CHAPTER SEVEN

SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS IN JOHN

7.1 Why an Investigation of Social Relationships?

With all its literary, historical and theological particularities it is quite natural to think that the Fourth Gospel reflects an origin in a group in sharp tension with its surrounding, and a situation where the Gospel is seen as both cause and result of this tension in compliance with inter alia Meeks (1972). Scholars often focus on the sharp delineation of the community and withdrawal from its surroundings or the world in general as one of its main ‘sectarian’ characteristics (cf. Segovia 1981:272, 1982; Smith 1974–1975:223). Tension, however, cannot be seen as identical to the model ‘sectarianism’ according to common social scientific definitions. Tension is after all a relative phenomenon; its force depends dialectically on both the group in question and the surroundings.

I have argued that compared to Philo and Qumran writings, the expressed temple relationships in the studied passages of the Gospel of John present a tense situation, but do not reflect a particularly high-tension group. A promising way to further analyse the social relationships of the community is to draw conclusions from the presentation of Jesus and how he met with non-believers. The main passages that present the stories of persons and named groups that meet Jesus will be analysed below. These passages concerning ‘others’ or social relationships shall be considered as bearing witness to external attitudes and relationships of this community. Again, I shall conclude that the picture of an isolated Johannine community is too strained and one-sided. The Gospel of John presents an ambivalent, but nevertheless also friendly image of how Jesus and the disciples responded to those who did not participate in the early Jesus movement.

Scholars have already analysed many essential aspects of the alleged community’s social boundaries and I see no reason to study these aspects in detail. While Meeks (1972) and scholars who share his perspective (see above) have analysed the relationship of the community towards the environment in general, Brown (1979) wanted
to test the ‘sectarian’ claim by looking at their relationship to other Christians (including what he calls ‘crypto-Christians’). Onuki (1984: 83ff) chooses another solution. He discusses the ‘outside world’ (‘Ausserwelt’) by describing the social function (‘pragmatische Funktion’) of the authorising and sending (missionary activity) in and by the community (see Jn 3:11; 9:4; 13:20; 20:19–23), as well as the function of the dualistic language. Similarly to Brown, Dahl observes that the way of defining the Johannine community as ‘sect’ according to the practice of Meeks, fails to distinguish the relationship of the Johannine ‘sectarians’ to their Jewish environment from their relationship to non-Johannine Christians (Dahl 1990:336, n. 26). In addition, possible relationships to other groups in the Gospel have been analysed in a non-sociological perspective as the basis for an evaluation of the general socio-cultural background of the Gospel.1 Since all individuals in the first-century Mediterranean defined themselves and others in categories of ‘in-group’ and ‘out-group’,2 finding expressions that indicate strong social boundaries is hardly surprising and in fact reduces the exclusivistic impression of the community. There may nevertheless be various degrees of ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ and it is exactly the question of degree that is to be discussed.

Martyn (1968; 1977; 1978; 1979) analysed the relationship between Jesus and his followers as a conflict with the ‘Jews’. As previously stated, much of the theoretical supposition for my investigation is based upon the theory saying that the Gospel reflects one particular historical conflict, the conflict with a local synagogue. This chapter intends to include the relationship to supposed non-Christians and non-Jews to the analysis. The negative attitude towards the ‘Jews’ is also an important element in other conflicts described in the Gospel as well, and regularly connected to the temple institutions in some way or the other (Jn 2; 4; 7; 5; 10; 11; 18–19).3 The encounter of

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1 See Bultmann (1925) on Mandean influence. On Docetism, see my comments on Käsemann in chapter 1, and particularly the sharp criticism of the theological presumptions of this approach in Frey (1997).

2 As pointed out above, see Malina and Rohrbaugh 1998:238.

3 Chilton (1992) touches upon several of the same temple issues that I am analysing below, but with a different focus (sacrifice) and a different perspective (social anthropological modes from R. Girard), see also my chapter 2. See the importance Brown (1966:CXLI) allocates to the Jewish institutions as the temple and worship in his division of the text. Cf. Dunn (1991; 1992) who uses large parts to explain the relationship between the temple and Jesus/the first Christians.