

## **The Community of the Beloved Disciple**

### **Raymond E. Brown**

All four Gospels show respect for John the Baptist, but the Fourth Gospel attributes to him a knowledge of Jesus' preexistence (1:15, 30)! Since the exalted Christology of preexistence never appears even on Jesus' lips in the other Gospels, its appearance in John the Baptist's proclamation is surely the product of Johannine theology. P26

Later in community history when the Johannine Christians were clearly distinct from groups of Christians who associated themselves with memories of the Twelve (ie Peter), the claim to possess the witness of the Beloved Disciple enabled the Johannine Christians to defend their peculiar insights in Christology and ecclesiology. The "one-upmanship" of the Beloved Disciple in relation to Simon Peter in the Fourth Gospel illustrates this. p31

If the Johannine community which produced the Gospel saw itself in traditional continuity with Jesus, we are in a position to perceive in the "we" of the prologues of both Gospel and Epistle, not the apostolic eye-witness per se, but a community which nevertheless understood itself as heir of a tradition based upon some historical witness to Jesus. p32

In chaps 2 and 3 of John there is a stress on the need to understand Jesus more fully than the surface appearance of his actions would warrant; otherwise the material in those chapters has considerable similarity to Synoptic material. It is in chap 4 that John again significantly departs from what we know of Jesus' ministry in the Synoptic Gospels, for in 4:4-42 Jesus passes through Samaria and wins over a whole village of Samaritans to the belief that he is the Savior of the world. In Matt 10:5 Jesus forbids his disciples even to enter a Samaritan city. In Luke, despite two favorable references to individual Samaritans (10:29-37; 17:16-18), the Samaritans show themselves very hostile to Jesus (9:52-55). According to Acts \*:1-25, it was only some years after the resurrection that Christianity was brought to Samaria by the Hellenist preacher, Philip. Thus there is real reason to doubt that historically during his ministry Jesus converted many Samaritans to his preaching; and the appearance of such a story in John (like the story in Acts 8) may well reflect the post-resurrectional history of the Christian movement. P35

Immediately after the story in chap 4 regarding the Samaritans, "we get the picture of a very high Christology and sharp conflict with 'the Jews' who charge that Jesus is being deified (5:16-18). I think evidence can be found in the Gospel itself for the entrance into Johannine Christianity of another group which catalyzed the Christological developments. The Jews challenge Jesus with 'Aren't we right, after all, in saying that you are a Samaritan?' (8:48) This suggests that the Johannine community was regarded by Jews as having Samaritan elements. P36

There was likely an influx of both Jews of anti-Temple views as well as Samaritans who brought a Christology that was not centered on a Davidic Messiah. We may speculate whether the hostile Johannine style of speaking of 'the Jews' may have been borrowed from the Samaritans on whose lips (as non-Jews) it would have been quite natural. Most Gentile readers of today do not notice the strangeness of John's having Jesus and the Jews around him refer to other Jews simply as 'the Jews' – for the Gentile reader the

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Jews constitute a different ethnic group and another religion (and often they think of Jesus more as a Christian than as a Jew!). But to have the Jewish parents of the blind man in Jerusalem described as being 'afraid of the Jews' (9:22) is just as awkward as having an American living in Washington, DC, described as being afraid of 'the Americans' – only a non-American speaks thus of 'the Americans.' What has happened in the Fourth Gospel is that the vocabulary of the evangelist's time has been read back into the ministry of Jesus. The Johannine Christians were expelled from the synagogues and told that they could no longer worship with other Jews; and so they no longer considered themselves Jews despite the fact that many were of Jewish ancestry. There are also signs of a Gentile component among the recipients of the Gospel because, for instance, the author stops to explain terms like 'Messiah' and 'Rabbi' – terms which no Jews, even those who spoke only Greek, would have failed to understand. P38-41, 55

Johannine Christology is very familiar to traditional Christians because it became the dominant Christology of the church, and so it is startling to realize that such a portrayal of Jesus is quite foreign to the Synoptic Gospels. P45

The evidence in Acts 5:33-42 indicates that the Jewish authorities grudgingly extended tolerance to fellow Jews who proclaimed that Jesus was the Messiah risen from the dead, provided that they did not attack the Temple as did the Hellenists. But John 5:18 shows that they were not willing to tolerate a Christian claim that presented Jesus as God's equal. The words directed to Jesus are meant for the Johannine Christians: 'We stone you...for blasphemy: because you, although a man, make yourself God' (10:33; 8:58-59; 19:7). In the Johannine community's confessions of faith, they hailed Jesus as "My Lord and My God" (20:28). P47

In the earlier Christian preaching the idea of a 'new covenant' had meant a renewed covenant between God and his Jewish people through and in Jesus – there was not the sense of the new totally replacing the old. But this attitude has disappeared in Johannine Christianity, and the theme of replacement has come to the fore. Jesus came to his own, but his own did not accept him. 'The Jews' are not the children of God but of the devil (8:44,47). The real Israel consists of those who receive the revelation of Jesus (1:13, 47), and so Jesus is the 'king of Israel' (1:49; 12:13). 'The Jews' had been the people of God through birth, but what is born of the flesh cannot inherit the kingdom of God – being begotten from above through belief in Jesus makes one the child of God (3:3-7; 1:12-13). The Temple may have been destroyed, but it has been replaced by the body of Jesus which is the true Temple (2:19-21). The traditional feasts, Sabbath, Passover, Tabernacles, Dedication (Hanukkah), are no longer feasts for believers in Jesus but 'feasts of the Jews' (5:1; 6:4; 7:2). John has Jesus make an appearance on each of these occasions and say something which shows that the feast has lost its significance in his presence. P48-49

In the early phase of preaching there was a strong final eschatology – Jesus would come a second time, and then he would bring about such things as had been predicted in the Law and the Prophets (Acts 3:21; I Cor 15:23-28). But by the time the Fourth Gospel was written, realized eschatology was dominant in Johannine thought – much of what had been expected at the second coming was already accomplished. God had sent his Son

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into the world; and whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe has already been condemned (3:17-21). For the Synoptic Gospels eternal life is a gift that one receives at the final judgment or in a future age (Mark 10:30; Matt 18:8-9); but for John it is a present possibility: "The one who hears my word and has faith in him who sent me possesses eternal life...he has passed from death to life" (5:24). P51

One of the great anomalies in the Fourth Gospel is that new insights are placed next to old insights, high Christology next to low Christology, realized eschatology next to final eschatology, individualism next to a stress on community, a sacramental understanding of reality in a Gospel that shows relatively little interest in the institution of individual sacraments, etc. p51

In Johannine theology, the human race is divided into non-believers and believers, into those who prefer darkness and those who prefer light, into those who are condemned and those who already have eternal life. Since the Johannine community identifies itself with the believers, it is no surprise that most of those outside the community are looked upon as more or less shadowed by darkness. No other Gospel portrays such an adversarial relationship with the world. Within the community though, there is a strong sense of family, and the address as 'brother' or 'sister' is common because the members are all children of God. The maxim 'love one another' is the chief commandment, and this love brings joy and peace to those who share the same vision of Jesus. p60

If Jesus is 'not of this world', the same fate of rejection inevitably greets the Johannine Christians: 'If the world hates you, bear in mind that it has hated me before you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love its own; but the reason why the world hates you is that you do not belong to the world, for I chose you out of the world' (15:18-19). Ultimately the home of the Johannine community is in heaven too. The rejection of the Johannine gospel by 'the Jews' and by the world has produced an increasing sense of alienation. P64

Perhaps I may be permitted a paragraph of commentary on what the Johannine attitude toward the world means for Christians on a long-term basis. On the one hand, texts reflecting alienation from a hostile world have comforted inward-looking Christians, inclined to leave outsiders to their own devices if they are not attracted by God toward Christian truth. This has often produced a fortress mentality. On the other hand, these texts have annoyed Christians who are very conscious of a mission to the world, whether that mission be to infiltrate and change it, or to enable it to develop its own spiritual potentialities, or to win it for Christ. Nevertheless, the Fourth Gospel remains a warning against naivete. The world is not simply unplowed ground waiting to be sown with the Gospel; it is not simply neutral terrain. There are elements in this world that are clearly hostile to the ways of Jesus and love (and sometimes Christians themselves are). P66

Jewish Christian churches would contain those who claimed the patronage of James and the brothers of the Lord, who insisted on the importance of physical Jewish descent, who had a low Christology, and who rejected a highly sacramental understanding of the eucharist. It is clearly demonstrable in the second century where patristic references become increasingly hostile to the Jewish Christians because of their close adherence to

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some of the tenets of Judaism, their low Christology, and their separateness from the Gentile Christian churches. Somewhere within the second century they begin to be treated as heretics. Epiphanius tells us that Jewish Christians imitated the Eucharistic mystery of the church only once a year, using bread and water. P78

In counterposing their hero (the beloved disciple) over against the most famous member of the Twelve (Peter), the Johannine community is symbolically counterposing itself over against the kinds of churches that venerate Peter and the Twelve – the Apostolic Churches, whom other scholars call the ‘Great Church’. 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 means that the Apostolic Christians are included in Jesus’ ‘own’ whom he loves to the very end (13:1). Their forbears were among those who kept Jesus’ word (17:6) and for whom he prayed (17:9, 20) since they were hated by the world (17:14). They saw the Risen Lord (20:19, 24; 21:2); and their most prominent spokesman, Simon Peter, glorified God by his death in the following of Jesus (21:19). Nevertheless, in the Fourth Gospel these named disciples do not seem to embody the fullness of Christian perception, as may be seen when the named disciples in general and Simon Peter in particular are compared with the Beloved Disciple. The others are scattered at the time of Jesus’ passion, abandoning him (16:32), while the Beloved Disciple remains with Jesus even to the foot of the cross (19:26-27). Simon Peter denies that he is a disciple of Jesus (18:17, 25), a particularly serious denial granted the Johannine emphasis on discipleship as the primary Christian category, and so he needs to be rehabilitated by Jesus who three times asks whether Peter loves him (21:15-17). No such rehabilitation is necessary and no such questioning is even conceivable in the case of the Disciple par excellence, the Disciple whom Jesus loved.

P84-85

Andrew, Peter, Philip, and Nathanael know that Jesus is the Messiah, the fulfiller of the Law, the Holy One of God, and the Son of God (1:41, 45, 49; 6:69); but they are told that they are yet to see greater things (1:50). As Jesus says to Philip at the Last Supper, ‘Here I am with you all this time and you still do not know me?’ (14:9) – a rebuke precisely because Philip does not understand the oneness of Jesus with the Father. We may make an informed guess that the precise aspect of Christology missing in the faith of the Apostolic Christians is the perception of the preexistence of Jesus and of his origins from above. From the Gospels of Matthew and Luke we know of the late-first-century Christians who acknowledged Jesus as the Son of God through conception without a human father; but in whose high Christology there is no hint of preexistence. They know a Jesus who is king, lord, and savior from the moment of his birth at Bethlehem, but not a Jesus who says, ‘Before Abraham even came into existence, I AM.’ Matthew and Luke/Acts also show that the Christian community continuing in the tradition of Peter and the Twelve was becoming important in church identity and self-security (as the first generation was beginning to die out). The greatest of the named apostles in the NT – Peter, Paul, and James of Jerusalem – all died in the 60s; and afterwards the churches which invoked their names solved the teaching gap that resulted from these deaths by stressing that the officials who succeeded the apostles should hold on to what they were

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taught without change (Acts 20:28-30; Titus 1:9; II Pet 1:12-21). But the Fourth Gospel, which knows of the problem of the death of the Beloved Disciple (21:20-23), stresses that the teacher is the Paraclete who remains forever within everyone who loves Jesus and keeps his commandments (14:15-17); he is the guide to all truth (16:13). P85-87

It seems best to work with the hypothesis that the Epistles were written after the situation envisaged by the evangelist in the Gospel. If the latter's work is dated ca. A.D. 90, the Epistles might be dated ca. A.D. 100, midway between the Gospel and the writings of Ignatius of Antioch (ca. A.D. 110), who will figure prominently in our discussions. P97

The Second and Third Epistles of John were written to different churches at a distance from the author (who intends to visit them), and so we know that the Johannine community was not all in one geographical place. Different cities or towns must have been involved. It may have been a large metropolitan center (Ephesus?) with many house churches of Johannine Christians to which I John was primarily addressed; and within reasonable traveling range there were also provincial towns with Johannine churches to which II and III John were addressed. P98

In the Epistles, the title presbyteros is used not as an official position in church leadership, but to designate the generation of teachers after the eyewitnesses. So these were people who had seen and heard others who, in turn, had seen and heard Jesus. These teachers are often described as the Johannine "school" of disciples who had learned from the Beloved Disciple (whoever he was). p100

In the epistles we learn that a group has split from the Johannine community. They believed that the human existence of Jesus was not salvifically significant. It is not hard to get this interpretation from the Gospel of John. For example, John gives a portrait of Jesus that somewhat relativizes his humanity. The Johannine Jesus seems scarcely to eat or drink in the normal sense, for when he discusses food (4:32), bread (6:33ff), or water (4:7-14; 7:38; 9:7), they are symbolic of spiritual realities. He loves Lazarus but with a love strangely lacking in human sympathy; for he does not hasten to Lazarus when he is ill (11:5-6). The Johannine Jesus knows all things (16:30), so that he cannot ask for information. When he says to Philip, 'Where shall we ever buy bread for these people to eat?' (6:5), the evangelist feels impelled in the next verse to insert parenthetically: 'Actually, of course, he was perfectly aware of what he was going to do, but he asked this to test Philip's reaction.' The very first time Judas is mentioned we are told, 'Jesus knew from the beginning the one who would hand him over' (6:64, 70-71). When he speaks to God on the occasion of the raising of Lazarus, he says, 'Father, I thank you because you heard me. Of course, I knew that you always hear me; but I say it because of the crowd standing around, that they may believe that you sent me.' The Synoptic tradition has Jesus pray in Gethsemane, 'Father, all things are possible for you; remove this cup from me; yet not what I wish but what you wish' (Mark 14:36, Matt 26:39; Luke 22:42). The Johannine Jesus has a very different attitude: 'What should I say? – Father, save me from this hour? No, this is precisely the reason why I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!' p113-115

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Second, there are elements in John that lessen the salvific import of the public ministry of Jesus or the physical death of Jesus. In Johannine theology the Word brought eternal life down from God to men and women on earth, but the secessionists may have thought that this eternal life was made available simply through the presence of the Word in the world and not through dependence on what the Word did while present. The author of I John aims a particular attack at the Christology of his opponents in the obscure statement of 5:6 where he praises Jesus Christ: 'He is the one who came by water and blood, not in water only, but in water and in blood.' It is generally thought that 'by water and blood' emphasizes the baptism and death of Jesus. The author of I John also tries to weed out his opponents by insisting on the confession that the sending or coming of the Word was in human flesh (I John 4:2; II John 7). P116-122

The opponents claimed an intimacy with God to the point of being perfect or sinless (1:8). The opponents also do not put much emphasis on keeping commandments (2:3-4; 3:22, 24; 5:2-3). They also are vulnerable on the subject of brotherly love. P124

The author of the Epistles seems to have been prophetic in proclaiming that the split between his adherents and the secessionists marked 'the last hour.' The Johannine writings and some elements of Johannine thought are attested in the second century, but after the Epistles there is no further trace of a distinct and separate Johannine community. It is likely that the two groups were swallowed up respectively by the 'Great Church' and by the gnostic movement. P145

The Great Church, which had accepted elements of the Johannine tradition when it accepted the Johannine Christians who shared the author's views, was at first wary of the Fourth Gospel because it had given rise to error and was being used to support error. Eventually, however, having added the Epistles to the Gospel as a guide to right interpretation, the Great Church (as illustrated by Irenaeus, ca. A.D. 180) championed the Gospel as orthodox over against its gnostic interpreters. Our oldest known commentary of the Gospel is that of the gnostic Heracleon (A.D. 160-180). The Gospel was greatly appreciated by the Valentianian gnostics (e.g. Ptolemaeus). There is also abundant evidence of familiarity with Johannine ideas in the recently published gnostic library from Nag Hammadi. For instance, there is a Word (Logos) christology in the Tripartite Tractate, and 'I AM' christology in the Second Apocalypse of James. P147-148

On the other hand, it is difficult to prove clear use of the Fourth Gospel in the early church writings deemed to be orthodox. The earliest indisputable orthodox use of the Fourth Gospel is by Theophilus of Antioch in his *Apology to Autolytus* (ca. A.D. 180). P148

We read John 1:14, 'The Word became flesh,' in the light of the Matthean and Lucan infancy narratives and assume that the moment of becoming flesh should automatically be interpreted as the conception/birth of Jesus. However, Reginal Fuller has done a service in pointing out that John could be read another way. If one isolated John's Gospel and read it with docetic spectacles, one might assume that the moment of the light's coming into the world and the moment of the Word's becoming flesh was right after the baptism of Jesus when the Spirit came upon Jesus. Another early heretic,

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Montanus, read the Johannine promises of the coming, giving, or sending of the Paraclete as a prediction of his own supposedly Spirit-inspired career. The Montanist stress on prophecy could be a continuation of the stress on prophecy among the secessionists, and of course the stress on prophecy in the Book of Revelation. p153, 154

The lesson that the Pauline churches learned (as we see in the Pastorals) may also have been learned by some of the author's adherents in the Johannine churches, namely, that authoritative presbyter-bishops serving as teachers were a bulwark against those who presented a doctrine which 'does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching which accords with godliness' (I Tim 6:3). I am proposing, then, that while 'the church catholic' exemplified by Ignatius may have accepted the high Johannine Christology of preexistence as a valid evaluation of Jesus, especially when it was accompanied by the stress on the earthly career of Jesus that we find in the Epistles, the Johannine adherents of the author of the Epistles may have had in turn to recognize that the hierarchy stressed by 'the church catholic' was a valid teaching office, so long as it exercised its functions in the name of the Paraclete who is the teacher of all. And through this mutual recognition of value in the other's strength, some of the Johannine Christians and the Apostolic Christians may have become 'one sheep herd.' P159

The theology of the Fourth Gospel is challengingly different, volatile, dangerous, and the most adventuresome in the NT. The history of the Johannine secessionists are proof of those adjectives. Over the centuries John's Gospel has also provided the seedbed for many forms of individualistic pietism and quietism. The ultimate check upon this maverick gospel has been the church's decision to place it in the same canon as Mark, Matthew, and Luke, Gospels which implicitly advocate the side opposite to many Johannine positions. This means that the greater church, whether consciously or unconsciously, has chosen to live with tension. It has chosen not a Jesus who is either God or man but both; it has chosen not a Jesus who is either virginally conceived as God's Son or preexistent as God's Son but both; not either a Spirit who is given to an authoritative teaching magisterium or the Paraclete-teacher who is given to each Christian but both; not a Peter or a Beloved Disciple but both. Tension is not easily accepted in ordinary life, and we usually try to resolve it. So too in church history, but because of the church decision about the canon, attempts at simple resolutions of these tensions into a static position on one side or the other are unfaithful to the whole NT. P163