The Gospel from a Specific Community but for All Christians: Understanding the Johannine Community as a “Community of Practice”

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Introduction

Studies on the Johannine community are naturally entwined with or embedded within the larger Gospel community debate.¹ The debate is usually concerned with whether various individual communities or a single “universal” community underlies the writing of the Gospels.² It is often presumed that historical reconstructions of the social situation or context of the Gospel communities subsequently betray the identity of the audience of the Gospels.³ Thus, there is a reciprocating relationship between the social situation of a Gospel community and the audience identity of the Gospels. Such reciprocating...


² The most obvious example is the collected essays in Richard Bauckham, ed., The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), which challenges the traditional assumption that a community exists behind each of the four Gospels. Cf. Craig L. Blomberg, “The Gospels for Specific Communities and All Christians,” in The Audience of the Gospels, 111–133. For a study that does not show any concern at all with respect to the audience of the Gospels, see Helmut Koester, Ancient Christian Gospels (London: SCM, 1996).

ing relationship might not actually exist, however. For whom the Gospels were written is something that is harder to grasp, as it rests solely in the minds of the Gospel authors—hence the scholarly debate over whether the Gospels were written for general or specific readership. It perhaps would serve both Gospel and Johannine scholarship well, if discussion is focused on just one side of the equation, that is, “from which communities were the Gospels written?” In other words, determining the intentions of the Gospel writers and studying the origins of the Gospels are two issues that need to be distinguished from each other. To be sure, in the Gospel community debate, the “whence” may not necessarily expose the “whither.”

This essay examines the Johannine community and argues for a via media view in the Gospel community debate. It demonstrates that the Johannine community was a special community that had its own unique characteristics, yet it also shared things in common with the larger Christian community of the first century. The first-century Gospel community was a community that can be viewed concentrically—a general Christian community composed of individual smaller communities. In what follows, this essay provides a short summary of the Gospel and Johannine community debate. This summary shows that scholarly efforts at discovering and reconstructing the historical and social situation of the Gospel communities have mostly aimed at providing answers for the “whither” aspect of the debate. This summary is followed by a discussion of three arguments for seeing how the Johannine community was a unique Gospel community that belonged to the general, larger Christian community. I posit these arguments based upon the sociolinguistic theory of “community of practice.”

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5 One of the sessions at the Life in Abundance: An International Conference on the Gospel of John meeting held in Baltimore, Maryland in 16–18 October 2003 was entitled “The Whence and Whither of the Johannine Community,” which is now published in Life in Abundance: Studies of John’s Gospel in Tribute to Raymond E. Brown (ed. John R. Donahue; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2005). The main paper of this session was presented by Robert Kysar, which appears to recognize this distinction. Nevertheless, it does not posit the argument I make in this essay. A summary of the proceedings of this conference is found in Klink, “The Gospel Community Debate,” 73–75; idem, “Gospel Audience and Origin,” 18–20.

6 Applying this sociolinguistic concept to the study of the Johannine community addresses some of the definitional and methodological concerns raised by Klink and Cirafesi, respectively, in their effort to provide suggestions as to how future research should proceed (see Klink, “The Gospel Community Debate,” 77–79; Cirafesi, “The Johannine Community,” 188–189).