

THE “FRIEND” WHOM “JESUS LOVED”

The Sudden Appearance of Lazarus

“Lord, behold, he whom thou lovest is sick”
“Now Jesus loved... Lazarus”

In the fourth gospel, verse 3 of the eleventh chapter records the following appeal of Mary and Martha to Jesus regarding their brother, “Lord, behold, he whom thou lovest is sick”. This reveals Jesus already had a close relationship with Lazarus prior to that moment. This fact is confirmed two verses later when we read, “Now Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus”. In addition, six verses later we see that Jesus referred to Lazarus as “Our friend Lazarus”. Yet, in spite of all the history this implies, **there is no mention of Lazarus of Bethany or Jesus’ friendship with Lazarus until his name appears in the eleventh chapter of the fourth Gospel.** Why is this?

Nothing in the fourth gospel overtly explains the origin of this friendship. Even more important, the first three gospels never refer to Jesus’ friendship with Lazarus or to the miracle of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. (This resembles the similar omission of “the disciple whom Jesus loved” in those gospels.) What makes this especially noteworthy is that, besides Lazarus, the Bible tells of only two people who were raised from the dead by Jesus: a widow’s son (Lu. 7:12-15), and Jairus’ daughter (Mt. 9:18-25, Mk. 5:22-24 & 35-42, Lu. 8:41-56). The news of these astonishing events spread quickly (Mt. 9:26, Lu. 7:16-17). All were amazing miracles, but the raising of Lazarus was **substantially different** from the other two, as will be shown.

What Is God Telling Us?

By describing himself as the one whom “Jesus loved”, the God-inspired author of the fourth gospel put the focus on Jesus’ relationship to him. So, if we want to ascertain the identity of this individual, then it is logical for us to begin by searching the Bible for evidence of such a relationship in the life of Jesus. Prior to Pentecost, did Jesus have this type of relationship with anyone identified in the Bible? Yes, he did. And, this was so clear that referring to this relationship was sufficient to identify one particular individual – without even mentioning his name (“Lord, behold, he whom thou lovest is sick”).

Scripture never identifies John as being the one whom “Jesus loved” and John is never singled out in regard to Jesus’ relationship to him. John’s presence at three events where he was one of three disciples taken aside by Jesus is not equivalent to the unique bond implied by the designation “the disciple whom Jesus loved”. The label “the disciple whom Jesus loved” indicates that Jesus had a relationship with this disciple which was notably different from his relationships with the rest of his disciples. And, ironically, it turns out that this phrase that has hidden the author’s identity from so many is actually the best indicator of his identity!

Hidden in Plain Sight

In fact, there is so much evidence pointing to the identity of this author that one has to wonder how it could have all been overlooked. To start with, consider the term “the disciple whom Jesus loved”, while it helped to hide the author’s identity it also is proof of Jesus’ relationship with the author. In the gospels, do we find any man besides the unnamed author who associated with Jesus, who was also identified as being “loved” by him? Yes we do! Incredibly, two chapters before the one whom “Jesus loved” is even mentioned, the author of the fourth gospel told his readers about a friend of Jesus who was “loved” by him – in 11:3, where this message was sent to Jesus, “Lord, behold, he whom thou lovest is sick”, and in 11:5, where we are told, “Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus”.

Except for “the disciple whom Jesus loved”, the **only** man who associated with Jesus who was singled out as being “loved” by Jesus was Lazarus. We are told explicitly that “Jesus loved” Lazarus. His sisters also referred to this relationship, and when “Jesus wept” prior to raising Lazarus, the Jews that were there “weeping” with his sisters attributed it to Jesus’ love for him (Fourth gospel 11:19, 33 & 36). By itself the fact that “Jesus loved” him does not prove that Lazarus was the “other disciple, whom Jesus loved”. However, this lead is certainly worth investigating!

Bible References to Jesus’ Love

The phrase “whom Jesus loved” identifies the author as being the object of Jesus’ love. Since he isn’t called the disciple who *loved Jesus*, this book doesn’t examine verses dealing with an individual’s love toward Jesus. Also this is not meant to be a discussion on the principles of love or on the general topic of the love of God. Instead, this study will examine what scripture says about Jesus’ love for or toward specific individuals.

Outside of the gospels, all of the references to Jesus’ love are unrelated to the identity of the “other disciple”. In the gospels, Jesus’ love was referred to fifteen times (Fourth gospel 11:3, 5 & 36, 13:1(2x), 23 & 34, 14:21, 15:9 & 12, 19:26, 20:2, 21:7 & 20, Mk. 10:21), but **only two men** in the fourth gospel were explicitly identified as being the object of Jesus’ love, Lazarus and the one whom “Jesus loved” (Fourth gospel 11:3, 5 & 36, 13:23, 19:26, 20:2, 21:7 & 20 [Forms of two Greek words, *agapao* and *phileo*, were translated “love” in these verses – and both were used to refer to ‘both’ men]).

The first three gospels record only one time where an individual was said to be “loved” by Jesus. Mark 10:17-22 tells us of a meeting between Jesus and an unidentified man, and this passage says that Jesus “loved him”. But the passage does not state whether this person ever had any other contact with Jesus or not. So, we will proceed to take a closer look at Lazarus, since the fourth gospel noted both his association with Jesus and the fact that he was “loved” by Jesus.

Jesus’ Friend Becomes a Celebrity

The fact the three other gospel writers avoid any mention of the raising of Lazarus is particularly striking because of what happened *after* Lazarus was raised from the dead. “Then many of the Jews which came to Mary, and had seen the things which Jesus did, believed on him” (Fourth gospel 11:45). (Keep in mind they were eyewitnesses.) Now, compare this to what happened six days later when Jesus was again in Bethany, “Much people of the Jews therefore knew that he was there: and they came not for Jesus sake only, but that they might see Lazarus also, whom he had raised from the dead” (Fourth gospel 12:9).

So, scripture lets us know the people were attracted to Lazarus in the aftermath of this miracle. This caused such a stir “the chief priests consulted that they might put Lazarus also to death: Because that by reason of him many of the Jews went away, and believed on Jesus” (Fourth gospel 12:10-11). Is this a testament to the allure of fame or to the witness of Lazarus or perhaps both? We lack further details as to why these people were drawn to Lazarus, but it is clear the public was aware of him and of the miracle Jesus did for him.

Consider the event people commonly call the Triumphal Entry (Fourth gospel 12:12-18). Did you know the raising of Lazarus played a key role in terms of the crowd’s attendance on that day? We read of the greeting Jesus received from a cheering crowd as he rode into town on a donkey (Fourth gospel 12:12-15). Notice, however, that scripture also tells us about the crowd’s motivation. Although one might assume it was the teachings of Jesus or the realization he was the Son of God that brought out the crowd on that day, the author of the fourth gospel highlighted a particular reason for the crowd’s participation in that event.

This author points out the raising of Lazarus helped bring out the crowd at that Triumphal Entry. “The people therefore that was with him [Jesus] when he called Lazarus out of his grave, and raised him from the dead, bare record. For this cause the people also met him, for that they heard that he had done this miracle” (Fourth gospel 12:17-18). Thus, the crowd’s presence on that day was linked to their having heard the reports about Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, “For this cause the people also met him” (Fourth gospel 12:18), and they had merely “heard”.

The disciples of Jesus witnessed the raising of Lazarus, which was surely an electrifying and unforgettable experience! Yet, for some reason, the writers of the first three gospels decided they should not mention a word about it.

What is more, we are told the formerly dead Lazarus had such an effect on the people that the priests took the extreme step of plotting to have him killed. Lazarus was **big news**. So why is it that the other gospels fail to mention any of this? If this seems odd to you, just think about how this parallels the way the first three gospels also omit “the disciple whom Jesus loved”.

The Transition

Even stranger than the silence of the other gospels on all of these Lazarus matters is his abrupt disappearance from the fourth gospel. In 12:9 it tells us the people came to see Lazarus and 12:11 says he had a strong influence on the Jews. But after 12:17 refers to his return from the dead, the fourth gospel never mentions Lazarus again!

The fourth gospel’s presentation of Lazarus reveals two noteworthy facts. The first is Lazarus is named in only eleven verses of the fourth gospel, six in chapter 11 and five in chapter 12. There is no mention of him before chapter 11 verse 1 and after chapter 12 verse 17 he seems to vanish.

But what is even more interesting to note is this friend whom “Jesus loved” is last mentioned in chapter 12 – just before the obscure and unnamed disciple whom “Jesus loved” is first mentioned in the very next chapter (Fourth gospel 13:23). If you think this transition might be simply an unimportant coincidence then just wait, for there is much more evidence to come.

Still, one has to admit this presents us with a striking parallel. The one man associated with Jesus who was also singled out as being “loved” by Jesus **abruptly vanishes** from the text, and then the only disciple to be singled out as being “loved” by Jesus **abruptly appears** in this same gospel. The sequence of these things in the Bible is no accident! Furthermore, this newly evident disciple plays an important role in the events that follow.

Some may want to dispute the thesis that the “other disciple, whom Jesus loved” was Lazarus because it might seem inconsistent for him to hide his identity as author of the gospel while mentioning his name several times in the same book. However, as will be shown a little later, by comparing scripture with scripture one is able to grasp a perfectly logical and biblically sound reason as to why Lazarus may have done precisely that. Others may point out the Bible does not call Lazarus a “disciple” and we will also deal with this potential difficulty.

For now, though, let us look at the second reason why the order of these events is significant. As noted above, this author did not employ the term “the disciple whom Jesus loved” until after Lazarus is raised from the dead in the text and that miracle was certainly a powerful act of love toward Lazarus. During his earthly ministry Jesus did not eliminate suffering and death for everyone and the Bible tells of only three people Jesus raised from the dead while he was here. Lazarus was definitely privileged in this regard. This is also extremely relevant to the sequence of gospel events because **after Lazarus was raised from the dead he would never be and could never be the same again.**

Dead Man Walking

The raising of Lazarus is no fairy tale. It is not fiction. It was an important event in history. So, let's take the time to consider the reality of this situation. Lazarus had a close relationship with Jesus *before* he was raised from the dead. Their relationship was close enough that when he was sick, his sisters sent for Jesus with the message, "Lord, behold, he whom thou lovest is sick" (Fourth gospel 11:3). We are not told about this relationship but it must have existed for some time and his sisters felt "he whom thou lovest" applied only to Lazarus, as their message did not even mention his name.

Lazarus had a close relationship with Jesus *before* Jesus raised him from the dead. So what do you think that relationship would have been like after that experience? How would Lazarus have been changed by that one-of-a-kind gift from God? Is it reasonable to believe that Lazarus simply said 'Thanks, Jesus!' and went back to his usual, daily routine – spending his time on the cares of this world, just like his fellow citizens?

It would be laughable to think Lazarus could have just brushed off the tomb dust and returned to his normal life. Pause and take time to consider that miracle. It would surely be the most profound event in anyone's life. But for one who was already close to Jesus the effect of this miracle must have been extremely transforming. How would Lazarus have been different after that? Later, when Jesus came to Bethany again, "they made him a supper" (Fourth gospel 12:1-2). Yet no one would believe that "a supper" was the full extent of Lazarus' effort to show his gratitude or his loyalty.

Peter once said, "Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life" (Fourth gospel 6:68). Where would Lazarus have gone? He had not only heard the words of Jesus, he had experienced their power firsthand, in a way that few ever did. In light of this, which of the following is most likely?

- A. Lazarus lived in fear of death for the rest of his time on earth because he knew what it was like to die and dreaded having to do it again.
- B. Lazarus returned to what he was doing before he got sick. He remained a normal guy, tried to be a good person, observed the Sabbath, etc.
- C. Lazarus was thoroughly and radically changed by that rare and precious gift from God.

Like White on Rice!

If we take the time to think upon these things we realize that, since Lazarus already had a special relationship with Jesus, his response to that gift from God would not have been limited to mere gratitude. Without a doubt, he would have been motivated to be even closer and more loyal to his friend Jesus than he had previously been. In fact, from that day forward, Lazarus, more than anyone else, would have reason to stick close to Jesus – 'Like white on rice!', as the old saying goes. Also, not surprisingly, close to Jesus is exactly where we next find Lazarus.

When Jesus was in Bethany again, we read, "There they made him a supper, and Martha served: but Lazarus was one of them that sat at the table with him" (Fourth gospel 12:2). This verse and 11:44 are the only verses that depict Lazarus, so this is the last time Lazarus is actually depicted in the Bible. (Lazarus is later mentioned in 12:9, 10, and 17, but he is not depicted as being present.) Since this is his last appearance, what stands out about this verse?

Where we find Lazarus in his final explicit appearance is the key thing to note. The last time that Lazarus is seen he is **sitting with Jesus at a supper table** and the first time that the one whom "Jesus loved" is seen he is **leaning on Jesus at a supper table** (Fourth gospel 12:2 & 13:23). Is this simply another remarkable coincidence or is it part of a larger pattern of evidence?

You will have to decide, but for now let us look at another occasion when someone seemed to stick close to Jesus. The night Jesus was arrested, the “other disciple” followed Jesus and “went in with Jesus into the palace of the high priest” (Fourth gospel 18:15). Later, when Jesus was on the cross, he looked down and “saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved” (Fourth gospel 19:26). We do not find “the twelve” standing at the foot of the cross, yet **this** disciple was there. Why him and not the rest? What gave this disciple the courage and stamina to stick with Jesus until he was assigned to the mother of Jesus and “took her unto his own *home*”?

The evening prior, Peter, James, and John let Jesus down by falling asleep three times. Then, the disciples fled when Jesus was seized. Peter and the “other disciple” reappeared and followed Jesus. But, while this “other disciple” went “in with Jesus”, Peter stayed out by the fire, denied knowing Jesus, and soon left. By contrast, as Jesus was on the cross, the disciple “whom he loved” was close enough for the crucified Jesus to speak to him. So, why did this beloved disciple behave in a way that set him apart as being a cut above the rest of the disciples?

Been There. Done That.

Given their relationship, Lazarus must have known about Jesus’ many miracles. Then, on top of hearing about or perhaps even seeing miracles, Lazarus personally experienced coming back from the dead. What priority would Lazarus have put on self-preservation after he was raised. Survival is a very potent human instinct, but it is still fairly easy to grasp why the raised Lazarus might not have behaved like the rest of the disciples. God taught him, in the most emphatic way possible, that death isn’t necessarily final and, more important, that Jesus could give life. Thereafter, faith in Jesus would not have been just a mental concept for him. He had become living proof of the power of Jesus, and every time he awoke, he was likely to recall the moment of that miracle.

Regarding death, Lazarus had ‘Been there. Done that.’, though he would surely not have been cavalier about it. Imagine the effect this miracle had on his life. Such an experience could reasonably be expected to have had a significant effect on his fear of death. (Possibly even overcome it?)

The Courage Evidence

A close call with death can change a person drastically. Being dead for four days, along with his interactions with those who came to see him after his return (Fourth gospel 12:9 & 17), would’ve given Lazarus a **wholly unique** outlook on life. Could this lead to the type of courage and character the Bible attributes to the unnamed “other disciple”?

The “other disciple” went “with Jesus into the palace of the high priest”, and we have seen that he was a known associate of Jesus (Fourth gospel 18:15-17). Unlike the rest of the disciples, he didn’t act in a way that exhibited a concern for preserving his own life. Nevertheless, this is perfectly understandable if this individual was Lazarus.

Also, if the “other disciple” was Lazarus, then he was truly at risk when he entered the “palace of the high priest”, because the “chief priests” wanted to kill Lazarus too (Fourth gospel 12:10). We are not told if Lazarus knew about the plot to kill him at that time or if he learned about it at a later point. Regardless, the unique behavior of the “other disciple” still befits a raised-from-the-dead Lazarus (i.e., one who would stick with Jesus even when his own life was at risk). Some may ask, ‘If the “other disciple” was Lazarus, then why didn’t they kill him that night?’ Well, they had planned to kill Lazarus because he had caused people to believe on Jesus. So if they killed Jesus, which they were in the process of doing, then they had no reason to bother with Lazarus. But the Bible does not speak to this, so we cannot be totally sure.

What Is a Disciple?

Some may try to argue against the “other disciple” being Lazarus by pointing out he was not called a “disciple” in scripture. This is true, but that does not mean he was not a disciple. It is clear he was a friend of Jesus and the apostles, for Jesus referred to him as, “Our friend Lazarus” (Fourth gospel 11:11). So Lazarus must have spent time with them. However, the question for us is: Would it be correct to refer to Lazarus as a “disciple”?

“Disciple” was not a rank like Eagle Scout. One didn’t pass a test to become a “disciple”. In the Bible, disciples come and disciples go (cf. Fourth gospel 6:66, Acts 6:1). This term is used in numerous verses about a wide variety of people. [In the Greek this word simply means a “learner” or “pupil”.] While it is not precisely clear what made one a “disciple”, to contend Lazarus was not a “disciple” merely because he is not explicitly called a “disciple” is unreasonable in light of what we know about his appearances in the Bible. The reason the first three gospels do not call Lazarus a “disciple” is simple, **they never mention him at all** – not his friendship with Jesus, not even the miracle of his being raised from the dead. The one gospel that tells us about Lazarus also does not call him a “disciple”, but this would fit with Lazarus using the term “the disciple whom Jesus loved” to cloak his identity as author of this gospel. (Another possibility is Lazarus may have graduated from friend to dedicated follower of Jesus only in the aftermath of what Jesus did for him and, if so, that may be why the author referred to himself as a “disciple” only after he reported that miracle.)

The author wrote, “these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God” (Fourth gospel 20:31). We will revisit this verse later when we discuss his motive for hiding his identity. For now though, let us realize the author was only including things that he believed would accomplish this goal. As we will see, this was reason enough for him not to call Lazarus a “disciple”. (Not identifying Lazarus as a “disciple” may well be the key reason the author’s effort at anonymity was so effective.)

Finally, to suppose Lazarus never became a “disciple” is not reasonable. We know he was “loved” by Jesus. He was raised from the dead by Jesus. He had supper with Jesus. Is it fair then to infer that Lazarus would have *learned* from his experiences and his relationship with Jesus? Yes, it is.

The Character Evidence

Coming back from the dead would certainly affect one’s character. Thus, it is reasonable to think that Lazarus might exhibit a high degree of courage and unusual faithfulness toward Jesus, in a way that would set him apart from “the twelve” and the rest of the disciples. Do we see Lazarus behaving this way? Well, if Lazarus was the “other disciple”, then surely he did manifest these traits. So, we will consider the actions of the “other disciple” to see if he behaved like a raised-from-the-dead Lazarus would act.

Notice how the one whom “Jesus loved” was set apart from the rest of the disciples by his reaction on the night of the supper. The topic of the betrayer came up several times that evening. First, before the bread and the cup, when Jesus said the traitor was “one of you” (Mt. 26:21b, Mk. 14:18b), the disciples were “sorrowful, and began every one of them to say unto him, Lord, is it I?” (Mt. 26:22; cf. Mk. 14:19). That isn’t the same as ‘Who is it?’, since to ask the question was to doubt their own character! Yet, that ended when Jesus ruled out all but “the twelve” by saying, “*It is one of the twelve that dippeth with me in the dish*” (Mk. 14:20). Then, after the bread and the cup, the issue came up again. But Jesus had already ruled out all but “the twelve”, so this time the response takes the form of a dispute about which apostle it would be, “they began to enquire among themselves, which of **them** it was that should do this thing” (Lu. 22:23).

Still, the reaction of one person did stand out from the rest, and we see this later that evening, after the foot washing, when Jesus sat down “again” (Fourth gospel 13:12). At that point, he once again raised the issue of the traitor (Fourth gospel 13:21), and it says, “then the disciples looked one on another, doubting of whom he spake” (Fourth gospel 13:22). Peter then took a step to probe further, just not directly. “Now there was leaning on Jesus’ bosom one of his disciples, whom Jesus loved. Simon Peter therefore beckoned to him, that he should ask who it should be of whom he [Jesus] spake” (Fourth gospel 13:23-24).

Why didn’t Peter ask his own question? Was he one of those who had doubted their own loyalty? Peter was an apostle but he still chose to go through the one whom “Jesus loved” to ask this question. What was there about this disciple that made Peter turn to him, instead of just asking Jesus directly? (Would Peter have gone through John to ask Jesus a question? Mark 10:41 suggests he would not.)

Anyone at the table was close enough to ask Jesus a question, yet Peter chose to prompt the one whom “Jesus loved” to do it. In any case, when Peter signaled him to ask which one of “the twelve” would be the traitor, he didn’t hesitate or exhibit self-doubt like the rest had. “He then lying on Jesus’ breast saith unto him, Lord, who is it?” (Fourth gospel 13:24-25). Indeed, his ease in posing the question befits the raised “friend” whom “Jesus loved”, since Lazarus would have known whoever the betrayer would be, it could not be him! Note the one whom “Jesus loved” did not ask, ‘Is it I?’ Unlike Peter, he appears to have no qualms about asking Jesus the question when he was prompted by Peter to do so. He seems sure of himself and his physical position even suggests this, for the author tells us that he was leaning on Jesus.

Three times the author describes his position at this event (Fourth gospel 13:23 & 25, 21:20). This was certainly not just to record the seating arrangements. His position at the table that night gives us insight into how close he was to Jesus personally. He could lean on Jesus because they had a close relationship. No one else is said to have “leaned” on Jesus. This bond did not materialize out of thin air on that night and it seems to be different from the bond Jesus had with the rest of his disciples, including Peter. The quality and degree of camaraderie revealed in this action imply a secure friendship and an obvious devotion.

Regardless, the fact is that Peter’s choice to use the one whom “Jesus loved” to ask about the betrayer tells us that he was not one of “the twelve”, for surely Peter would not have tagged any of the apostles to ask this question – because Jesus had already said one of them would be the traitor (Mk. 14:20). One of the apostles could not be trusted and Peter wanted to know who it was. If he was going to get someone to ask for him, it would have been someone who was **not** one of “the twelve”.

Does the Evidence Fit?

Is it reasonable to suppose that Lazarus may have been privileged to enjoy an especially close friendship with Jesus at the time of this event? Yes, it is. Would such a relationship help explain some of the actions of the one “whom Jesus loved” on the night of the supper? Does the evidence fit Lazarus? If you have not yet been persuaded, then perhaps the evidence from the morning that Jesus’ vacant tomb was discovered will convince you.

Resurrection Morning

Take a close look at the unnamed author’s account of events on resurrection morning. It is not just a confirmation of the vacant tomb. If that was all God wanted, then the author might well have been inspired to use fewer words. So, keep an eye out for the details that his words contain, because they can actually provide us with quite a bit of revealing data regarding the “other disciple” (and **all** of it ends up supporting the case for Lazarus).

“The first *day* of the week cometh Mary Magdalene early, when it was yet dark, unto the sepulchre, and seeth the stone taken away from the sepulchre. Then she runneth, and cometh to Simon Peter, and to the other disciple, whom Jesus loved, and saith unto them, They have taken away the Lord out of the sepulchre, and we know not where they have laid him. Peter therefore went forth, and that other disciple, and came to the sepulchre. So they ran both together: and the other disciple did outrun Peter, and came first to the sepulchre” (Fourth gospel 20:1-4).

Pause for a moment and consider that last sentence. Of course, it’s possible the author wanted to record this fact merely in order to tell us that he (the “other disciple”) was the better athlete. Or perhaps the author was simply being accurate. There is, however, another possibility that we should consider. Ask yourself: Other than sheer athletic ability, what could have caused the “other disciple” to “outrun Peter”? (The answer to this, it turns out, also suggests why this point was even noteworthy.)

The answer is adrenaline. The “other disciple” might well have outrun Peter simply because he had a more intense desire to see that tomb. If so, then he would have pushed himself harder to get there more quickly. As you consider this, remember that it was the one whom “Jesus loved” who wrote this and took the time to describe this seemingly trivial detail from that day. Also, note it is highly likely the idea that Jesus’ body was not in the tomb would have had a special impact on Lazarus – who had recently vacated a tomb of his own.

Now, let’s pick up where we left off. “And he [the “other disciple”] stooping down, *and looking in*, saw the linen clothes lying; yet went he not in. Then cometh Simon Peter following him, and went into the sepulchre, and seeth the linen clothes lie, And the napkin, that was about his head, not lying with the linen clothes, but wrapped together in a place by itself. Then went in also that other disciple, which came first to the sepulchre, and he saw, and believed. For as yet they knew not the scripture, that he must rise again from the dead” (Fourth gospel 20:5-9).

In our day ‘the witness of the empty tomb’ is a term used by those who say the empty tomb itself is proof of Jesus’ resurrection. While it may be well intentioned, this is not strictly biblical. First, realize that the things Peter and the “other disciple” saw in the tomb that morning did not harmonize with their understanding of scripture. We know this because we read, “as yet they knew not the scripture, that he [Jesus] must rise again from the dead” (Fourth gospel 20:9). This point is particularly significant because these two men react differently. In addition, the Bible makes it clear **the tomb was not empty**. Even though the tomb no longer contained the body of Jesus, it did contain some very important pieces of evidence.

The Evidence Inside the Tomb

When Mary Magdalene told Peter and the “other disciple” the body of Jesus had been taken they both immediately rushed to the tomb. It says, “So they ran both together: and the other disciple did outrun Peter, and came first to the sepulchre”. When the “other disciple” got there he stooped down and “saw the linen clothes” lying inside, at which point he stopped and “went he not in”. When Peter got there, however, he did not stop. He went right in. The “other disciple” was outside until that point, but “then” he “went in also” (cf. Fourth gospel 20:2, 4, 5, 6 & 8).

Why do you think the “other disciple” stopped when he “saw the linen clothes”? After Peter went in, the “other disciple” did too. Why didn’t he go in when he arrived? He ran, so he must have felt a sense of urgency. Despite this, he seems to freeze just outside the entrance until Peter passes by him and enters the tomb. So, why did the sight of “the linen clothes” cause him to stop in his tracks? In a moment you will see there is a reason why this curious behavior of the “other disciple” is further evidence that he was Lazarus. But first let us look at the difference in the reactions of Peter and the “other disciple” to the items they saw in the tomb on that morning – **one of them “believed”!**

“Then went in also that other disciple, which came first to the sepulchre, and he saw, and believed” (Fourth gospel 20:8). The “other disciple” was the one who believed, but notice when this occurred. It happened only after he entered the tomb and saw “the napkin, that was about his [Jesus] head, not lying with the linen clothes, but wrapped together in a place by itself” (Fourth gospel 20:7).

The First Disciple to Believe

When he witnessed those “linen clothes” and “the napkin that was about his [Jesus] head” in the tomb, the “other disciple” suddenly “believed”. Why? The author takes the time to depict these items precisely, and he underscores the “linen clothes” by repeating this phrase three times (Fourth gospel 20:5-7). This is important. We can learn something about this author/“other disciple, whom Jesus loved” from the emphasis that he placed on these things and the effect that they had on him, “he saw, and believed”. This is the first time the word “believed” is used after the resurrection and it pertains to the “other disciple”! This is no small point. His being the first person who “believed” is extremely significant. (The Appendix will expound on this point later.)

Does scripture indicate the Apostle John had any reason to react in a unique way to those items that were in the tomb? No, it does not. Furthermore, note the Bible does not state that Peter “believed” (at that point in time). The author here makes it clear the vacant tomb, “the linen clothes”, and “the napkin” did not have the same impact on Peter. However, the sight of “the linen clothes” likely would have stopped Lazarus in his tracks and the sight of “the napkin” would have had a unique effect on him. The significance of these items would not have been lost on Lazarus, for he had experienced waking up after he had been dressed him in “linen”, the material that was used to wrap dead bodies!

The “Linen” Effect

“And he [Lazarus] that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with graveclothes: and his face was bound about with a napkin” (Fourth gospel 11:44). It’s no accident that the author took the time to mention the seemingly trivial detail of the “napkin” with regard to Lazarus also. Moreover, it was only after the sight of the “napkin” that the “other disciple” reacted – **then** “he saw, and believed”.

While the author did not take the time to record what Lazarus’ “graveclothes” were made of, he did note the Jews in those days used “linen” to bury the bodies, “Then they took the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes with the spices, as the manner of the Jews is to bury” (Fourth gospel 19:40). So, this indicates “linen” was likely used for Lazarus’ body also.

Let’s take a quick look at the usage of “linen” in the New Testament. The English word “linen” was used to translate several different Greek words, but only two of these Greek words involve dead bodies. These two words were both used to describe the material that covered the body of Jesus, so they may well be synonyms (cf. Fourth gospel 19:40 compared to Mt. 27:59; and Lu. 23:53 compared to Lu. 24:12). One of these words always refers to the cloth covering a corpse. Likewise, the other always refers to the cloth covering a corpse, with one exception. We’ll discuss this curious exception a little bit later. What we need to think about at this juncture is how Lazarus would have reacted to the sight of the items which had been covering the body of Jesus.

What was the first thing Lazarus saw when he came back from the dead? Significantly, it would have been the “napkin” that covered his own face! In the moments after Jesus called him back to life, Lazarus came out of his cave-grave still wrapped in his graveclothes and Jesus gave the instruction, “Loose him, and let him go” (Fourth gospel 11:44). It is unlikely Lazarus ever forgot being loosed. Therefore, it is logical to suggest that **the sight of Jesus’ abandoned graveclothes would have had a powerful and wholly unique effect on Lazarus.**

The “other disciple” ran to Jesus’ tomb and stooped down to go in, but instead he stopped when he saw “the linen clothes” (Fourth gospel 20:3-5). When he did go in moments later, this “other disciple” became the first person to believe on the risen Lord, “he saw, and believed” (Fourth gospel 20:8). In light of this evidence, particularly given his reactions to “the linen clothes” and “the napkin”, can we conclude that the behavior of the “other disciple” would befit Lazarus? The facts that were recorded about this event fit together logically and completely if the “other disciple” was Lazarus.

The Fishing Trip

After resurrection morning the one whom “Jesus loved” is next seen when he and five others decide to accompany Peter, who elected to go fishing. “There were together Simon Peter, and Thomas called Didymus, and Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, and the *sons of Zebedee*, and two other of his disciples. Simon Peter saith unto them, I go a fishing. They say unto him, We also go with thee” (Fourth gospel 21:2-3a). They caught nothing that night, and the next morning “Jesus stood on the shore: but the disciples knew not that it was Jesus” (Fourth gospel 21:3b-4). He spoke with them and said to, “Cast the net on the right side of the ship”, and when they did they could not pull in the net because of “the multitude of fishes” (Fourth gospel 21:5-6). In the next verse the author’s presence is revealed when we read, “Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved saith unto Peter, It is the Lord” (Fourth gospel 21:7).

So we see “the disciple whom Jesus loved” was the first disciple to recognize Jesus that day. More important, however, is the author’s list of who was in attendance, for right after he mentioned “the *sons of Zebedee*” (James and John), he noted two unnamed disciples were present. This reference to an unnamed disciple fits with the author’s pattern of concealing his identity at this point in his gospel. Still, it should grab our attention when we see the author **grouped John in with the five apostles** whom he chose to identify in the first part of his list but then, in contrast with that set of apostle names, he lumped together the two unnamed disciples and tacked them on to the end of his list (Fourth gospel 21:2).

The author listed “the *sons of Zebedee*” with the apostles, yet he referred to himself anonymously (as “that disciple whom Jesus loved”) moments later in verse 7 and this argues against his being John. The author consistently used anonymous terms to refer to himself since he first did so in his record of Jesus’ last Passover and he continued that practice in this very passage. So, it would be contrary to that effort for the author to include himself with the group he elected to name in verse 2.

The First Error

Later during that event, the disciples came to shore and dined with Jesus (Fourth gospel 21:7-14). Following that, Jesus had a conversation with Peter (Fourth gospel 21:15-19). Immediately thereafter we read, “Then Peter, turning about, seeth the disciple whom Jesus loved following, which also leaned on his breast at supper, and said, Lord, which is he that betrayeth thee? Peter seeing him saith to Jesus, Lord, and what *shall* this man *do*?” (Fourth gospel 21:20-21). To this Jesus replied, “If I will that he tarry till I come, what *is that* to thee? follow thou me” (Fourth gospel 21:22).

Next, there is a very strange reference to the unnamed disciple. “Then went this saying abroad among the brethren, that that disciple should not die: yet Jesus said not unto him, He shall not die; but If I will that he tarry till I come, what *is that* to thee?” (Fourth gospel 21:23). Here the author reports and seeks to correct an error that was circulating “among the brethren”. So, the first error about this disciple occurred long before he was mistakenly called John when some were falsely told he would not die!

How should one respond to a false teaching? The method used by this God-inspired author was to note what was not said and to emphasize what was **actually** said. He pointed out that Jesus did not say what the rumor said (“He shall not die”) and then he again quoted Jesus’ words verbatim (“If I will that he tarry till I come, what *is that* to thee?”). This author offered no further commentary on Jesus’

words but, rather, chose to bear witness to the words of Jesus and let them speak for themselves. The author apparently expected his readers to understand the words of Jesus. But if those words were sufficient for the readers of his gospel, what caused them to be misinterpreted by the brethren who were claiming this disciple would “not die”?

A Telltale Rumor

The fourth gospel's author tried to correct the misunderstanding that had been circulating among “the brethren”. We are not told if Jesus' words were misinterpreted by one or more of the men that were on the fishing trip or if the “not die” idea sprang up later, after others had been told about this trip. But regardless of who started the rumor, the fact is that the brethren accepted the notion that the one whom “Jesus loved” would “not die”. This begs the question, What could have caused this? The words spoken by Jesus on that day did not dictate such a conclusion, for the author twice quoted Jesus' words verbatim (Fourth gospel 21:22 & 23). So he knew the “not die” idea did not correspond to the words of Jesus but, rather, it was wrongly *substituted* for his words.

There is a difference between those who had heard Jesus' words recounted by the men who were on the fishing trip and those who would later read those words in this author's book. The former group would have had a key piece of information that the author withheld from his readers, and interestingly, this would help to explain why the “not die” idea was ever believed in the first place. The knowledge of the identity of “the disciple whom Jesus loved” is what differentiates these two groups. The author's identity was concealed from the readers of his gospel. The disciples of Jesus, on the other hand, knew the one whom “Jesus loved”. His identity was not a mystery to them and, initially at least, they would have included this information in their testimony of what happened on the fishing trip. What was it about this particular disciple that caused some to jump to the wrong conclusion and led them to assume they could interpret Jesus' words, “If I will that he tarry till I come” as meaning, “that disciple should not die”?

The erroneous “not die” idea was not caused by what Jesus said. Rather, it arose because of whom Jesus had been talking about. What if the men on the fishing trip and those who heard about this event knew Jesus' words referred to Lazarus? Since he had already been raised from the dead, a reason for the erroneous rumor becomes evident. One can see why some of them might jump to the conclusion that Jesus' words meant, “he should not die”. Jesus had displayed his willingness to have his “friend” Lazarus loosed from the bonds of death, even after four days (and that miracle took place not all that long before this misunderstanding occurred). This was a very special blessing, one not granted to all of Jesus' disciples, nor their families and friends. Lazarus was one of the few individuals who had ever been chosen to receive this one-of-a-kind gift and ‘everyone’ knew it (Fourth gospel 12:9, 11 & 18).

If the one whom “Jesus loved” was Lazarus, then, as noted, there is a logical explanation for the origin of the false rumor. Since Jesus had already raised his friend Lazarus from the dead, those who knew that Lazarus was the subject of Jesus' words had mistakenly inferred he would be exempted from having to undergo a second physical death. The “not die” rumor may also have arisen due to people reading a false meaning into these words – “he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die” (Fourth gospel 11:25-26). Jesus said this to Martha in the context of his raising of Lazarus and she likely mentioned this when she talked about that event. So, the “not die” idea could also be linked to a misapplication of Jesus' words “shall never die”. Once again, it turns out the facts surrounding this disciple whom “Jesus loved” perfectly fit Lazarus. This telltale rumor easily harmonizes with all of the other biblical data if Lazarus was the one whom “Jesus loved”. We will be considering still more evidence in support of this conclusion but first let us try to answer this question: Why did this author conceal his identity?

Visit LazarusComeForth.com for the rest of this Bible study on the “friend” who “Jesus loved”.