

# WAS LAZARUS THE BELOVED DISCIPLE?

## The Motive?

The fourth gospel's anonymous author recorded his purpose for writing his book and that purpose may be linked to the reason he hid his identity. He wrote, "And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book: But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing ye might have life through his name" (Fourth gospel 20:30-31). The author's intent, therefore, was to focus his reader's attention on Jesus and to provide information that would help them to "believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God". While this may appear to be merely the author's goal for his gospel, it turns out that this objective also provided a motive for this author to cloak his identity. (All of this was under the inspiration of God, of course, but God does use individuals in their existing circumstances to declare His will and carry it out.)

As the author's intent was to point people to Jesus, he would have avoided doing anything that might have interfered with that goal. Also, there is evidence Lazarus would have had reason to believe his identity could have interfered with that objective. If we think about what happened after Lazarus was raised from the dead, then we can understand the problem that Lazarus had to face; he had become a 'celebrity'. If he was the author of the fourth gospel, this may have presented a dilemma for Lazarus, in the form of a potential conflict with that stated goal.

## The Fame Problem

In chapter 12, which is the last place that the author mentions Lazarus, we get a feel for just how famous he became. For instance, it says, "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). Consider the implications of that – **"they came not for Jesus' sake only"**! How do you think that would have affected Lazarus? Would he have enjoyed the spotlight and basked in the glory this brought to him? There is no evidence Jesus' "friend" Lazarus took advantage of this situation or milked it for his own ego. (Actually, the sudden disappearance of Lazarus from the fourth gospel indicates quite the contrary.)

Prior to Pentecost we do not read of people wanting to see Peter or any of the apostles "also", even though they helped feed the crowds (Mt. 14:19, 15:36, etc.), and displayed power over "devils" (Lu. 10:17). The focus of the people had always been Jesus. They came to confront, see, touch, listen to, or be healed by Jesus. But after Lazarus was raised from the dead in front of many eyewitnesses, the people came to see him "also". Therefore, the "friend" whom "Jesus loved" faced a peculiar dilemma.

We read, "by reason of him [Lazarus] many of the Jews went away, and believed on Jesus" (Fourth gospel 12:11). Moreover, the raising of Lazarus was a key reason that the crowd met Jesus when he rode in to Jerusalem on a donkey. "For this cause the people also met him [Jesus], for they heard that he had done this miracle" (Fourth gospel 12:18). This may lead some to suggest that Lazarus' new found fame was a good thing because it could help to draw more people, who would then get to learn about Jesus. However, there is good reason to suspect that method would not achieved a lasting result, since the crowd at that Triumphal Entry was not cheering for Jesus just a few days later when the choice for pardon was Jesus or Barabbas.

There is no reason to believe that the raised Lazarus was anything but loyal to his friend Jesus. Nevertheless, he became a novelty that people also sought in addition to Jesus (Fourth gospel 12:9). We should immediately recognize this would have presented Lazarus with an unusual problem. John the Baptist articulated the idea, "He [Jesus] must increase, but I *must* decrease" (Fourth gospel 3:30). One obvious way Lazarus could avoid drawing any attention away from Jesus would be to 'disappear' (by obscuring his identity or becoming anonymous).

The fourth gospel's author explicitly said he did not report everything Jesus did (Fourth gospel 20:30). His book sought to achieve a stated goal – that its readers, "might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God" and that they would, "have life through his name" (Fourth gospel 20:31). The author had a reason for cloaking his identity. If he was Lazarus, then he may have hidden his identity to prevent his notoriety from interfering with the stated goal of the gospel. Is this in fact what led the author to hide his identity? While we cannot know for sure, this thesis is at least a reasonable and biblically sound possibility.

## **What about Him?**

Even the disciples were not immune to the distraction effect, as can be seen when six of them accompanied Peter on a fishing trip and Jesus paid them a visit. While seven disciples were present, the resurrected Jesus took the time to focus on Peter (Fourth gospel 21:15-19). Moreover, we are told this was only, "the third time that Jesus shewed himself to his disciples, after that he was risen from the dead" (Fourth gospel 21:14).

However, in spite of Jesus' focus on him, it seems as if Peter's attention was easily distracted – by the presence of "the disciple whom Jesus loved"! "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).

Instead of responding to the words that Jesus had just spoken to him, Peter appears to change the subject. It's not likely that he did this simply because "the disciple whom Jesus loved" happened to fall in his line of sight. So, what do you think could have prompted Peter to ask this question? Furthermore, several disciples were present, so what motivated Peter to focus on "the disciple whom Jesus loved"? Verses 20 and 21 do refer to him "following" and Peter's "seeing him", but the mere fact he was nearby would not have been a sufficient reason for Peter to single out this one particular disciple from the rest who were there.

At that instant, Peter deliberately referred to this one disciple only. Why? Well let us consider the possibility Peter may have asked specifically about "the disciple whom Jesus loved" at that moment **because of who this disciple was** – since Peter would have known this man as Lazarus! One other thing to take into account is the point at which Peter's attention turned to the one whom "Jesus loved". This is noteworthy because the topic of conversation had just changed, and at that moment Jesus was speaking about Peter's death!

## **Jesus Foretells Peter's Death**

"This spake he [Jesus] signifying by what death he [Peter] should glorify God" (Fourth gospel 21:19). Without getting into the particulars of Jesus' words in verse 18 note we are told he raised the topic of Peter's death. Then Jesus had two more words for Peter, "Follow me" (Fourth gospel 21:19). When the matter of his death was raised, Peter seemed to change the subject, which might be dismissed by some as a typical reaction to anxiety. But bear in mind the one speaking to Peter was the resurrected Jesus, who had overcome death. When Jesus told Peter, "by what death he should glorify God" what did Peter do? "Then Peter, turning about, seeth the disciple whom Jesus loved... Peter seeing him saith to Jesus, Lord, and what *shall* this man *do*?" (Fourth gospel 21:20-21). [The literal Greek reads, "Lord, but of this one what".] Why, upon learning "by what death he should glorify God", did Peter feel compelled to refer to one particular disciple? Was Peter merely concerned for this disciple or is there a more rational explanation that might better account for his question?

Of course, if the one whom "Jesus loved" was Lazarus, then we can see logic in Peter's question. Peter knew Lazarus had been raised from the dead, so he may have been asking if Lazarus would have to die again – especially since he likely heard Jesus say, "he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die" prior to raising Lazarus (Fourth gospel 11:25-26). But regardless of why Peter asked his question we can consider the distracting effect the one "whom Jesus loved" seemed to have on Peter. Death is a weighty matter. Still, when Jesus brought up Peter's death, Peter turned his attention from Jesus to "the disciple whom Jesus loved". However, the key here is not the topic of death or Peter's attention shifting from Jesus, it is his timing. He focused on the one whom "Jesus loved" as soon as the topic became death. Would Peter's mind have associated Lazarus with this topic? Naturally.

This event was only “the third time that Jesus shewed himself to his disciples, after that he was risen from the dead” (Fourth gospel 21:14). Even so, Jesus was not the sole focus of Peter’s attention. The author (known to us as “the disciple whom Jesus loved”) proved to be a distraction for Peter, just as he later became a distraction to those who were telling people he would not die. Being a distraction would surely conflict with the author’s objective (cf. Fourth gospel 20:31). We have already discussed how this potential conflict would have provided a motive for the author to remain anonymous. The question for you is: Do the facts support the conclusion that this was Lazarus, writing anonymously to avoid any hindrance to his goal?

## **The Humbleness Question**

The idea that Lazarus would forgo using his name to avoid becoming a distraction to others would be in line with the author’s expressed intent. After he was raised from the dead, Lazarus became an attraction for people (Fourth gospel 12:9). If he was also the God-inspired writer of the fourth gospel, then Lazarus would have been more than willing to avoid claiming authorship, rather than taking the risk of interfering with the reader’s focus on Jesus.

“The disciple whom Jesus loved” may not be a very humble sounding term but we know it is an accurate description, since it was written under the inspiration of God – and note the timing here also. The author began referring to himself by this term only after he reported that “they came not for Jesus sake only, but that they might see Lazarus also”.

It is common to hear people claim John was humble because of the author’s anonymity. But this author was not John, so any attributes that one may want to infer about this author do not apply to John. If this author’s effort to remain anonymous is an indication he was humble, then this quality pertains to the author whoever he was, including Lazarus. Likewise, another fact may also imply humility on the part of Lazarus. This gospel tells of the raising of Lazarus and the subsequent public response but **the author did not record a single word spoken by Lazarus**. We have no way to know if humility was the reason for either this or his anonymity. Still, it is worthwhile to note these things so you can weigh all of the data regarding the author’s character (i.e., Lazarus’ character).

## **Names in Scripture**

The belief that a man might forgo his name isn’t foreign to the Bible. The disciples of Jesus were quite willing to change their names. Simon became Peter (Lu. 6:14), Saul became Paul (Acts 13:9), etc. Further, this practice was not new. Abram became Abraham way back in Genesis 17:5. In addition, the Bible often uses multiple names for people. James and John were surnamed, “Boanerges” (Mk. 3:17), Thomas was, “called Didymus” (Fourth gospel 21:2), and “Judas” (not Iscariot) was also called, “Thaddaeus” (cf. Lu. 6:16, Mk. 3:18).

Thus, it is at least compatible with scripture to suggest that Lazarus may have stopped using his name. Did he do this? If he was the unnamed author of the fourth gospel, then, in so far as this gospel is concerned, the answer is yes. As the jury you must decide, first, if scripture can prove that this author was not John. If so, then your next job is to decide if the biblical evidence indicates that this author was Lazarus. Hopefully you have been convinced, but we will look at one final piece of evidence that might help to persuade anyone who is still unsure.

## **The Other Murder Plot**

Lazarus had an effect on “many of the Jews”, for we’re told that “by reason of him [Lazarus] many of the Jews went away, and believed on Jesus” (Fourth gospel 12:11). Of course, this may have been due solely to the fact that he had been raised from the dead. But it is also true that if Lazarus had been a known figure in the community, then that would have amplified the effect of the news of him being raised and several things hint at this idea. For example, after he died “many of the Jews” came to comfort his sisters (Fourth gospel 11:19), and even after four days “the Jews” were still seen “weeping” (Fourth gospel 11:33).

In addition to his well attended memorial service, the body of Lazarus was in a cave tomb with a rock door (Fourth gospel 11:38), which sounds very much like the kind of tomb we find associated with a rich man, Joseph of Arimathea (Mt. 27:57-60). Moreover, once when Lazarus and his sisters threw a supper for Jesus, his sister Mary anointed Jesus with “a pound” of “very costly” ointment (Fourth gospel 12:1-3). This, too, may be another indication that their household had no shortage of money.

Regardless, “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). We can see that in the which passed time between the raising of Lazarus and the plot to kill him, a ground swell of response to this miracle started to develop among the people (cf. Fourth gospel 12:18). Also, as word of the raising of Lazarus spread, the religious leaders would have had even more reason to want to dispose of him.

Lazarus was the only one besides Jesus who was the object of a murder plot by the “chief priests” prior to Pentecost. The “chief priests” did not plot to kill all of the disciples of Jesus, and they did not target just any random “friend” of Jesus. These men wanted to get rid of Lazarus specifically. The thing to consider is that the “chief priests” knew that Lazarus had been raised from the dead – and they knew of the public’s fascination with him and the impact that he was having on the people (Fourth gospel 11:46-47, 12:9-11 & 18). The “chief priests” may have known Lazarus as a figure in that community before Jesus raised him from the dead, but after he was raised they knew him as the man that they wanted to kill (Fourth gospel 12:10). These facts from the biblical record are relevant because they reveal that Lazarus was known unto the “chief priests”.

## **Which Disciple Was Known?**

Now, remember that the author twice tells us the “other disciple” was “known unto the high priest” (Fourth gospel 18:15 & 16). As shown earlier, this helps to prove John could not be the “other disciple, whom Jesus loved”. The case for John faces a truly insurmountable problem here. On the other hand, if this “other disciple” was Lazarus, then this fact can be reconciled with the biblical evidence. Here too, as with all of the other Bible facts that were weighed in this study, it can be shown that the scriptures harmonize completely with Lazarus being “the other disciple, whom Jesus loved”.

## **“Add Thou Not unto His Words”**

Earlier it was noted that the title *The Gospel of John* was not in the original text. Since that title was added later and since the actual words written by the God-inspired writers of scripture can show the John idea is false, we have a compelling reason to avoid promoting the false idea that the one whom “Jesus loved” was John. Therefore, in this study the book that was written by “the disciple whom Jesus loved” has not been referenced by the misleading title *John/Gospel of John*, for doing so serves to perpetuate a false idea. Instead the work of this anonymous gospel author was referenced as the fourth gospel, which is a simple, true, and easy-to-understand way to refer to his book in terms of its location in the New Testament.

Those who reject the unbiblical John tradition (and who refer to the gospel in a way that does not promote that erroneous tradition) will no doubt have to endure ridicule and scornful looks from those who will not accept the biblical evidence on this issue. Nevertheless, those who are careful to refer to the gospel of “the disciple whom Jesus loved” by a term that does not promote the John error are justifiably encouraged by the verse, “Prove all things; hold fast that which is good” (1 Th. 5:21), for they are holding fast to the truth revealed in scripture.

Inspired scripture is what we are to rely on – not the things that men may add to it. “Every word of God *is* pure: he *is* a shield unto them that put their trust in him. Add thou not unto his words, lest he reprove thee, and thou be found a liar” (Pr. 30:5-6).

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