

Unit 10: John: A Gospel for Insiders or Outsiders?

The narrative of the healing of a blind man, which was considered in the last unit, is widely interpreted as offering important clues about the historical situation of the Johannine community and how that situation could have affected the content and development of the Gospel. The references to 'being cast out of the synagogue' (9:22; 12:42; 16:2) are said to imply a context of conflict between Johannine Christians and 'the Jews', and that this resulted in the expulsion of believers from the synagogue. Building on J. Louis Martyn's two-level reading of the Gospel, it is proposed that the community's own experiences are represented in the narrative, leading to the reshaping of earlier tradition in order to reflect that community's history.

To define the historical and social setting of this community, scholars appeal in particular to social-scientific biblical criticism. This interpretative approach employs the methods and results of the social sciences, including sociology, cultural anthropology, psychology and sociolinguistics, in an attempt to determine the meaning of biblical texts within their social and cultural contexts. One social-scientific model widely applied to New Testament study is what is known as 'sociology of knowledge'. This phenomenon, developed by the social scientists P.L. Berger and T. Luckmann, works with the principle that knowledge is *socially constructed* and that the ideas and language expressed in a text are developed from *social realities*. Sociology of knowledge therefore seeks to examine how a particular group of people interprets its social reality and how it endeavours to maintain its own particular social structure. Two tasks therefore need to be undertaken. First, an attempt must be made to reconstruct the worldview of a community or group (what can be learnt about its values, ideals and circumstances in socio-economic and cultural terms). The second task is to discover how the worldview of a group serves to legitimate and maintain its own particular social structure.

In the case of John's Gospel, the question is this: how do the religious ideas and language expressed in the Gospel enable us to gain insights into the kind of community for which the Gospel was written? John, it is argued by some scholars, is a text derived from an ideologically and sociologically closed group due to a crisis that led them to be cut off from much that had given identity and structure to their lives. Expulsion from the synagogue would have involved

social isolation and alienation, forcing the group to turn inward upon itself (that is, become an introversionist group), while its own Jewish-Christian traditions and beliefs now became the source of a new social context. By focusing on the features identified in sociology of knowledge as characteristic of sects, it is claimed that John's Gospel fulfils the following sociological definitions of a text written by a sect:

- it expresses a rejection of 'the world' (cf. Jn 17:16) and understands its community to be separated from the world (references to the disciples being hated by the world; 15:18-19; 16:2; 17:14), but particularly from the kind of Judaism that expelled believers from the synagogue ('the Jews'). It seems that the kind of sectarianism reflected in the Gospel is directed at Judaism rather than at other Christ-believers;
- a claim to the possession of a unique and special truth (14:6) which is only available to those who belong to the group;
- group membership is based on religious experience or knowledge (17:3);
- there is intimate fellowship within the group (13:12-20, 34; 15:12);
- a dualistic view of reality (cf. 8:23): believers are no longer associated with the earthly realm (the world below) because of their new status as the children of God (born from above); this is a reality expressed through binary opposites (light and darkness, truth and falsehood, spirit and flesh), also attested in the literature of the Qumran community, which is also defined as a sectarian community removed from 'the world'.

In other words, John's Gospel is a text about a small and isolated group, struggling against the power of the Jewish synagogue, existing on the fringes of the early Christian movement.

In an important article on this subject Wayne Meeks analyses the particular social worldview and peculiar language used in John's Gospel on the basis of a detailed analysis of Jesus' discourse with Nicodemus (John 3). Nicodemus, a Jewish teacher, finds Jesus incomprehensible; the prominence of the descent-ascent motif in the chapter suggests that Jesus is to be understood here as the 'man from heaven' who speaks a language 'from above' and who brings knowledge of God to the world. Nicodemus is told that a person cannot enter God's kingdom unless born 'from above'; since he interprets this in its crudest form (3:4: a return to his mother's womb) he shows that he is not 'from above' but from below (3:6-8). The dialogue with Nicodemus then becomes a monologue, first by Jesus (3:10-15), then by the narrator

(3:16-21) who explicates the true meaning of Jesus' words (3:11). This dynamic interaction between different levels of meaning is a literary strategy encountered elsewhere in Jesus' discourse with 'the Jews', who also misunderstand Jesus' enigmatic sayings. According to Meeks, texts like John 3 function as a two-storey narrative imposing special meaning on key words. Only some people understand Jesus (those within the community), while most do not grasp him at all. Members of the community thus align themselves with Jesus; they, like him, have been misunderstood, rejected, and alienated from the world. What Meeks highlights in this article is the nature and function of John's language; if Nicodemus symbolizes the incomprehension of outsiders for whom the language of the Johannine Jesus is unintelligible, this is contrasted with community members, who fully comprehend this language in virtue of their community in-group identity. There is an attempt, through its language, to disassociate the community from 'the world', and this alienation produces a socially exclusive language. The language and symbolism of John's Gospel is therefore interpreted as the language of a sectarian community, an inward-looking group. Meeks states: 'It could hardly be regarded as a missionary tract, for we may imagine that only a very rare outsider would get past the barrier of its closed metaphorical system. It is a book for *insiders*, for if one already belonged to the Johannine community, then we may presume that the manifold bits of tradition that have taken distinctive form in the Johannine circle...would be immediately recognizable, the double entendre which produces mystified and stupid questions from the fictional dialogue partners... would be acknowledged by a knowing and superior smile' (p. 193).

But what does it mean to speak of John's special community language - one whose distinctiveness is repeatedly accentuated through the technique of misunderstanding? This coded language, it is claimed, was developed by John and/or his community members and is only understood by them. For those who do not share the symbolic worldview and convictions of the community, it functions as a closed language. This is what has recently been defined in sociolinguistic terms as an 'antilanguage', one which seeks to create an alternative or counter-reality set against the outside world and is largely incomprehensible to the outside world because of its specialized features (Bruce Malina and R. L. Rohrbaugh). John's so-called antilanguage is defined as the use of everyday language imbued with new meaning: the use of new words to express a reality that is not usually referred to with these words (belief = being

born of God, abiding in him, receiving him; seeing glory); the use of many different words to refer to one reality (salvation = light, truth, from above, love, spirit); the metaphorical use of words in a new sense (eternal life = bread, water, light); use of word-plays and double meanings (*anôthen*: above/again; *hydôr zôn*: living/running water; *hypsoô*: lift up/exalt). This coded language is said to bewilder those on the outside, but confirms the self-identity of John and the community members as insiders.

Sociological studies of the so-called Johannine community continue to be influential, although they have not been spared from criticism. It is noted, for example, that they draw heavily on only some parts of John's Gospel, without paying proper heed to the function of the Gospel narrative as a whole. Proponents of such theories are therefore criticized for their confidence that, through a 'mirror reading' or two-level interpretation of John, they are able to provide a detailed historical reconstruction of the community for which this Gospel was written. The most direct form of critical response to John as a community-oriented document has come in a collection of essays edited by Richard Bauckham (*The Gospel for All Christians*), which challenges the prevalent view that the four canonical gospels were primarily directed at the evangelists' own communities. Rather the gospels, from the outset, were intended for general circulation around the churches of the early Christian movement. These communities, it is claimed, formed a network of communities in close connection with each other.

With regard to the issue of possible expulsion from synagogues, Bauckham proposes that this would have been the case in diaspora cities all over the Roman Empire where Christians continued to worship in synagogues in the late first century (p. 23). An immediate response to this argument, of course, is that no other gospel mentions such expulsion (only synagogue discipline) and so the suggestion that Christians everywhere were expelled from the synagogue must remain an open question. Certainly, it cannot be *assumed* that the four gospels were written for particular communities. But this is not to deny that, in one or more cases, the circumstances of an individual group are being addressed and that these documents, whatever their aims, have emerged from specific communities. In the case of John, the references to what were perhaps local incidents of expulsion reflect, in all probability, actual circumstances rather than abstract observations, whereas the view that John's Gospel originates from and addresses a

particular group finds support in its direct use of ‘community’ language: the use of ‘we’ language in such important verses as ‘and we have beheld his glory’ (1:14; cf. 1:16; 21:24). The tendency in the recent attempt at interpreting John as a ‘Gospel for all Christians’ is to set up an either-or scenario: either John’s Gospel was written *purely* for its own community (which Bauckham *et al.* reject) or it was written for *all* Christians. An alternative more mediating view is also possible: John’s Gospel was written in the context of and addressed the needs of an immediate community, but at the same time was aware that its message would or could appeal to a wider audience.

Thus, perhaps the most debatable issue in sociolinguistic analyses of John’s text is their claim that the nature of the Gospel’s language suggests that it was a text written by a totally isolated community, a book directed solely at insiders - and for their consumption alone. Proponents of the ‘antilanguage’ theory state unreservedly that John’s Gospel amounts to a closed system geared towards exclusion rather than inclusion, although there are hints in Meeks’ article that he does not want to draw such uncompromising conclusions: he refers at one point to the Johannine text as capable of generating the response of rejection or fascination (p. 192) and acknowledges that, despite those who misunderstand, there are those who do respond to Jesus’ signs and words, and through their coming to faith are, and I quote, ‘progressively enlightened and drawn into the intense intimacy with Jesus, until they, like him are not “of this world”’ (p. 193). This more nuanced approach suggests that closer examination of the function of John’s distinctive language is warranted. Is it a closed code, one that defies comprehension or interpretation by those who are outsiders, or does it also form part of the process of ‘coming to faith’?

Certainly no one would deny the elusive nature of its language, memorably described as that ‘in which a child can wade and an elephant can swim’, both shallow and deep at the same time (quoted by R. Kysar, *Fourth Evangelist*, 6, as a paraphrase of the words of Gregory the Great). But what is its purpose? If we interpret the text as a process of communication between the author and reader, we should also be sensitive to the rhetorical strategies of the Gospel as a whole. A number of factors suggest that, in terms of its content and structure, the special language of John belongs to the strategy of drawing readers or hearers into the narrative rather than shutting them out, an invitation rather than direct alienation.

a) In the first place, John's Gospel is a text full of explanations. On many occasions the author provides parenthetical remarks to ensure that the readers/hearers are kept on track. This can include fairly basic information about Jewish feasts or customs (2:6; 6:4; 18:28; 19:40), but it also extends to explanations about the meaning of Jesus' elusive pronouncements, a phenomenon which is difficult to reconcile with the description of Johannine language as the 'barrier of a closed metaphorical system' and that it is geared only towards insiders to whom such language would be 'immediately recognizable'. In 7:39, for example, John informs the reader that the living water to which Jesus referred was a reference to 'the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive'. While Holy Spirit as water belongs to John's special language, the inclusion of such comments does not point to the alienating function of that language (cf. also 2:17; 6:71; 12:33).

b) Secondly, the technique of misunderstanding is not a device limited to such unreceptive characters as Nicodemus and 'the Jews' (those who are said to represent 'the world' and the incomprehension of outsiders) but can be used with reference to Jesus' disciples and even a non-Jewish individual like the Samaritan woman. In many such cases, Jesus' dialogue partners do not remain in the dark but come to faith, and, in the case of the Samaritan woman, she takes the message to others. During her dialogue with Jesus, she moves gradually from misunderstanding to comprehension; a process of transformation is taking place that enables her to move from being an outsider to an insider. Such discourses also possess the didactic function of explaining images through the dynamic of the narrative (4:10-15, 31-34; 8:31-36); for even if the characters in the text do not always understand, this is not the case with the readers/hearers who act as observers and interpreters outside the narrative. Is it not the aim of such symbolic language to invite readers/hearers to explore deeper and to go beyond the level of the surface text? The tendency in sociological studies of John has been to reduce its elusive language (riddles) and technique of misunderstanding to their social function (the exclusion of outsiders and the support of insiders), but this denies that language any role in the Gospel's distinctive theology of revelation – a narrative that perpetually depicts people as 'searching' for Jesus (1:38; 20:15).

c) There is also evidence in the Gospel of what can be called 'a strategy of sequential disclosure', in the sense that the meaning of John's special language is disclosed step-by-step at

various junctures in the text. This applies, for example, to the enigmatic use of the verb ‘to lift up’ (in a literal sense), which in Greek can also, in a metaphorical sense, mean ‘to exalt’. It is a linguistic conundrum set out three times in the Gospel (3:14; 8:28; 12:32), but it is only on the third occasion that its double meaning connotation is explained: ‘He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die’ (12:33). Once again, this word belongs to the distinctively Johannine vocabulary, but the polyvalent force of its use (that Jesus’ death is both his lifting up on the cross and his exaltation) would not, in view of the explanation offered in the twelfth chapter, be totally lost on those entering the community or on those encountering the Gospel for the first time. Another case of gradual unfolding in the narrative can be detected in its use of the term ‘hour’ (2:4; 7:6, 8; 12:23, 27; 13:1; 17:1) and the expression *egô eimi* without a metaphor: here there is movement from a statement of self-identification (4:26) to a steady disclosure of its revelatory and salvific significance (8:24, 28, 58; 13:19), and culminating in the dramatic enactment of its ‘absolute’ force in the narrative of Jesus’ arrest.

Some years ago I examined a doctoral thesis that applied the strategy of sequential disclosure to the prologue of John’s Gospel. It could be argued that John 1:1-18 defies such a strategy in that it provides the key to John’s christological convictions from the outset. But read as an initial *crossing of the threshold*, a linear development can be detected within the prologue. It moves gradually from the introduction to the resemanticization (shift in meaning) of the term ‘logos’ (word). This term, like so many of John’s symbols, resonated for a wide range of readers because it possessed a variety of possible meanings drawn from different contexts (from its use in the Hebrew scriptures, in Greek philosophical texts, and also Stoic traditions). But in the prologue it leads to a disclosure of the identification of the Logos with Jesus, that is, a movement towards becoming part of a community centred on the author’s point of view.

If there are indicators in the Gospel that its particular language is not necessarily geared towards excluding outsiders, is it possible to identify clues that it actually sets out to include those from the outside? Certainly, one of the features of ‘sectarian’ readings of John is that they focus on the negative use of the term ‘the world’ (*kosmos*), particularly in the farewell discourse (Jn 13-17), to denote that from which the community has separated itself and rejected. This reading again results from a focus on individual passages, without

acknowledging the multifaceted use of the term ‘world’ to denote not only, in a symbolic sense, those who are opposed to Jesus, but also, in a neutral sense, God’s created world and humanity in general (3:16-17; 4:42; 17:21). Jesus’ farewell prayer in the seventeenth chapter calls for the protection of those whom Jesus is sending ‘into the world’ (17:15-19); because they are not ‘of the world’, precisely for this reason they are called to engage with the world to bring about its transformation. This call is then broadened to include those who come to faith through their witness, asking that both groups might be one, ‘so that the world may believe that you have sent me’ (17:20-21). These requests suggest that the group has not turned its back completely on the possibility of mission to the world. [Note also John 20:21-23: the task of forgiving or retaining sins is given to the community by the risen Jesus in the context of being sent. The mission is to draw people from darkness into light (1:29; 12:46).]

Whether, on the basis of such statements, it can be deduced that John’s Gospel possesses an active missionary strategy directed at outsiders continues to be debated. Could it rather have been written to sustain the Johannine community in its own mission? Much of this debate has revolved around the meaning of John’s concluding statement: ‘these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God’ (20:30-31). But determining the precise connotation of the verb ‘to believe’ here must also wrestle with a textual question. Some manuscripts read an aorist subjunctive (*pisteusēte*: ‘that you might come to believe’), which is suggestive of an evangelistic intention, while other textual witnesses read a present subjunctive (*pisteuēte*: ‘that you might continue to believe’), an encouragement of belief for those who are already Christians. Whether this denotes insiders or outsiders is difficult to determine, but what can be concluded from the language of mission used elsewhere in John is that the emphasis is as much on gathering in (4:35-38; 10:16; 11:51-52; 12:32) as it is on sending out (17:15-19; 20:21). In other words, like the narrative strategy associated with its special language, what the Gospel seeks to do is to draw people to its *distinctive understanding* of what it means to believe in Jesus as the Messiah, Son of God.

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