



THE HISTORICAL JESUS XVI:

The Gospel of John: Authorship

SCHOLARS HAVE DEBATED the authorship of the Gospel of John. For example, Paul Barnett states, “By a process of elimination of seven disciples who were present by the lakeside after the resurrection, as recorded in John 21:1-2, we conclude that one of these, ‘the disciple whom

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Jesus loved’ (Jn 21:20), who witnessed the death of Jesus, who first looked into the empty tomb (Jn 19:35; 20:2-4) and who wrote this book (Jn 21:24; 20:30-31), was John Zebedee (Jn 21:2).”¹ On the other hand, Ben Witherington claims a different identification for “the disciple whom Jesus loved”: “Scholars have traditionally pointed to John 13:23 (at the Last Supper) as the gospel’s first mention of the Beloved Disciple. ‘One of his disciples — the one whom Jesus loved — was reclining next to him.’ However, this very same kind of language comes a little earlier. In John 11:3, Mary and Martha urgently ask Jesus to come quickly because ‘he whom you love is ill,’ referring to their brother Lazarus. This is confirmed in John 11:5: ‘Jesus loved Martha and her sister [Mary] and Lazarus.’ Can this help us identify the last man standing?

“Let us suppose for a moment that it *was* Lazarus. How does this information help us? First, it comports with the accounts of the other gospels that none of the Twelve was at the cross (Lazarus was not one of the Twelve).

“Second, it clears up another conundrum: Where was the Last Supper held? . . . Jesus tells a messenger that when he reaches the house where the supper is to be held, he is to ‘say to the owner of the house, “The Teacher asks, Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?” He will show you a large room upstairs, furnished and ready’ (Mark 14:14-18). The owner of the house clearly knows Jesus and even seems to be expecting the Teacher and

his disciples. But the owner is not one of the Twelve who come with Jesus ('When it was evening, he came with the twelve' [Mark 14:17]).

"As noted earlier, John 13:23 indicates that the Beloved Disciple was present at the Last Supper, reclining next to Jesus on a couch. . . . [W]ho do we find on Jesus' couch? The Beloved Disciple! In other words, the Last Supper was probably held in a house owned by Lazarus (a.k.a. the Beloved Disciple) in Bethany, a suburb of Jerusalem. That the Beloved Disciple had a home near Jerusalem is reflected in the notice that, after the crucifixion, the Beloved Disciple took his mother 'into his own home' (John 19:27). . . .

"In John 19:35 we are told that the Beloved Disciple witnessed the crucifixion. This Beloved Disciple was not just an eyewitness, but he also wrote these things down (John 21:24). Is it not plausible that the Fourth Gospel is the memoir of Lazarus, who was the Beloved Disciple, the last man raised by Jesus before his own death, the last man standing at the cross and, indeed, the last of the Evangelists to testify to these things?"²

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It is in this context that the nature of the Christ and the significance of his actions recorded in the Fourth Gospel can now be addressed.

Endnotes

1. Paul Barnett, *Jesus & the Rise of Early Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), p. 311.
2. Ben Witherington III, "The Last Man Standing," *Biblical Archaeology Review* (March-April 2006): 24, 76.