

Who was the Beloved Disciple in the Gospel of John?

LAZARUS - The Beloved Disciple

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INTRODUCTION

The church and practically all biblical scholars have always agreed that John, the brother of James and one of Jesus' twelve disciples, wrote the gospel of John in the New Testament that bears his name. I don't agree. I believe Jesus' best friend Lazarus wrote the gospel because he was "the one whom Jesus loved" identified in the gospel as its author.

The church, as well as most biblical scholars, has mainly hung its belief on John as the author of the gospel bearing his name because Polycarp, one of the esteemed first century church Fathers, said he met John, then an old man, in Asia Minor and John told him he wrote the gospel. This was not a first hand report, but was reported by Irenaeus (Polycarp's disciple). However, this became the position of the church that has been handed down through the ages. Most scholars have not seen fit to challenge this "tradition" of the church even though it would not diminish the gospel in any way. A few have, however, and have not only impressed me with their positions, but have enriched the gospel with a reasonable and legitimate author. I am grateful for their courage and choose to inject my "two cents" into the debate that I believe is clearly settled by the gospel of John itself.

No one doubts that Jesus and Lazarus were good friends as depicted in the gospel. We don't know how they became friends, but we do know that they were both Judeans, since Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, and that may have come to play in their friendship. However, we do know that Jesus spent much of his time when he was in Judea with Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha in the little town of Bethany just outside Jerusalem. We are pretty sure that Lazarus was a well to do man as evident from Mary's precious ointment poured on Jesus just before his crucifixion. The ointment, we are told, was worth a year's wages for the average worker then. This would indicate the family's wealth since we can assume Mary had been given the ointment as part of her dowry if and when she married.

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We must look outside the bible to learn more about this family, and when we do we find that the family members were Pharisees. We know this because Lazarus' father, whose name was apparently Simon, was a high priest in Jerusalem at one time. (This may be the same Simon who, the New Testament tells us, gave a large party and invited Jesus. And since by the time of Christ, the Saducees had disappeared as a recognizable force in Judea and the Pharisees had emerged as the power in the Jewish community, this would have given the family high social status in Judea and entree to the inner circles of Jerusalem. This is an important point for identifying Lazarus as "the disciple whom Jesus loved" and a key player during Jesus' trial. It indicates that Jesus did have influential followers among the Pharisees such as Nicodemus and Joseph of Aramathea who provided the tomb for Jesus.

So, having established the Jesus and Lazarus friendship, what does that have to do with the author of the gospel of John? Well, we do read in Chapter 21 (the last chapter of the gospel) beginning at verse 20 that "Peter turned and saw following them the disciple whom Jesus loved, who had lain close to his breast at the supper and had said, 'Lord who is it that is going to betray you?' When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus 'Lord, what about this man?' Jesus said to him, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!" The saying spread abroad among the bretheren that this disciple was not to die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he was not to die, but, 'If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?' (Now comes the important part.) This is the disciple who is bearing witness to these things, and who has written these things; and we know that his testimony is true."

This is pretty strong proof that the author of the gospel of John was indeed the disciple whom Jesus loved. And who was that disciple? The gospel also tell us who he was. The first time he is mentioned is in the first few verses of Chapter 11 – "Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill. So, the sisters sent to him, saying,

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‘Lord he whom you love is ill.’ This certainly indicates to me that the “beloved disciple” was Lazarus, but this is not the only place in the gospel that indicates this.

In the twelfth chapter of the gospel we read that “six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. There they made him a supper; Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at table with him.” The text goes on with Mary anointing Jesus with a costly ointment and places Jesus in the home of Lazarus for the Passover.

In Chapter 13 the Last Supper seems to be again at the home of Lazarus – “And during supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon’s son, to betray him, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, rose from supper, laid aside his garments, and girded himself with a towel. Then he poured water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel with which he was girded.” Then in verse twenty-one he said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me. The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he spoke. One of his disciples, whom Jesus loved, was lying close to the breast of Jesus; (This would have been Lazarus to the left of Jesus, since Jesus would have been the honored guest of Lazarus and at his right. Peter probably would have been to the left of Lazarus as the second most honored guest.) So Simon Peter beckoned to him (Lazarus) and said, ‘Tell us who it is of whom he speaks.’ “So lying thus close to the breast of Jesus, he (Lazarus) said to him, ‘Lord, who is it?’ “Jesus answered, ‘it is he to whom I shall give this morsel when I have dipped it.’ “So when he had dipped the morsel, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot.”

Yet, the strongest proof for Lazarus as the author of the gospel seems to come from Chapter eighteen beginning at verse fifteen just after Jesus’ betrayal by Judas and his arrest. It begins “Simon Peter followed Jesus, and so did another disciple. As this disciple was known to the high priest, he entered the court of the high priest along with Jesus, while

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Peter stood outside the door. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out and spoke to the maid who kept the door, and brought Peter in.” No amount of argument can justify the “another disciple” as John. How in the world would John be known to the high priest and have such entree when Peter did not? On the other hand, Lazarus would have such access given his priestly connections with the Pharisees. And surely Lazarus would not desert his “best friend” at such a crucial time! It also goes without saying that only the author of the gospel would have known what transpired and was said in the courtyard of the high priest.

However, we are not done with the “beloved disciple” yet. At Jesus’ crucifixion, we read in verse twenty-six of Chapter nineteen that “when Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, behold your son!’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Behold your mother!’ And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home. Whose home could she be taken to? Surely not John’s! There doesn’t seem to be any indication in the New Testament that John even had a home other than that of his parents. Besides, why would Jesus turn over his mother to the keeping of a man who would be at risk every day from the Pharisees and their persecution? But it makes very good sense that he would give her into the safekeeping of Lazarus who had a nice home in Bethany and could provide Mary with the comforts and care he wanted her to have. And since Bethany is just outside Jerusalem, that would leave Mary close to the city where her other son James would be as head of the church in Jerusalem. Then in Chapter twenty we read “Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. So she ran, and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple; the one whom Jesus loved (Lazarus), and said to them, ‘They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.’ Peter then came out with the other disciple, and they went toward the tomb. They both ran, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first; and stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb;

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he saw the linen cloth but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not know the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples went back to their homes.”

There are three points that need to be made here. In the first place, “the other disciple” did not outrun Peter to the tomb because he was younger or stronger. He outran Peter to the tomb because he knew where it was and Peter did not. Peter wasn’t at the crucifixion, but “the other disciple” (Lazarus) was. In the second place, Peter didn’t seem to know the significance of the napkin that had covered Jesus lying rolled up by itself. The significance was that this napkin rolled up and lying by itself meant that this was a deliberate act of the resurrected Lord and not the act of some grave robber. It was a deliberate clue that Jesus had risen – one that made Lazarus believe. Peter didn’t get it because he was not that familiar with Pharisaic rituals of burial, but Lazarus the Pharisee understood its significance. The third point is that the “disciples went back to their homes.” This would not be home to Galilee for Peter because after Mary Magdalene’s encounter with the risen Lord she went and told the disciples about it. Surely this would have to be the home of Lazarus in Bethany, the only home the disciples could go to in Judea.

Chapter twenty-one, however, seems to solidify the argument that Lazarus was the “beloved disciple,” as well as restore Peter to leadership of the disciples as Jesus forgives his denial at his arrest. After the resurrection of Jesus, we read that he revealed himself to the disciples at the Sea of Galilee – “Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanel of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee (James and John) and two others – one of whom had to be Lazarus – of his disciples were together. Simon Peter said to them, ‘I am going fishing.’ They said to him, ‘We will go with you.’ They went out and got into the boat; but that night they caught nothing. Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the beach; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, ‘Children, have you any fish?’ They answered him, ‘No.’ He said them, ‘Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will

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find some.’ So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in, for the quantity of fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved (Lazarus, one of the other two disciples who were in Galilee with Peter) said to Peter, ‘It is the Lord!’

When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his clothes, for he was stripped for work, and sprang into the sea. But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, but about a hundred yards off.”

Then in verse twenty, as we come full circle in our argument, we read again that “Peter turned and saw following them (Peter and Jesus) the disciple whom Jesus loved (Lazarus), who had lain close to his breast at the supper and had said, ‘Lord who is it that is going to betray you?’ When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, ‘Lord, what about this man?’ (which seems to be a reference to what role Lazarus would play in the future of the church, since Jesus had already told Peter that the church would be built around him, and whether Lazarus would live until Jesus returned) Jesus seems to give Peter a gentle rebuke and tells him not to worry about Lazarus but ‘Follow me!’ And verse twenty-four declares that “This is the disciple who is bearing witness to these things, and who has written these things; and we know that his testimony is true” -- an emphatic statement that this disciple Lazarus, the one whom Jesus loved, was the author of the gospel.

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