JOHANNINE SOTERIOLOGY AND CHRISTOLOGY

THE JOHANNINE COMMUNITY

Understanding some of the history of the Fourth Gospel assists understanding

While the Fourth Gospel must be read and treated as a completed document, understanding something of the history of its development assists the reader in understanding its meaning.²

The Johannine community started out as a group of Jews

J. L. Martyn detects in 1:35-51 that the Johannine community began among Jews who came to Jesus and with relatively little difficulty found him to be the Messiah they expected. I [Raymond Brown] think he is perfectly right.³

The Johannine form of Christianity emerged from a Jewish matrix

The Johannine form of Christianity emerges from a Jewish matrix whose existence can be confirmed from several sides. And elements within this Jewish matrix may prove very suggestive in accounting for the language and conceptuality of the Johannine discourses. That the Qumran scrolls attest a form of Judaism whose conceptuality and terminology tally in some respects quite closely with the Johannine is a commonly acknowledged fact. …

Another link between John and Judaism has been seen in John the Baptist, perhaps a close relative of the Essenes, in whom the Fourth Gospel manifests a peculiar interest, which is probably to be understood as a reaction to claims of a Baptist sect concerning their martyred leader (cf 1:6-8, 15, 19ff.; 3:2cff.; 4:1; 5:33ff.; 10:40-42)⁴

The life of the Johannine Community and of the Fourth Gospel is a chapter of Jewish history

The history of the Johannine community from its origin through the period of its life in which the Fourth Gospel was composed forms to no small extent a chapter in the history of Jewish Christianity.⁵

The Johannine church was in the mainstream of Jewish Christianity

According to Martyn, the Johannine church is to be seen in the mainstream of Jewish Christianity, basically concerned with what Paul called “the gospel of the Circumcision.” Even the “sheep not of this fold,” which will eventually join the fold, are not Gentiles but Jews of the dispersion who have also been excommunicated from their synagogues by the use of the Birkath ha-Minim on account of their Christianity. The “one fold” which the Fourth Gospel envisions is not the Great Church which the Acts of the Apostles represents as fully committed to the Gentile mission, but the church in which all are Jewish Christians.⁶

The Johannine Community was expelled from the synagogue because of their beliefs

There came a stage in the history of the Johannine group when the status it accorded to Jesus began to be felt as intolerable by the parent community, who consequently decided to expel Jesus’ followers from their midst.⁷

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¹ NOTE: The Bibliography is at the conclusion
² Riddles of the Fourth Gospel, page 68
³ Community of the Beloved Disciple, page 27
⁴ Johannine Christianity, page 26
⁵ John in Christian History, pages 120-121
⁶ Book review by Herold Weiss, page 254
⁷ Understanding the Fourth Gospel, pages 144-145
[John Ashton’s] theory is that the expulsion was the consequence, not the cause, of the Johannine group’s adoption of beliefs incompatible with the strict monotheism of those whom the Gospel calls ‘the Jews’.8

**Reasons for the expulsion from the synagogue**

It appears that the Johannine community experienced an expulsion from their religious home in the synagogue for at least two reasons.

First, their increasingly successful missionary efforts among their colleagues in the synagogue began to pose a threat to the leadership of the synagogue. …

The second reason for the expulsion was the destruction of the Jerusalem temple by the Romans in A.D. 70 and the resulting crisis of faith. The destruction of the temple brought a kind of identity crisis for the Jews … and may have resulted in purging sympathizers of Jesus of Nazareth from some synagogues. (In three places in the Gospel the expulsion of the Christians from the synagogue is echoed—Jn 9:22; 12:42; 16:2). …

This informal and localized expulsion of the Christians was possibly (later) formalized and made a common practice by the Council of Jamnia (ca. 90 A. D.).

This expulsion had a mighty effect on the Christian community, producing a trauma of faith of major proportions. It was amid this crisis that the fourth evangelist gathered the traditions of the community and interpreted them so as to address the needs of the newly isolated community. It was then that the major themes of the Gospel took shape, providing the Johannine Christians with assurance and confidence in the midst of the uncertainty of their recent experience of deprivation. Furthermore, it was in the subsequent, and perhaps violent, debate with the members of the synagogue that the Gospel found its setting (e.g., Jn 16:2).9

**The community believed that Jesus was the Messiah**

The Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. (John 9:22, NRSV)

**However, some remained quiet, lest they be expelled from the synagogue**

Many, even of the authorities, believed in [Jesus]. But because of the Pharisees they did not confess it for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved human glory more than the glory that comes from God. (John 12:42-43, NRSV)

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John 12:42-43 supplies the clearest reference to a group of Jews who were attracted to Jesus so that they could be said to believe in him, but were afraid to confess their faith publicly less they be expelled from the synagogue. John has contempt for them.10

**Expulsion would be followed by martyrdom**

They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, an hour is coming when those who kill you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God. And they will do this because they have not known the Father or [Jesus]. (John 16:2-3, NRSV)

**Significant polemical situation within the synagogue and with the Johannine community**

One may begin, in agreement with Louis Martyn and others, with a recognition that a polemical situation within the synagogue and later between the Johannine community and the synagogue is almost certainly a significant, if not the central, milieu of the Johannine material, particularly the Fourth Gospel. Although some of the distinctive points of Martyn’s thesis, including the proposed deliberate two-level hypothesis with its implications regarding the topography of the city in which

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8 *Understanding the Fourth Gospel*, page 23
9 *Johannine Community*, (page number not provided; see the source as given in the Bibliography)
10 *Community of the Beloved Disciple*, page 71
John was written, may be problematical, he has forcefully and persuasively called attention to a wide range of evidence for such a setting.\footnote{Johannine Christianity, page 23}

The determinative factor in the milieu of the Johannine Christian community was its conflict with the synagogue. We must think at first of a group of Christians still entirely within the fold of the Jewish community. Evidently the affiliations of some members of this group were with Essene-like or other “mystical” or dualistic tendencies in ancient Judaism rather than with a more ordinary piety.

The group also possessed traditions about Jesus and used them to nourish its faith and life. Its confession of Jesus as Messiah, however, brought it into growing tension with the authorities of the Jewish community. In this process, Jewish Christians were especially subject to pressure, and for the Johannine group the result was expulsion from the synagogue community altogether. Particular factors in the makeup of Johannine Christianity at this point—the nature of its christological confession above all, but perhaps also the presence in it of “heterodox” Jewish elements, or its relation to Samaritans and Gentiles—may have helped bring about the rupture.\footnote{Johannine Faith, pages 25-26}

Thus the Johannine group was faced with a crisis, as those who openly acknowledged their faith were expelled, while others strove through secrecy to maintain their standing within the Jewish community.\footnote{Johannine Faith, page 26}

A growing isolation and even alienation from outsiders apparently came to characterize the group. It could now think of “the Jews” as such as a foreign and hostile body, representative of “the world” at large.\footnote{Johannine Faith, page 27}

The Johannine community saw itself as unique, alien from the world, under attack, misunderstood, but living in unity with Christ and God

There can be no question, as Louis Martyn has shown, that the actual trauma of the Johannine community’s separation from the synagogue and its continuing hostile relationships with the synagogue come clearly to expression here. But something more is to be seen: coming to faith in Jesus is for the Johannine group a change in social location. Mere belief without joining the Johannine community, without making the decisive break with “the world,” particularly the world of Judaism, is a diabolic “lie.”

Thus, despite the absence of “ecclesiology” from the Fourth Gospel, this book could be called an etiology\footnote{etiology: “a study of the cause or origin”} of the Johannine group. In telling the story of the Son of Man who came down from heaven and then re-ascended after choosing a few of his own out of the world, the book defines and vindicates the existence of the community that evidently sees itself as unique, alien from its world, under attack, misunderstood, but living in unity with Christ and through him with God. 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. …

One of the primary functions of the book, therefore, must have been to provide a reinforcement for the community’s social identity, which appears to have been largely negative.\footnote{In Search of Early Christians, page 77}
The Johannine Community represented itself as “the sheep”
In Chapter 10 [the word “sheep”] occurs no less than fifteen times, and it is obviously used in ways which are quite revealing as regards the history of the Johannine community. … Leaving aside verse 16 for the moment … in all fourteen instances the primary reference is quite clear. The sheep stand in the first instance for the Johannine community.

a. It is they who hear the voice of the Good Shepherd. …

b. It is they who flee from alternative shepherds. …

c. It is they whose lives are threatened by the wolf. …

d. It is they who receive the absolute assurance from the Good Shepherd.17

“Other sheep”
We come now to verse 16 [of John 10]. If we accept the wording of papyrus 66, the text reads:

And I have other sheep, that are not of this fold.
I must gather them also,
and they will heed my voice,
and there will be one flock, one shepherd. …

Why, we may ask, should there be such an emphasis on unification, and why for the sake of the unification must the other sheep be gathered? The obvious answer is that they have been scattered.

… In the experience of the Johannine community the scattering of the sheep occurred when the Birkath ha-Minim was imposed in their city. … It follows, I think, that the portrait of the “other sheep” is drawn in such a way as to refer primarily to other Jewish Christians who, like those of the Johannine community, have been scattered from their parent synagogues by experiencing excommunication. It is, then, a vision of the Johannine community that the day will come when all of the conventicles of scattered Jewish Christians will be gathered into one flock under the one Good Shepherd.18

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Their hopes for the future may be expressed by 10:16, if that verse is a reference to the Apostolic Christians, as J. L. Martyn has argued: “I have other sheep, too, that do not belong to this fold. These also must I lead, and they will listen to my voice. Then there will be one sheep herd, one shepherd.”…

Ah, one may object, the Johannine prayer for unity with the Apostolic Christians carried a price tag—those other Christians would have to accept the exalted Johannine christology of pre-existence if there was to be one sheep herd, one flock.

If this did not happen, one may argue, the Johannine Christians would reject the Apostolic Christians from koinonia even as they had previously rejected the Jewish Christians. Yet we are spared discussing that theoretical possibility, for in fact the larger church did adopt Johannine pre-existence christology.

Relationship with followers of John the Baptist
[The Gospel of] John portrays the first followers of Jesus as disciples of JBap [=John the Baptist], and the Johannine movement itself may have had its roots among such disciples. Therefore, it is surprising to find in the Fourth Gospel such a large number of negative statements pertinent to JBap. …

All of this becomes intelligible when we hear in 3:22-26 that some of the disciples of JBap did not follow Jesus (contrast 1:35-37) and jealously objected to the number of people who were following him. If once more we read the Gospel partly as an autobiography of the Johannine community, we are

17 John in Christian History, pages 115-116
18 John in Christian History, pages 116-117, 118, 119
19 koinonia = communion, fellowship
20 Community of the Beloved Disciple, page 90
led to suspect that Johannine Christians had to deal with such disciples and that the negations are meant as an apologetic against them.  

**Favourable attitude towards the Apostolic Christians**

What is the Johannine attitude toward the Christianity of the Apostolic Christians? The scene mentioned in diagnosing their presence (6:60-69) suggests a fundamentally favorable attitude. The Apostolic Christians are clearly distinct from the Jewish Christians who no longer follow Jesus. The presence of the Twelve at the Last Supper (13:6; 14:5,8,22) means that the Apostolic Christians are included in Jesus’ “own” whom he loves to the very end (13:1).  

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The Johannine Christians, represented by the Beloved Disciple, clearly regard themselves as closer to Jesus and more perceptive than the Christians of the Apostolic Churches. The one-upmanship of the Johannine Christians is centered on christology; for while the named disciples, representing the Apostolic Christians, have a reasonably high christology, they do not reach the heights of the Johannine understanding of Jesus.  

**THE JOHANNINE GOSPEL**

John’s Gospel was formed over several decades, reaching its final form about 90 CE

The pre-gospel period of distinctive Johannine formation took several decades from the 50s to 80s, and the Gospel was probably written ca. A.D. 90.

**Time from Jesus passed before the Gospel was composed and first read**

A distinction certainly has to be drawn between the time in which the story of Jesus took place and the time in which the Gospel was composed and first read.

**Outlining John’s Narrative**

John’s Gospel may be divided into four unequal parts: a shorter Prologue (1:1-18) and an Epilogue (21:1-25) and, between them, a more substantive “Book of Signs” (chaps. 1-12) and “Book of Glory” (chaps. 13-20).

In contrast to the Gospel of Mark, which begins with the ministry of John the Baptist, or to Matthew and Luke, which begin with different wondrous birth narratives, John’s Prologue features a worship hymn to the cosmic Word of God made flesh. …

The “Book of Signs,” so called because it features the seven signs of Jesus, then leads off with the witness of John the Baptist to Jesus and the calling of four disciples and Nathanael (1:19-51). The next eleven chapters (2-12) feature seven signs of Jesus, only two of which are also found in the Synoptics. …

The “Book of Glory” (13:1-20:31), so called because it features the glorification of Jesus during the last week of his ministry, begins with the fulfillment of Jesus’ “hour” and his imparting his last will and testament to his followers. In this section, the focus of the book changes radically from an apologetic endeavor to convince audiences to believe that Jesus is the Messiah/Christ to affirming their solidarity within community.
The Gospels are not biographies of the lives of Jesus Christ

The widespread but largely mistaken belief [is] that the Gospels are Lives of Christ. ... To call them biographers without further ado is to focus on what was for them a secondary aspect of their work. 27

A gospel is not a theological treatise, certainly, but it is not a biography either; nor is it, properly speaking, a compromise between the two nor yet an amalgam of both; it is sui generis. 28

John’s Gospel is distinctly Jewish

Given the diversity in both first century Judaism and in early Christianity, it would be reasonable to presume that there was also a certain amount of diversity in Jewish Christianity. ... what is striking is the fact that it is possible to read and understand John quite naturally as containing precisely those features which have been singled out by many scholars as distinctively Jewish Christian: adoptionist Christology, Torah observance, and a continuing Jewish or Israelite self-identity. 29

The evangelists were addressing themselves to their own contemporaries

The Gospels were written many years after the events that they record. Though narrating events that took place in the first half of the first century CE, the evangelists were addressing themselves to their own contemporaries in the second half of the same century. So we have to bear in mind the differences between the social and political conditions prevailing during Jesus’ lifetime and those of the time of the composition of the Gospels. 30

The Gospels are not simply Lives of Christ. A Gospel (and by that I mean one of the four Gospels recognized by the Christian church) is a proclamation in narrative form of faith in Jesus as Messiah and Son of God. Ostensibly historical documents, entirely concerned with events that had occurred in the past, they are actually addressed to the evangelists’ own communities and speak to their hopes and fears. Such, at least, is the hypothesis that underlies what is known as redaction criticism. 31

John’s Gospel and Letters enable a picture of the Johannine Community

Within the pages of the Gospel and Letters [of John] is buried a surprising amount of positive data enabling us to piece together a picture of the nature and history of the community. Of course the piecing-together cannot be done without conjecture. As in all historical study, it is important to hold apart the factual evidence and the shaping hypothesis. 32

Primarily a source for the historical situation it arose from

Rudolf Bultmann wrote (in English):

Wellhausen brought clearly to light a principle which must govern research. We must recognize that a literary work or a fragment of tradition is a primary source for the historical situation out of which it arose, and is only a secondary source for the historical details for which it gives information.’

Written in 1926, these words are as true today as they were then. 33

The characters and situations in the texts may reflect events from the author’s own experience

Actual conflicts between religious communities of the past were often fictionalized and recorded as dramas rather than related in terms of verbatim dialogue. This means that stories of conflict in the gospels can be viewed as dramas created to represent and record actual dialogue between later

27 Understanding the Fourth Gospel, pages 24, 27
28 Understanding the Fourth Gospel, pages 332-333
29 Johannine Christianity: Jewish Christianity?, page 14
30 Gospel of John, page 45
31 Gospel of John, page 85
32 Understanding the Fourth Gospel, page 100
33 Gospel of John, page 45
relational communities. The record of an intercommunity dialogue may therefore appear in the form of a hidden rather than an open controversy, in which case the author will not explicitly mention his ideological rival (Hirshman 1996, 126). Given this situation, we must examine religious texts thoughtfully, recognizing that some portions may contain valuable information for understanding the development of the author’s theology in relation to other contemporary religious texts. In other words, the characters and situations in the texts may reflect events from the author’s own experience of ideological conflict rather than actual “historical” events involving those characters.  

**The Gospel is written for a particular period, situation, and purpose**

While recognizing that the Gospel was actually addressed to the Christian community, Wrede insisted that “to achieve an historical understanding of the Gospel we must see it as a writing born out of and written for conflict. And further that “what really allows us to discern the true lever of the Gospel is an acknowledgement of its polemical thrust. In a word, from being a timeless meditation, the Gospel becomes a writing that belongs to a particular period, has a particular situation in view, and is written for a particular purpose.”

**The Gospel and Epistles reveal the struggles of the John community**

The gospel and epistles of John reveal the struggles of one particular Christian community whose beliefs and practices were in tension with other early Christian communities.

**John was composed in the context of conflict with the synagogue**

The issue of the setting of the Fourth Gospel is really a kind of condensed history of a particular Christian community in the first century. …

It was within a situation of conflict, crisis and alienation that the Fourth Gospel was written, and against this background it must be understood. The community’s traditions about Jesus were powerfully recast in this milieu, reflecting the influence both of forces outside mainstream Jewish piety and of the conflict with the synagogue.

Since the publication of J. Louis Martyn’s decisive study, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (1979), there has been a growing consensus among Johannine scholars that the Gospel of John was composed in the context of conflict with the synagogue, and that it is thus best understood and interpreted against the background of Judaism and Jewish Christianity.

The Gospel in its present form was written in the wake of the expulsion of the Johannine Christians from the synagogue. This was clearly a traumatic event for the group, since they did not leave by choice, but were expelled. If the Johannine Christians in this context had feelings of alienation from ‘Judaism’. this is hardly surprising.

**Most of the story is directly relevant to the controversies between two groups in the synagogue toward the end of the first century**

Most of the story is directly relevant to the controversies between two groups in the synagogue toward the end of the first century. Conclusive for this position, as [Martyn] himself observes, is the contemptuous dismissal of the man born blind in 9:28: “You are that man’s disciple, but we are disciples of Moses,” a statement that, as he says, “is scarcely conceivable in Jesus’ lifetime, since it recognizes discipleship to Jesus not only as antithetical, but also as somehow comparable, to discipleship to Moses. It is, on the other hand, easily understood under circumstances in which the synagogue views the Christian movement as an essential and more or less clearly distinguishable

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[^34]: Jesus in Johannine Tradition, page 305
[^35]: Gospel of John, page 87
[^36]: Brother of Jesus, page 143
[^37]: Johannine Community, (page number not provided; see the source as given in the Bibliography)
[^38]: Johannine Christianity: Jewish Christianity?, page 1
[^39]: Johannine Christianity: Jewish Christianity?, page 11
rival.” This point deserves to be underlined. Moses is by far the most important single figure for Judaism, as Jesus is for Christianity and Muhammad for Islam.\textsuperscript{40}

**The Fourth Gospel reflects the trauma of excommunication and persecution**

I [Herold Weiss] would certainly agree with Martyn that the Fourth Gospel reflects the trauma of excommunication and persecution.\textsuperscript{41}

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The earliest (dating from 1820) and one of the most interesting reflections on the immediate purpose of the Fourth Gospel came from the pen of a German scholar, Karl Gottlieb Bretschneider.

The Fourth Gospel appears to have been composed in the same historical context: its apologetic and polemical purpose is plain to see. … It is more an apologia than a work of history, and its author assumed the role of a polemicist rather than of a historian. Hence: … the debates and doctrinal sections (\textit{dogmata}), which concerned controversies not between Jesus and the Pharisees but between Christians and Jews of the second century.\textsuperscript{42}

**The first edition of the Gospel included reminders of their expulsion**

… the Johannine group was expelled from the synagogue. The first edition of the Gospel included reminders of this experience, now built into dialogue (chs. 5, 8, and 10) and narrative (ch. 9).\textsuperscript{43}

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The nature of the Johannine community is exhibited in the Gospel.\textsuperscript{44}

**A work that spoke directly to their immediate survival needs**

John was not writing a theological treatise for posterity but a work speaking directly to the hopes and fears of his own first readers. Yet at the same time he is writing about the past. He telescopes past and present together by operating upon two levels of understanding.\textsuperscript{45}

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The [Johannine] community’s concern for its own survival found expression in a series of allegories (door, shepherd, vine) which are eloquent testimony of the sustenance it continued to derive from its total commitment to Jesus.\textsuperscript{46}

**The courtroom atmosphere of John’s Gospel reflects the community’s experiences**

The courtroom atmosphere of the Fourth Gospel with its constant stress on testimony / witness, accusation, and judgment (Jn 1:19–21; 5:31–47; 7:50–51; 8:14–18; etc.) and with its debates over the implications of Scripture texts (Jn 6:31–33; 7:40–43, 52; 10:34–36) reflects the controversies and how they were conducted.\textsuperscript{47}

**The expulsion of the Johannine community drove them to a more radical confession of Jesus**

If it was their confession of Jesus that had caused them to be expelled from the synagogue, their expulsion drove them to an ever more radical confession of him. Jesus became the center of their new cosmos, the locus of all sacred things. Not only the messianic fulfillment of scripture but also judgment and eternal life, the religious observances now closed to them, and Deity itself were all

\textsuperscript{40} \textit{Gospel of John}, page 93
\textsuperscript{41} Book review by Herold Weiss, page 255
\textsuperscript{42} \textit{Gospel of John}, page 86
\textsuperscript{43} \textit{Understanding the Fourth Gospel}, pages 105–106
\textsuperscript{44} \textit{Understanding the Fourth Gospel}, page 115
\textsuperscript{45} \textit{Understanding the Fourth Gospel}, page 336
\textsuperscript{46} \textit{Understanding the Fourth Gospel}, page 114
\textsuperscript{47} \textit{Johannine Community}, (page number not provided; see the source as given in the Bibliography)
centered on him. His rejection by the world symbolized their own alienation, and the correct confession of Jesus became for them the touchstone of truth. 48

John should be read on the level of what happened (history) and the level of its meaning (theology)

Central to [J. Louis] Martyn’s contribution is the thesis that the Gospel of John should be read on two levels: the level of what happened (history) and the level of its meaning (theology) for the Evangelist and his audience. … His central thesis is that the dialogue between the local synagogue and Johannine Christians was the primary issue being addressed by John’s story of Jesus, presenting him vigorously as the Jewish Messiah (20:31).

Under Martyn’s paradigm, as Johannine Christians’ belief in Jesus evolved into a higher set of christological beliefs, this became a threat to Jewish monotheism. Jesus adherents were thus likely labeled “ditheists” and were conceivably expelled from local synagogues, the plausibility of which is corroborated by the twelfth of eighteen Benedictions drafted at the Jamnia councils between 80 and 90 C.E. …

Therefore, three seemingly anachronistic statements in John 9:22, 12:42 and 16:2 should be understood as implying: “even back then (as now), those who claimed adherence to Jesus openly as the Messiah/Christ were cast out of the synagogue.” Martyn sees the term for being “cast out of the synagogue” as a technical term for Jewish excommunication, or at least marginalization from fellowship by the local Jewish community of faith. Therefore, John’s presentation of “history” is primarily apologetic in character—crafted to convince later audiences that Jesus was indeed the Messiah/Christ. That accounts for many of John’s distinctive elements and particular emphases.

Martyn’s contributions, accompanied by Raymond Brown’s sketching a history of the Johannine situation in which tensions with the Synagogue were also acute, shifted the primary historical interest in Johannine studies from the history of the tradition and its subject (Jesus) to the history of the Johannine situation (its community).

In the meantime, appreciation for John’s thorough Jewishness (aided by the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947) bolstered the conviction of most Johannine scholars over the last four decades that Jewish-Christian dialogues were central to John’s presentation of Jesus. …

The Martyn-Brown hypothesis accounts for an impressive connection between three texts that are difficult to explain otherwise (9:22; 12:42; 16:2) and the Twelfth Benediction against followers of “the Nazarene”; fraternal proximity to Judaism does not demolish this theory, it qualifies it. 49

J. Louis Martyn argues compellingly in his History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel that the Fourth Gospel must be read against the situation history of Johannine Christianity. 50

While the history of the Johannine situation must be taken into account when reading the Johannine literature, its second level of history should not displace the first. 51

I (Raymond Brown) would like to study the history of the Johannine community (which ultimately involves questions of church and sect) by using a fruitful approach that has been opened up in Johannine scholarship of the last ten years. This is based on the suggestion that the Gospel must be read on several levels, so that it tells us the story both of Jesus and of the community that believed in him. …

48 Johannine Faith, page 28
49 Riddles of the Fourth Gospel, pages 117-118
50 Riddles of the Fourth Gospel, page 63
51 Riddles of the Fourth Gospel, page 119
Wellhausen and Bultmann were pioneers in insisting that the Gospels tell us primarily about the church situation in which they were written, and only secondarily about the situation of Jesus which prima facie they describe.

I would prefer to rephrase that insight as follows. Primarily, the Gospels tell us how an evangelist conceived of and presented Jesus to a Christian community in the last third of the first century, a presentation that indirectly gives us an insight into that community’s life at the time when the Gospel was written. Secondly, through source analysis, the Gospels reveal something about the pre-Gospel history of the evangelist’s christological views; indirectly, they also reveal something about the community’s history earlier in the century, especially if the sources the evangelist used had already been part of the community’s heritage. Thirdly, the Gospels offer limited means for reconstructing the ministry and message of the historical Jesus.}

It would be fair to say that ten years after Martyn’s original proposal, a considerable number of Johannine specialists have taken up his suggestion that the Fourth Gospel may be read at two historical levels. Many have also come to recognize that this Gospel’s church was involved in a dialogue with a Jewish synagogue – rather than with Gentiles who were influenced by the religiosity of the mystery cults.

Martyn’s lasting contribution to Johannine scholarship is his insight that the Fourth Gospel may be profitably read on two levels, and that what gave this Gospel its unique tone and vocabulary was a confrontation with the Jewish synagogue.

It was a traumatic time of decision for Christians who had maintained their allegiance both to the Jewish religion and synagogue fellowship and to the messiahship of Jesus and the new Christian group. John’s gospel was written for those who were faced with this decision and explores the communal and theological dimensions of it by means of a “two-level drama” wherein the stories about Jesus reflect also the experience and convictions of the author and his church. … Subsequent studies have fully confirmed the rightness of this basic insight.

The reader is to become sensitive to the two historical levels

It is clear that [the Gospel of] John has been used as a “window” through which the critic can catch “glimpses” of the history of the Johannine community. The meaning of the gospel derives from the way it was related to that history. The meaning of the text, therefore, is assumed to lie on the other side of the window. The task of the reader, then, is to become sensitive to the two historical levels, the historical level (the ministry of Jesus) and the contemporary level (the situation of the Johannine community). By observing how the latter is reflected in an ostensible account of the former, the reader is able to grasp the gospel’s message for its first-century readers. … This approach to the gospel has been immensely fruitful and exciting.

The community’s fear and anger is projected back onto the life of Jesus

The fear and anger of the Johannine community, as they see themselves exiled from the synagogue by those they call the Jews, is similarly projected back upon the life of Jesus. But they had a burning conviction that they had been given the truth.
Two major sections of the Gospel, first the acrimonious controversies between Jesus and ‘the Jews’ in chapters 5-10, and … the farewell discourse and prayer in chapters 14-17. Although projected back into the life of Jesus, these display the concerns of a much later period. The violent dissensions of chapters 5, 8, and 10, the way ‘the Jews’ are portrayed in these, the claims made by Jesus about himself and the consolatory words of the farewell discourse (14-16) all go to prove that their author, whom we call the evangelist, was writing for readers whose circumstances were radically different from those of the few followers Jesus had gathered in his own lifetime and who must have read these chapters as a direct reflection of their own experiences. …

It is true that this need [for a two-level text] does not apply to all sections of the gospel narrative or to all the characters who play a part in it. Composed, as I have already argued, over a long period, this is not a homogeneous text.58

Experiences of the Johannine Community symbolised through Nicodemus

Nicodemus and the blind man are “historical” figures in the gospel of John, not in the sense of their being figures from the past in whom the gospel writer is interested, but as representatives of historical realities in the experience of the Johannine community.59

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[Nicodemus] seems in fact to symbolize an important element in the Johannine milieu.60

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[Nicodemus] is clearly meant to portray one of these untrustworthy believers. Furthermore, he speaks to Jesus in the plural, and Jesus likewise addresses him in the plural. … Since the interview is represented as taking place alone at night, these plurals are both surprising and significant. Nicodemus evidently does not stand for himself alone but for some specific group, which is rather negatively portrayed. In the same manner Jesus undoubtedly speaks for the Johannine Christians and stands for them here over against the group represented by Nicodemus.61

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Nicodemus is pictured as a Pharisee, one in a position of authority, who acknowledges the miracles of Jesus but cannot reach real faith in him while he retains his own claim to be Israel’s teacher. It would seem plausible that the group he symbolizes might also be characterized in this way. This impression is confirmed at Nicodemus’ next appearance, in John 7:45-52.62

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Throughout the gospel, then, Nicodemus appears as a man of inadequate faith and inadequate courage, and as such he represents a group that the author wishes to characterize in this way. Evidently members of this group may hold positions of authority, may even be Pharisees themselves, but their status makes them fearful rather than bold in confessing their faith in Jesus. …

This group, symbolized by Nicodemus, was one that was present in the environment of the Johannine community.63

Experiences of the Johannine Community symbolised through the Blind Man

The blind man of John 9, who is healed by Jesus and then brought before the Pharisees … is a powerfully symbolic figure, whose story can help us understand much about how the Johannine community interpreted its experience.64

58 *Understanding the Fourth Gospel*, page 27 (bold emphasis added)
59 *Johannine Faith*, page 48
60 *Johannine Faith*, page 37
61 *Johannine Faith*, page 38
62 *Johannine Faith*, page 39
63 *Johannine Faith*, page 40
64 *Johannine Faith*, page 37
Johannine Soteriology And Christology

The blind man whose story is told in John 9 “is acting out the history of the Johannine community,” refusing to take the way of concealment.65

This story [of the Blind Man in John 9] sums up in a remarkably lucid and compact way what the Fourth Evangelist had to say about his community’s relationship to Jesus, to the synagogue authorities, and to the secret believers. It is a symbolic story in the best sense, … a representation in memorably vivid narrative form of the events and convictions that molded the Johannine community and the Fourth Gospel itself.66

The blind man, it seems clear, symbolizes the Johannine Christians. They have received their sight, as he does, from the one who is the Light of the World, and they have suffered, as he does, for their confession of it.67

He tells the story of the blind man in chap. 9 as an example of someone who refuses to take the easy way of hiding his faith in Jesus and is willing to pay the price of expulsion for confessing that Jesus is from God (9:22-23, 33-38). This blind man is acting out the history of the Johannine community.68

Beginning in Jn 5 a dominant theme of the Johannine account of Jesus’ ministry is the hatred that “the Jews” have for Jesus because he is making himself God. The divinity of Jesus as one who had come down from God (an aspect of divinity not apparent in the other gospels) is publicly spoken of and attacked. There are long debates between Jesus and “the Jews” that grow increasingly hostile.

What lies beneath the surface becomes apparent in the story of the man born blind (Jn 9).69 The Jews in anger say, “We are the disciples of Moses; we know that God has spoken to Moses. As for that fellow (Jesus), we do not even know where he comes from” (Jn 9:28-29). The man born blind, who is described by them as one of the disciples of “that fellow”, also speaks as a “we”: “We know that God pays no attention to sinners … if this man (Jesus) were not from God, he could have done nothing” (Jn 9:31,33).

The synagogue and the Johannine community are thus alienated from each other as disciples of Moses and disciples of Jesus; and through the medium of struggles in Jesus’ own life, the struggles between these two groups are being told. (In other words, the Fourth Gospel narrates on two levels: the level of Jesus’ life and the level of the community’s life). Just as the man born blind is put on trial before the Pharisees or “the Jews”, so have members of the Johannine community been put on trial by synagogue leaders. Just as the man born blind is ejected from the synagogue for confessing that Jesus has come from God, so have the Johannine Christians been ejected from the synagogue for their confession of Jesus (see also Jn 16:2).

To have suffered expulsion from the synagogue because of a belief that Jesus had come from God inevitably sharpened and tightened the adherence of Johannine Christians to their high Christology.70

65 Johannine Faith, page 41
66 Johannine Faith, page 41
67 Johannine Faith, page 42
68 Community of the Beloved Disciple, page 72
69 Johannine Faith, pages 41-48 (on the man born blind).
70 In scholarly jargon, “low” christology involves the application to Jesus of titles derived from the Old Testament or intertestamental expectations (e.g., Messiah, prophet, servant. Son of God )—titles that do not in themselves imply divinity. “Son of God,” meaning divine representative, was a designation of the king (cf. 2 Sam 7:14); “lord” need mean no more than “master”. “High” christology involves an appreciation of Jesus that moves him into the sphere of divinity, as expressed, for instance, in a more exalted use of Lord and Son of God, as well as the designation “God.” Raymond E. Brown, The Community of the Beloved Disciple (London : Chapman, 1979) 25.
Jesus is so much one with the Father (Jn 10:30) that he is not only Lord but also God (Jn 20:28). Over such issues the Johannine Christians were willing to criticize even other Christians. There is contempt in the Fourth Gospel for Jews who believed in Jesus but who were unwilling to confess it openly lest they be put out of the synagogue (Jn 12:42). There is hostility towards Jewish disciples who have followed Jesus openly but who object when it is said that he has come down from heaven and can give his flesh to eat (Jn 6:60-66) or because he is described as existing before Abraham (Jn 8:58).

Such criticism of others suggests that the Johannine Christians must have been extremely controversial because of their Christology. 

**The primary aim of the evangelists was to promote faith in Jesus**

To call the Gospels *Lives of Christ* without further ado is inadequate and misleading, simply because we have not yet taken account of the primary aim of the evangelists, which was to promote faith in Jesus as Messiah and Son of God. 

The Fourth Gospel was written by a Jew seeking to convince Jewish audiences that Jesus was indeed the Jewish Messiah.

**Mark and John represent separate impressions about Jesus and his ministry**

The Johannine tradition shows every sign of having developed independently, emerging alongside Mark, but not dependent upon it. Put otherwise, unlike Matthew and Luke, which depend extensively upon Mark, the Gospel of John shows a radical independence from Mark. …

The perspectives underlying Mark and John represent two separate sets of impressions about Jesus and his ministry, formed also by their oral delivery within the early Jesus movement. In so doing, the pre-Markan and early Johannine traditions both addressed the needs of the churches with the message of Jesus in ways that also conformed to the gifts and ministry inclinations of the early preachers themselves. As with any historical project, the main interests of these early preachers were not simply in “what happened,” as though all events were equally significant or memorable. Rather, selection of materials and slant in presentation were primarily influenced by the purpose of connecting “what happened” during Jesus’ ministry with “what was happening” among their audiences—as mediated through the preachers themselves.

**Fourth Gospel not cited during the first part of the second century**

Because the secessionists and their heterodox descendants misused the Fourth Gospel, it was not cited as Scripture by orthodox writers in the first part of the second century.

All our evidence points to the fact that a wide acceptance of the Fourth Gospel came earlier among heterodox rather than among orthodox Christians. Our oldest known commentary on the Gospel is that of the gnostic Heracleon (A.D. 160-180). The Gospel was greatly appreciated by the Valentinian gnostics.

There is abundant evidence of familiarity with Johannine ideas in the recently published gnostic library from Nag Hammadi.
On the other hand, it is difficult to prove clear use of the Fourth Gospel in the early church writings deemed to be orthodox. There is no specific citation of John in Ignatius of Antioch. More curious is the absence of a citation in the letter of Polycarp of Smyrna to the Philippians (ca. A.D. 115-135); for Polycarp is said by Eusebius to have heard John, and Polycarp shows knowledge of some eighteen NT works.\(^79\)

The earliest indisputable orthodox use of the Fourth Gospel is by Theophilus of Antioch in his Apology to Autolycus (ca. A.D. 180).\(^80\)

This curious history of the Fourth Gospel would become quite intelligible if we posit that the larger part of the Johannine community, the secessionists, took the Gospel with them in their intellectual itinerary toward docetism, gnosticism, and Montanism, while the author’s adherents carried the Gospel with them as they were amalgamated into the Great Church. This would explain why Johannine ideas but not quotations appear in the earlier church writings: because a majority of those who claimed the Gospel as their own had become heterodox, there would have been a reluctance among the orthodox to cite the Gospel as Scripture.\(^81\)

**THE JOHANNINE GOSPEL’S SOTERIOLOGY AND CHRISTOLOGY**

**The Prologue shows the destination and purpose of the Fourth Gospel**

By far the most common text for assessing the destination and purpose of the Fourth Gospel, however, is the Prologue. If indeed John 1:1-18 reflects an intended introduction to what is to follow in the narrative text, getting a sense of the central thrust of the Prologue will rightly suggest the thrust of the Johannine Gospel. …

Alan Culpepper … used a chiastic literary analysis of the Prologue’s structure as a means of getting at its central meaning. By noting parallels between the beginning and end (A and A₁), the second and next-to-last feature (B and B₁), and so forth, one finally gets to the center—the pivotal fulcrum of the composition.

In this case, Culpepper argues that the chiastic center of the Prologue is verse 12: “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.” From that standpoint, the whole emphasis of the Prologue is the response of faith to Jesus as the Word and Light, to which all are invited as prospective children of God. This actually makes a good deal of sense, in that it resonates with John 20:31, chapter 17, and also 12:44-50 and 3:31-36. Even the christological imagery and action within the Johannine Prologue serves this missional purpose.

In both the Prologue and the rest of John 1, Jesus’ agency as the One who is sent from the Father comes through clearly. The central structure of the Fourth Gospel features the divine-human dialogue in which God speaks to humanity through his Word, which is actually a person, Jesus, inviting the world to respond in faith to God’s saving/revealing initiative. Those responding in faith are promised the gift of life, welcomed into the fellowship of God’s children as members of the divine family.\(^82\)

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\(^79\) Community of the Beloved Disciple, page 148  
\(^80\) Community of the Beloved Disciple, page 149  
\(^81\) Community of the Beloved Disciple, page 149  
\(^82\) Riddles of the Fourth Gospel, pages 22-23
The chiastic structure of John 1:1-18

Box 1.1 The Chiastic Structure of John's Prologue

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>G</th>
<th>H</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>vv. 1-2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4-5</td>
<td>6-8</td>
<td>9-10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12a</td>
<td>12b</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- A vv. 1-2  
- B 3  
- C 4-5  
- D 6-8  
- E 9-10  
- F 11  
- G 12a  
- H 12b

18 The word with God  
17 What came through the Word  
16 What was received from the Word  
15 John announces the Word  
14 The Word enters the world  
13 The Word and his own people  
12a The Word is accepted  
12b The Word's gift to those who accepted him

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83 Riddles of the Fourth Gospel, page 22