synoptic Gospels, the narrow circle of the top three disciples consists in Peter, James, and John, in this hierarchical order,²⁵ in the Gospel of John, the Beloved Disciple appears to be much closer to Jesus than all other disciples Peter included.²⁶

After the last supper, Jesus predicts his departure from the world by stating that where he goes, his disciples cannot follow him (13:33). Peter wants to remain close to him not being able to accept that the Messiah of Israel will abandon his disciples. Therefore, he declares himself willing to follow Jesus wherever he goes, and even to

²² Cf. 1:18 and see Maynard, 'Peter', 535–36; Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 779.

²³ Karakolis, 'Sons', 671; see also the relevant extensive analysis of Michael Theobald, 'Der Jünger, den Jesus liebte: Beobachtungen zum narrativen Konzept johanneischer Redaktion', in *Frühes Christentum*, vol. 3 of *Geschichte – Tradition – Reflexion: Festschrift für Martin Hengel zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. Hermann Lichtenberger (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), 219–255, at 220–222; cf. Udo Schnelle, 'Der ungenannte Jünger in Johannes 1:40', in *The Opening of John's Narrative (John 1:19–2:22): Historical, Literary, and Theological Readings from the Colloquium Ioanneum 2015 in Ephesus*, eds R. Alan Culpepper and Jörg Frey, *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament* 385 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 103–5.

²⁴ In 11:5, the evangelist mentions that Jesus loved Martha, Maria, and Lazarus. However, all three of them are not considered as Jesus' disciples, at least not expressly.

²⁵ See Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 568.

²⁶ Cf. Michael Labahn, 'Simon Peter: An Ambiguous Character and His Narrative Career', in *Studies*, eds Hunt, Tolmie, and Zimmermann, 151–67, at 158–59; Richard Bauckham, 'The Beloved Disciple as Ideal Author', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 49 (1993): 21–44, at 35.

sacrifice his life for him (13:36–37). Again, Peter presents himself as having more faith, greater willingness for self-sacrifice, and more profound love for Jesus than all other disciples. However, Jesus brings him back to reality by predicting not only his failure to sacrifice his life but also his three denials of him (13:38). Peter, who considers himself as the most faithful and dedicated of the disciples, will eventually be found in a much lower state than them as to his relationship to Jesus.

Indeed, at the scene of Jesus' capture, Peter pulls out his sword and cuts the ear of the high priest's servant (18:10). Here, it seems that Peter really intends to defend Jesus even at the risk of his life, since he exposes himself to the members of the armed guard who could easily take him out. Consequently, he seems to be surpassing the other disciples moving, however, in the wrong direction. To his mind, Peter tries to defend the earthly Messiah of Israel, while Jesus is the heavenly divine king.²⁷ As Jesus himself states in front of Pilate, if his kingdom were from this world, then his followers would have fought to protect him from being handed over to the Jewish authorities (18:36). However, here, Peter's main problem is not that he does not grasp the spiritual character of Jesus' messianic identity—almost nobody does at this stage of the narrative—but that he does not fully put his trust and faith in him, since he attempts to take the initiative himself, pushing things in the opposite direction from Jesus' purpose and will (cf. 16:5–7; 18:8–9).²⁸ Thus, Peter not only fails to understand Jesus and follow his lead, but he also acts against his command (18:8). Instead, the other disciples abstain from any rushed action, thus leaving the possibility open for Jesus to guide them through his words and actions. Therefore, after Jesus tells his persecutors to let them go, they eventually leave not abandoning him but instead accepting his protection according to his previous saying: 'I did not lose a single one of those you gave me' (18:9; cf. 17:12).

A little later, Peter, who had just drawn his sword and was about to sacrifice his life to defend Jesus, experiences acute fear in front of a young woman and of servants in the high priest's courtyard (18:16–18.25–27). Peter's narrative development shows that his expectations and convictions have now fully collapsed. To Peter's mind, the fact that Jesus allowed his enemies to capture him without any resistance on his part is a clear sign that he was not the expected Messiah of Israel after all. Having lost his hope and faith in Jesus, Peter expectedly prioritizes saving his own life, since he now lacks any reason whatsoever to offer it. Unlike the parallel synoptic narratives (Matt. 26:75; Mark 14:72; Luke 22:62), the fourth evangelist does not convey Peter's reaction upon hearing the crowing of the rooster (18:27). At this point, Peter's narrative character disappears altogether only to reappear in the post-Easter stories

²⁷ See on the image of the heavenly king in the Gospel of John the relevant monograph by Jan G. van der Watt, *Family of the King: Dynamics of Metaphor in the Gospel according to John* (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

²⁸ Cf. Jason S. Sturdevant, 'The Centrality of Discipleship in the Johannine Portrayal of Peter', in *Peter*, eds Helen K. Bond and Larry W. Hurtado, 109–20, at 116; Arthur J. Droge, 'The Status of Peter in the Fourth Gospel: A Note on John 18:10–11', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 109 (1990): 307–11, at 310–11.

(20:2). On the contrary, the Beloved Disciple follows Jesus to the end, he is at the foot of the cross along with Jesus' mother, and Jesus names him her son. He then takes her to his house (19:26–27). Thus, the Beloved Disciple becomes a model for the believers, since he never abandons or denies Jesus, while the latter loves and trusts him to such an extent that he even entrusts his mother to him practically making him his brother.²⁹ It is also noteworthy that the Beloved Disciple does not fail to provide for Peter as well, as he is the one to enable his entrance into the high priest's courtyard (18:15–16).

The above indirect narrative comparison of Peter and the Beloved Disciple is continued in the post-Easter narratives. In chapter 20, Mary Magdalene informs both of them that Jesus' body has mysteriously disappeared from the tomb (20:2). Both run towards it, but the Beloved Disciple does not enter, although reaching it first, thus showing his respect for Peter (20:3–5).³⁰ When Peter arrives, however, he enters the tomb and sees Jesus' wrappings and handkerchief (20:6–7). Only then does the Beloved Disciple enter the tomb as well, sees and believes (20:8). Peter, on the other hand, does not yet believe, as it seems, and fails, therefore, once again to reach the Beloved Disciple's level of connectedness to Jesus.³¹

Both disciples also appear in the twenty-first and final chapter of the Gospel, which I will here regard as being in organic unity with the Gospel's first twenty chapters, regardless of its literary history.³² In the list of the seven disciples present in 21:2, Peter's name is importantly the first one to be mentioned. The narrative begins with Peter stating his intention to go fishing, followed by the other disciples (21:3). These two details probably hint at Peter's leading role among the apostles³³ especially concerning missionary activities being symbolized by the miraculous catch of the large number of fish that follows a little later in the narrative (21:11).³⁴ While fishing, however, it is the Beloved Disciple who firstly recognizes Jesus standing at the shore

²⁹ On the characterization of the Beloved Disciple in John's Gospel see Christos Karakolis, 'The Mother of Jesus in the Gospel of John: A Narrative-Critical and Theological Approach', *Analogia: The Pemptousia Journal for Theological Studies* 1 (2016): 1–16, at 2–6.

³⁰ Cf. Johannes Beutler, *Das Johannesevangelium: Kommentar*, 2nd ed. (Freiburg: Herder, 2016), 518.

³¹ Cf. Barnabas Lindars, *The Gospel of John*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 602; D. Francois Tolmie, 'The (not so) Good Shepherd: The Use of Shepherd Imagery in the Characterisation of Peter in the Fourth Gospel', in *Imagery in the Gospel of John: Terms, Themes, and Theology of Johannine Figurative Language*, eds Jörg Frey, Jan G. van der Watt, and Ruben Zimmermann, *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament* 200 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 353–367, at 360.

³² See on John 21 as an appendix to the Gospel's initial text Udo Schnelle, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, 2nd ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), 555–56. However, from a synchronic point of view, it is possible to view the present form of John's Gospel as a unity representing the end-product of its redaction.

³³ Cf. Bradford B. Blaine, Jr., *Peter in the Gospel of John: The Making of an Authentic Disciple*, Society of Biblical Literature Academia Biblica 27 (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 144; Schnelle, *Evangelium*, 399; Schultheiss, *Petrusbild*, 153.

³⁴ On the missionary connotation of the great catch in 21:11 cf. Richard Bauckham, 'The 153 Fish and the Unity of the Fourth Gospel', in *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple: Narrative, History, and Theology in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 271–84; Blaine, *Peter*, 154–55.

and shares this insight with Peter (21:7). Thus, again, the Beloved Disciple would seem to refer to Peter as the leading disciple, while at the same time also caring for him (cf. 18:16; 20:5–8). Subsequently, Peter dives into the water to reach Jesus before the others (21:7). Once again, he appears as being more zealous than the rest of the disciples. His attitude, of course, is not meant as blame towards the other disciples, but apart from being a distinct trait of Peter's narrative character, it also probably implies Peter's sense of guilt for his previous denial of Jesus. Peter is also the one to obey Jesus' command by pulling the net onto the land (21:11).

The ensuing dialogue of Jesus with Peter brings the latter's story to its conclusion. Three times, Jesus formally asks Peter if he loves him (21:15–17). In fact, Jesus asks Peter at first if he loves him more than the other disciples (21:15).³⁵ According to our previous analysis, Peter might well have responded positively to this question, had he not in the meantime denied Jesus. As it is, however, he cannot anymore do so. Peter has now been made aware of his faith's weakness. He, therefore, simply responds to Jesus that he loves him, thus avoiding the comparison with the other disciples (21:15). At the same time, he recognizes Jesus' omniscience, which he failed to do during the last supper. Jesus asks Peter twice more if he loves him (21:16–17) so that Peter's three denials of Jesus are resolved through his three declarations of his love towards him. In this sense and on this basis, Jesus' three commands to Peter to shepherd his sheep restore him to the order of being a disciple and an apostle.³⁶ From a narrative-critical point of view, there is no proof here for the notion that Peter receives some exclusive authority that the other disciples lack. Quite differently, Jesus categorically confirms that Peter shares the authority of all other disciples who had not denied Jesus in the first place.³⁷

Finally, after hearing about his future martyrdom, Peter asks about the fate of the Beloved Disciple (21:21). Jesus then replies that this does not concern him. Peter should restrict himself to his own matters (21:22). The life and the end of the other disciples only concern Jesus, their Lord and God (cf. 20:28). Peter is entirely devoid of any authority over or responsibility for them.³⁸

3. Conclusions

The Gospel of John presents Peter's narrative character in a manner corresponding to his counterpart in the synoptic Gospels, that is to say, as a spontaneous, loyal,

³⁵ Thus, among others Schultheiss, *Petrusbild*, 154; contra Ilaria Ramelli, 'Simon Son of John, Do You Love Me? Some Reflections on John 21:15', *Novum Testamentum: An International Quarterly for New Testament and Related Studies* 50 (2008): 332–50, who understands *τούτων* as neutral and, therefore, not referring to the other disciples present.

³⁶ Cf. Zumstein, *Johannesevangelium*, 787.

³⁷ Cf. Thyen, *Johannesevangelium*, 787–89; R. Alan Culpepper, 'Peter as Exemplary Disciple in John 21:15–19', *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 37 (2010): 165–78, at 165–66.

³⁸ Cf. Schnelle, *Evangelium*, 344; Labahn, 'Simon', 166.

and devoted disciple, with evident leadership traits but at the same time also ignorant to a great extent and spiritually immature. Peter puts his life at risk to defend Jesus, but finally refuses him three times when his misconceptions are falsified and his messianic expectations fall apart. He believes in Jesus in his way but is unable to accept that Jesus is different from his own perception. He seems to be erroneously thinking that he loves Jesus more than the other disciples do. On the other hand, he remains within the disciples' community, even after all hope and expectation have left him. In sum, John's Gospel presents Peter as a narrative character who has marked weaknesses but also essential virtues; a character who faces extreme challenges, wavers between self-sacrifice and denial, but who will ultimately be restored to the apostolic order and will indeed offer his life for Christ.

Concerning the synoptic Gospels, the Fourth Gospel's novelty is that it introduces the Beloved Disciple as a narrative character from a unique perspective, namely as a paragon of a disciple. He is the first one to follow Jesus along with Andrew, and he is Jesus' one and only beloved disciple. He is closer to Jesus than any other disciple, he continues following him even after his capture and up to the cross, he becomes the son of Jesus' mother and, thus, Jesus' brother, he believes in Jesus' resurrection before everybody else does, and he is the only one to recognize the resurrected Lord from afar. From the very beginning, the Beloved Disciple is wholly devoted to Jesus. He never appears to be in doubt, to disagree with Jesus, to question his words, to mistrust him, to despair, abandon or deny him.

Notwithstanding the sharp contrast between Peter and the Beloved Disciple, there is a remarkable unity and cooperation between them.³⁹ The Beloved Disciple enables Peter to enter the courtyard of the high priest's house. He transfers Peter's question to Jesus. He waits for Peter and allows him to be the first one to enter Jesus' tomb. Finally, he lets Peter know that it is the Lord who is standing at the shore of the lake. On the other hand, Peter seems to care about the fate of the Beloved Disciple. Both remain in Jesus' communion as his disciples. Although they are very different from each other, they share a common faith and common goals. Both of them observe Jesus' new command, namely, to love each other, just as Jesus has loved them. In such a community, there is no place for destructive antagonisms.⁴⁰

All the above-presented characterization of the two disciples is not random but serves a strategic goal. The Johannine narrative echoes the perceptions of its author, as well as of its recipients. The existence of a historical community of recipients of the Fourth Gospel that embraced its author's views is evident among other things from the fact that the Gospel uses a very demanding theological language that only

³⁹ As Blaine, *Peter*, 177, rightly puts it, 'Peter and the Beloved Disciple are not rivals but colleagues... cooperating when possible.'

⁴⁰ Cf. the conclusions of Kevin Quast, *Peter and the Beloved Disciple: Figures for a Community in Crisis*, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplement Series 32* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 162–70.

people familiar with it can understand to an adequate extent. Moreover, much information is taken for granted and not mentioned expressly, such as the name and identity of the Beloved Disciple himself.⁴¹

Based on the above, for the Johannine community, there is no primacy of Peter over against the Beloved Disciple or any other disciple for that matter. On the contrary, the Beloved Disciple is regarded as the most prominent disciple and being closer to Jesus than Peter. On the other hand, Peter's leadership qualities and role are recognized in accordance with the synoptic tradition, while at the same time, his weaknesses are also emphatically highlighted.⁴²

According to our extant sources, we have to assume that first-century Christianity contained 'islands' often associated with particular apostolic personalities and that in principle, no single apostle had prevailed upon the other apostles and their communities. There seems to be no way for Peter, as he is presented in the Fourth Gospel, to have been able to function as a guarantor of faith for Johannine Christians or being their primate. These particular Christians had founded their faith upon the testimony of their own 'Beloved Disciple.' Just like the other early Christian stories (e.g., of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Paul), the Johannine narrative does not claim exclusivity, but accompanies and enriches such stories, thus contributing to the diversity and the plurality of the early Church as a whole.

I believe that until now, the New Testament has not been sufficiently taken into account, at least by those representing the Orthodox side in interconfessional theological dialogues. However, as a commonly accepted authority by all churches, the New Testament can help Christian churches realize their shortcomings, which mainly consist in the absolutization of their narratives over all other alternative narratives. If we really wish to approach one another to eventually achieve Church unity and if a minimum of commonly accepted contents of faith is a prerequisite for such an approach, we can only begin with the New Testament, the holy book of all Christians, the treasury of the apostolic voices, and the authentic birth-story of the Christian Church.

Finally, regarding papal primacy, it is clear that it cannot be biblically founded but is a much later historical development. Of course, the Bible does not rule out later historical developments. Christianity is a living organism and, therefore, it develops, and it evolves. However, it is necessary always to be aware of the biblical testimony, because this testimony offers us alternate models, in our case ecclesiological ones, which can even coexist with one another and not necessarily be mutually exclusive.⁴³ If in the New Testament itself Peter's position is fluid and negotiable,

⁴¹ On the so-called Johannine Community see among others David A. Lamb, *Text, Context and the Johannine Community: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of the Johannine Writings*, The Library of New Testament Studies 477 (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2015).

⁴² Cf. R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1983), 122.

⁴³ Cf. the very similar conclusion of Theodore Stylianopoulos, 'Concerning the Biblical Foundation of

this could be the case in later historical periods as well with regard to his so-called successors. John's story of Peter shows us the way of reformulating and renegotiating even what appears to be carved in stone, for the sake of Church unity and welfare.