

John 9

Textual Analysis

The ninth chapter of John's Gospel describes the healing of a man blind from birth. It is the penultimate of Jesus' signs, one in which the account of the miracle is interconnected with an explanation of its symbolic significance. Several features also suggest continuity between this sign and Jesus' discourse in the previous chapter. There is no change of time; the setting within the feast of Tabernacles continues. Jesus leaves the temple (8:59) and, as he is walking along, he sees a man blind from birth (9:1). The location does change, for it is outside the temple that Jesus repeats his earlier claim: 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life' (8:12; cf. 12:46). Jesus, at the beginning of the ninth chapter, offers an enactment of this christological claim by giving sight to a man blind from birth. But this *egō eimi* pronouncement, like many others, focuses on its implications for discipleship, a theme gradually drawn out in John 9: the blind man who comes to physical sight makes the journey towards spiritual sight and faith in Jesus, but, due to the clash of opposing claims, the religious leaders are said to move increasingly towards blindness.

Despite evident links with the preceding discourse, the ninth chapter is marked by a literary and thematic unity. It is bound together not only by the vocabulary of sight, but by the themes of sin, knowledge and origins. It is also possible to divide the chapter into a series of scenes, due to the narrative technique used elsewhere by John of not allowing more than two active dialogue partners to appear on stage at the same time: Jesus and the disciples (9:1-5), Jesus and the blind man (9:6-7), the healed man and his neighbours (9:8-12), the man and the Pharisees (9:13-17), the Pharisees and the healed man's parents (9:18-23), the Pharisees and the healed man (9:24-34), Jesus and the man (9:35-38), Jesus and the Pharisees (9:39-41). On this basis there are eight scenes, while attempts to fuse the first

two scenes into one (9:1-7) to draw out the symbolic significance of seven scenes is open to debate.

The setting of these events within a series of scenes also complements the emphasis on transformation in John 9. Again, with a view to the theme of discipleship, the chapter sets out the significance of what happens to the blind man as a consequence of him having gained sight. He is intended as a model for the readers, as suggested by the fact that he becomes the central character in the middle scenes (9:8-34), the longest period for Jesus to be physically absent from the Gospel narrative. The character of the healed man also undergoes profound development, arguably more so than any other figure in the Gospel. The transformation from his physical blindness to spiritual sight embodies Jesus' claims that faith is necessary in order to move from darkness to the light (12:46) and that it is through new birth that people can 'see' the kingdom of God (3:3).

The account of the healing itself (9:6-7) is prefaced by a discussion on human responsibility prompted by the appearance of this man who has never experienced sight. The disciples' question, 'Rabbi, who has sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' (9:2), presupposes a connection between illness and sin (Num. 14:18; Tobit 3:3-4). Jesus however offers an unexpected answer by proleptically telling them that the situation exists 'so that God's works might be revealed in him' (9:3) and that his role, as long as he is in the world, is to offer light. Jesus then adopts the traditional practice of forming mud from the dust and placing the spittle on the man's eyes (cf. Mk 7:33; 8:23). This act and its consequences are narrated in the briefest of terms, demonstrating the limited focus in the chapter on the physical event of the gift of sight. A parenthetical remark notes that the pool of Siloam (cf. Isa. 8:6 LXX), in which the man is to be washed, means 'Sent' (Jn 9:7). It is the man's acceptance of the word spoken by the one sent by God (9:4), more so than the waters, that bring about his cure.

The man then undergoes questioning from his neighbours and those who have seen him begging (9:8-12). Their probing first focuses on his identity - is he the same person that

they knew - and then on the 'how' of the physical miracle. Their question about the method of the miracle not only points to their limited perspective (failing to ask about the identity of healer), but is a question posed repeatedly by the Jewish authorities through most of the chapter (9:10, 15, 16, 19, 21, 26). The healed man also testifies to the physical facts (the miracle of having received sight) and identifies Jesus at this point simply as 'the man called Jesus' (9:11).

Whether the neighbours' questions were initially innocent, other motives are suggested by their act of bringing the man to the Pharisees (9:13), confirmed by the remark that the healing took place on the Sabbath (9:14; cf. 5:1-18). At this point the probing takes more of the form of a formal interrogation, forcing the healed man to offer testimony, 'now I see' (9:15). A division (*schisma*) of opinion follows about the significance of the healing (9:17), with the issue of Jesus' identity now centred on his relationship with God. As in 5:19-30, a sabbath healing leads to questions about Jesus' origins (cf. 7:27, 28; 8:14; 19:9). Some Pharisees are convinced that he is not 'from God' because he has broken the sabbath laws;¹ others who have witnessed the signs cannot accept that he is a sinner. This division is linked to the issue of how to 'see' the signs. From the viewpoint of the healed man, it is a debate that encourages him to move to the next step in his recognition of Jesus – he is a prophet.

When the healed man's parents are called as witnesses (9:19-23), the Jewish authorities (now described as 'the Jews' rather than 'the Pharisees') move even further in the opposite direction by seeking to prove that it is a physical impossibility for a man born blind to come to sight. But the parents, the only ones who are in a position to testify, confirm that he was born blind, although they profess ignorance about the identity of the healer due to their fear of the authorities and of being 'cast out of the synagogue' (9:22). This stands in stark contrast to the action of their son who, in the next scene (9:24-34), boldly confronts

¹ Not only the healing itself is illegal, but the 'kneading' of dough or clay is listed in mishnaic tradition as one of the thirty-nine forbidden forms of work (m. Shabbat 7:2).

the authorities. From this point onwards, only one part of the divided group continues to be represented in the chapter. The forensic language permeates this scene where the focus is on the man's testimony to Jesus; their call for him to give glory to God is none other than a call for him to admit the truth and to make a solemn oath (Josh. 7:19; II Chron. 30:6-9). But Johannine irony is also at work, for the true way to give glory to God is through belief in Jesus. In this scene the healed man's transformation takes a dramatic step; the authorities' repeated refusal to accept the validity of his testimony leads him to disclose his own allegiance to Jesus as his disciple. The Jews, on the other hand, claim to be disciples of Moses, judging Jesus on the basis of their interpretation of the law; as a consequence, they have closed their minds to Jesus. By returning to the issue of Jesus' origins (cf. 9:16), the man moves to a true seeing of the sign: for Jesus to have carried out the unprecedented act of healing a man born blind, he must be from God. The authorities abuse him by stating that his blindness was caused by sin (this is their answer to the question posed by the disciples in 9:2) and cast him out (9:34).

Now reunited with Jesus, but outside the context of the synagogue, the healed man's christological insight develops at a rapid pace. On one level to call for belief in the Son of Man is unexpected, but this is John's answer to the central question about Jesus' origins and identity. Repeatedly in the Gospel it is made clear that Jesus, as the Son of Man, is the one who has descended from heaven, from God (1:51; 3:13). But it also links with the theme of judgement taken up by Jesus in 9:39: 'I came into this world for judgement', for as Son of man he has been given the authority to judge (5:27-29). Having been judged by the earthly religious authorities, the healed man finds himself in the presence of the one who possesses heavenly authority to act as judge. Those who believe in Jesus will see that God is being made known in him (1:50-51), while those who refuse to see are condemned (cf. 3:36; 5:37-38; 6:36). The recognition that the one who healed him is this Son of Man leads the man to a full Johannine confession of faith: 'Lord, I believe', the final step in his

journey towards the light. It is a journey of progressive knowledge, bold confession, increasing clarity of sight.

A final dramatic reversal occurs as the Pharisees come face to face with the one who is the Son of Man. The tables are once again turned as Jesus pronounces judgement (*krima*) on those who have judged him, demonstrating both its positive and negative outcome. The positive aspect has been demonstrated in the gift of sight to the blind man, but the negative is underlined in connection with the Pharisees who are depicted as embodying those described in 3:19-21 as opting for the darkness rather than the light, because all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light. On one level, and in response to their own question (9:40), these Pharisees are not blind, but what they are suffering from, according to John, is a false illusion of sight and a refusal to accept the light when it is offered. The Pharisees had earlier attempted to link the man's blindness with sin (9:34), as the disciples had also done (9:2), but sin in John's Gospel is the refusal to accept Jesus as sent from God.

If attention to theological motifs and narrative effects disclose the function of John 9 as a story about christological insight and hardening opposition, to what extent does it mirror the actual experiences of Johannine Christians? During the last few decades NT studies have been greatly influenced by attempts to establish the identity of the group of believers from which John's Gospel emerged, the so-called Johannine community. The most significant contribution in this respect has been the work of J. Louis Martyn, particularly his book *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, which first appeared in 1968 but is already in its third edition. This book, described by John Ashton as 'probably the most important single work on the Gospel since Bultmann's commentary' (*Understanding the Fourth Gospel*, 107), sets out to determine through historical investigation whether John's Gospel in any way responds to contemporary issues in the life of the community. Through a detailed analysis of key chapters, including John 9, Martyn concludes that John's Gospel functions as a 'two-level drama', a fusion of two perspectives. On one level it is a narrative

about the words and acts of Jesus and the response of his contemporaries, but at the same time, and on another level, this witness to Jesus is shaped by the events and experiences of the Johannine community in relation to their Jewish opponents. Thus in the case of the story of the healing of the man born blind (John 9), a traditional healing narrative about a Jew from Jerusalem also represents those Jewish Christian members who had at one time worshipped in the context of the synagogue.

Clues regarding this second narrative level can be identified at various points, including the focus on the theme of interrogation, suggestive of actual conflict with synagogue leaders. Furthermore the response of the healed man's parents in John 9 point to those not prepared to face conflict and to the situation of alienation among families caused by such synagogue conflict. John 9 also suggests that the community forged its distinctive christology within this context of hostility. The healed man's understanding of Jesus' identity grows specifically through the process of witness, conflict, interrogation, trial and rejection, indicating that claims about the significance of Jesus would not only have sparked off conflict in the first place but would have been elaborated upon in the continuation of the conflict and its aftermath.

The most crucial clue, the key to Martyn's reconstruction of the community, is the explicit reference to excommunication in a narrative comment: 'His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue' (Jn 9:22). The reference to the fear of the Jews is not new in John (cf. 7:13), but the comment that the authorities have decreed that anyone who confesses Jesus to be the Messiah must become 'synagogue outcasts' (*aposynagōgos*) is unprecedented, and is yet repeated on two further occasions (12:42; 16:2). The various elements of this assertion point to its anachronistic nature, reflecting a time later than the mission of the earthly Jesus. It presupposes a situation in which Christian believers were expected to make a formal confession of Jesus as the Messiah, and that Jewish religious authorities had formally agreed what to do in

response to these confessions. In addition, this response is said to have taken the form of excommunication from the synagogue. Although there is widespread evidence in the New Testament that Jewish Christians experienced discipline from the synagogue in the form of punishment and interrogation (Mk 13:9; Mt. 10:17-18; Lk. 21:16), even physical beating (Acts 9:2; 26:11; II Cor. 11:24), there is no evidence of official expulsion like that described in John 9:22.

But is there evidence elsewhere of Christians being excluded from the synagogue and how does the activity described in John relate to that evidence? Does the Gospel reflect a specific situation involving its own community or a more widespread break between Christian believers and the synagogue? One of the most distinctive aspects of Martyn's work (pp. 50-62) is his claim that the expulsion took place directly as a result of decisions taken by the Jewish authorities at Yavneh (or Jamnia) during the last decades of the first century CE. Specifically this decision related to the reformulation of the twelfth of the Eighteen Benedictions (*Shemoneh Esreh*) of the synagogue service, a benediction known euphemistically as the *birkat ha-minim* because it was amended to declare that 'minim' (heretics) were to be accursed. The evidence for this can be found in a talmudic tradition which refers to the revision of the twelfth benediction, undertaken in Yavneh by Samuel the Small under the instigation of Gamaliel II (in the period between 80 and 115 CE), with the aim of expelling those suspected of heresy (b. Berakhot 28b-29a):

Our rabbis taught: Simeon ha-Pakuli arranged the eighteen benedictions in order before Rabban Gamaliel in Yavneh. Rabban Gamaliel said to the Sages: 'Can any one among you frame a benediction relating to the minim?' Samuel the Small arose and composed it. The next year he forgot it and he tried for two or three hours to recall it, but they did not remove him. Why did they not remove him, seeing that Rab Judah has said in the name of Rab: 'If a reader made a mistake in any of the other benedictions, they do not remove him, but if in the benediction of

the minim, he is removed, because we suspect him of being a min'? - Samuel the Small is different, because he composed it.

This talmudic tradition does not cite the benediction itself, but J. Louis Martyn argues that it is attested in a Palestinian version of the benediction discovered in the Cairo Genizah:

For the apostates let there be no hope
and let the arrogant government
be speedily uprooted in our days.
Let the Nazarenes (*notsrin* - Christians) and the minim (heretics) be destroyed
in a moment
And let them be blotted out of the Book of Life
and not be inscribed together with the righteous.
Blessed art thou, O Lord, who humblest the proud!

According to Martyn, a benediction that originally referred simply to *minim* (heretics) was revised by Samuel the Small to include a reference to *notsrin* ('Nazarenes', that is Christians). He therefore assumes that the version of the benediction presupposed in the Babylonian Talmud is the same as the one recorded in the Cairo Genizah document. The purpose of the recitation of this twelfth benediction was to bring to light a person's faith in Jesus. People suspected of believing in Jesus as the Messiah would be called upon to lead the recitation of the benediction (which would apply to any adult male that was not a slave), and if they refused or faltered, they would reveal themselves to be 'heretics' and excommunication procedures would follow. This benediction, it is claimed, had recently been introduced into the synagogue liturgy in the city of Ephesus. Martyn also links this evidence with the statements of Justin Martyr (*Dialogues*, 16, 95, 110, 133) about Jews cursing Christians in their synagogues.

Key aspects of Martyn's theory have nevertheless been disputed, particularly his interpretation and reconstruction of the twelfth benediction and, secondly, his view that the Johannine references to expulsion relate directly to this benediction.

i) Martyn's reconstruction on the basis of the extant rabbinic material is open to criticism. Although the benediction is attributed in the talmudic tradition to Samuel the Small (80-90 CE), such attributions are quite often suspect and are attempts at making a tradition more authoritative. The link with Samuel the Small is only found in b. Berakhot 28a-29b, whereas the connection between the formulation and Yavneh is found elsewhere only in the Jerusalem Talmud (j. Berakhot 14:3), both of which represent late layers of rabbinic tradition.

ii) It seems likely that the original benediction referred only to *minim* (heretics) and probably denoted Jewish sectarians. From a rabbinic perspective, a *min* was a Jew who did not accept the authority of the rabbis and rejected their halakhah. The term might then include Jewish Christians, but is not necessarily limited to them. A specific reference to Christians was probably not introduced into the twelfth benediction until the fourth century CE (the reference to *notsrim* (Nazarenes) as an addition to 'minim' as attested in the Genizah version). If the reference to *notsrim* was original and preceded the reference to *minim*, it is unlikely that the benediction would be known as the *birkat ha-minim*.

iii) It is doubtful whether the benediction had already gained widespread importance in connection with Jewish-Christian relations by the end of the first century CE. Even if the reformulation of the benediction of the rabbis at Yavneh does stem from 80-90 CE, one cannot be certain that it had circulated quickly through the Jewish Diaspora. The rabbis at Yavneh were not, at this early stage, in a position to enforce their formulations in the synagogues of Palestine, let alone those in the Diaspora. How plausible, then, is the suggestion that it had already reached Ephesus by the time of the composition of John's Gospel? The rabbis' decisions were not imposed overnight, nor were they felt uniformly throughout all Jewish communities, certainly not until the third century CE. It is much

more likely that the *birkat ha-minim* was introduced gradually into the synagogue liturgy.

iv) John's Gospel does not refer to synagogue *prayers or curses* (as in the *birkat ha-minim*) but to exclusion from the synagogues: 'John does not speak of people who do not go to synagogue because they cannot conscientiously say the prayers. It speaks of being put out of the synagogue' (Wayne Meeks, 'Breaking Away', 103).

It cannot be proven that the Johannine Christians were excluded from the synagogue fellowship as a direct result of the official benediction against the heretics. Appeal to this benediction as the key that unlocks the historical situation of the Johannine community has, as a consequence, been described as something of a 'red herring' in Johannine studies (Meeks). This, however, does not invalidate the essence of Martyn's proposal that the Johannine Christians were in the process of, or more likely, had already been expelled from the synagogue, and that the situation described in John 9 would have resonated with their own. It may well have been a local phenomenon growing out of a local situation. And from the way in which they are treated throughout the Gospel (e.g., Jn 1:24; 4:1; 12:42) it seems that the Pharisees or synagogue leaders were perceived as the authorities behind it.

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