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St John's gospel unquestioningly an 'eyewitness account' says Pope

Pope Benedict XVI takes aim at doubting scholars, declaring that St John's Gospel is unquestionably an 'eyewitness account'

Richard Owen in Rome

Taking aim at scholars who doubt St John's Gospel as confirming the "historical reality" of Jesus, Pope Benedict XVI has declared that it is unquestionably an "eyewitness account".

The Pope said St John's Gospel was "the passionate testimony" of a man who as a young, humble fisherman had been attracted to Jesus, had loved him as a disciple, had shared his experiences at first hand for three years, and had seen Him die on the Cross and then rise again.

"From this experience, which he meditated in his heart, John drew an intimate certainty - that Jesus was the Knowledge of God incarnate" the Pope said during a recent Angelus address.

Gianni Gennari, an Italian theologian, said that whereas St Mark had learned much of Jesus' life and teachings from St Peter, St Luke was believed to have been given details by the Virgin Mary after Jesus' death and St Matthew had "put Jesus parables and speeches in chronological order" with the skill of a former tax collector, St John was "different. He reflected on his experiences for years, and then put his personal memories together with a series of doctrinal statements on the relationship between Jesus and the Holy Spirit and on Jesus as the Word Incarnate".

He said no-one doubted the existence of figures such as Alexander the Great or Aristotle even though the first accounts of them appeared long after their deaths. By contrast the first known papyruses referring to Jesus dated to the end of the first century. St John described himself arriving at Jesus' tomb before St Peter because he was younger and could run faster (20:1-6), and included other vivid details which could only have come from his own experience.

He had also described settings since confirmed as authentic by archeologists, such as the Pool of Bethesda, a rectangular pool uncovered in the nineteenth century near the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem with five porches or covered colonnades, where Jesus healed a lame man and told him "Take up thy bed and walk" (John 5:2-9).

Professor Gennari said John included details which Jesus shared only with the disciples, including his farewell speeches, as well as miracles not found in the Synoptics, such as raising Lazarus from the dead. It is commonly held by supporters of St John's Gospel as a first hand account that he is referring to himself when he repeatedly describes "the disciple whom Jesus loved".

However beginning at the end of the nineteenth century, sceptics have suggested that inconsistencies and non sequiturs indicate the Gospel was put together by various authors, and is not a reliable source for Jesus' life and ministry. La Stampa said the Pope was also responding to recent best-selling books on "the historical Jesus" written by the Italian author Corrado Augias with two Biblical scholars, Remo Cacitti of Milan University and Mauro Pesce of Bologna University.

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