

The Johannine Community Hypothesis (1968–Present): Past and Present Approaches and a New Way Forward

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Abstract

This article surveys and evaluates the most influential approaches to the Johannine community debate, beginning with Martyn's 1968 study to the more recent work of Bauckham and Klink. The survey divides these approaches into three main categories: (1) studies in the historical-critical stream (mostly from the late 1960s–1970s), (2) sociological studies and (3) studies that have departed from the community hypothesis altogether. The observation is made that, to date, the majority of approaches have been more prescriptive and model-driven rather than descriptive and data-driven. In light of this overarching trend, this article suggests that a potential direction of exploration within the debate could be the development of methods that place primary emphasis on textual data and, at the same time, have a deep concern for a text's social setting.

Keywords

Audience of John, Gospel of John, Johannine community, J. Louis Martyn, *The Gospels for All Christians*

Introduction

In 1977, R. Kysar noted that there were five discernible 'vectors' that were increasingly dominating research on the Gospel of John (1977: 355–66). From his viewpoint, each of these vectors was very closely related to the question of the 'community in whose midst it was written' (p. 355). That is, each represented a specific avenue of research in the overarching attempt to reconstruct the original

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community standing behind the Fourth Gospel's production and reception. Kysar identified these vectors as: (1) the origin and nature of the community, (2) the community's traditions (i.e., the forms and sources on which the Gospel is based), (3) the community's theology, (4) the situation of the community and (5) the special concerns of the community, in which he included the unsettled issues of the origins of the Prologue and the identity of the Beloved Disciple.

Kysar's survey indicates 'at least two' (Kysar's survey indicates at least two things.) things. First, it demonstrates that already by the mid-1970s the Johannine community hypothesis had come to include a variety of areas of research; however, most of them were based on traditional historical-critical methodologies such as form, source and redaction criticism. Second, it shows that by the time of his writing, the community hypothesis had become the dominant approach to the interpretation of John. It will be seen later that while there has been significant push-back recently against the community hypothesis in Gospels research (on which see below), its influence in Johannine studies is still prevalent today.

A plethora of literature on John and its supposed community has been produced since Kysar's review. Thus, the goal of the current literature survey is specifically to trace the development of research on the first and fourth vectors Kysar identified—the nature and situation of the Johannine community as the audience of John's Gospel. The survey will group the development of research into three general categories. The first two are defined primarily by the methods they employ and are presented in roughly chronological order. The first category includes the most influential works of the 1960s and 70s, which were almost exclusively based on historical-critical methods (Marytn 1979 [orig. 1968]; Cullmann 1976 [orig. 1975]; Richter 1975; Pancaro 1975; Culpepper 1975; Brown 1979). The second category includes significant studies that built on earlier models but did so by introducing methods from the social sciences (Meeks 1972; Olsson 1974; Neyrey 1988; Malina 1985; Fuglseth 2005). The third category considers significant voices dissenting from the community hypothesis in the last two or so decades of research, which are currently calling the hypothesis into question altogether (Bauckham (ed.) 1998; Klink 2007 (ed.) 2010). Conducting the survey like this—by means of methodologies—will help paint a picture of what I believe is most needed in the ongoing debate over the so-called Johannine community. In the end, I will offer a suggestion regarding a potentially fruitful avenue of research as it pertains to the nature and social situation of the audience of John's Gospel.

The Nature and Situation of the Johannine Community in 1960s–1970s Research

In 1968, J. Louis Martyn published the first edition of his *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, which John Ashton has said is the most important work in Johannine scholarship since the writing of Rudolf Bultmann's commentary

(1991: 107; see also Bauckham 1998b: 19; D. Smith 1990: 293). Although not the first among modern interpreters to attempt a reconstruction of the Johannine community, Martyn's approach to the Gospel and his portrait of its community quickly became a standard in Johannine scholarship. There are three aspects of his model that deserve attention here. First, in the preface to the first edition Martyn admits the great impact that the work of Bultmann had upon him when he began his study of John's Gospel (esp. Bultmann 1925: 100-146; 1941; 1967: 10-35 [orig. 1923]). However, Martyn is convinced that instead of possessing a conceptual milieu dominated by gnostic Hellenism, as Bultmann suggested so strongly, the Fourth Gospel evinces closer similarities of thought to ancient Jewish literature (especially rabbinic). This shift in thinking regarding conceptual background is significant for Martyn's reconstruction because it provides the socio-religious context for seeing the Gospel's community in direct conflict with the Jewish synagogue (see below).

The second and most important aspect of Martyn's model is his two-level reading of John. That is, Martyn's basic hermeneutic is that John (and all of the Gospels for that matter) should be read (1) on the level of tradition, and (2) on the level of the authors' and recipients' contemporary circumstances. The first level refers to the earliest traditions about the life and ministry of Jesus as primarily reflected in the shared material of John and the Synoptic Gospels. The second level refers to those places—and they are many—where John has apparently handled these traditions in drastically different ways than the Synoptics, displaying a concern for the unique, contemporary situation of its community. In this way Martyn's two-level reading strategy rests heavily on a redaction-oriented methodology and leads him to the conclusion that the different appropriations of the Jesus tradition in John must be equated with a distinct community standing behind these appropriations (1979: 15-21).

Third, as stated briefly above, central to Martyn's description of the nature and situation of the Johannine community is its conflict with the Jewish synagogue. This comes through supremely in his treatment of the healing of the blind man and his ensuing conflict with 'the Jews' in John 9 (see esp. 1979: 37-62). For Martyn, the interaction between 'the Jews' and the blind man reflects not the situation in Jesus' own day but rather a later period of time in which the synagogue leadership began to view the early Christian movement as a distinct rival. The term *ἄποσυνάγωγος* ('put out of the synagogue', used at 9.22 and 16.2) indicates a formal agreement 'reached by an authoritative body within Judaism, intended to separate two rivals, and at John's writing it has already been in effect for some indeterminate time' (1979: 39). Thus, the conclusion is drawn that John's purpose is polemical and that the Gospel is written by and for an isolated Jewish-Christian community struggling to deal with the legal ban from the synagogue placed on them due to their dual desire to maintain devotion to Moses and faith in Jesus as the Messiah (cf. 5.46; 9.28).

In 1975, four significant contributions related to the Johannine community debate were published—two in German and two in English—by Cullmann (translated into English one year later), Richter, Pancaro and Culpepper, respectively. Compared to Martyn, Cullmann's work exhibits noticeably less confidence in the heuristic powers of source and redaction criticism regarding the authorship, composition history and the historical situation of John's audience. He is also more sensitive to the uncertainty that plagues the task of reconstructing an original individual Johannine community. Nevertheless, Cullmann's monograph focuses mostly on the origin and nature of the community responsible for the Gospel, the religious environment out of which the Gospel came and its place within the broader scope of early Christianity.

There are two important points to make concerning Cullmann's description of the Johannine 'circle' and the overarching purpose of the Gospel. To start, he argues that the circle was born out of a group of converts from a marginal (or what he terms 'heterodox' or 'non-conformist') Judaism (1976: 32). To him, the Gospel demonstrates contact with various Jewish 'sectarian' groups, such as those represented by Samaritan religion and the Qumran scrolls, and has roots in a form of Judaism characterized by pagan syncretism. While Cullmann certainly does not accept entirely Bultmann's proposal that John is dominated by the ancient gnostic redeemer myth, he does further characterize the Gospel as being derived from a Judaism with 'pre-gnostic' features. The Johannine circle as a community founded on this form of 'syncretistic' Judaism is ultimately traced back to Jesus himself, whom Cullmann believes shared similar understandings and syncretistic practices. However, thought of in terms of its relationship to the broader world of early Christianity, Cullmann links the Johannine circle rather closely to a group of Christians called the 'Hellenists', who are represented by Stephen and his speech in Acts 7. The main point of contact between these two groups, Cullmann suggests, is their affinity to heterodox Judaism, specifically Samaritan religious thought. In this way he is sympathetic to the views of Buchanan, who argues that portions of John convey a certain implied polemic against 'the Jews' that can only be understood as coming from a Samaritan (or a Samaritan group; Buchanan 1968: 149-75). Cullmann does not say, however, that Samaritanism is the only form of heterodox Judaism to which the Gospel of John is similar. He also points to the Qumran 'sect', the Mandaean, the baptist movement (represented by John the Baptist), Jewish syncretism and gnostic Ebionitism (1976: 51). Cullmann is also semi-supportive of Bowman's theory that John's Gospel was written to a Samaritan audience (see Bowman 1958: 298-327).

Regarding the Gospel's purpose, Cullmann is not content with the Gospel's own words in 20.31: 'These things were written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you might have life in his name'. This verse, he says, is too general to be determinative of the Gospel's more specific purpose. Cullmann envisions a social-religious context for the

Gospel in which its audience is composed of those already believing in Jesus. Thus, John is meant to provide a ‘special’ testimony to the life of Jesus, demonstrating that ‘the *Christ present in his church* is already at work’ (1976: 14; original emphasis).

While Cullmann is skeptical about the certainty rendered by the results of source and redaction criticism, his work in *The Johannine Circle* is often characterized by a similar sort of uncertainty. For example, his description of the Johannine community as being derived from converts from a marginal Judaism is based more on a hypothetical historical reconstruction rather than on evidence from the Gospel itself. The argument that the community knew Jesus as a syncretistic Jew is also largely based on conjecture.

Richter’s contribution—appearing just months before his death in August 1975—fundamentally differs from the work of Martyn (for a summary and analysis of Richter’s work in English, see Matill 1977: 294–315). However, the difference lies not in his method of analysis but in his conclusions. Whereas Martyn saw a general continuity within the Johannine community, Richter attempts to map the theological views of four different communities, each of which worked on and used an early Johannine ‘basic writing’—what he calls a *Grundschrift*—to defend its views of Jesus as the Messiah (1975: 126–27). He describes these four communities in terms of their particular christological outlook: (1) Prophet-like-Moses Christology; (2) Son-of-God Christology; (3) Docetist Christology; and (4) Anti-Docetic Revisionist Christology. Richter’s analysis divides the Gospel into heavily redacted strata, with each stratum representing a different community in a different (theological) situation. At times Richter assigns parts of individual verses to different strata in order to make sense of the Gospel’s apparent theological tensions (especially regarding the issue of present vs. future eschatology). But important to note is, like Martyn, Richter thinks that the Gospel originated among Jews who believed Jesus fulfilled popular Jewish expectations, and that at later stages in the communities’ history a higher Christology developed that went beyond these expectations.

In contrast to Cullmann and Richter, Pancaro’s *The Law in the Fourth Gospel* is very much in line with the sort of reconstruction proposed by Martyn, as he too places great emphasis on the Jewish–Christian conflict with the synagogue and uses comparison with the Synoptics as a means to draw out distinctive features of the Johannine presentation of this conflict. While Pancaro does not come to wildly different conclusions about the Gospel’s community, his 561-page study is far more comprehensive than Martyn’s and represents one of the first adaptations of Martyn’s *History and Theology*. As its title suggests, the volume is nearly entirely devoted to investigating the relationship between Jesus and the law in the Fourth Gospel and to elucidating this theme as an indicator of the historical situation involving the Johannine community (he uses the term ‘church’) and the Jewish synagogue (see 1975: 489–546). Pancaro believes that a major

component of John's Gospel is the elevation of Jesus' authority over that of the law. This is seen throughout the Gospel in the recurring conflict between Jesus and 'the Jews' caused by Jesus' claims about himself. Pancaro argues that this conflict did not stop with the death of Jesus; rather the Gospel demonstrates that the conflict intensified and extended to include the Johannine community, which was later forced to confront the synagogue on the issue of Jesus and the law. On this point, it is clear that Pancaro's argument that Jesus' conflict with 'the Jews' reflects the later situation of the Johannine community's conflict with the synagogue is based on his fundamental agreement with Martyn's two-level reading of the Gospel.

Although Pancaro says his study is not intended to be a full-blown analysis of the audience of John, he does note—briefly but strongly—that the evidence of his study indeed favors a Jewish audience understood as entrenched in a battle against 'normative' Judaism (1975: 510-11). That is, the Gospel was written as a response to the Jewish-Christian expulsion from the synagogue and reflects a historical situation towards the end of the first century in which some Jews were struggling to maintain their Jewish cultic identity in the wake of the temple's destruction (cf. the study of Kerr 2002, writing nearly thirty years later).

Pancaro's study is primarily text-based and full of exegetical insight. However, like Martyn, his move from the text of John to the reconstruction of the situation of the community involves the hermeneutical decision of reading the Gospel on two levels: first, as a testimony to the life of the earthly Jesus, and second, as a testimony to the contemporary circumstances of the authors and audience of the Gospel.

A fourth influential study to appear in 1975 was Culpepper's *The Johannine School*, his doctoral dissertation written under the supervision of D. Moody Smith at Duke. In it he engages the issue of whether the Johannine community should rightly be called a 'school' in light of the characteristics of 'schools' in the ancient world. The starting point for Culpepper's study is the fundamental assumption that there was in fact some sort of 'Johannine community' standing behind the Gospel and Letters in the first place. This assumption becomes especially clear in the conclusion to his history of research. Here, in an attempt to situate his own study, he remarks that 'Today most Johannine scholars are convinced that John was written in and for a definite community... One of the cutting edges of Johannine research is the effort to learn more about this community' (1975: 37). Thus, his goal is to describe the nature of an already existing community. Culpepper's approach is essentially a comparative one: he investigates nine ancient schools, compiles a list of nine characteristics that he uses to define the term 'school' and then compares them to the Johannine community by examining the Gospel and Letters. In the end, Culpepper suggests that the Johannine community is indeed rightly called a 'school' in the ancient sense of the term (see 1975: xvii, 258-59).

Most important for us is what Culpepper says regarding the nature of the Johannine school as well as the situation that gave rise to the Gospel's production. One of the key connections he makes between the Johannine community and other ancient schools is the development of 'esoteric teachings, terminology, and metaphorical systems which were understood only by members of the school' (1975: 262). Thus, based on John's 'peculiar development of metaphors, images, and phrases', Culpepper argues that the Gospel was contrived for a narrow readership that was familiar with its use of 'esoteric language'. Although he is not explicit about the metaphors, images and phrases to which he refers, they are likely the ones he discusses in a later section titled 'The Nature of the Johannine School' (1975: 271-79). Here Culpepper draws attention to the Gospel's use of words such as 'disciples', 'children', 'children of God', 'servants', 'friends', 'brothers' and the metaphors of the 'sheep' and the 'vine', which, to him, are all used by the evangelist as titles for the community. In view of their occurrence (plus other terms such as *τηρέω* and *μένω* in the context of 'keeping' or 'remaining' in Jesus' teachings, cf. Jn 15.9-25), Culpepper identifies 'discipleship' as a controlling theme in John. This—coupled with the Gospel's use/interpretation of the Old Testament—leads him to suggest that the community was actively engaged in the study of the Scriptures and that obedience to the teachings of Jesus was a primary concern within the community, especially since their obedience to Jesus had been directly put to the test in light of the community's conflict with the synagogue. Thus, similar to Cullmann, Culpepper contends that the purpose of the Gospel was to strengthen the faith of the entire community, but particularly those who may have been tempted to deny the faith (i.e., leave the community) or who were on the verge of confessing Jesus as the Christ (i.e., entering the community).

While the majority of Culpepper's work is not even on the Johannine literature (chs. 2–11 are analyses of ancient schools; only ch. 12 is on the Johannine school), it remains one of the influential treatments of the Johannine community, although not many scholars, if any, have picked up on the term 'school' to describe the community (also noted by Klink 2007: 31). Furthermore, Culpepper is open to the same methodological criticism as Martyn, since he adopts Martyn's two-level hermeneutic: what evidence does the Gospel give that justifies a two-level reading? How can one move with any certainty from the simple observation of John's frequent use of *μαθητής* to the conclusion that the decision to stay in or leave the community was a major struggle for its members? Though Culpepper's description of the community is provocative, it ultimately requires too many assumptions about John's historical situation and its use of language.

In 1979, Raymond Brown published his *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*, which was intended to build on and pull together his perspective on Johannine Christianity put forth with less development in his two-volume Anchor Bible commentary (1966, 1970). Like Cullmann, Brown is refreshingly skeptical

about the level of certainty that comes with attempting to reconstruct the original Johannine community through traditional source and redaction models (1979: 18-20). He even retains this healthy level of skepticism regarding his own reconstruction (see 1979: 7). Nevertheless, Brown's primary goal is to give a history of the life of the community by adopting the multi-level reading of the Gospel initiated by Wellhausen and Bultmann and applied thoroughly by Martyn.

Brown posits four distinct phases in the community's development, suggesting that the Gospel was edited to meet new goals as the life-situation of the community changed. Phase One of his reconstruction is the 'pre-Gospel era', which stretched over three decades of the mid-first century (50s-late 80s; see 1979: 25-58). This phase is characterized by the very beginnings of the community, and is represented by references in the Gospel to the destruction of the temple in 11.48 and various Palestinian places and customs. It also included the rise of tension between Johannine Christians and synagogue leaders, although this tension did not materialize in the community's expulsion from the synagogue until just before Phase Two of its development.

For us, Phase Two is the most relevant portion of Brown's reconstruction, since it describes the *Sitz im Leben* of the Johannine community at the time the Gospel was penned (ca. 90; see 1979: 59-91). At this point expulsion from the synagogue is in the community's recent memory, yet there is a persistence of persecution from 'the Jews'. This phase reflects the community's insistence on a high Christology, which put it into further conflict with the unbelieving Jewish leadership but also with other Christian groups. Thus, Brown sees a major task of the Gospel being the portrayal of the community's relationships to 'outsiders'. To him, John—more than any other Gospel—constructs its community's relationships around a binary opposition: on the one hand, internal love for its own members (e.g., 13.34-35), and on the other, external opposition (e.g., 'the Jews', although 'external opposition' is understood as those who are simply non-Johannine, even if Christian). However, Brown rejects the idea, contra Culpepper (see above) and Meeks (see below), that the Gospel represents a community so insular that it developed a sort of esoteric language that could only be understood by its own members. Therefore, Brown says, '[t]he Gospel is not an in-group manifesto meant as a triumph over outsiders; its goal is to challenge the Johannine community itself to understand Jesus more deeply (20:31)' (1979: 62). However, while John may not intend to depict the 'triumph' of the community over other groups, Brown still conceives of a very narrow audience for the Gospel, which does little to dismantle the idea that it employs 'esoteric' language.

For Phases Three and Four, Brown employs data from the Johannine Letters. He believes Phase Three represents the time the Letters were written (ca. 100; see 1979: 93-164). At this point the Johannine community had become divided (cf. 1 Jn 2.19). The division centers on two disciples within the original community who interpreted the Gospel in opposite ways regarding theological issues

such as Christology, ethics, eschatology and pneumatology. Thus, the Letters were written by the leader of the more conservative group of Johannine Christians and constitute his attempts to prevent false teachers from further infiltrating the community. In the fourth phase the Johannine communities had altogether dissolved, the secessionist group likely integrating with groups of gnostics, docetists and other heterodox groups, while the adherents to the writer of 1 John merged with orthodox groups—or ‘the church catholic’—mentioned by Ignatius in the second century.

Other studies related to the Johannine community worth mentioning here that continue in this historical-critical vein (but focus on various issues) are: Fortna (1970, 1988), which focus on the source and redactional origins of the Gospel; Wengst (1983), which argues that the geographic origins/setting of the conflict of John’s community is the northern Transjordan; Onuki (1984), which focuses on the theological function of Johannine ‘dualism’ in creating various horizons of meaning within the Gospel—the life of Jesus, the recent circumstances of the community and the future life of the community. However, for Onuki, the community itself is not sectarian, since it has been entrusted with the task of preaching salvation to ‘the world’. Von Wahlde (1989, 2010) focus on reconstructing the compositional history of the Gospel and thus the theological development of the community; and Painter (1993) focuses on the history of the community as revolving around its search for the Messiah.

The Johannine Community and Social-Scientific Criticism

A turning point in scholarship on the Johannine community, and one of the first works with an explicit interest in applying sociological categories to the study of the Fourth Gospel, was Wayne Meeks’s 1972 *JBL* article ‘The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism’. Meeks uses as his starting point Bultmann’s emphasis on the gnostic descending/ascending redeemer and the concept of ‘myth’. By adapting a model of structural social anthropology (as articulated especially by Claude Lévi-Strauss) and categories from the sociology of knowledge (based on Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann), Meeks traces the descending/ascending theme throughout the Gospel, suggesting the need to understand this specific myth in terms of its social function within the symbolic world of the Johannine community (1972: 49).

While the dominant portion of the article comprises Meeks’s summary of the descending/ascending theme at certain places in the Gospel (particularly in Jesus’ dialogue with Nicodemus in ch. 3), his conclusions about the theme are provocative and relevant here. First, Meeks notes that descending/ascending appears only in direct discourse, never in narrative, and is most often used in contexts where either certain characters misunderstand Jesus, or Jesus’

statements about himself are ambiguous. This purposeful ambiguity, Meeks says, is characteristic of Johannine language as a whole (see 1972: 56). He argues that these misunderstandings and ambiguities surrounding the descending/ascending motif are clarified later by narrative portions 'so that the internal tensions of the material being work in a progressive, didactic spiral' (1972: 56). In light of the dialectical relationship between the theme in discourse and its explanation in narrative, Meeks contends that the main literary purpose of Jesus' descending/ascending is to emphasize his 'strangeness' and his incomprehensibility, chiefly among 'the Jews' (1972: 57, 58). This is understood then to be replicated by the experience of the Johannine community. Second, the literary perspective on the progressively developing nature of the Gospel's material leads Meeks to suggest that only readers with prior, special information would have been able to understand this ambiguous language and symbolism and thus avoid the confusion displayed by characters in the Gospel like Nicodemus. This literary observation is fundamental to Meeks's argument because based on it he takes the step towards a sociological reconstruction of an isolated, radically alienated Johannine community (and thus a 'sect'), constituting the only readers with insider knowledge to understand the esoteric language of descending/ascending woven throughout the Gospel (1972: 63).

Meeks's study has been influential for those coming after him, as it attempts to make sense of Johannine 'symbols' in terms of their function within a specific social context. However, while Meeks's article is innovative in some ways, to a significant extent it depends on the prior work of Martyn, especially with reference to Martyn's two-level hermeneutic. A further issue is Meeks's apparent equation of ambiguous language in John with esoteric language. That is, it is very difficult to see why the progressive development of material (from ambiguity to clarity) necessitates seeing an isolated community of insiders as the intended readership of the Gospel. The idea that the evangelist does indeed clarify ambiguous symbols at later points in the narrative would seem to suggest the opposite—that the author expected the Gospel to be read by people who were not part of an isolated insider group but rather needed clarification of certain elements that were unfamiliar. Thus, while the sociological concerns of Meeks can be appreciated, his study makes assumptions about how language functions in the construction of social contexts (i.e., ambiguity = isolated community of insiders) without analyzing the language of John itself.

Olsson's 1974 monograph *Structure and Meaning in the Fourth Gospel* and Malina's 1985 essay 'The Gospel of John in Sociolinguistic Perspective' represent significantly different kinds of treatment of the Gospel in general and the situation of the Johannine community specifically (or what Malina calls 'John's collectivity'; see 1985: 47), since they both employ elements of sociolinguistic theory.

Olsson's study is not directly related to the Johannine community, but it does make claims that have a direct impact on the issue. While his work is partly influenced by German text linguistics, which developed significantly during the 1960s and early 1970s, the work mostly adopts methods from what he calls 'American discourse analysis'. Olsson finds the generative-transformational approach of Eugene Nida the most helpful because of its focus on semantic structures and 'discourse universals', which are seen to constrain and govern the character of a given discourse. According to Olsson, there are eight discourse universals that provide any discourse with semantic structure. Briefly, they are (1) terminal features, (2) transitions, (3) temporal relations, (4) spatial relations, (5) logical relations, (6) participant identification, (7) foregrounding and backgrounding and (8) the involvement of the author (1974: 14). For Olsson, the focus on semantic structure is key, since he believes that it is directly related to the intention of the author and the message of the text, which is, above all, his primary concern.

One of Olsson's main goals is to determine the text-type of two portions of John's Gospel: the narrative text of 2.1-11 and the dialogue text of 4.1-42. In the end he proposes that 2.1-11 should be considered a 'symbolic narrative text with many allusive elements', and that 4.1-42 should be considered a 'strongly "screened" text' (1974: 114, 257). His analysis leads him to conclude that these texts are 'deeply rooted in a Jewish environment', specifically in a synagogue environment due to their 'special language and use of the Scriptures' (1974: 286). Thus, the texts' use of such material indicates a *Sitz im Leben* in a Christianized form of Jewish worship. Though Olsson is slightly less concerned with socio-historical issues, he clearly intends his text-centered study to produce results that are relevant to a description of the social context in which John was read.

Whereas Meeks's sociological study retains and employs elements of historical criticism (e.g., issues of composition and redaction), Malina's work is almost entirely devoted to developing a sociological model that is able to interpret the social situation of John—a model which in the end exhibits little interest in traditional questions of sources, redaction history and community development. Malina bases his approach to John on the work of three sociologists, but the approach essentially rests upon the foundation of cultural anthropologist Mary Douglas's 'grid and group' model of social locations (see Douglas 1971, 1973, 1978). However, in order to situate John's Gospel as a text within this model, Malina uses two other sociological 'devices': Hayden White's metahistorical model to determine 'the type of story Jn tells', and Michael Halliday's sociolinguistic concept of 'antilanguage' to determine 'the type of language Jn uses in telling his story' (Malina 1985: 1-2; see Halliday 1978). The results of applying the three mutually informing models to John's Gospel are, first, the Fourth Gospel possesses the characteristics of weak group/low grid groups. These

groups tend to be individualistic (in relation to society at large, i.e., ‘weak group’), and within them there is a mismatch between the group’s values and its experiences. Second, the type of story the Gospel tells is ‘romanian tragedy’, its mode of argumentation is ‘formist’ and its mode of ideological implication is ‘anarchist’, which is seen in John’s group breaking away (or being expelled from) existing Jewish religious systems (1985: 10-11). Third, the language system of John’s Gospel can be described as an ‘antilanguage’, which is employed to construct a social reality for John’s audience that runs counter to the reality of (Jewish) society at large (1985: 11-17; on the various characteristics of Halliday’s notion of antilanguage, see Halliday 1978). Thus, for Malina, John’s ‘group’ represents an ‘antisociety’ within early Christianity and resembles Meeks’s depiction of the Johannine community as a secluded and alienated ‘sect’.

In 1988, Jerome Neyrey published his *An Ideology of Revolt*, which in many ways builds on the previous work of Meeks, and, to my knowledge, is the first monograph-length study to employ a social-scientific model to the Gospel of John. In the book Neyrey tries to answer the question of how the Gospel’s high Christology—particularly the Johannine ‘confession’ that Jesus is equal to God (Jn 5.18; 10.31-38), communicated in such a way that disassociates Jesus from the earthly world of the flesh—reflects the social context and experience of the Johannine community. While also retaining a historical-critical bent, Neyrey, too, applies the cultural anthropological model of Douglas and believes that by doing so he is able to determine three stages of development within the Johannine community: (1) Stage One (the earliest stage), which was characterized by the community’s missionary propaganda; (2) Stage Two was characterized by the community’s more intense claims, which is evidenced by Jesus’ claims to replace the temple, the Jewish feasts and cult; and (3) Stage Three, which is characterized by the community’s now high Christology, its rejection (i.e., ‘revolt’) of all Jewish systemic ritual and, indeed, of anything having to do with the flesh (see 1988: 115-50). Therefore, it is within the social context of the third stage that Neyrey argues the heaven/earth, flesh/spirit dichotomies in John construct the community’s ‘ideology of revolt’—‘revolt against its neighbors, both synagogue and Christian’.

In the end, Neyrey’s reconstruction of the Johannine community is much like Martyn’s and Meeks’s. His initial presupposition is that the Gospel was written in multiple stages and thus reflects the development of the community’s theology and world view. Further, he admits that he is asking the same questions that earlier form-critics did with the same goal in mind; the only difference is that he is using a model from the social sciences to address them (1988: 5-6). Lastly, Neyrey’s study, like those before him, is overly model driven. This is seen in that once he defines and establishes Douglas’s social-anthropological categories, his concern clearly becomes fitting the data from John’s Gospel into these categories rather than allowing the data to dictate categorization in the first place.

In 2005, Kåre Fuglseth published his contribution to the Johannine community debate, *Johannine Sectarianism in Perspective*. His goal is to reframe on sociological grounds the pursuit of a ‘community’ standing behind the text of the Fourth Gospel. While cautiously concluding that there was indeed a ‘community’ behind John’s Gospel, Fuglseth combats the idea that the community should be called a ‘sect’ as many previous studies have done. He argues this by comparing the social relationships evidenced in the Gospel of John, Philo and Qumran, using the attitude of each toward the temple as a test case. To do this he develops three separate models to evaluate each corpus of literature: a rejection model, an acceptance model and a conjunction model (2005: 175), which correlate to three categories of ‘qualified groups’ (i.e., not a general audience): sect, parent-body (church), cult (2005: 55, 62–64). After applying these models, Fuglseth concludes that the rejection model best explains the Qumran literature as representative of a sect, i.e., a separatist movement being an offshoot of an original religion; that the acceptance model adequately explains the Philonic literature as representative of a parent-body, i.e., an institutional religion in little tension with the surrounding social environment; and that the conjunction model best explains John’s Gospel as representative of a ‘cultic’ community, i.e., a group that claims ‘to be different and justify the difference by a new revelation or new insight that changes the original tradition’ (2005: 55). Thus, for Fuglseth, the Johannine community is neither a high-tension exclusivist sect nor a non-tension unqualified group; John does indeed evidence several ‘high-tension’ issues (e.g., its attitude toward the temple), but such issues are resolved by a ‘new insight’ rather than a desire to revamp the traditional institution. The type of community depicted by Fuglseth, then, is quite nuanced as it is seen in the context of other ancient ‘communities’ and is different than those depicted by Meeks and Malina.

Dissenting Voices within the Johannine Community Debate

The 1998 publication of *The Gospels for All Christians*, a collection of articles written by a group of British scholars and edited by Bauckham, marked another turning point in Johannine scholarship (though the book treats all four Gospels), and it appears to represent the direction that a good deal of English-speaking Gospel scholarship is currently heading (for a critique of the volume, see Sim 2001: 3–27). The volume contains seven articles, but none has been more influential than Bauckham’s ‘For Whom Were the Gospels Written?’ In it Bauckham argues that the hypothesis that the Gospels were written to individual, isolated communities has been almost exclusively assumed rather than argued, and he suggests that the apparent ‘success’ of the community hermeneutic has tended to stifle debate (see esp. 1998b: 9–26; Bauckham says that this is particularly true of Martyn’s work on John [p. 19]). In contrast, for Bauckham the Gospels were

written with a broad Christian audience in mind and were meant to circulate among a broad network of Christian communities.

Bauckham's argument rests on three general points. First, he attacks the notion that the Gospels can be approached hermeneutically like the Pauline epistles, that is, in the same way as one approaches an explicitly context- and occasion-specific text like Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. The concern here for Bauckham is the need to consider the genre of the Gospels. If, as Burridge 2004 has argued, the Gospels are a form of Greco-Roman biography, what implications might this mean for the Gospels' implied readership? Bauckham believes it unlikely that readers of ancient biographies would expect these literary works to address very specific needs of an isolated community of people. Rather a biography's 'relevance would be pitched in relatively broad terms for any competent reader' (1998b: 28). Second, Bauckham highlights the fact that the Gospels were written down in the first place. The purpose of a *written* Gospel would have been to communicate with groups of people to whom one could not have spoken orally. This principle is exemplified in Paul's writing letters and prompts the question as to why a Gospel writer would have written for his own community when there was ample opportunity to teach orally and in person. Third, Bauckham suggests that the character of the early Christian movement, as 'a network of communities with constant, close communication among themselves', speaks against the idea that a Gospel was written only for one's own community (1998b: 30).

Bauckham's analysis has had an impact particularly upon studies of the Johannine community (see also his article specifically on the audience of John in Bauckham 2001: 101-111). In place of the dominant assumption of a symbiotic relationship between the text of John and the circumstances of an individual community, Bauckham's work has forced Johannine scholars to reconsider the possibilities of a single author (who perhaps was an eyewitness of the life and ministry of Jesus, e.g., the Beloved Disciple), a closer relationship between John and the Synoptics and a larger quantity of historical data recounted in the Fourth Gospel (on these issues, see, e.g., Anderson, Just and Thatcher 2007, 2009; Anderson 1996, 2006; Byrskog 2000; D. Smith 2001; Mackay 2004; and Lang 1999).

While *The Gospels for All Christians* was a paradigm shifting moment for Gospel scholarship, the seeds of this shift, as Klink rightly mentions, had been sown in the years leading up to its publication (Klink 2010: 5-13). Such a seed for Johannine scholarship was the publication of Brodie's *The Quest for the Origin of John's Gospel* (1993), in which Brodie argues that the fourth evangelist was closely connected to the Synoptic (and thus 'mainline Christian') tradition, and that he was in no way a marginal voice writing to a marginal community. Instead John's Gospel originated in the heart of the early Christian church as a prophetic voice, in some ways critiquing traditional church leaders (i.e., Peter) as well as 'the world' and 'the Jews', but in other ways seeking to bring unity to the church (see pp. 144-52). In this way, Brodie's argument stands in direct contrast

to earlier models that see John as a polemical voice, reflecting a separationist community in conflict with other Christian communities (see, e.g., Whitacre 1982; Woll 1981). Another precursor to Bauckham's work can be found in Hengel 1993. Here Hengel also expresses skepticism towards the ability (and helpfulness) of reconstructing a Johannine community, and is clearly critical of the notion that a community was responsible for the various stages of the Gospel's composition (see esp. 1993: 248-52). Similar negative views are expressed in Hengel (2000: 106-107).

As one of Bauckham's students, Klink advances a similar line of thinking in his *The Sheep of the Fold* (2007; see also his 2010 edited volume *The Audience of the Gospels*). The bulk of Klink's book is devoted to three tasks. His primary objective is to (re)define the term 'community' as it is applied to early Christianity. Instead of defining the term territorially, Klink defines it relationally, making the Fourth Gospel (as well as the Synoptics) 'intended for "any and every Christian"' (2007: 63). Thus, a common Christian identity would have allowed any number of Christian groups spread across the Roman empire to successfully read and participate in John's story of Jesus.

Klink's second objective is to reframe the Gospel community debate in terms of the Gospels' literary genre. Here he attempts to answer such questions as, how does a Gospel text reveal its audience? And, how would first-century readers have understood the story told by a Gospel? Asking these questions leads Klink to essential agreement with Burridge on the genre of the Gospels, i.e., that they are Greco-Roman biography. Being of the biographical genre would suggest, then, that the Gospels were written with 'types of people...in mind', and that it is unlikely that they were intended for one specific community (2007: 114). In his more recent work (Klink 2010: 1-26), Klink notes an article by J. Smith (2007) that advances a similar understanding of the audience and function of ancient Greco-Roman biography, although Klink gives no extended interaction with the piece. Smith proposes four categories of sub-genre that he believes may have potential application to the canonical Gospels: (1) ancient-definite, (2) contemporary-definite, (3) ancient-indefinite and (4) contemporary-indefinite. The ancient/contemporary distinction refers to whether or not the subject of the biography existed within the author's living memory, and the definite/indefinite distinction refers to whether or not the biography was intended for a definite audience. However, it is important to note that, for Smith, even 'definite' biographies were probably never intended for very restricted audiences or 'communities' (see 2007: 203-211). Thus, for Klink, a reading strategy rooted in the genre of John's Gospel provides a much more solid foundation than Martyn's two-level approach.

Klink's third major objective is to analyze the function of John's Gospel within early Christianity. He does this chiefly by considering the various characters in the Gospel, tracing the theme of mission and proposing that instead of characters

representing specific groups in conflict, they rather represent various (Christian) readers (or ‘witnesses’) that the Gospel means to bring into unity. John, then, is seen ‘to have a rhetorical [as opposed to polemical] witness that included a specific purpose of invitation, a mission rooted in the very subject of the biography, and a goal of being included in the wider early Christian movement’ (2007: 246). In arguing this, Klink takes the minority perspective that John’s Gospel is an ‘evangelistic’ Gospel, meaning that the Gospel ‘is aimed not just at different “types of readers”, but also at different “types of faith”’ (2007: 250).

Synthesis and a Potential Direction of Future Exploration

In some ways, the debate over the Johannine community—specifically its nature and situation as the audience of John’s Gospel—has come full circle and returned to where it began many years before Martyn’s study appeared. Traditional perspectives on the origins of John were first challenged as early as the late 1700s (see Culpepper 1975: 1-3), with the rise of form criticism in the mid-nineteenth century acting as a catalyst for such challenges. The peak of the historical-critical paradigm in Johannine scholarship is seen in the works surveyed above. However, the introduction of methods from the social sciences to answer the ‘Johannine Question’—while asking similar questions and arriving at similar answers as previous form critics—exemplifies the dissatisfaction that arose regarding historical criticism’s ability to address issues surrounding the social context of John’s Gospel. Such dissatisfaction is seen in the following comments, most of which are made by scholars who are themselves historical critics: Wengst (1983: 32 n. 84) equates aspects of Brown’s reconstruction with seeing ghosts in the dark, saying: ‘And in the dark one is not necessarily protected from seeing ghosts. Especially the last article of Brown seems to me to have succumbed to this risk’ (translation mine). Wengst’s own reconstruction is considered by Hengel to be an ‘invention of scholarly fancy’ (Hengel 1989: 116). Canonical critic B. Childs accuses such historical reconstructions of being ‘creative imaginations’ (1984: 483). Inherent in these comments is the recognition that there is simply not enough evidence to attempt such historical reconstructions, or at least such detailed ones as have been proposed in the past. We only have the text—an instance of language in use—with which to work. The malcontent accompanying the perpetuation of old questions and insufficient results, even among sociological studies, created an environment within Johannine studies in the latter part of the twentieth century that lent itself to the asking of new questions—although ‘new’ is probably not quite an accurate description. The paradigm shift set in motion by Bauckham’s *The Gospels for All Christians*, I suggest, is in essence a shift back to a scholarly setting that allows for the reconsideration of traditional perspectives on issues such as the authorship, audience and historical value of John’s Gospel.

At this point, I wish to offer a brief suggestion regarding a potential direction of future exploration in the Johannine community debate. From my perspective, the survey above indicates that the majority of approaches over the past fifty years or so have been more prescriptive and model-driven rather than descriptive and data-driven. That is, the tendency has been for scholars to develop historical or sociological constructs with the goal of fitting the text of John within the particular construct. This tendency has at times led to conclusions that are based very little on quantifiable evidence within the Gospel itself. Thus, it may be more helpful for contemporary scholars to invest their energies in the development of methods that prioritize the textual data of John while at the same time retain a deep concern for the text's social setting. In this way, methods from the field of modern linguistics may be quite fruitful for the Gospel community debate, particularly those that attempt to understand the use of linguistic patterns as the basis for a describable social situation (see, e.g., Porter 2000a, 2000b). Nevertheless, whether linguistic in orientation or otherwise, future work would benefit from a push toward methods that seek to provide quantifiable evidence within John's Gospel itself in order to engage such issues as the Gospel's audience, nature and situation.

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