

*If you want to cause Biblical scholars to get their knickers in a knot there are two sure fire ways to accomplish that end: 1) you can skewer a sacred cow whether a liberal or conservative one; 2) you can propose a theory that requires one to believe in the possibility of the miraculous to even entertain the thesis. If you can accomplish both with one theory, well, you've created a Mallox moment! I seem to accomplished this at the last SBL meeting in November when I gave the following lecture. I'll let you decide whether you find it illuminating or inflammatory. Flame On!*

–Ben Witherington III,  
Posted on Monday, Jan 29, 2007 at  
<http://benwitherington.blogspot.com/2007/01/was-lazarus-beloved-disciple.html>.  
(Comments beginning on pg 7.)

## **THE HISTORICAL FIGURE OF THE BELOVED DISCIPLE IN THE 4TH GOSPEL**

Ben Witherington III

### I. The problem with the traditional ascription of this Gospel to John Zebedee

Martin Hengel and Graham Stanton among other scholars have reminded us in recent discussions of the Fourth Gospel that the superscripts to all four of the canonical Gospels were in all likelihood added after the fact to the documents, indeed they may originally have been added as document tags to the papyrus rolls. Even more tellingly they were likely added only after there were several familiar Gospels for the phrase ‘according to....’ is used to distinguish this particular Gospel from other well known ones.

This means of course that all four Gospels are formally anonymous and the question then becomes how much weight one should place on internal evidence of authorship (the so-called inscribed author) and how much on external evidence. In my view, the internal evidence should certainly take precedence in the case of the Gospel of John, not least because the external evidence is hardly unequivocal. This does not alleviate the necessity of explaining how the Gospel came to be ascribed to someone named John, but we will leave that question to the end of our discussion.

As far as the external evidence goes it is true enough that there were various church fathers in the second century that though John son of Zebedee was the author. There was an increasing urgency about this conclusion for the mainstream church after the middle of the second century because the Fourth Gospel seems to have been a favorite amongst the Gnostics, and therefore, apostolic authorship was deemed important if this Gospel was to be rescued from the heterodox. Irenaeus, the great heresiarch, in particular around A.D. 180 stressed that this Gospel was written in Ephesus by one of the Twelve--- John. It is therefore telling that this seems not to have been the conclusion of perhaps our very earliest witness—Papias of Hierapolis who was surely in a location and in a position to know something about Christianity in the provenance of Asia at the beginning of the second century A.D. Papias ascribes this Gospel to one elder John, whom he distinguishes presumably from another John and it is only the former that he claims to have had personal contact with. Eusebius in referring to the Preface to Papias’ five volume work stresses that Papias only had contact with an elder John and one Aristion, not with John of Zebedee (Hist. Eccl. 3.39-3-7) who is distinguished by Eusebius himself from the John in question. It is notable as well that Eusebius reminds us that Papias reflects the same chiliastic eschatology as is found in the book of Revelation, something which Eusebius looks askance at. Eusebius is clear that Papias only knew the ‘elders’ who had had contact with the ‘holy apostles’ not the ‘holy apostles’ themselves. Papias had heard personally what Aristion and the elder John were saying, but had only heard about what the earlier apostles had said.

As most scholars have now concluded, Papias was an adult during the reign of Trajan and perhaps also Hadrian and his work that Eusebius cites should probably be dated to about A.D. 100 (see the ABD article on Papias), which is to say only shortly after the Fourth Gospel is traditionally dated. All of this is interesting in several respects. In the first place Papias does not attempt to claim too much, even though he has great interest in what all the apostles and the Twelve have said. His claim is a limited one of having heard those who had been in contact with such eyewitnesses. In the second place, he is writing at a time and in a place where he ought to have known who it was that was responsible for putting together the Fourth Gospel, and equally clearly he reflects the influence of the millennial theology we find only clearly in the Book of Revelation in the NT and not for example in the Fourth Gospel. This suggests that the John he knew and had talked with was John of Patmos, and this was the same John who had something to do with the production of the Fourth Gospel. It is significant that Hengel after a detailed discussion in his *The Johannine Question* concludes that this Gospel must be associated with the elder John who was not the same as John son of Zebedee. More on this in due course. As I have stressed, while Papias' testimony is significant and early we must also give due weight to the internal evidence in the Fourth Gospel itself, to which we will turn shortly. One more thing. Papias Fragment 10.17 has now been subjected to detailed analysis by M. Oberweis (NovT 38 1996), and Oberweis, rightly in my judgment draws the conclusion that Papias claimed that John son of Zebedee died early as a martyr like his brother (Acts 12.2). This counts against both the theory that John of Patmos was John of Zebedee and the theory that the latter wrote the Fourth Gospel. But I defer to my friend and colleague Richard Bauckham whose new book is a wealth of information about Papias and his conclusion is right--- we should take very seriously what Papias says. He knew what he was talking about in regard to both the earliest and latest of the Gospels.

## II. The growing recognition of the Judean provenance and character of this Gospel

Andrew Lincoln in his new commentary on the Gospel of John has concluded that the Beloved Disciple was a real person and "a minor follower of Jesus during his Jerusalem ministry" (p. 22). While Lincoln sees the BD traditions as added to the Gospel as small snippets of historical tradition added to a larger core that did not come from this person, he draws this conclusion about the Beloved Disciple's provenance for a very good reason—he does not show up at all in this Gospel in the telling of the Galilean ministry stories, and on the other hand he seems to be involved with and know personally about Jesus' ministry in and around Jerusalem.

One of the things which is probably fatal to the theory that John son of Zebedee is the Beloved Disciple and also the author of this entire document is that none, and I do mean none, of the special Zebedee stories are included in the Fourth Gospel (e.g. the calling of the Zebedees by Jesus, their presence with Jesus in the house where Jesus raised Jairus' daughter, the story of the Transfiguration, and also of the special request for special seats in Jesus' kingdom when it comes, and we could go on). In view of the fact that this Gospel places some stress on the role of eyewitness testimony (see especially Jn. 19-21) it is passing strange that these stories would be omitted if this Gospel was by John of Zebedee, or even if he was its primary source. It is equally strange that the Zebedees are so briefly mentioned in this Gospel as such (see Jn. 21.2) and John is never equated with the Beloved Disciple even in the appendix in John 21 (cf. vs. 2 and 7-- the Beloved Disciple could certainly be one of the two unnamed disciples mentioned in vs. 2).

Also telling is the fact that this Gospel includes none or almost none of the special Galilean miracle stories found in the Synoptics with the exception of the feeding of the 5,000/walking on water tandem. The author of this document rather includes stories like the meeting with Nicodemus, the encounter with the Samaritan woman, the healing of the blind man, the healing of the cripple by the pool, and the raising of Lazarus and what all these events have in common is that none of them transpired in Galilee. When we couple this with the fact that our author seems to have some detailed knowledge about the topography in and around Jerusalem and the historical particulars about the last week or so of Jesus' life (e.g. compare the story of the anointing of Jesus by

Mary of Bethany in John to the more generic Markan account), it is not a surprise that Lincoln and others reflect a growing trend recognizing the Judean provenance of this Gospel. Recognition of this provenance clears up various difficulties not the least of which is the lack of Galilean stories in general in this Gospel and more particularly the lack of exorcism tales, none of which, according to the Synoptics, are said to have occurred in Jerusalem or Judea. Furthermore, there is absolutely no emphasis or real interest in this Gospel in the Twelve as Twelve or as Galileans. If the author is a Judean follower of Jesus and is not one of the Twelve, and in turn is sticking to the things he knows personally or has heard directly from eyewitnesses this is understandable. This brings us to the question of whom this Beloved Disciple might have been.

### III. The "one whom Jesus loved"--- the first mention--- Jn 11 or Jn 13?

It has been common in Johannine commentaries to suggest that the Beloved Disciple as a figure in the narrative does not show up under that title before John 13. While this case has been argued thoroughly, it overlooks something very important. This Gospel was written in an oral culture for use with non-Christians as a sort of teaching tool to lead them to faith. It was not intended to be handed out as a tract to the non-believer but nevertheless its stories were meant to be used orally for evangelism. In an oral document of this sort, the ordering of things is especially important. Figures once introduced into the narrative by name and title or name and identifying phrase may thereafter be only identified by one or the other since economy of words is at a premium when one is writing a document of this size on a piece of papyrus (Jn. 20.30-31). This brings us to John 11.3 and the phrase *hon phileis*. It is perfectly clear from a comparison of 11. 1 and 3 that the sick person in question first called Lazarus of Bethany and then called 'the one whom you love' is the same person as in the context the mention of sickness in each verse makes this identification certain. This is the first time in this entire Gospel that any particular person is said to have been loved by Jesus. Indeed one could argue that this is the only named person in the whole Gospel about whom this is specifically said directly. This brings us to Jn. 13.23.

At John 13.23 we have the by now very familiar reference to a disciple whom Jesus loved (*hon agapa* this time) as reclining on the bosom of Jesus, by which is meant he is reclining on the same couch as Jesus. The disciple is not named here, and notice that nowhere in John 13 is it said that this meal transpired in Jerusalem. It could just as well have transpired in the nearby town of Bethany and this need not even be an account of the Passover meal. Jn. 13.1 in fact says it was a meal that transpired before the Passover meal. This brings us to a crucial juncture in this discussion. In Jn. 11 there was a reference to a beloved disciple named Lazarus. In Jn. 12 there was a mention of a meal at the house of Lazarus. If someone was hearing these tales in this order without access to the Synoptic Gospels it would be natural to conclude that the person reclining with Jesus in Jn. 13 was Lazarus. There is another good reason to do so as well. It was the custom in this sort of dining that the host would recline with or next to the chief guest. The story as we have it told in Jn. 13 likely implies that the Beloved Disciple is the host then. But this in turn means he must have a house in the vicinity of Jerusalem. This in turn probably eliminates all the Galilean disciples.

This identification of BD= Lazarus in fact not only clears up some conundrums about this story, it also neatly clears up a series of other conundrums in the Johannine Passion narrative as well. For example: 1) it was always problematic that the BD had ready access to the High Priest's house. Who could he have been to have such access? Surely not a Galilean fisherman. Jn. 11.36-47 suggests that some of the Jewish officials who reported to the high priest had known Lazarus, and had attended his mourning period in Bethany. This in turn means that Lazarus likely had some relationship with them. He could have had access to Caiphas' house, being a high status person known to Caiphas' entourage. ; 2) If Lazarus of Bethany is the Beloved Disciple this too explains the omission of the Garden of Gethsemane prayer story in this Gospel. Peter, James and John were present on that occasion, but the Beloved Disciple was not; 3) It also explains Jn. 19.27. If the Beloved Disciple took Jesus'

mother ‘unto his own’ home (it is implied) this surely suggests some locale much nearer than Galilee, for the Beloved Disciple will show up in Jerusalem in John 20 immediately there after, and of course Mary is still there, according to Acts 1.14 well after the crucifixion and resurrection of her son. 4) How is it that the Beloved Disciple gets to the tomb of Jesus in Jn. 20 before Peter? Perhaps because he knows the locale, indeed knows Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, being one who lived near and spent much time in Jerusalem. One more thing about John 20.2 which Tom Thatcher kindly reminded me of—here the designation of our man is a double one—he is called both ‘the other disciple’ and also the one ‘whom Jesus loved only this time it is *phileō* for the verb. Why has our author varied the title at this juncture, if in fact it was a pre-existing title for someone outside the narrative? We would have expected it to be in a fixed form if this were some kind of pre-existing title. Notice now the chain of things—Lazarus is identified in Jn. 11 as the one whom Jesus loves, and here ‘the other disciple’ (see Jn. 20.1-2) is identified as the one whom Jesus loves, which then allows him to be called ‘the other disciple’ in the rest of this segment of the story, but at 21.2 we return once more to his main designation—the one whom Jesus loved=Lazarus. All of this makes good sense if Jn, 11-21 is read or heard in the sequence we now find it. 5) of course the old problem of the fact that the Synoptics say all the Twelve deserted Jesus once he was taken away for execution, even Peter, and record only women being at the cross, is not contradicted by the account in Jn. 19 if in fact the Beloved Disciple, while clearly enough from Jn. 19.26 a man (-- called Mary’s ‘son’, and so not Mary Magdalene!) is Lazarus rather than one of the Twelve. 6) There is the further point that if indeed the Beloved Disciple took Mary into his own home, then we know where the BD got the story of the wedding feast at Cana—he got it from Mary herself. I could continue mounting up small particulars of the text which are best explained by the theory of Lazarus being the BD but this must suffice. I want to deal with some larger issues in regard to this Gospel that are explained by this theory, in particular its appendix in Jn. 21 But one more conjecture is in order here.

Scholars of course have often noted how the account of the anointing of Jesus in Bethany as recorded in Mk. 14.3-11 differs from the account in Jn. 12.1-11, while still likely being the same story or tradition. Perhaps the most salient difference is that Mark tells us that the event happens in the home of Simon the Leper in Bethany, while Jn. 12 indicates it happens in the house of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus in Bethany. Suppose for a moment however that Simon the Leper was in fact the father of these three siblings. Suppose that Lazarus himself, like his father, had also contracted the dread disease and succumbed to it (and by the way we now know for sure that the deadly form of Hanson’s disease did exist in the first century A.D.). Now this might well explain why it is that none of these three siblings seem to be married. Few have remarked about the oddness of this trio of adults not having families of their own, but rather still living together, but it is not at all odd if the family was plagued by a dread disease that made them unclean on an ongoing or regular basis. It also explains why these folks never travel with Jesus’ other disciples and they never get near this family until that fateful day recorded in Jn. 11 when Jesus raised and healed Lazarus. Jesus of course was not put off by the disease and so had visited the home previously alone (Lk. 10.38-42). But other early Jews would certainly not have engaged in betrothal contracts with this family if it was known to be a carrier of leprosy.

#### IV How seeing that eyewitness as Lazarus himself explains both the ending of the Gospel and its character

Most scholars are in agreement that John 21 makes clear that while the Beloved Disciple is said to have written down some Gospel traditions, he is no longer alive when at least the end of this chapter was written. The “we know his testimony is true” is a dead give away that someone or someones other than the Beloved Disciple put this Gospel into its final form and added this appendix, or at a minimum the story about the demise of the Beloved Disciple and the conclusion of the appendix. This line of reasoning I find compelling. And it also explains something else. We may envision that whoever put the memoirs of the Beloved Disciple together is probably the one who insisted on calling him that. In other words, the Beloved Disciple is called such by his

community perhaps and by his final editor certainly, and this is not a self designation, indeed was unlikely to be a self-designation in a religious subculture where humility and following the self-sacrificial, self-effacing example of Jesus was being inculcated. This then explains one of the salient differences between 2-3 John and the Gospel of John. The author of those little letters calls himself either the 'elder' or 'the old man' depending on how you want to render presbyteros. He nowhere calls himself the Beloved Disciple, not even in the sermon we call 1 John where he claims to have personally seen and touched the Word of Life, which in my view means he saw and touched Jesus. We must conjure then with at least two persons responsible for the final form of the Fourth Gospel while only one is necessary to explain the epiphenomena of the Johannine Epistles. This brings us to the story itself in John 21.20-24.

Why is the final editor of this material in such angst about denying that Jesus predicted that the Beloved Disciple would live until Jesus returned? Is it because there had been a tradition in the BD's church that he would, and if so, what generated such a tradition? Not, apparently the BD himself. But now he has passed away and this has caused anxiety among the faithful about what was the case with the BD and what Jesus had actually said about his future in A.D. 30. I would suggest that no solution better explains all the interesting factors in play here than the suggestion that the Beloved Disciple was someone that Jesus had raised from the dead, and so quite naturally there arose a belief that surely he would not die again, before Jesus returned. Such a line of thought makes perfectly good sense if the Beloved Disciple had already died once and the second coming was still something eagerly anticipated when he died. Thus I submit that the theory that Lazarus was the Beloved Disciple and the author of most of the traditions in this Gospel is a theory which best clears up the conundrum of the end of the Appendix written after his death.

And finally there is one more thing to say. It is of course true that the Fourth Gospel takes its own approach to presenting Jesus and the Gospel tradition. I am still unconvinced by the attempts of Lincoln and others to suggest that the author drew on earlier Gospels, particularly Mark. I think he may have known of such Gospels, may even have read Mark, but is certainly not depend on the Synoptic material for his own Gospel. Rather he takes his own line of approach and has an abundance of information which he is unable to include in his Gospel, including much non-Synoptic material (see John 20.30 and 21.25) because of the constraints of writing all this down on one papyrus. He did not need to boil up his Gospel based on fragments and snippets from the Synoptics. On the contrary, he had to be constantly condensing his material, as is so often the case with an eyewitness account that is rich in detail and substance. But it is not enough to say that the author was an eyewitness to explain its independence and differences from the earlier Synoptic Gospels. There are other factors as well.

As I pointed out over a decade ago, this Gospel is written in a way that reflects an attempt to present the Jesus tradition in the light of the Jewish sapiential material (see my *John's Wisdom* ). Jesus is presented as God's Wisdom come in the flesh in this Gospel, serving up discourses like those of Wisdom in earlier Jewish Wisdom literature, rather than offering aphorisms and parables as in the Synoptics. I have suggested that this reflected Jesus' in house *modus operandi* for his private teaching with his own inner circle of disciples. We need not choose between the public form of wisdom discourse found in the Synoptics (i.e. parables and aphorisms) and the private form of discourse (see e.g. Jn. 14-17) in John when trying to decide which went back to the historical Jesus--- both did, but they had different *Sitz im Lebens* and different functions. But I have concluded even this line of thinking is insufficient to explain the differences from the Synoptics we find in the Fourth Gospel. There is one more factor in play.

Our author, the Beloved Disciple, had been raised not merely from death's door, but from being well and truly dead--- by Jesus! This was bound to change his worldview, and did so. It became quite impossible for our author to draw up a veiled messiah portrait of Jesus like we find in Mark. No, our author wanted and needed to shout

from the mountain tops that Jesus was the resurrection, not merely that he performed resurrections, that he was what E. Kasemann once said about the presentation of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel—he was a God bestriding the stage of history. Just so, and our author pulls no punches in making that clear in various ways in this Gospel, especially by demonstrating that everything previously said to come only from God, or the mind and plan of God known as God’s Wisdom is now said of and said to come from Jesus. He is the incarnation of the great I Am.

The Beloved Disciple would not have been best pleased with modern minimalist portraits of the historical Jesus. He had had a personal and profound encounter of the first order with both the historical Jesus and the risen Jesus and knew that they were one and the same. This was bound to change his world view. It is no accident that the book of Signs in the Fourth Gospel climaxes with the story of Lazarus’s own transformation, just as the Book of Glory climaxes with the transformation of Jesus himself. Lazarus had become what he admired, had been made, to a lesser degree, like Jesus. And he would have nothing to do with mincing words about his risen savior and Lord. Rather he would walk through the door of bold proclamation, even to the point perhaps of adding the Logos hymn at the beginning of this Gospel. This was the Jesus he had known and touched and supped with before and after Easter, and he could proclaim no lesser Jesus.

This then leads us to the last bit of the puzzle that can now be solved. How did this Gospel come to be named according to John? My answer is a simple one—it is because John of Patmos was the final editor of this Gospel after the death of Lazarus. Once Domitian died, John returned to Ephesus and lived out his days. One of the things he did was edit and promulgate the Fourth Gospel on behalf of the Beloved Disciple. Somewhere very near the end of John’s own life, Papias had contact with this elderly John. It is not surprising, since this contact seems to be brief, that Papias learned correctly that this John was not the Zebedee John and that this elderly John had something to do with the production of the Fourth Gospel. This I think neatly explains all of the various factors involved in our conundrum. It may even have been Papias who was responsible for the wider circulation of this Gospel with a tag ‘according to John’. It is not surprising that Irenaeus, swatting buzzing Gnostics like flies, would later conclude that the Fourth Gospel must be by an apostle or one of the Twelve.

If I am right about all this it means that the historical figure of Lazarus is more important than we have previously imagined, both due to his role in founding churches in and round Ephesus and of course his role in the life of Jesus and Jesus’ mother. Jesus must have trusted him implicitly to hand over his mother to him when he died. Lazarus was far more than one more recipient of a miraculous healing by Jesus. He was “the one whom Jesus loved” as the very first reference to him in John 11 says. We have yet to take the measure of the man. Hopefully now, we can begin to do so.

**59 comments:**

[Nance](#) said...

While on the whole that lecture was very interesting to say the least and it seems to me to have several very convincing points to make, I still have two questions:  
1)if the gospel editor is meaning to create a label, if you will, for the BD that may be used throughout and associated with him, why the switch early on between "hon phileis" for Lazarus and "hon agapa" for the more ambiguous BD later?  
2)if Lazarus were indeed Simon the Leper's son and a leper himself, do you think he would still have access to the house of Caiphas and have "high status" amongst the Pharisees?  
again, I really enjoyed the post.

[Claytonius](#) said...

Fascinating, and possibly convincing. I'd like to hear more reactions.

My only question, which was posted above is how it would be possible for a leper to have access to the high priest's house?

[Todd](#) said...

Ben, this very theory has been bouncing around in my brain for some time now. I had never encountered anyone who put this theory forward, though.

I had made the connection with the naming of Lazarus as the one "whom Jesus loved" and the later beloved disciple. I had not seen, though, the clarifying of later elements. Rather, I had noticed that the possibility of Lazarus being the BD was not out of the question.

Thanks for bringing this to light. I, for one, would be interested in seeing the debates to come.

[Ben Witherington](#) said...

Hi friends: The Greek terms phileo and agapeo are used rather interchangeably in the Fourth Gospel, and in the LXX as well. One could argue as well that the sisters of Lazarus would quite naturally speak of Jesus' brotherly love for Lazarus, whilst the Johannine community might use the more exalted term. Access to Caiphas' house would certainly be granted to a person who had been healed, and indeed certified by the priest, which is what one was supposed to do once healing happened. Then one was off the outcast list. One must assume there was some days or weeks between when Lazarus was raised and when he went to Caiphas' house on Maundy Thursday, time enough to have been declared clean.

Ben

[metapundit.net](#) said...

Have you ever read Vernard Eller's "The Beloved Disciple"? Eller is a minor (though favorite of mine) Church of the Brethren theologian who taught at the University of La Verne. His book posits Lazarus as the beloved Disciple as well and identifies him as the head of a Jerusalem based group of disciples with Mary Magdalene/Lazarus Sister Mary (IIRC).

It's been a while since I read it but it was an interesting take. Herb Drake at House Church Central has an online text of the book (<http://www.hccentral.com/eller8/>) as part of his Eller Collection project...

[Ben Witherington](#) said...

Nope, don't know Eller, but its good to know I am not the only one who thought this.... :)

[Jeremy Pierce](#) said...

*One of the things which is probably fatal to the theory that John son of Zebedee is the Beloved Disciple and also the author of this entire document is that none, and I do mean none, of the special Zebedee stories are included in the Fourth Gospel*

But there's a longstanding response to this. If John was deliberately trying not to draw attention to himself by not naming himself, as most proponents of the traditional view hold, why would we expect references to the Zebedees by name? There surely is reference to them in several places when the gospel indicates that other disciples were there. Yet these incidents sound eyewitness enough that you'd think John would at some point be mentioned if there hadn't been a deliberate reason not to mention him, given both his closeness to Peter and his tremendous influence beyond virtually any other of the twelve but Peter. The only plausible explanation I have for that fact is that John was the author and had trouble mentioning himself by name due to genuine humility and modesty.

I don't think much depends on how much of the accounts from the Synoptics appear in John. If the author was deliberately trying to supplement them with some emphases not found as strongly in them, then you'd expect inclusion of accounts not in the synoptics, with the inclusion of synoptic accounts only insofar as they furthered the particular purposes that the fourth gospel was emphasizing as a supplement to what was already in the other three.

If the gospel is accurate, than Jesus spent a lot more time in Judea than the synoptics alone would indicate. But of

course you would expect this given the four times a year traveling for the feasts that was traditional, and this gospel confirms Jesus didn't break with that tradition during his three-year ministry. A few weeks four times a year and then a significant amount of time after the resurrection in the fledgling church would easily have given John some pretty serious understanding of the geography of the general Jerusalem area.

[Rodney Reeves](#) said...

Ben,

I agree. I think John intended for his readers to see the beloved disciple as Lazarus (as you know, a few scholars have made the same correlation, beginning with J. Kreyenbuehl, ca. 1900). I love the imagery of Lazarus rummaging through the grave clothes at the empty tomb, being the first to believe Jesus is alive (the seventh sign!). It also makes sense of why he was the only male disciple (thank God for the women) to follow Jesus all the way to the cross. He's not afraid to die.

As you know, I try to find some intriguing implications for our discipleship in the example of "the one whom Jesus loves."

[samlcarr](#) said...

Ben, that's a very interesting reading and one that ties up a lot of loose ends. I ran into the idea of the BD being Lazarus once before by Floyd Filson (not sure of the exact ref but can look it up if you wish).

[the reverend mommy](#) said...

The Lazarus story is indeed the pivot for the book -- it really changes nothing but perspective for Lazarus to be the beloved disciple -- a new spin around the pivot.

[Ben Witherington](#) said...

Hi Jeremy:

Your argument is an argument from silence on the basis of humility.  
This won't do.

The references to the Beloved Disciple do not begin before John 13 and nowhere do we have the equation BD=Zebedee. In fact we have only one reference to them in the whole book--- in the appendix, John 21.

The way eyewitness testimony worked in early Judaism is that you testified to the important things you saw, especially the one's that changed your life.

No account of the call? No account of the first sighting of a raising of the dead at Jairus' house in Galilee? In fact no accounting of any of the Galilean miracles recorded in the Synoptics except the feeding and walking on water tandem? This just won't do for a Galilean eyewitness. It

makes no sense in its original Jewish context.

Blessings,

Ben W.

[Edward T. Babinski](#) said...

What if the "Lazarus" story is a late legend?

For instance, Luke says Jesus mentioned a "Lazarus and Dives" in a parable about the afterlife, and Dives who is stuck in a hot afterlife spot pleads for Laz to be raised from the dead to warn his brothers, and the lesson there is that "even if one is raised from the dead, yet they will not believe." So Laz doesn't get resurrected in the parable in Luke, and doesn't have "sisters" either.

In fact only in the fourth Gospel is Lazarus a human being instead of a figure in a parable, and only in the fourth Gospel is the resurrection of Lazarus mentioned, and also made into the "reason" why Jesus gets crucified. (In the synoptics, the "reason" is the "cleansing of the Temple," but the fourth Gospeler moves that incident to the very beginning instead of at the end of Jesus's ministry to make way for the new miracle/sign of the raising of Lazarus, and to add another "I am" saying to go along with the new "sign," i.e., having Jesus say, "I am the resurrection and the life.")

I should add that just prior to the "raising of Lazarus tale," the fourth Gospeler tells another tale that involves information from earlier Gospels. I'm speaking about the Johnine story about Lazarus's alleged sisters, "Mary and Martha," and how "Mary sat at Jesus's feet," "anointed them" with perfume, and "wiped them with her hair" in the town of "Bethany." (John 12)

The action, the names of the women and the name of the town and the name of "Lazarus" appear in earlier Gospels but in separate stories that each contain incomplete information. The fourth Gospel seems to have pulled bits and pieces of separate stories together to fashion one in which nothing is left unnamed and in which people are related to one another.

Mark 14:3--An unnamed woman anointed Jesus's head in Bethany at the house of Simon the Leper.

Luke 7:37-38--An unnamed sinner anointed Jesus's feet and wiped them with her hair in Nain at the house of a Pharisee.

Luke 10:38-39--Mary, the sister of Martha, listened at Jesus's feet in an unnamed town at her house, and no anointing is mentioned at all.

By the time the Gospel of John was composed, similar persons and events from the earlier Gospels may have become amalgamated in people's minds. In John 12:3, Mary, the woman who simply "listened" at Jesus's feet is now also "anointing them and wiping them with her hair" like the unnamed sinner in Nain at the house of a Pharisee. And the unnamed town where "Mary and her



sister Martha" lived is now named as the town where the unnamed woman who anointed Jesus's "head" lived, i.e., "Bethany." And Mary used expensive "spikenard ointment" on them, as the lady in Mark (and possibly Luke) did. Only this time it is not at Simon the Leper's house, nor at the house of a Pharisee, but at "Mary's house."

What does the above discussion have to do with the "resurrection of Lazarus" story? Well, it shows how stories in the Gospel of John might be the result of amalgamating things from earlier Gospels in order to make it appear like everything is fully named and connected together. Lastly, only the Gospel of John depicts Lazarus as a real person. Luke mentions a real Mary and Martha, but says nothing about them having a brother, nor in which town they lived. So the author(s) of the Gospel of John appear to have amalgamated Mary and Martha, the town of Bethany, and the "Lazarus" from a parable in the Gospel of Luke.

Neither is this Lazarus a poor "beggar," since he's rich enough to have his own tomb and live in a house with his "sisters.") He is "raised from the dead"--a parable come true.

Lastly, one should also compare the healing/raising of the synagogue ruler's daughter in Mark 5 with the raising of Lazarus in the last written Gospel. In Mark 5, Jesus does the healing/raising in the privacy of the home with only a few people around, and tells them to tell no one (viz., the synagogue ruler's daughter was "at the point of death...He put them all out, he took the child's father and mother and the disciples who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, 'Little girl, I say to you, get up!'...the girl stood up and walked around...He gave strict orders not to let anyone know about this").

Jesus in the fourth Gospel is not secretive, doesn't warn people not to speak about his miracles, and each time announces after a major sign/miracles that "I am...this" or "I am that," and in the case of the raising of Lazarus announces, "I am the resurrection and the life."

These are some of the questions the fourth Gospel raises (not to mention the fact that the Jews spoke Aramaic in Jesus's day, and if a "Nicodemus" came to Jesus "at night" to discuss being "born again" then the discussion would have been in Aramaic in which case there would have been no confusion in Nicodemus's mind about having to "enter my mother's womb a second time" [sic] since that confusion only would arise if Greek was being spoken, not Aramaic, because in Greek there is confusion about the meaning of a single word that can mean either "born from above" or "born again," while in Aramaic there is no confusion and it can only mean "born from above." So this raises questions concerning the reality of the Nicodemus discourse as well in John 3.

Other questions include the fourth Gospel author's view that Jesus is the "lamb of God," something that the author has even John the Baptist say, while the synoptics know of no such saying of John the Baptist. And the author of John adds his "Lamb of God" teachings in the

speech of Nicodemus and even has Jesus die while the lambs are being killed prior to Passover, which disagrees with the time of Jesus's death according to the synoptics. So the author of John was writing his own theological interpretation of Jesus, as is also plainly apparent from the prologue.

Edward T. Babinski

[Ben Witherington](#) said...

Hi Edward:

There are so many problems with this whole approach to the matter that there is not space enough to deal with them here: 1) this is a Gospel about which is it claimed eyewitness testimony is its basis. This is claimed not only in Jn. 21 but also in Jn. 19. Furthermore, we are told in Jn. 21 that the Beloved Disciple wrote his traditions down. This material cannot be ignored in analyzing where the story of Lazarus may have come from.

2) Richard Bauckham, in his new book *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* has thoroughly discredited the form critical assumptions of the old German approach to these traditions. They were not handed down like legends, and as Bauckham shows in some detail there was not time for them to become legends-- all four Gospels, including John the latest of them which shows up in the 90s, were written when there were still eyewitnesses like the Beloved Disciple to provide check and balance in the way the Gospels were written. In short, there wasn't a lengthy traditioning process, and what materials were handed down were handed down like Jews handled such materials, not like Bultmann thought (who drew analogies with Balkan folklore-- a very inapt comparison indeed!)

3) Eliezer (which we render as Lazarus) is a very common name, after a Maccabean war hero. There is no reason at all to connect the story in John 11 with the parable in Luke-- none whatsoever. Indeed the name is just about as common as John in that period. And indeed these two narrative involve different kinds of material-- a parable is not an historical narrative and vice versa;

4) The anointing stories in John 12 and Mk. 12 are one and the same. This scholars are in agreement on.

5) It is entirely an argument from silence to say that "because the Lazarus story is not in the Synoptics, this makes it historically suspect. Why? Singularly attested traditions are not made suspect simply because they are singularly attested. It may well be that the placement of the story of Lazarus at the end of the book of John's signs is theological rather than chronological. In that case, no Gospel writer was under any obligation to include all accounts of one type of miracle. Each of the four Gospels have a raising story. None of them have more than about two such stories.

6) the vast majority of Johannine specialists, whether conservative, moderate, or liberal, do not think that the writer of the Fourth Gospel used any of the previous

Gospels in composing his own. In other words, while some think John may have known Mark, the Fourth Evangelist draws on no Synoptic accounts, but rather gives his own independent witness to the events.

7) Its time to leave behind the old form critical assumptions which we still find in some older scholars like Crossan or Borg. Those assumptions has been rather thoroughly discredited even before the 21rst century began. See my What Have They Done with Jesus?

Cordially,

BW3

[yuckabuck](#) said...

Edward,  
See also "A Marginal Jew" volume 2 by John Meier.

Using some of the "old German critical assumptions" (that are SO twentieth century) :-) Meier shows that it would be far more likely that the name Lazarus would have been attached to the parable because of the miracle story, rather than the reverse. Many form critics usually see the names of people found in miracle stories as belonging to the "earliest traditions," even when the critics don't think the actual miracles actually happened. Names given within parables, however, are seen as suspect and later additions.

Ben,  
On the use of "agape" vs. "phileo" for the BD- I didn't think it was too big of an issue. The gospel ends with Peter's restoration where both words are used in Jesus' threefold question to Peter, "Do you love me?" Why couldn't both words be used in relation to one person (BD/Lazarus)? Though, if your theory becomes widely accepted, does that mean I will have to hear as many sermons on the difference between agape and phileo regarding Lazarus as I already do regarding Peter in John 21?

[E. I. Sanchez](#) said...

Ben,

This has been fascinating reading. I am going to share it with others.

Thanks for sharing.

Edgar,

[mason booth](#) said...

Dr. Witherington,

as a pastor i see a wealth of preaching and teaching material on Lazarus and especially your understanding of Johannine authorship. in your book Wisdom of John you had several section set aside for "Bridging the Horizon" that helped pastors break things down in a way that

would help in their preaching and teaching of the material (great idea btw). could you please share some ways of how this idea of Lazarus being the BD could be taught and preached in such a way as not to get you run out of most churches, but at the same time include several applicable points for our own growth and maturity?

blessings.....

"There is one thing stronger than all of the armies of the world and that is an idea whose time has come..." Victor Hugo

[Deep Furrows](#) said...

Nicely done. I was also concerned about Nance's #2, but think that it's also possible that Simon the Leper's family may have had unusual status in the community.

Fred

[Percival](#) said...

Fascinating. This approach really seems to answer a lot of questions I have had for a while.  
In addition, I see no reason to assert that Eleazar, Mariam, and Marta were lepers. If Simon the Leper was their father, that would be reason enough in the eyes of the community for them to not be marriagable while still being from a prominent family. Near-Eastern shame cultures definitely work that way. I have had Arabs tell me how honorable a family was but how the daughters of the family were not considered marriagable because of some problem in the ancestry. Thus, Eleazar would have access to the High Priests house and have prominent guests. And, if this gospel includes the personal experiences and witness of Eleazar, would not his cleansing from leprosy show up as well in the gospel?  
As for "hon phileis" or "hon agapa", neither term was actually used by Jesus, after all, he was not speaking Greek.

[Percival](#) said...

Sorry, correction. "considered UNmarriagable."

[Percival](#) said...

Aww shucks. You know what I mean.

[Nathan Brasfield](#) said...

This post has been removed by a blog administrator.

[Nathan Brasfield](#) said...

I had heard that you presented a lecture on this issue at SBL and I was sad I missed it so I was really glad to see that you posted it. Now I have a hard time avoiding bringing up Lazarus when people say "John, the Beloved

Disciple..so and so" What you wrote is a very thorough explanation.

[Ben Witherington](#) said...

Hi Mason:

The approach I would use is simple. I would explain to them that the labels on the Gospels are not part of the inspired text of this book of the Bible. They are identity markers added later. Thus we need to base our views on this matter primarily on the inspired text itself from John 1 to John 21. This being the case, then the internal evidence strongly favors the view that a Judean disciple is responsible for this Gospel. This is why we have those special Judean stories about the paralytic and the man born blind, and Lazarus. Lastly I would say that the one Judean disciple who is called by name "the one whom Jesus loved" is Lazarus in John 11.

It is of course true that Jesus spoke in Aramaic, and either *phileo* or *agapeo* could represent a good translation of what he meant.

Blessings,

Ben

[John](#) said...

Ben --

A few questions that I haven't seen addressed yet (or perhaps I missed them, and if I did I apologize):

(1) On your theory, John didn't write the Gospel (though he edited it); the Beloved Disciple did.

But if that's true, that means that all the stylistic features which this Gospel shares with John's epistles and with Revelation must be due to John's editing of this manuscript. That is, they aren't part of the original manuscript by the BD. Doesn't that seem like a huge stretch?

And if Warren Gage at Knox Theological Seminary is correct when he argues (in the John-Revelation project, which is online) that John and Revelation are a huge chiasm, then it seems even less likely that John simply edited the Gospel. It seems more likely that he wrote it and wrote Revelation as a chiastic "mirror" of it. Or at least, it seems to me that it would be easier to write two documents yourself and make them chiastic than to try to edit someone else's manuscript to make it fit chiastically with one you have written or are planning to write.

(2) You say that John 13 doesn't have to be the Last Supper in the Upper Room in Jerusalem.

But the events in John 13:1ff. lead to Jesus handing the bread to Judas (which, of course, is when we hear about the beloved disciple). Judas then leaves and Jesus immediately starts a speech (v. 31: "When he had gone

out" tells us that this speech didn't happen some days later; it's part of the same scene).

That speech continues with no indication of a change in time or place, straight through to 18:1, when Jesus goes out to the garden. "When Jesus had spoken these words" appears to refer to the whole speech/dialogue from 13:31 on, and indicates that what's happening now in chapter 18 follows immediately on the heels of that speech.

So what's the argument for saying that John 13:1ff. doesn't have to be the Last Supper? It certainly appears to me to be.

(3) You mention "leprosy" and suggest that Hanson's disease did exist in Judea at the time of Jesus. I'd be interested in hearing how we know that.

But at the same time, even if it did exist, wouldn't it be best to take the "leprosy" talked about in the New Testament as being the same as the "leprosy" talked about in the Old Testament?

After all, the stories about the cleansing of a leper are stories steeped in that Old Covenant background where lepers are excluded from the synagogue, etc.

But that leprosy which we read about in Leviticus ISN'T Hanson's disease. It's something that houses and clothes can get, for one thing. For another, if a person was white from head to toe with "leprosy" in Leviticus, he's clean and allowed back into the presence of God. He isn't a health risk. That wouldn't be true of Hanson's disease, would it?

Just some thoughts. Thanks for your willingness to interact!

[Layman](#) said...

Fantastic stuff, Professor. Thanks for blogging on it and addressing so many questions.

John raises a question in my mind, however. He seems to think that you are saying that John 13 is not the Last Supper. Perhaps I misunderstood, but I thought you were suggesting that the Last Supper occurred in Bethany. Can you clarify that for me? Bethany is only a couple of miles from Jerusalem. But if John 13 is the Last Supper in the home of Lazarus, and if you equate the home of Simon the Leper with that of Lazarus, then do we have Jesus sending his disciples out to find a "certain man" to get a place for the Last Supper which turns out to be the home he is in?

And if you are saying the supper in John 13 is not the Last Supper, what about all the similarities with the Last Supper account in the Synoptics?

[Ben Witherington](#) said...

Hi John:

Some good questions, which are answered at length in my commentaries on the Fourth Gospel, the Johannine Epistles, and on Revelation. If you want more you'll need to read them.

First all, there is no way that the Fourth Gospel and the book of Revelation are a giant chiasm. The works are not in any way mirror images of each other, for their themes are very different-- no seals, trumpets or bowl plagues here in the Fourth Gospel. Indeed these two books often use the very same Greek words to mean entirely different things. For example, the term *ethnos* refers always to Jews in the 4th Gospel but always to the Gentile nations in Revelation and so on.

Secondly, I do not see John of Patmos being more than a collector and editor of the Beloved Disciples' materials. He gathered the materials already written down by the Beloved Disciple. he edited them, perhaps adding the prologue and some of the material in John 21-- that's it. And the vast majority of scholars recognize how very different the style is of Revelation and the Fourth Gospel, which contrasts with the similarities between the Johannine epistles and the Fourth Gospel.

So those theories from our brother at John Knox just won't wash. In fact there are no significant commentaries that even mentions such ideas-- a very minority, and I might add odd, opinion. Most scholars are rightly very leery of those who claim to have found chiasms even within a single work, and never between two separate works that are so very different in genre and style and themes etc.

Blessings,  
Ben

[John](#) said...

Thanks for the response, Ben.

(1) In case you haven't seen it, Knox Seminary's John-Revelation project is [here](#). One essay, showing some correspondences between John's Gospel and Revelation is [here](#). The chiasm is [here](#).

I haven't worked through all of this, and some of it looks iffy to me, but there are some interesting connections that I'd like to look into further, in light also of comments like [these](#) and [these](#).

I recognize that it's a minority position, and I recognize too that many scholars are reluctant to identify something as chiasmic. But other scholars (e.g., John Breck, David Dorsey, James Jordan) aren't. The entire book of Judges is quite clearly chiasmic, and so it seems possible to me that John and Revelation could be, too. At least, I don't see any reason to rule that out in advance.

(2) You say that you think John simply edited the beginning and end of the Beloved Disciple's Gospel.

But if you grant (as you seem to) that there are stylistic similarities between this Gospel and John's letters, wouldn't that make it more likely that John wrote the

Gospel as well?

Didn't Vern Poythress do his doctoral dissertation on grammatical similarities between the Gospel, the epistles, and Revelation or am I misremembering?

In short, wouldn't these similarities make a pretty good case for applying Occam's Razor: the simplest explanation is that John wrote the whole Gospel, not that he edited it in such a way that it's similar to his epistles (and, I would say, to Revelation).

(3) You didn't interact at all with my stuff on John 13. I realize that you pointed me to your commentaries, which is fair enough, but it does seem to me that this gets to the heart of your blog post.

If John 13 is the Last Supper, then you're claiming that the Last Supper was in Bethany, not Jerusalem, which seems contrary to the Synoptic Gospels. If John 13 is NOT the Last Supper, then how do you account for the flow from John 13 to John 18, which all seems to be one consecutive uninterrupted event: a meal with a speech, followed by the trip to the garden?

Thanks again and blessings!

John  
<http://barach.us>

[thunderbeard](#) said...

john,  
i could be mistaken, but i think that ben's thesis is that the BD did also write the epistles, but i might just be imagining that. i'll have to go back and reread. if that is the case, then there's your answer.

[Worship in Action](#) said...

I am curious as to what Jn 12:10-11 might imply for your theory, particularly as regards the BD's presence in Caiaphas' courtyard during Jesus' trial.

What a previous commenter remarked concerning the BD's presence at the crucifixion might apply here as well: Lazarus no longer feared death, having had a unique and transformative encounter with the One who is the Resurrection and the Life.

But if that is not the case, this would seem to be a particularly dicey time for Lazarus to show his face--and the whole story assumes that ease of recognition and favored status with the high priest are his entree to the compound, and he clearly would have been linked with Jesus (complicating Peter's weak attempts at an alibi).

(But Lazarus' status outside the Twelve might explain why Peter is always unaccompanied in the Synoptics, but not in the 4th Gospel.)

Do you think the corollary plot against Lazarus

complicates this proposal, or is it irrelevant on yet to be mentioned grounds?

[Terry Hamblin](#) said...

Thank you, Ben, for this fascinating exposition. I was converted listening to a sermon on the raising of Lazarus and it has always seemed to me to be one of the most powerful stories in the whole of the New Testament, one that has the aroma of personal testimony about it. The traditional ascribing of the gospel, the epistles and Revelation to John bar Zebedee has always seemed to me unlikely, though it is almost heresy to say so in some circles.

I have ordered your commentaries to see if the whole thing sits happily in my mind.

[ben cassil](#) said...

I first heard this approach from Dr. Rodney Reeves. I hadn't thought much about it before, so later when I read numerous commentaries with others (J of Z) as the beloved disciple, they all seemed problematic. After reading your column about Lazarus in B.A.R., it cemented this theory to me. What confuses me is that others would be so against this idea. Should we not employ Ockhem's Razor? Lazarus is clearly the most simple answer.

Anyways, thanks for not being afraid to be innovative!

[Jim](#) said...

LazarusComeForth.com lays out the case for Lazarus using nothing but the scriptures which you/your readers may find interesting.

[Ben Witherington](#) said...

Well John, I can't find a single commentary that thinks Judges is a chiasm either, so I am afraid such chiasm's are in the eyes of the beholder.

My position is indeed that the Beloved Disciple wrote the epistles, which explains the similarities with the Gospel. You seem to have missed that point.

John 13 is a composite account just as John 14-17 is. The latter involves discourses given at several junctures during that last week, John 13 combines several meal stories. Jesus and his disciples of course had meals all through that week.

John does not recount the Lord's Supper at all, simply the earlier meal, but he does indeed add the end of the last supper meal story about Judas going out and betraying Jesus here which is necessary to the plot line continuing.

This is rather typical of the editing of the day, blending several accounts of similar content together.

What is clear is that the dating of this early in the week meal, coupled with the absence of the footwashing in the Synoptics at the last supper, and perhaps the location of this meal make it clear it is not the last supper meal, which took place within the city walls of Jerusalem.

Blessings,

Ben W.

[Roger](#) said...

I have long held that the beloved disciple was the owner of the upper room. Could be Lazarus, but since they wanted to kill him also, would Lazarus really have led Peter into Caiphass' courtyard?

[David](#) said...

Thanks for posting this. I've been reading your blogs for a few months now and always am enlightened by them. Thanks for taking the time. It's interesting and compelling reading. I hope you don't mind if i link this article on my personal Typepad blog.

David

[Ben Witherington](#) said...

Here is a little footnote to this entire discussion. I was looking again at John 20 when the Beloved Disciple visits the tomb of Jesus. A new thought struck me-- if the BD is Lazarus then the reason he believed without seeing Jesus at the tomb, but simply seeing the tomb empty with grave clothes left behind is that he himself had experienced resurrection personally. It was not the empty tomb that convinced him in itself, but the reminder of his own experience when he went there.

Ben

[Jim](#) said...

Roger asked, Could be Lazarus, but since they wanted to kill him also, would Lazarus really have led Peter into Caiphass' courtyard?

Sure! This "friend" who "Jesus loved" is the ONE person that would be the LEAST likely to fear death, for at this point for Lazarus death was -- Been there. Done that.

[Chris Whisonant](#) said...

Thank you for sharing this. I've never heard this theory and it's very plausible. There is nothing really, other than tradition, that warrants the belief that John was the author and BD. And if he were not the author, the only implication to the NT is that it's another book not written by an "Apostle" but still written by an eyewitness of the risen Lord.

I started to look through John this morning and had a few thoughts I would like to share. I saw that only David mentioned one of them in the 3rd comment above mine.

Before that, I know that it will be said that my argument is one from silence. This seems to be a standard reply here... The whole premise that Lazarus = BD is also one of silence. Jesus is said to have loved a lot of people - not just Lazarus. It may not have been the exact phrase, but we should keep in mind that the identification of *anyone* with BD is ultimately one of silence since we are never told who he is.

First of all, in the Synoptics, Jesus asked Peter and John to meet an anonymous man with a jar of water who would take him to his master - the home of the person to prepare the Passover. Why not just tell them to go to Lazarus' house since they were just there? I know the key was secrecy and that Jesus likely planned for the meal ahead of time with the owner of the house and wouldn't want Judas to know too early where they would be for the meal. And I will admit that there may be no better time to have planned this next meal than the place Jesus ate just 6 days before the Passover.

Secondly, the plot was already in place prior to the passover to kill Lazarus. It's entirely possible that the chief priests would have had someone keeping an eye on Lazarus. But, again, this could be mere speculation. But in this debate, it's certainly something to consider.

[tony garrood](#) said...

What about specifically Johannine material that is not Judean in origin, like the material about John the Baptist, miracle at Cana, the woman at the well in Samaria, the discourse in John 6? This appears to be part of the same witness of the Judean sections that you attribute to Lazarus having access to because he was living in and around Jerusalem, with Simon his father and his sisters at Bethany. The attraction of John Zebedee being the author of the gospel is that as one of Jesus's three most intimate disciples and earliest he would have been around for the events and teaching in Galilee and Judaea.

So who was the eye-witness to the events and teaching in Galilee on your understanding?

Having said that, I have the same sort of feeling reading this that I had reading Orchard on the Synoptics, that I am not predisposed to an idea I had given little credence to before.

[tony garrood](#) said...

Sorry Ben

that is 'witness as' not 'witness of' and 'now predisposed' not 'not predisposed'

[CPA](#) said...

Wow. Thank you for making available such a powerful piece of scholarship on the web.

And I am quite impressed by the level of comments as well.

We are studying the Gospel of John in our adult Sunday School and I will be printing this out and making copies for the members.

QUESTION: Does the John who edited the Gospel have to be the same John who wrote the Book of Revelation? Could it be that the Revelation author is John the Apostle, while the Gospel editor is John the Presbyter? I don't know Greek, but from what everyone says, the language of the two is so different. Plus the whole style/content seems so different it seems hard to associate them with the same persons.

[Michael79](#) said...

Hi Ben!

Interesting work you did. Our group has come up with a similar interpretation but it is somewhat different. Here it is:

"The gospels tell of the disciple whom Jesus loved in several places...

23 There was reclining in front of Jesus' bosom one of his disciples, and Jesus loved him (John 13).

26 Therefore Jesus, seeing his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing by, said to his mother: Woman, see! Your son!

27 Next he said to the disciple: See! Your mother! And from that hour on the disciple took her to his own home (John 19).

20 Upon turning about Peter saw the disciple whom Jesus used to love following, the one who at the evening meal had also leaned back upon his breast and said: Lord, who is the one betraying you?

21 Accordingly, when he caught sight of him, Peter said to Jesus: Lord, what will this [man do]?

22 Jesus said to him: If it is my will for him to remain until I come, of what concern is that to you? You continue following me.

23 In consequence, this saying went out among the brothers, that that disciple would not die. However, Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but: If it is my will for him to remain until I come, of what concern is that to you?

24 This is the disciple that bears witness about these things and that wrote these things, and we know that the witness he gives is true (John 21).

Now we must beg the reader to worship God with his mind and not to worship the long established Roman Catholic Church with all its glitter and status in this world. So please take off your Papal Mitre and put on your Sherlock Homes Deer Stalker once again and let us obey the law given to Moses, that Jesus made into the

first commandment. It is still in force today, to serve not a church of men but our creator, Jehovah, our God, with our whole heart our whole mind our whole soul and our whole strength.

Now the Catholics would have us believe that only Jesus and the apostles were present at the last supper. They would further have us believe that Jesus had a favourite apostle, namely John. He loved him more than the rest they say, because he wrote John 21 and so he was the one whom Jesus used to love as can be seen from verse 24. This seems to make sense because we all know that Leonardo Da Vinci only had Jesus plus 12 at the last supper and because John did see Jesus come in vision as recorded in Revelation.

But there are a few problems with that interpretation.

1. People in the world do have favourites, but one doesn't imagine that Jesus would be like that.

2. Nowhere in scripture is 'the one whom Jesus loved' called an apostle, he is always called a disciple.

3. Jesus gave this person to his mother as her fleshly son. This means he must have had authority to do that, which means he must have been his fleshly father in some sense. Jesus was John's father in spirit, but not in flesh. Furthermore Jesus as head of his family, being the firstborn son, and Joseph being dead, gave his mother to the one whom he loved. Mary then went to live in his home. Why did he not give her to the secondborn son? Jesus had 4 brothers...

55 Is this not the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary, and his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? (Matthew 13).

He was making 'the one whom he loved' the head of his family, the head of his fleshly house. So he was giving his birthright to this one. So this one must have been his firstborn fleshly son. But how could Jesus who never got married, have a fleshly son?

Answer: Lazarus. He was the father of the body that Lazarus received upon his resurrection. So Lazarus, being the firstborn by resurrection of the firstborn by holy spirit of Mary, was the legitimate head of the household once Jesus died. Jesus could not sin and break the law and give his mother and family to an imposter.

This interpretation explains why Lazarus was leaning back upon Jesus bosom at the last supper. He was his son, and sons are in the bosom of fathers in the bible...

18 No man has seen God [Jehovah, unbegotten] at any time; the only-begotten God [Jesus, the first angel to become a God to be worshipped, the only begotten God] who is in the bosom with the Father is the one that has explained him (John 1).

But this raises the question: How could Lazarus be at the last supper? Surely only the 12 were there with Jesus...

18 He said: Go into the city to So-and-so and say to him,

The Teacher says, 'My appointed time is near; I will celebrate the

passover with my disciples with/towards you.

19 And the disciples did as Jesus ordered them, and they got things ready for the passover.

20 When, now, it had become evening, he was reclining at the table with the 12 disciples (Matthew 26).

At first sight it just looks like Jesus celebrated the passover with his 12 disciples. Not with 13 disciples, but with 12. But So-and-so was a Jew as were Jesus and the 12 disciples, so they would all have celebrated the passover together. And Jesus would not have excluded So-and-so or his family from celebrating with him. Indeed such a thing would have been unlawful.

But who was this guy So-and-so and why is he given this non-descript designation? Well, in John 12 we read that...

1 Accordingly Jesus, 6 days before the passover [The last supper], arrived at Bethany, where Lazarus was whom Jesus had raised up from the dead.

2 Therefore they spread an evening meal for him there, and Martha was ministering, but Lazarus was one of those reclining at the table with him (John 12).

Now there is a thing. 6 days before the last supper Lazarus is reclining with Jesus at the table at an evening meal. Imagine you were Lazarus and you had been raised from the dead by Jesus and you had eaten an evening meal with him 6 days before the passover. Would you not want to eat the passover with him too? The law said that the passover should be eaten in Jerusalem. So Lazarus would have gone up to Jerusalem to a friend's house there to eat the meal with his sisters. But why So and so? Well further on in John 12 we read...

9 Therefore a great crowd of the Jews got to know he was there, and they came, not on account of Jesus only, but also to see Lazarus, whom he raised up from the dead.

10 The chief priests now took counsel to kill Lazarus also,

11 because on account of him many of the Jews were going there and putting faith in Jesus (John 12).

So Lazarus could not go around openly or he would be killed. So for security reasons Jesus and presumably the disciples as well referred to him as So-and-so. In this way people overhearing their conversation would not realise that Lazarus was there and would not be tempted to betray Lazarus to the chief priests who presumably would pay them silver money for the information.

So actually at the last supper were the 12 apostles, Jesus, Lazarus, Mary, Martha and the family of whoever owned the house which had the upper room where it was celebrated. So now the last supper ceases to be a sterile apostolic refectory, and becomes a loving family affair. Certainly if Martha ministered at the evening meal 6 days previously, why would she not do the same thing at the passover itself? Perhaps the women ate at a different table, but these girls were saints of the New Covenant, so in theory they would have partaken of all the cups, as did the apostles. Lazarus however could not die, since he

was now in a non adamic body. By which we mean he would be raptured the minute he died physically, he would not see Hades for a second time.

Consider these scriptures...

5 Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus (John 11)

33 Jesus, therefore, when he saw her weeping and the Jews that came with her weeping, groaned in the spirit and became troubled;

34 and he said: Where have you laid him? They said to him: Lord, come and see.

35 Jesus gave way to tears.

36 Therefore the Jews began to say: See, what affection he used to have for him! (John 11).

Now Jesus most likely wept because he saw the distress of Mary, the one who had wept at his feet and wiped her tears off with her hair. And what man would not? But nonetheless the scripture says referring to Lazarus: See what affection he used to have for him!

1 On the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the memorial tomb early, while there was still darkness, and she beheld the stone already taken away from the memorial tomb.

2 Therefore she ran and came to Simon Peter and to the other disciple, for whom Jesus had affection, and she said to them: They have taken away the Lord out of the memorial tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him (John 20).

The wording of John 20:2 is such that Jesus loved Peter as a son as well. In fact he loved Peter as the head of his wife to be more precise! Obviously Lazarus being in a brand new non adamic body, actually being a son of Isaac in a 240 year max lifespan body, could run a bit faster than poor old Peter!

7 Therefore that disciple whom Jesus used to love said to Peter: It is the Lord! Hence Simon Peter, upon hearing that it was the Lord, girded about himself his top garment, for he was naked, and plunged into the sea (John 21)

So Lazarus could hear more distinctly than the other disciples as well! Nice body! He had a human body x2 in Personal Computing terminology! There is no other named person in the Gospels that Jesus was said to love and so for us that decided things.

Who wrote John then?

This problem was what prevented us from accepting the research at first. But then we put the last verses of John 20 together with the last verses of John 21...

30 To be sure, Jesus performed many other signs also before the disciples, which are not written down in this scroll.

31 But these have been written down that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God, and that, because of believing, you may have life by means of his

name (John 20).

25 There are, in fact, many other things also which Jesus did, which, if ever they were written in full detail, I suppose, the world itself could not contain the scrolls written (John 21).

The end of each chapter is saying the same thing, namely that Jesus did a whole load more things that are not written in this scroll. So if we have two endings then we have two authors. John wrote chapters 1 - 20 and Lazarus wrote chapter 21. With this understanding we can now make sense of the last 5 verses of the chapter of Lazarus.

20 Upon turning about Peter saw the disciple whom Jesus used to love [Lazarus] following, the one who at the evening meal had also leaned back upon his breast and said: Lord, who is the one betraying you?

21 Accordingly, when he caught sight of him, Peter said to Jesus: Lord, what will this [man do] [seeing as he has already died once and been resurrected]?

22 Jesus said to him: If it is my will for him to remain until I come, of what concern is that to you? You continue following me.

23 In consequence, this saying went out among the brothers, that that disciple would not die. However, Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but: If it is my will for him to remain until I come, of what concern is that to you?

24 This [Lazarus] is the disciple that bears witness about these things and that wrote these things [wrote John 21], and we know that the witness he gives is true ['we' being Christians of higher authority than Lazarus, the pillars of the church, Peter, James and John].

25 There are, in fact, many other things also which Jesus did, which, if ever they were written in full detail, I suppose, the world itself could not contain the scrolls written.

So the Gospel of John runs from chapter 1 to chapter 20. Then we have the book of Lazarus which is presently called

John 21. This one chapter is not a gospel since it covers events after Jesus' death. We know there are only 4 gospels. However we now have a new bible writer and a new book of the bible.

[Dr Stibbe](#) said...

Hi Ben

Mark Stibbe here

I have been teaching that Lazarus was the BD for 20 years, and have written about this in at least three of my books on John. From a reading of the final form of the FG narrative, the implied reader HAS to conclude that BD is Lazarus... for all the reasons you outline and others too

I would be interested in your take on Bauckham's dismissal of such views. In Jesus and the Eyewitnesses he says it makes no sense for FG to introduce Lazarus



and then immediately engage in a strategy of protective anonymity through the BD epithet

What do you make of that?

GB

Mark Stibbe

[bob](#) said...

Believe it or not, one "new" suggestion regarding the identity of the BD has not yet been refuted, although it has been mentioned superficially for centuries. Anyone who is interested can check it out

<http://www.clementdialogue.org/Robinson.htm> .  
Comments, anyone?

Bob

[bob](#) said...

5/13:

Since I haven't seen a response to my 5/8/07 post, let me explain it a little better. In the BD passages of the Gospel of John, the author tells us about a pretty amazing disciple, one who was closer to the Lord and spiritually more perceptive than even Peter. Because of this, he is a trustworthy witness (21:24). The above website proposes that these statements about the BD are not John bragging about himself while totally ignoring his brother who ranked above him. Nor were they written in an attempt to elevate some outsider above the Twelve who were specifically chosen by Jesus. Instead, John is the author, and his trustworthy witness is James, the disciple who in the first two gospels is Peter's competitor for the most favored position in Jesus' kingdom (Matt 20:21; Mk 10:37). We know from Acts that John later continued to work with Peter, while James apparently separated himself from the other two. When James died, he apparently left written records containing "these things" that John translates from Aramaic with comments.

We also know, from the other gospels, that 21:2 alludes to four anonymous disciples, two of whom ("those of Zebedee") we can identify as James and John. In the view of the above website, they are anonymous because they are the source and the author of the Gospel, respectively, and because of John's humility. (The other two anonymous persons are to prevent readers from identifying the author and the Beloved Disciple by the process of elimination, unless they already know the truth of the matter.) John's humility keeps him from any mention of himself in his Gospel. James' anonymity is also partly because many people felt that he had been discredited by the rumored prophecy that he would not die, which turned out to be false. Readers would not accept his testimony until after John corrects this rumor. Then and only then, John and his amanuensis reveal James' role and attest to his veracity ("we know that his testimony is true"). John can attest to this because he was present with James at most of the events reported here. If Luke is the amanuensis, as I think likely, he can add his

own attestation ("we" instead of "I" in 21:24) because of his own research into the origin of the gospel accounts. As the amanuensis, he would also have seen John's sources, witnessed the translation process, and been able to ask questions.

I believe there's a special significance to the epithet "the disciple whom Jesus loved," because knowledgeable readers find at the end that this disciple is someone whom the church did NOT love, because of his alleged insubordination to Peter. Readers need to know that Jesus himself had told Peter that he had plans for James which were none of Peter's business (21:22); therefore, James was not in rebellion.

I'm unclear why so many people look for a different candidate, or conclude that the eyewitness whom we can all trust is not an actual person. Certainly the rumor referred to a specific person who was already well known as a leader during Jesus' ministry, probably based on the Synoptics. I think this eliminates everyone except James.

Dr. Witherington, please help us out.

Bob

[Richard M Riss](#) said...

A reference that corroborates the idea that the beloved disciple was Lazarus is J.N. Sanders, "Who was the Disciple Whom Jesus loved?" in F. L. Cross, ed., *Studies in the Fourth Gospel* (1957), pp. 72-82. Corroboration of this idea may also be found in the work of Oscar Cullmann and of Floyd V. Filson. For corroboration of the idea that Simon the Leper was the father of Lazarus, Martha, and Mary and a member of the Sanhedrin, one need only consult the article on Lazarus in Smith's Bible Dictionary.

[Mike Childs](#) said...

I am a fool for question the conclusions of Dr. Ben, whom I greatly admire. This is very interesting, but ... My only problem with Lazarus as the BD is that the synoptics clearly say that it was "the twelve" who were in the upper room, and John 13 clearly puts the BD there leaning against Jesus' breast. The only way around this is to say that John 13 is not the upper room and last supper. (After all, there is no story of communion.) However, Jesus saying that the one who will betray him is the "the one to whom I will give this piece of bread, when I have dipped it in the dish" makes it clear that this is the upper room story. Mark 14:20 is too close a parallel. Also, why would Jesus need to tell them that one of them would betray him twice – once in Bethany and once in the upper room? As Dr. Ben says, "They were the Duh-ciples," but that is a little too much duh for me. To me that is a fatal flaw.

But then again, I am pretty much a "Duh-ciple" too. Thanks Dr. Ben for stretching our minds. Mike Childs

[ledebespreguntar](#) said...

I agree that the Beloved Disciple would obviously have known about Mark, or maybe even read it. This was obviously a man of enormous intelligence and talent, and to think that he wouldn't be interested in what his contemporaries were writing about The Man seems ludicrous. Most authors read their contemporaries, or at least want to. I can at least imagine the Beloved Disciple asking a traveler from a community where Mark was known many questions about what that gospel was up to.

Also, I find it fascinating to wonder how Jesus and Lazarus may have gotten to know each other. Maybe when Jesus first met him, Lazarus showed him something he'd written, and when Jesus looked at it he knew the special way this young man would remember him. He would be his witness to the truth, as it were. Maybe Lazarus kept a journal, and wrote in it at night, and pondered over all the things Jesus said that day. If he was rich, he could probably afford the writing utensils. Also, I wonder sometimes if Lazarus was taught by Nicodemus, since Nicodemus is a "teacher of Israel."

Also, does anyone think it's strange that the parable in Luke that mentions Lazarus actually has a name in it? I don't know of any other parable that has a name. It would be really odd for this tradition to stay alive for so long without a name that everyone seemed to know. Was Jesus using Lazarus' name in this parable because Lazarus had "sores" on his body? Was he including his young friend in his teaching? Also, the end of the parable mentions how there will be unbelief, even if someone rises from the dead. Any thoughts?  
--Andrew Wood

[ledebespreguntar](#) said...

One other thing: The way Jesus talks in Galilee, and the way he talks in Jerusalem are different. I wonder if some of this is because Galilee is the country, and Jerusalem is the big city. I grew up in the country, and live in the big city, and I know I talk differently depending on where I am. I can imagine Jesus in Jerusalem would be talking to some very educated Jewish men, and he would be using different sorts of discourse. The parables and aphorisms take place in the country, and I am very aware of all the great tales and classic aphorisms from the people in my small hometown. You don't get that in the big city.

[ledebespreguntar](#) said...

One other thing: I think another blow against the idea of John son of Zebedee as the author are words directly from Christ. When James and John ask Jesus for special positions in the kingdom, and when they say that they are truly able to drink from the cup Jesus will drink from, and be baptized with the baptism he will be baptized with, and Jesus agrees with them, it seems to me that Jesus is talking about his martyrdom and that he is telling the brothers that they, too, will indeed be martyred. He probably knew this because these guys were the Sons of Thunder, and were more likely to really upset people and

get in their face. Didn't they want to bring fire down on the Samaritans?

[ledebespreguntar](#) said...

Here's something else that may be a bit of a stretch, but still seems interesting:

John 20:8 "Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead."

I've heard it argued that the writer of the gospel wants superiority over Peter, and that's why he says he got to the tomb first, but that seems childish, and totally inconsistent with the mature and reflective style of this author. I wonder if it's more a play on words, in that the writer, presumably Lazarus, had "reached the tomb first" in death, which Peter had not, and therefore was more able than Peter to see and believe. However, the line about not understanding that he must rise from the dead totally baffles me.  
--Andrew Wood

[Mike Hancock](#) said...

Ben- If the Gospel of John was authored by Lazarus, who himself was resurrected from the dead, why/how do you suppose God would not allow Lazarus to testify more specifically in the Gospel as to his personal experience in the tomb? Obviously, Lazarus held in his grasp some power to clarify human thought on the death experience. I find myself thinking that, had I been Lazarus, I would have included something of this in my account.

[lmwal931](#) said...

no i don't believe so. we know nothing of his character or personality. i believe the beloved disciple is nathanael. we know from john 1 that he has no guile. you can trust what he says. we have 3mtches from what we are told about the b.d.. i have a two page essay i mail out free by usps.

[Randall Carter Gray](#) said...

Lazarus?! The poor guy was just raised from the dead. How active could he have been? How effective would he have been with Annas, as "the other disciple?" Death takes a lot out of one. If Jesus loved him so much, why did he die? The true beloved disciple, as Peter points out in Jn. 21 was not supposed to die ... but Lazarus, if he was the beloved disciple ... had already died!

The disciples whom Jesus loved were John Mark and his mother Mary, who were the John and Mary at the cross of Jesus. Alterations by heretics have fooled us all these years. Read my take: <http://tanata.squarespace.com>

Regards,  
RCG

[Esa Hyvönen](#) said...

Thanks Dr. Witherington for a fascinating reading! I have one question to which your lecture does not give an answer. How is it possible that John 21:1-8 identifies the Beloved Disciple as a fisherman fishing up in Northern Galilee? Your theory does not take into account this piece of internal evidence which, in my opinion, is the hardest fact to come around with your theory. How a man from nearby Jerusalem may have been identified with a fishing industry?

[Julie Glavic](#) said...

Dr. Witherington,

This is great! I had a professor at Gordon College, Dr. Steve Hunt, who gave a lecture in which he argued the same thing. (As I remember, the other Biblical Studies professors teased him good-naturedly but mercilessly about the whole thing.)

One point that Dr. Hunt made during his argument was about the connection between Lazarus's grave clothes (specifically his head covering) and Jesus's grave clothes (specifically his head covering). My Greek isn't great, but I remember Dr. Hunt thinking that it was incredible that the same words were used - and that the BD "saw and believed" upon looking at Jesus's used grave clothes.

What do you think about this connection (if you think that there is one!)?

One other note I remember Dr. Hunt making which he admitted was pure speculation: did the BD outrun Peter at Jesus's tomb because the BD had been restored to incredible vitality after being raised from the dead? An interesting suggestion.

-Julie Glavic

[Julie Glavic](#) said...

Here we go:

<http://paulglavic.wordpress.com/2008/07/06/lazarus-and-the-fourth-gospel-part-two/>

[wgshuster](#) said...

Has anyone mentioned the book, "Lazarus and the Fourth Gospel Community" by Frederick W. Baltz. (Mellen Biblical Press: 1996). It presents the same thesis--that Lazarus was the Beloved Disciple--but goes a step further in identifying Lazarus (Greek for Eleazar) with the former High Priest Eleazar (4 BC to 6 AD), son of Boethus, who, like Lazarus, had two sisters, named Miriam and Martha (with whom he identifies Lazarus'

sisters, Mary and Martha). Is his a reasonable hypothesis?

[davek](#) said...

My teacher in New Testament history, who is also a proponent of the "Lazarus as the Beloved Disciple" theory brought up an interesting speculation. If Lazarus was the BD, perhaps this explains why he didn't enter the tomb in John 20:5. He would perhaps be reluctant to enter a tomb again, after his resurrection.