

The Johannine Community

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Studying the putative Johannine Community properly requires examination of various theories relating to both the composition and the audience of the gospel, epistles and apocalypse. We must consider both the community or communities from which and for which the literature of the Johannine corpus may have been written. A cluster of inter-related issues will therefore arise: traditions history, authorship (including date and place), redaction, purpose and various methodological and historical questions.¹

Followers of “John” seem evident in the text of the Fourth Gospel at 21:24². There is no other direct and unambiguous reference to a Johannine Community in the gospel³.

The so-called implied readers of the gospel are referred to most directly in 19:35 and 20:31. The flow of 20:26ff suggests that the intended audience had not themselves seen the risen Jesus and that they are encouraged to believe without seeing on the basis of these signs.

It is disputed whether or not 20:31 requires an evangelistic purpose⁴. There is a textual variant with the evidence being fairly well balanced between ‘ινα πιστευητε

¹ A treatment of this length must inevitably be partial and selective. I have decided to concentrate on the internal evidence of the Fourth Gospel, which has been the focus of debate, although a number of useful comments could be made from external traditions which have some bearing on the question of Community, such as the association of John with various towns or the possible role of John the Elder. This external material is not normally given great weight in the present discussion. Ashton comments: “All we know about the Johannine community is what can be inferred from its writings. Such external guides as we have are at best unreliable, at worst misleading. But within the pages of the Gospel and the Letters is buried a surprising amount of positive data enabling us to piece together a picture of the nature and history of the community. Of course the piercing-together cannot be done without conjecture.”. Ashton, John, Understanding the Fourth Gospel (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1991) p160. The lack of evidence external to the Johannine Corpus may be telling although the existence of the Johannine Epistles might imply more than one “Johannine Community”. Revelation, in which the drama is on a cosmic scale and which may include a critique of the Roman Empire, with its letters to the seven churches suggests more than a narrowly parochial outlook focused on a single introverted community. If we hold to the traditional view of a single Apostolic author for the corpus, it seems plausible to think of a network of churches who accepted the authority of John.

² “This [i.e. the disciple whom Jesus loved who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper, v20] is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down [‘ο γραψας ταυτα - although some scholars argue this should be taken more loosely, perhaps as “caused these things to be written down”, thinking of the use of an amanuensis, who may have been allowed considerable freedom, or perhaps even of passing on a body of traditions that were subsequently written up] and we know that his testimony is true”. (c.f. 19:35 – which speaks of the veracity of the eye-witness account of the crucifixion in similar terms). Indeed, some have suggested that chapter 21 is an appendix added by a final redactor (possibly after the death of the Beloved Disciple to settle any difficulty concerning his death which the tradition of this incident may have occasioned among the community, vv22-24) although it should be added that there is no manuscript evidence for the Gospel in a substantially different form from the one we have, except for the absence of 7:53-8:11 from many witnesses.

³ Although, it is possible that some of those around John may be included in the “we” of 1:14 who have seen the glory of the Word made flesh, which alternatively might be editorial, apostolic or referring to all the eye-witnesses of the Jesus-event.

⁴ contrast 1 John 5:13, which is clearly pastoral.

and ἵνα πιστευσητε⁵, the latter having slightly more in its favour. However, Carson warns that: “Quite apart from the fact that this [involves] a reductionistic analysis of what a ‘strict interpretation’ of the present and aorist tenses requires, it can easily be shown that John elsewhere in his Gospel can use either tense to refer to both coming to faith and continuing in the faith.”⁶ Carson argues on syntactical grounds that the ἵνα clause must be rendered, “that you may believe that the Christ, the Son of God, is Jesus” – the issue being, “Who is the Messiah?”, making this a Gospel intended primarily for those who are not yet Christians. The aim of the Gospel is to convince unconverted Jews, proselytes to Judaism and God-fearers, to whom the question of who the Messiah is would be a pressing one and who would understand many of the rich Old Testament ideas and images of the Gospel.⁷ Some scholars have argued that the bitter rejection of both the world (κοσμος) and “the Jews” make it unlikely that the gospel is evangelistic and especially unlikely that the author hopes that the Jews will be persuadable. However, this is a matter of judgement: we should not underestimate the intensity of dispute which is possible in a family-squabble, impose our sensibilities about the degree of polemical force or overlook the possible rhetorical appeal to disassociate oneself from the world and side with the One from above. Carson suggests that John is urging the Jews of the diaspora to avoid the same terrible sin of rejecting the Messiah that the Jews of Palestine, and especially their leaders, have committed.⁸

If we accept this analysis, then the Fourth Gospel was not written primarily for the Johannine Community but for those spread throughout the Empire who still needed to be persuaded of its stated thesis, “that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God”, that by believing they might have life in his name.

Many scholars go far beyond this helpful linking of the explicit statement of the purpose of the gospel with a modest investigation into the likely intended audience. The gospel is assumed to have been written from and for a particular community, the history, situation, needs and concerns of which have controlled the editing and even the composition of the material. Certainly we must admit that the fourth evangelist has selected the material that best fits his purpose (20:30; 21:25), but it is common to ascribe greater creativity to him. At its most enthusiastic, reconstruction of the Johannine community employs a process of mirror reading by which the implied situation in life of the Gospel is arrived at, with characters and events in the text acting as ciphers for the community, to the point that the historical Jesus and the events of his ministry are lost from view.

⁵ present subjunctive – in order that you may continue to believe (pastoral) - and aorist subjunctive – that you may decisively believe (evangelistic) – respectively. Various intermediary positions have, of course, been proposed, such as that the gospel was intended as an evangelistic resource for Christians (a way in which it has often been used to great effect).

⁶ Carson, Don A., *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester, IVP, 1991) p661, see also p90

⁷ This is a particularly impressive argument as the data is both explicit and implicit and often mentioned without any particular explanation such as, for example, the use of Jewish Feasts, the Lamb of God, the prophet like Moses, the snake in the desert, the New Temple, the Bread from Heaven, the Good Shepherd. Carson concludes: “These and scores of similar features rule out the view that the Evangelist had a biblically-illiterate readership in mind”. *Ibid.*, p91.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p92

Numerous examples of this procedure can easily be found in commentaries and studies of the Fourth Gospel⁹.

As a general response to these proposals, it is not unfair to say that if more New Testament scholars were believers with a good systematic theology, they would be less likely to see the teaching contained in the Fourth Gospel as so necessarily particular. The conviction that the disciple is chosen out of the world and must be ready for persecution and determined to live in loving unity with other believers is by no means tied to an embattled first century sect, as we are so often encouraged to think, but rather common to all those who have been brought into the light.

After adopting their method of mirror reading and making numerous individual comments, scholars then attempt to provide a convincing overall account of the Gospel¹⁰.

One of the most influential and broadly representative of such studies of the history and life of the Johannine Community is that of Raymond E. Brown¹¹, which Lindars calls the best reconstruction on offer.

According to Brown, the authors of the Johannine literature had eight distinct groups in mind:

- (1) The World – non-believing society at large
- (2) John opposed “the Jews” who rejected Jesus and decided that anyone who accepted Jesus must be put out of the synagogue. (9:22; 16:2) The main matters of dispute with this group were the high Christology of the Johannine Community (e.g., speaking of the oneness of the Son with the Father) and the claim that the Jewish cult was superseded by Jesus.
- (3) The Adherents of John The Baptist
- (4) Crypto-Christians who are unwilling to face a full split from the synagogue. (12:42f) For practical purposes John’s gospel lumps these together with “the Jews”, as they prefer to be known as the disciples of Moses rather than of Jesus and value the praise of men over the praise of God.

⁹ The following from Wayne Meeks is fairly typical: “The book functions for its readers in precisely the same way that the epiphany of its hero functions within its narratives and dialogues... . In telling the story of the Son of Man who came down from heaven and then re-ascended after choosing a few of his own out of the world, the book defines and vindicates the existence of the community that evidently sees itself as unique, alien from its world, under attack, misunderstood, but living in unity with Christ and through him with God.” Meeks, W., “The Son of Man in Johannine Sectarianism” (1972) in *The Interpretation of John*, (London, SPCK, 1986) ed. John Ashton. pp162-3. Brown gives a particularly convenient summary of some recent scholarly proposals in Appendix I of Brown, Raymond E., *The Community of the Beloved Disciple – The Life, Loves and Hates of an Individual Church in the New Testament* (London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1979)

¹⁰ Ashton writes: “A fully rounded theory concerning ‘the Johannine community and its book’ must integrate the study of both of these into a comprehensive account of the Gospel’s growth, the successive stages of composition corresponding to the changing situation of those for whom it was being written.”, *Op.Cit.*, p162.

¹¹ R. E. Brown, *Op. Cit.*, also ‘Other Sheep Not Of This Fold: The Johannine Perspective On Christian Diversity In The Late First Century’, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 97 (1978) pp5-22; – *The Life, Loves and Hates of an Individual Church in the New Testament*.

- (5) Jewish Christians who have left or been expelled from the synagogue, whom the evangelist opposes for their inadequately low Christology. Brown sees the low view of Jesus' family in the Fourth Gospel as polemic against the subsequent followers of James, the half-brother of Jesus. He claims the main alleged faults of this group were that they rejected the divinity of Christ (8:39f, 58f) and did not understand the eucharist as the real body and blood of Jesus (6:60-64).
- (6) The Apostolic Christians, who are the "sheep of another fold", particularly represented by Peter. Unlike the Johannine Community, Brown thinks that they did not generally accept the pre-existence of Christ, but nevertheless John wants his church to pray for unity with these others (17:20f).
- (7) The Johannine Community, a mixed group of Jews and Gentiles, represented in the gospel by the Beloved Disciple, who is the original source for the gospel – marked by a high Christology (5:18; 10:33).
- (8) Secessionist Johannine Christians who held docetic ideas, denying the humanity of Christ (1 Jn 2:22; 4:3f), and who claimed freedom from moral constraints (1 Jn 1:8-2:6). Evidence for this group is found mainly in the Johannine Epistles – although dangers of a split are anticipated in Jn 17 - (written by John the Elder, a devoted follower of the Beloved Disciple after his death).

Brown's monumental work properly deserves, and is susceptible to, a detailed point by point critique, which space prohibits. As we have already touched on the religious and ethnic make up of John's audience, it may be fruitful to pursue these questions as illustrative of the lines of response to Brown's other points. The relations between the Johannine Community and the synagogue is, in fact, one of the great centres of the debate across almost all the literature.

According to Brown (see points 2 & 5 above) and others, the originally Jewish church has now been expelled from the synagogue. Because of the expulsion of anyone who acknowledged Jesus as the Christ, which is reported in 9:22 the gospel is thought to have been written after the time of the introduction of the *birkat hamminin*¹². Casey asserts: "There is only one feasible interpretation of our primary sources. The threat to make people *αποσυναγωγοι* on the grounds of confessing Jesus is quite anachronistic. It is out of place in the ministry of Jesus, and has a perfectly good setting at a later period.... Once again, the people responsible for the fourth Gospel have told us their central concerns in the guise of narrative about the ministry of Jesus."¹³ However, despite Casey's confidence, this is far from being the only view of the data. It must be pointed out that there is no obvious or explicit reference to the prayer in the text of the Fourth Gospel. A situation of hostility between the Jesus Movement and the synagogue can be clearly demonstrated to be early, and it is not true to say that Christology only became an issue later in this debate. 9:22 is not an isolated anachronism but is in keeping with the attitude of "the Jews" to Jesus elsewhere in the Fourth Gospel and beyond. Persecution of Jesus and his followers at an early date is also evident from the synoptics (e.g., Mark 13:9 which warns of the handing over of Christians to be flogged in the synagogue would be guilty of a similar

¹² i.e. the twelfth benediction – the blessing against the heretics, which was promulgated at the Council of Jamnia (/Javneh/Yabneh) under Gamaliel II AD 85-90 see e.g. Lindars, Barnabas, John – New Testament Study Guides (1990), p54 and Thompson, 'John', IVP Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels

¹³ Casey, Maurice, Is John's Gospel True? (London, Routledge, 1996), p110

anachronism) and Acts (e.g., the stoning of Stephen – Acts 6-8; Saul’s persecution of the Christians, and then the subsequent opposition which he faces from the Jewish authorities). Further, the circumstances of the *birkat hamminin* are far from clear and it may be significantly later, perhaps dating from after AD 135, making any connection with the Fourth Gospel less likely. Seeing the *birkat hamminin* as part of the life-setting of the putative Johannine Community and its book is, then, at best speculative and certainly far from demonstrated.

From such accounts of the community’s relations with Judaism (detected from the gospel), it is usual to theorise concerning the purpose of the book. Carson warns: “Inevitably a degree of circularity is set up: the community is reconstructed by drawing inferences from the Fourth Gospel, and, once this background is sufficiently widely accepted, the next generation of scholars tends to build on it, or modify it only slightly, by showing how the Fourth Gospel achieves its purpose by addressing that situation so tellingly. The circularity is not necessarily vicious, but it is far weaker than is often assumed, owing to the very high number of merely possible but by no means compelling inferences that are invoked to delineate the community in the first place”¹⁴. How can we possibly tell how the community and its text interacted? How do we know when the writer is reinforcing, confronting or merely demonstrating a particular feature in his community or surrounding environment, especially if we postulate different phases in the life of the community and the growth of its Gospel?

Whilst some of these details of Brown’s clever study may be correct, it is clear from focussing on this one issue that other interpretations are possible. Indeed, the fact that there are almost as many reconstructions as there are scholars implies that the conclusions are not all well founded. Brown’s is a massive edifice constructed on extremely shaky and slender foundations. The methodological leap from Jesus and his disciples to the Beloved Disciple and his community is not substantiated¹⁵. In fact, we must give Brown credit for admitting the weakness of his own case. He says: “my reconstruction claims at most only probability; and if sixty per cent of my detective work is accepted, I shall be happy indeed”¹⁶. J. L. Martyn’s suggestion is pertinent: “it would be a valuable practice for the historian to rise each morning saying to himself three times slowly and with emphasis, “I do not know””¹⁷.

Evangelicals might legitimately make a theological objection against theories such as Brown’s which inflate the importance of reconstructing the Johannine Community and which tend to make the result the hermeneutical key to understanding the author’s agenda, based on their convictions concerning the perspicuity and continued relevance of Scripture. If the Spirit intended this book for his people for all time, then the substance of the meaning must remain accessible to the believer illumined by the Spirit. This is not to rule out the usefulness of all Biblical scholarship or to say that

¹⁴ Carson, Op. Cit., p87, Ashton also recognises the danger of circularity: “Any theory in which the main arguments all lean on one another runs the risk of circularity”, Op.Cit, p162

¹⁵ In fact, it should be noted that the Fourth Evangelist often preserves an explicit distinction between the time of Jesus and that of the “Community”: the disciples’ understanding after Jesus’ death and resurrection is repeatedly distinguished from the period of his earthly life (e.g. 2:19-22; 12:16; 13:7; 20:9). Thompson, M. M., The Incarnate Word (Peabody, Henrickson, 1988), p123.

¹⁶ Brown, Op.Cit., p7

¹⁷ It is a shame that Martyn did not heed his own advice! Ashton, Op.Cit, p198 quoting Gospel of John in Christian History, p92.

historical context is not important, but the real meaning of the text ought not to depend on the successful filtering of the 60% probability of a late 20th Century piece of detective work at any points of great significance. Because the text does not give us the information we would need to determine the nature of the Johannine Community, we can conclude that this information is not necessary for us to understand the book rightly.

Richard Bauckham and others have challenged the very existence of the Gospel communities and the interpretive importance placed upon them¹⁸. They identify in most recent studies a consensus accepted without any substantial argument: “Nearly all scholars writing about the Gospels now treat it as virtually self-evident that each evangelist addressed the specific concerns of his own community”. In contrast they contend that “the Gospels were written for general circulation around the churches and so envisaged a very general Christian audience. Their implied readership is not specific but indefinite: any and every Christian community in the late-first-century Roman Empire.”¹⁹. He says: “In the end, the hermeneutical issue is whether a Gospel should be read as narrative about Jesus or as a narrative about a hypothetical Christian community that scholars can reconstruct behind the Gospel”²⁰. Unlike the Pauline Epistles, “Since a Gospel does not address a specific community, we cannot expect to learn much from it about the evangelist’s own community (even assuming that he had only one, rather than a succession of very different ones), but in any case the enterprise of reconstructing such a community is hermeneutically irrelevant. The Matthean, Markan, Lukan, and Johannine communities should disappear from the terminology of Gospel scholarship.”²¹

These arguments are pursued by Stephen C. Barton in his insightful contribution to the volume. He argues: “... the quest for the Gospel communities, like the quest for the historical Jesus, which it has displaced to some extent, is not a neutral exercise and is likely to be prone to the same dangers.”²² The quest is driven by factors in our context as much as theirs²³ and runs the analogous risk of recreating John’s church in our own image. Brown, for example, is very much concerned with ecumenical dialogue, a situation which he thinks the Fourth Gospel can address, and is also inclined to elevate the importance of the Community as his Roman Catholic theology stresses the unity and authority of the church as a continuation of the incarnation²⁴.

Beyond the limited statement concerning audience, the quest for the specific Johannine community is largely impossible and irrelevant. John is calling his audience out from solidarity with “The Jews” and “the world” and the whole flock of Christ is the “Johannine”, Apostolic Church.

¹⁸ Bauckham, Richard, ed., *The Gospels for All Christians – Re-thinking the Gospel Audiences* (1998)

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p1

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p2

²¹ *Ibid.*, p4

²² *Ibid.*, p175. Barton also has a brief section particularly on the Fourth Gospel.

²³ e.g. the 1960s search for alternative forms of community, 1990s communitarianism, the rise of sociology, stress on the community in liberation theology and the house church movement

²⁴ Brown, *Op.Cit.*, p162ff

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