

St. John the Evangelist

BORN ABOUT 6; DIED ABOUT 104

APOSTLE

FEAST DAY: DECEMBER 27

JOHN was one of two sons of Salome and her husband Zebedee, a fisherman who was well-to-do enough to have hired servants. John's birthplace is not known but he is supposed to have been born in Galilee. He and his older brother James were fishermen with their father, and were business partners with another fisherman, Simon. It is probable that James and John, like Simon and his brother Andrew, lived in the fishing village of Capernaum on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. It is also probable that James and John were cousins of Jesus on their mother's side. John was regarded as an uneducated, common man. It is possible that, before he met Jesus, John was a follower of St. John the Baptist, since there is considerable information about him in the Gospel of John.

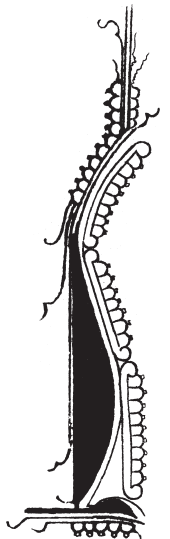
The Gospels give slightly different accounts of Jesus' call of James and John. In the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, Jesus called the brothers Andrew and Simon on the shore of the Sea of Galilee and then walked a little farther and found James and John in their boat, mending their nets together with their father. Jesus called them and they immediately left their father. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus encountered Simon, James, and John washing their nets after a fruitless night of fishing, got into Simon's boat and asked him to put out a little from the shore, taught the crowds along the shoreline, and then asked Simon to put out into the deep to make a catch. Simon brought up so many fish that he had to call James and John for help, and both boats were almost sinking. They returned to land, left everything, and followed Jesus. Although the Gospels do not give the ages of the apostles, John is thought to have been the youngest of the twelve, and traditionally is considered to be the only one who did not marry and remained a virgin.

Throughout the Gospels, Simon (later renamed Peter by Jesus), James, and John re-



St. John, by James Tissot, 1856-1902

main linked, and are the disciples closest to Jesus. Together with Andrew, these three were the only witnesses to the first miracle of healing recorded in the Gospel of Mark, of Peter's mother-in-law. Out of the apostles, Jesus chose Peter, James, and John to be witnesses to other significant events: the raising from the dead of the daughter of Jairus, one of the rulers of the synagogue at Capernaum; the Transfiguration of Jesus on a "high mountain alone" in Galilee (probably Mount Tabor), when he revealed his glorified body before he suffered and died; and





Jesus' agony in the Garden of Gethsemane just before his arrest. And it is these three, along with Andrew, who privately asked Jesus about his prophecy of the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem shortly before the Last Supper. Jesus told them of the signs of the destruction to come, both for the temple and the city and for the end of the world.

In the Gospels, James and John seem almost as close as twins, and perhaps they had similar temperaments. Jesus nicknamed them "boanerges," meaning "sons of thunder." Their reaction to Jesus being spurned by a village in Samaria (the area between Galilee and Judea that was populated by people who were regarded as "half-Jews" and therefore despised by Jews) was to ask Jesus if they should call down fire from Heaven to consume the village. This earned them a rebuke from Jesus. They were boldly ambitious, telling Jesus that he should do what they wanted, which was to be placed on either side of him when he was in his glory. (In

the Gospel of Matthew, it is their mother, who with other women was traveling with the band of disciples, who makes the request, presumably at their prompting.) This time, Jesus did not rebuke them. He first asked them if they would be willing to suffer as he was going to suffer, which they said they would, and then deflated them by telling them that they would, indeed, suffer, but that he couldn't promise them anything about high placement. The other apostles, quite reasonably, became indignant with James and John, and Jesus then rebuked them all, telling them that, if they wanted to be first, they had to be the slaves of everyone.

As the end of Jesus' life approached, John became more closely linked to Peter than to his brother. Jesus chose Peter and John to prepare the Passover that would become Jesus' Last Supper (in the Gospel of Matthew, unnamed disciples ask Jesus where he wants the Passover prepared, and he then sends them). At the Last

Supper, the Gospel of John records a private scene among Jesus, Peter, and John (mentioned not by name but as the disciple "*whom Jesus loved*") (Jn 13:23), understood to be John's reference to himself). Jesus had told all the apostles that he would be betrayed by one of them, and they looked at each other in confusion and consternation. Peter then beckoned to John, who was reclining "*close to the breast of Jesus*" (Jn 13:23) and asked John to find out which one it was. John

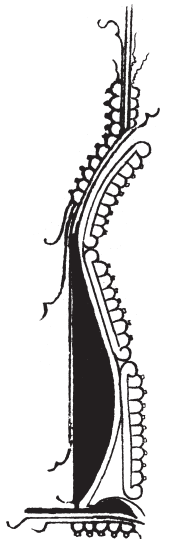
quietly asked Jesus, and Jesus replied it was the one to whom he would give a morsel of food that he had dipped — that is, Judas. It was John, "*another disciple*" (Jn 18:15), who perhaps surprisingly was known to the high priest, who with Peter followed Jesus after his arrest and who got Peter into the courtyard of the high priest, where Peter then in cowardice denied knowing Jesus three separate times. After Jesus' Resurrection, it was Peter and the disciple "*whom Jesus loved*" (Jn 20:2) who responded to Mary Magdalene when she came to

tell them that she had found the tomb empty. Fleeter of foot, John arrived at the tomb first, looked in, but waited for Peter and followed him into the tomb. John was immediately convinced of the Resurrection. It was John, the "*disciple whom Jesus loved*" (Jn 21:7), who recognized the resurrected Jesus from a fishing boat filled with Peter, James, and four other apostles, but it was Peter who flung on his clothes and swam to shore to greet Jesus. There Jesus forgave Peter for his denial, confirming him as head of the Church, and also foretold his martyrdom. John, the disciple "*whom Jesus loved*" (Jn 21:20), stayed near the two, and Peter asked Jesus what would happen to John. Jesus rebuked him for his curiosity.

Following Jesus' Ascension into Heaven and the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, Peter and John remained in close association. They prayed at the temple together, and once when they did this, they healed a crippled beggar, who



Mary receives from St. John, c. 1900, by François Lafon





first leaped about praising God, and then clung to his two healers. A crowd gathered, and Peter took the opportunity to preach the Gospel. He and John were immediately arrested. The following morning, during a hearing by the temple rulers, chief priests, and scribes, Peter again preached. Faced with the fact of the beggar's healing, the impromptu "court" let Peter and John go with a warning to cease preaching in the name of Jesus, which they immediately refused to do. The support of the crowd prohibited further action against them. They are recorded as being the two apostles sent for by the new Christians in Samaria, and they laid their hands on these Christians so they could receive the Holy Spirit (that is, the sacrament of Confirmation). On Peter and John's return journey to Jerusalem, they preached throughout Samaria. They were in Jerusalem for seventeen years after Paul's conversion, who identifies Peter and John, together with James as the pillars of the Church there. (James is not John's brother but the other apostle James; John's brother had been the first apostle martyred, under King Herod Agrippa I, about 42 or 44 AD.)

John alone is highlighted just once. He was the only apostle who was at the foot of the cross when Jesus died, and it was to him that Jesus entrusted the care of his mother and him whom Jesus made Mary's adoptive son. The Gospel of John here records not merely a familial arrangement but a moment charged with tremendous symbolism, for Jesus gave Mary to all Christians as their mother, John the beloved disciple standing in for all believers.

It was the persecution of Herod Agrippa I that caused most of the apostles to leave Jerusalem to embark on their worldwide mission. From this point on, the history of John comes

from tradition, especially as it is recorded by the people who knew him during the remainder of his very long life. John first went to Antioch (in modern Syria), and then to Ephesus (in modern Turkey) some time after the martyrdom of Sts. Peter and Paul in Rome. He is said to have visited Rome and miraculously survived an attempt to martyr him in a vat of boiling oil during the persecution of the Roman emperor Domitian (who reigned from 81-96). Unwavering in his proclamation of the Gospel, he was exiled by Domitian to the Greek island of Patmos (off the coast of modern Turkey), and it was there that he received the visions that comprise the book

of Revelation. Following Domitian's death, John returned to Ephesus and there wrote his Gospel and three letters that appear in the New Testament. He eventually died in extreme old age, the

only apostle not to die a martyr.

John's two major books, his Gospel and the book of Revelation, create highly symbolic links between the Old and the New Testaments. The first words of both the book of Genesis and the Gospel of John are *"In the beginning"* (Gn 1:1; Jn 1:1). The book of Genesis tells of the creation of Paradise and the expulsion of Adam and Eve from it; the book of Revelation tells of the restoration of humanity to Paradise. Of all the Gospels, the Gospel of John provides the most clearly stated and completely developed theology of God's love for his creatures and of the Incarnation, the divinity of Christ, and the Eucharist. The themes of truth and love recur throughout the Gospel of John and his three letters. It is said that, at the end of John's life, he repeatedly urged: "My dear children, love one another." Although Peter was chosen by Jesus to be first in the leadership of the Church, John has the primacy of love.

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