

The Audience of the Fourth Gospel

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During the last three decades, many important studies of the Fourth Gospel (FG) have focused attention on the so-called "Johannine Community." Such studies use this term to refer to a particular church or small group of churches in a specific locality (in some versions, the community moved from one place to another in the course of its history). FG is understood to be a product of this community, taking shape during the course of the community's history and reflecting its experiences. Most who write about the Johannine Community also assume that FG was written for this community *alone* and not with the wider Christian movement in view. Indeed, it is generally assumed that the Johannine Community had little or no contact with the wider Christian movement until perhaps the final stage of FG's redaction, the period when chapter 21 was added to the earlier work. The proposed close relationship between FG and the isolated and distinctive Johannine Community functions as an explanation for the striking differences between FG and the Synoptic Gospels. As a result, the theological distinctiveness of the Fourth Gospel, which was once attributed to the creative thought of a single Johannine author or a "Johannine School" of Christian leaders and writers, has come to be attributed to the life experience and sociological setting of the isolated Christian community within which the author of FG lived and worked.

Of course, all conclusions about this Johannine Community and its history must be deduced from the Fourth Gospel and 1-2-3 John, for there is no relevant external evidence. There are second-century traditions that attribute FG

to "John," the Beloved Disciple. Other traditions suggest that FG's original audience was the Christian community in Ephesus, one of the most prominent churches in the early Christian movement, and also suggest that FG was written for *all* churches, not just its community of origin. But modern theories about the Johannine Community are rarely able to allow more than a tiny grain of truth to these traditions about FG's original audience and usually dismiss them as incompatible with information that can be derived from the text itself. This deduced information then takes priority over the early traditions in discussions of FG's character, origins, and intended audience.

The prominence of the Johannine Community in Johannine scholarship corresponds to the increasing focus on the Matthean, Markan, and Lukan communities in the study of the Synoptics. Like the Johannine Community, these groups are understood as the particular communities within which and for which those Gospels were written. Elsewhere I have argued against this approach to the gospels in general (Bauckham 1998). Yet the assumption that each gospel was written for a specific church or group of churches has come to be widely taken for granted, despite the fact that it has never been established by serious argument. Most scholars treat this principle as virtually self-evident and have not hesitated to use it as a foundation on which to build increasingly sophisticated edifices of scholarly reconstruction. It remains, however, an unproven assumption that needs to be tested against the other, most plausible possibility that *all* the gospels were written with the intention that they should be widely circulated around *all* the churches.

In favor of the hypothesis that the early gospels were written for a broad, general Christian audience, I have elsewhere argued that the early Christian movement was not a scattering of relatively isolated, introverted communities, but rather a network of communities in constant close communication with one another. Moreover, all the evidence we have about early Christian leaders (the potential authors of a gospel) suggests that such people typically traveled widely and worked in more than one community at different times. Thus, neither the early communities nor their teachers would have been locally minded; both would have had a strong, lively, and informed sense of participation in a worldwide movement. Even rivalry and conflict between early Christian communities took place across the general network of Christian communication: it did not produce exclusive enclaves of churches which were out of communication with others. In addition, the evidence we have shows that early Christian literature circulated around the churches very rapidly, and in some cases that literature produced in one major church was deliberately launched into general circulation.

For this reason, in my view it is implausible that someone would write a gospel simply for members of the specific community in which he was then

living, with its specific, local issues determining the scope and nature of his presentation. Knowing that his work was bound to reach many other churches very quickly, the author would instead address the Christians in any and every church to which his gospel might circulate. His intended readership would not be a specific community or even a defined group of communities, however large, but rather an open and indefinite category: any and every Christian community of his time in which Greek was understood. But if the early gospels were not addressed to particular communities, we cannot expect to learn much from them about their author's own communities, even if those communities did, indeed, influence the authors' thinking and writing. On this view of the intended audience of the gospels, the Matthean, Markan, Lukan, and Johannine Communities can no longer play the hermeneutically significant role to which they have been elevated in the scholarship of the last three decades.

In the past, my discussion of this issue has been general, with examples drawn from, and conclusions applied to, the Fourth Gospel as well as the Synoptics. But there are respects in which FG is a special case. Even if my general portrait of the early Christian movement is accurate, might there not have been a Christian group in some remote spot, out of contact with other churches, in which the Fourth Gospel originated? Because Johannine scholars have increasingly tended to set the Johannine Community in just such splendid isolation, it may not be easy to persuade them that arguments about the Christian movement in general should apply to FG as a particular case. Does not this Gospel bear all the marks of a "sectarian" (i.e., an ideologically and sociologically closed) group? Does not its very special character demand an origin apart from the rest of the Christian movement? Further, the presence of 1-2-3 John to complement the evidence of FG has allowed reconstructions of the Johannine Community, including the distinct stages of its history, to be bolder and fuller than most attempts to reconstruct the communities behind the Synoptics. In any case, there are significant arguments in play in the case of FG that do not have the same importance in the case of the Synoptics. If my general argument about the intended audiences of all the gospels is to be sustained in the case of FG, it will be necessary to address specific questions of Johannine scholarship. What follows is a brief account of the way I should wish to do this.

A Two-Level Reading?

Most attempts to reconstruct the Johannine Community and its history depend on the type of two-level reading strategy pioneered by J. Louis Martyn (1979). This approach treats FG not only as the story of Jesus but also as the story of

the Johannine Community. The community, it is suggested, would have seen its own story encoded in FG's narratives about the past history of Jesus. Martyn's paradigm is based on the story of the blind man in John 9, which, in his view, represents the community's own experience of exclusion from the local synagogue, an experience that is attributed a high level of historical certainty by most scholars who have attempted to reconstruct the Johannine Community's history. From such a view of the narrative, the conclusion inevitably follows that much of FG's story about Jesus has been decisively shaped by the Johannine Community's experiences. Of course, FG is rooted in the traditions about Jesus preserved in the community, but these traditions have been reshaped and developed to reflect the community's history. Martyn's approach, and that of those who have followed his precedent, is therefore the most recent way to explain the peculiarities of the Johannine narrative that are considered not to reflect early Jesus traditions. Ironically, scholars who take this approach generally lack confidence in FG's historical value as a narrative about Jesus but display remarkable confidence in its evidence for the history of the Johannine Community.

Martyn's argument is built on the fact that the blind man in John 9 is expelled from the synagogue (9:22; cf. 12:42; 16:2). In Martyn's view, such an event is historically inconceivable during the ministry of Jesus but appears to correspond to what happened to Jewish Christians in the late first century when the *Birkhat ha-Minim* (a liturgical curse against heretics) was introduced into the synagogue liturgy. Against this argument, we should first note that the historical issue of the status of Jewish Christians in the late first century has been much debated, and it is not at all clear that what happened to Diaspora-Jewish Christians resembles what happens to the blind man in John 9. The trend of scholarly opinion is certainly against such a resemblance. Second, if it is the case that expulsion from the synagogue is anachronistic in John 9, Martyn's two-level reading of the passage is not the most obvious explanation for the problem. Anachronisms in historical writing are not uncommon, but they are not usually explained through the sort of two-level reading Martyn supposes.

More generally, the most damaging criticism of Martyn's two-level reading strategy is the fact that it has no basis in the literary genre of the Fourth Gospel. The genre of a particular text generally guides readers to the appropriate strategy of interpretation. But what genre gives its readers to understand that they should approach the story of a historical individual (here Jesus) as an encoded version of the history of their own community? Recent discussion of the gospel genre strongly favors the view that first-century readers would have recognized all four canonical gospels as a special form of Greco-Roman biography. While FG's original readers would certainly expect such a work to be relevant to their own community and situation, they would not expect it to

address the very specific circumstances of one particular community, and much less would they suspect that it required the kind of two-level reading strategy Martyn proposes. Moreover, the Fourth Gospel itself displays a strong sense of the "pastness" of the story of Jesus, temporally and geographically located in its own time and space, and not infrequently draws explicit attention to the difference between the periods before and after the resurrection of Jesus (e.g., John 2:22; 7:3-9; 12:16; 13:7). Insofar as FG says anything explicit about its own content and purpose, that purpose is described in terms of the history of Jesus (20:30-31; 21:24-25), not the history of the Johannine Community.

We should also note that the two-level reading strategy is not easy to practice, for those who take this position generally do not believe that the current version of FG's narrative can be read sequentially as a story about the Johannine Community. Rather, the sequence of events and theological developments in the history of the community can only be perceived when the various parts of FG are restored to the actual chronological order of their composition. Moreover, the two-level strategy cannot be applied to every part of the narrative and is generally applied inconsistently to the parts of the narrative to which it is applied. Not every character in FG can plausibly represent some group in the community's history, as is evident from the absence of Judas and Pilate in most reconstructions of this sort. For these reasons, every reconstruction of the Johannine Community's history based on the two-level reading strategy is riddled with arbitrariness and uncertainty. The more one realizes how complex and selective the use of this reading strategy must be, the less plausible it becomes.

A Two-Level Text?

Closely associated with the two-level reading strategy is the view that FG is a multilayered work, in which texts from various stages of the community's history have been preserved alongside one another. This perspective posits a complex history of literary redaction as the key to the Johannine Community's social and theological history. The ability to distinguish these various sources and levels of redaction depends primarily on the identification of aporias and ideological tensions between different parts of FG.

But this approach to FG's composition has not yet adequately addressed or resolved two major issues. The first concerns the relationship between interpretive approaches that appeal to discontinuities of all kinds as indications of sources and redactional layers and the newer literary-critical approaches that treat the final form of the text as a literary and rhetorical whole. In light of literary criticism's sensitivity to the strategies of the text, many of the apparent

aportas on which source critics depend are seen to be much less problematic. A passage that seems awkward to the source critic, whose judgment often amounts merely to observing that he or she "would not have written it like that," can appear quite reasonable to a critic who is attentive to the literary dynamics of the text. Thus, the conclusions of literary criticism cannot just be added to the concerns of source and redaction criticism, leaving their results intact, as most Johannine scholars seem to suppose. Instead, these conclusions must pose serious questions about the interpretation of the evidence on which the older source-oriented approaches were based.

The second issue concerns assumptions about the Fourth Evangelist's (FE) theology. If diachronic stratification of the text too often lacks literary sensitivity, it also often displays a rather wooden and overly modern reaction to the ideological tensions and seeming conceptual contradictions between the different parts of FG. We need to be much more open to the possibility that these tensions belong to the character and method of FE's theology. After all, the redactors who are generally believed to have put the various parts of FG together were evidently content with these contradictions, which they could have edited out. It is no more difficult to view these tensions as the deliberate theological strategies of a single author, and this direction of thought may lead us back to an older view about the distinctiveness of the Fourth Gospel. Perhaps we are dealing not with the product of an idiosyncratic community and its history, but rather with the work of a creative theologian who, in his long experience of teaching and on the basis of his special access to traditions about Jesus, developed his own distinctive interpretation of the history of Jesus.

In-group Language?

With this topic we reach the point where it will be possible to decisively turn the tables on those who argue that an isolated Johannine Community was the intended audience of the Fourth Gospel. The evidence to be considered in fact points to the opposite conclusion.

An influential strain of Johannine scholarship has identified the distinctive terminology and symbolism in FG as the language of a sectarian community. The Fourth Gospel, it is claimed, could only have been understood by members of the community in which this special in-group language had developed. In fact, FE even uses everyday language in a novel sense to confuse outsiders and to confirm insiders in their sense of belonging and superiority. This literary strategy is especially evident when characters in FG, notably the Jews, are depicted as misunderstanding Jesus' enigmatic sayings. At such points in the narrative, members of the Johannine Community (and only they) find them-

selves "in the know," aligned with Jesus in radical distinction from the culpable incomprehension of outsiders, whom the community would identify with the non-Christian Jews of the synagogue from which they had separated.

It should be said that this line of argument is not *primarily* concerned with the relationship between the Johannine Community and other Christian groups or the Christian movement in general, but rather with its relationship to the non-Christian world (especially Jewish, but also pagan) with which it was in daily contact. The Johannine Community is usually classified as "sectarian" in sociological terms specifically in relation to society at large. But the argument does bear on the relationship between the Johannine Community and the rest of the Christian movement, in that the in-group language of FG is not treated as the common language of all Christians but rather as the special language of the Johannine Community. Perhaps non-Johannine Christians would have some advantage over non-Christians in understanding the Fourth Gospel, but the impression one gains from scholars who take this approach is that the advantage would not be very great.

Those who are not already familiar with this line of argument may well find it surprising. In the modern church's experience, the Fourth Gospel has been seen as the most accessible of the New Testament books both to Christians with little education in the faith and to complete outsiders who have minimal knowledge of the Christian tradition. How can this be the case, given that the characters in FG so often misunderstand or are puzzled by the sayings of the Johannine Jesus? There are at least three reasons within the literary strategy of this Gospel that demonstrate that FG's special language and symbolism would be accessible to noninitiates. Against the line of argument previously cited, these three reasons also show that FG is designed precisely to introduce this in-group language to readers not already familiar with it.

First, FE sometimes explicitly explains the meaning of figurative or enigmatic sayings of Jesus (John 2:21; 6:71; 7:39; 11:13; 12:33; 13:11; cf. 11:51-52). Of these, the first example is particularly instructive. The saying at John 2:19 is the first case in FG where Jesus uses figurative language: "Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.'" As in many later instances, Jesus' words have both an obvious, literal meaning, referring to a physical reality, and also a metaphorical meaning that turns the physical image into a symbol of his salvific activity or the salvation he brings. The Jews (i.e., the Jewish leaders), however, understand only the literal sense and therefore misunderstand (2:20); indeed, not even the disciples understood Jesus' words at the time (2:22). But FE explains the meaning of the puzzling saying directly to the readers: "But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken" (2:21-22). FE surely intends

this to be an illustrative example: he will not always help his readers on later occasions, but he has shown them how to figure out what Jesus means.

Second, the misunderstandings by Jesus' hearers (disciples, Jewish leaders, individuals such as the Samaritan woman) frequently have the literary function of leading Jesus to explain the image he has used or to develop it in ways that clarify its meaning (John 3:3-8; 4:10-15; 3:1-34; 6:32-35; 8:31-36; 56-58; 10:6; 11:23-26; 14:4-6). Sometimes the characters in the narrative come to understand as a result of these explanations by Jesus, and sometimes they do not (e.g., 4:15; 10:6, 19). But in either case, the reader of FG always comes to understand. The dialogues teach the reader the Johannine language and symbolism. Hence, the symbols are often introduced and developed in Jesus' dialogues, like those with Nicodemus (John 3) and the Samaritan woman (chap. 4). Even if a symbol, at its first occurrence, is as puzzling to readers as it is to the characters in the Gospel, this is not because readers must already be familiar with it in order to understand it. Rather, it is because FE wishes to stir readers into a desire to understand, a desire that the continuing development of the dialogue then helps them to fulfill.

When read sequentially, FG progressively leads its audience into a greater understanding of its themes by initiating them step-by-step into its symbolic world. For example, at John 4:13-14 the reader learns that, in Jesus' usage, the everyday language of "water" refers to the source of eternal life that Jesus will give. Jewish or Christian readers might naturally detect such symbolism in Jesus' words to the Samaritan woman from their knowledge of the broad use of water as a symbol of the Holy Spirit. But readers who do not detect this nevertheless learn enough to follow the story, and later in the narrative they will gain the further insight that "water" symbolizes the Spirit that Jesus will give to those who believe in him (7:37-39). Of course, FE's explanations of the symbolism are never adequate, because the symbolism is not just a code that can be translated into an adequate literal description, as the sociological reduction of these symbols to an in-group language tends to suggest. The realities to which the symbols refer are transcendent realities that escape linguistic capture. This is why symbols proliferate through FG without redundancy: each new symbol moves the reader closer to what they symbolize. But FE gives sufficient explanation of the symbols to point readers in the direction of their meaning.

The third point which demonstrates that the language of FG would be accessible to noninitiates relates to the specific point that confuses the characters in the story. Specifically, the misunderstandings that occur before Jesus' resurrection involve his many enigmatic references to his coming death. FE makes it clear, especially in his paradigmatic explanation of the first of Jesus' figurative sayings (John 2:21-22), that not even the disciples could have under-

stood these references to Jesus' "glorification" (cf. 13:7; 12:16; 20:9). However, by pointing this out in 2:21-22, FE puts his readers in a better position than any of the characters in the story to understand this major theme in the words of Jesus. But the knowledge the readers have to bring to the text is not some esoteric information known only to members of the Johannine Community, but the fact that Jesus is going to be crucified and then rise from the dead. Even non-Christian readers interested enough to read FG would surely know that Christians believed this about Jesus.

None of this should be taken to suggest that readers of FG would find the text uniformly easy to understand. Jesus sometimes seems to speak in unexplained riddles (as he does also in the Synoptics). These would be more puzzling for some readers than for others but would probably be somewhat puzzling to most first-time readers. But such riddles are part of a larger literary strategy that drives readers both to think about their meaning and to read on in hope of learning their answers. A good example is the "lifted up sayings" (John 3:14-15; 8:28; 12:32-34), an instance of Johannine double entendre that combines a literal use of the verb (referring to the manner of Jesus' death: "lifted up" on the cross) with a figurative use (referring to his resurrection/exaltation). FE in fact explains the literal meaning, leaving the paradox of its concurrence with the figurative meaning to be inferred, but it is only on the last occasion when Jesus uses the figure that he provides this explanation (12:33). Such a procedure is inexplicable under the theory that this is in-group language that Johannine Christians would already know but which other readers would find impenetrably opaque. It makes sense, however, if these Johannine enigmas are meant to tease initially uncomprehending readers into theological enlightenment. To those who have not managed to penetrate the meaning through the first two occurrences of the figure "lifted up," FE gives substantial help on its third occurrence but avoids depotentiating the riddle by giving too much help too soon.

Why have scholars who read FE's language as the in-group talk of a sectarian community missed the fact that FG seems designed, on the contrary, to introduce readers to its special language and symbolism? Perhaps a focus on the stratification of FG into sources and redactional layers has distracted such scholars from the literary strategies of the narrative as a text designed to be read sequentially and as a whole. This literary approach to FG's figurative language has, in fact, inclined me to change my mind about the book's intended audience. Not only do I still think that FG was written for the church at large, I am also now inclined to think that its intended readership included interested non-Christians. The latter is not an alternative to the supposition that FG would reach its readers through circulation among the churches, since it is unlikely that Christian literature would interest or even come into the hands

of outsiders other than through the mediation of Christians. Such non-Christian readers would already have been acquainted with the Christian message by Christian friends and would have to be seriously interested. But it appears to me that FG is designed in such a way that it could be sufficiently understood by interested outsiders. These people would doubtless miss the deeper levels of meaning that would be accessible to more informed readers, but they would have been puzzled only enough to keep them reading.

It is noteworthy that most of FG's major symbolic images come from the common experience of all people of that time period: light and darkness, water, bread, vines and wine, shepherds and sheep, judgment and witness, birth and death. Many of these symbols have a background in the Hebrew Bible and Jewish tradition that would enhance their meaning for some readers, but it is rarely the case that this kind of background knowledge is required to such an extent that non-Jewish readers would be simply baffled. Such language would mean *something* to them, even if it might mean more to those who were better informed. For example, FG's account of Jesus at the Feast of Tabernacles (John 7-8) is considerably informed by the way this festival was celebrated in the first-century Jerusalem Temple (which could not be known from the Hebrew Bible). Readers with this knowledge would certainly benefit from it in their reading of these chapters, but the chapters are nevertheless quite intelligible to readers who lack this knowledge.

It is also true that most of the major Johannine images have some place in the synoptic teaching of Jesus and would therefore not be wholly unfamiliar to non-Johannine Christians. What is distinctive in FG is the extensive development of these images. Every Christian familiar with the traditional words of Jesus at the Last Supper would recognize the bread-of-life discourse in John 6 as a further development of the same images that he or she knew in a much more concise form in the Last Supper tradition. It becomes clear that FG is designed to "work" for readers from a variety of backgrounds and to continue to work for those who read it again and again it with increasing understanding. It contains riches that only a scripturally informed reader could unearth, but it also speaks accessibly to a reader with only minimal prior knowledge of Christian belief. In any case, FG is certainly not a gospel directed only to those who already understand everything it has to say.

Universal References

Our necessarily brief study of the way the language and imagery of FG function has taken us in precisely the opposite direction from the view that sees the Fourth

Gospel as a text written for an isolated Johannine Community. In fact, FG may envisage a wider readership than perhaps any other New Testament text.

A final indication that the Fourth Gospel does not reflect an introverted and isolated group of Christians, uninterested in or even alienated from the rest of the Christian movement, can be found in its use of universal language. FE's multivalent use of the word "world" includes a neutral usage in which the sense is "humanity in general." In this sense, it is the world that God loved and Jesus came to save (John 3:16-17; 4:42; 6:33; 51; 17:21; and cf. 12:32). It is hard to reconcile this repeated and quite emphatic universal perspective with the outlook of a community that deliberately set itself apart from the worldwide Christian movement.

Most commentators recognize that John 21 is also irreconcilable with such an outlook. Here the flock that Jesus commissions Peter to tend is the universal church, not the Johannine Community, a fact confirmed by the allusion to Peter's martyrdom in Rome (21:18). The chapter acknowledges Peter's generally recognized apostolic authority in the whole church, while also asserting the Beloved Disciple's less generally recognized role in the whole church. BD's special role as a witness to Jesus, which FE has already highlighted (see esp. 19:15), now becomes a role of witness to the whole church as BD writes his testimony for the whole church to read (21:24). Thus, the Beloved Disciple's witness, as well as Peter's apostolic pastorate, is given a role in the universal mission of the church, of which the miraculous catch of every kind of fish (21:5-11) functions as an acted parable.

The evidence from John 21 can, of course, be dismissed with the claim that the chapter is a later addition to a book that originally ended at 20:31, part of the last redaction of the text by a writer attempting to integrate the Johannine Community into the wider church. The alternate view, that chapter 21 is an epilogue and an integral feature of the design of FG, cannot be argued here, but it is at least suggestive that this epilogue forms so appropriate a conclusion to the reading of the rest of FG that we have explored in this essay. Once again, the issue concerns the difference between a vertical reading of the text as accumulated layers of evidence for the Johannine Community's history and a horizontal reading of the text as a literary whole. From the latter perspective, the Johannine Community (the community in which the Beloved Disciple lived at the end of his life) finally makes its one and only appearance at John 21:23: "So the rumor spread in the community that this disciple would not die. Yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but, 'If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?'" This where the Johannine Community belongs, leaving the rest of FG free to be the narrative about Jesus that it patently claims to be.