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**THE JOHANNINE VISION OF COMMUNITY:  
TRENDS, APPROACHES, AND ‘NARRATIVE  
ECCLESIOLOGY’**

This book focuses not on the community that produced John’s Gospel, but on the sort of community John’s Gospel seeks to produce. The primary concern lies not in identifying the historical community behind the text, but in discerning the identity envisioned for that community within the text. Since that text is a story, I understand the Johannine construct of ‘church’ as ‘narrative ecclesiology’. A comprehensive ecclesial vision is established in the Gospel’s opening and then accrues expanded layers of significance and meaning as the plot unfolds. Attending to the sequential development of this narrative ecclesiology reveals an understanding of the people of God as corporate members within the interrelation of the Father and Son, an interrelation that constitutes a divine community inclusive of, and open to, human participation. Here are the primary claims central to the volume, corresponding respectively with the three major divisions:

- 1) ecclesiology is not a secondary or ancillary theme for John but one that appears just as prominently in the Prologue as christology and wields normative force over the entire Gospel;
- 2) the concept of oneness, universally recognized as a critical motif for Johannine ecclesiology, is grounded in the theological oneness of the Shema (‘YHWH is one’ – Deut. 6:4);
- 3) the Gospel portrays the human community of believers undergoing such a striking transformation for the sake of divine participation that recourse to the patristic language of ‘theosis’ is both warranted and exegetically promising.

Applying this later terminology associated primarily with Alexandrian Christianity is not to detract from John’s early Jewish milieu. The Fourth Gospel is a ‘deification narrative’ that is explicitly *Jewish*: to be ‘one’ with the christologically reconceived divine identity refers to something more profound than a state of ecumenical harmony, internal social unity, or unity in function or will with God. Jesus’ prayer in John 17 ‘that they

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may be one, as we are one' beckons believers to become 'partakers of the divine nature' (to draw from a Petrine text) of the 'one' God of Israel (to draw from the Shema).

I acknowledge that any enterprise in examining the Fourth Gospel's understanding of 'church' must come to terms with influential voices that have dismissed ecclesiology as a central Johannine concern. Rudolf Bultmann drew attention to the absence of the term ἐκκλησία<sup>1</sup> and attributed the Eucharistic language of John 6 to a later ecclesiastical redactor.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Ernst Käsemann argued that the evangelist 'does not seem to develop an explicit ecclesiology'.<sup>3</sup> Yet both scholars betrayed appreciable suspicions that ecclesiology indeed bears some significance for this Gospel. Bultmann's claim that 'no specifically ecclesiological interest can be detected' seems self-corrected only a few sentences later by his affirmation that the Gospel actually evinces a 'lively interest' in the church.<sup>4</sup> In comparable fashion, Käsemann follows his own assessment that John lacks a clear ecclesiology with a certain degree of incredulity: 'I cannot conceive that Christian proclamation, including proclamation in which christology is so central, could be without ecclesiology'; he goes on to conclude that the 'kind of ecclesiology' on offer in John must be of the sort that simply eludes historians working with the Gospel text.<sup>5</sup> The equivocal sense shared by these influential interpreters that ecclesiology is virtually imperceptible in John, yet nonetheless important in some way, is broadly representative of scholarly approaches to Johannine ecclesiology. One is left to wonder if the Johannine vision of community is every bit as elusory, if not more so, than the historical details of the Johannine community.

I propose that it is not just the 'kind of ecclesiology' that confounds interpreters of the Fourth Gospel (one of participation and deification), but also the means by which that ecclesiology is presented (through sequentially developing narrative threads). Rather than offering a standard literature survey listing individual scholarly treatments, I categorize below four approaches to Johannine ecclesiology (noting representative figures and works) and briefly sketch how they relate to

<sup>1</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. Kendrick Grobel (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 2:91.

<sup>2</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, trans. George R. Beasley-Murray, R. W. N. Hoare, and J. K. Riches (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster John Knox, 1971), 218–19; 234–37.

<sup>3</sup> Ernst Käsemann, *The Testament of Jesus: A Study of the Gospel of John in the Light of Chapter 17*, trans. Gerhard Krodel (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1968), 27.

<sup>4</sup> Bultmann, *Theology*, 2:91. <sup>5</sup> Käsemann, *Testament*, 27.

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my own agenda of articulating the Gospel's vision of community with the patristic language of theosis.<sup>6</sup> This introduction will close taking a closer look at the idea of 'narrative ecclesiology' followed by a few words of orientation to the format of the project.

### **The Empty Search for a Formal Ecclesiology: Johannine Individualism and (Anti-)Institutionalism**

The 'kind of ecclesiology' many scholars had been searching for in John when Käsemann puzzled over its liminal nature was one concerned with the formal dynamics of institutional church life. Read in comparison with the Synoptics, the omission of Jesus' baptism and the absence of a Eucharistic institution scene were at times interpreted as disinterest in (or even aversion to) sacramental rites.<sup>7</sup> Other interpreters, however, found strong sacramental allusions in the Bread of Life Discourse and in Jesus' language of birth from above through water and Spirit, venturing that the evangelist simply presupposed these liturgical practices along with other institutional dimensions associated with ecclesial life.<sup>8</sup> Still, Käsemann reasoned that a document produced by Christians around the turn of the first century would surely reflect a more appreciable degree of complexity in church order and form.<sup>9</sup> The absence of such

<sup>6</sup> For other literature reviews on Johannine ecclesiology, see Johan Ferreira, *Johannine Ecclesiology*, JSNTSup 160 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 35–44 and R. Alan Culpepper, 'The Quest for the Church in the Gospel of John', *Int.* 63, no. 4 (2009): 341–54.

<sup>7</sup> Those (like Bultmann) viewing John as anti-sacramental or at least less interested in the sacraments include Günther Bornkamm, 'Die eucharistische Rede im Johannes-Evangelium', *ZNW* 47 (1956): 161–69; Eduard Schweizer, 'The Concept of the Church in the Gospel and Epistles of St John', in *New Testament Essays: Studies in Memory of Thomas Walter Manson, 1893–1958*, ed. A. J. B. Higgins (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1959), 230–45. For a recent monograph arguing against a eucharistic reading of John 6 see Meredith J. C. Warren, *My Flesh is Meat Indeed: A Nonsacramental Reading of John 6:51–58* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> Scholars who perceived a positive interest in the sacraments in John include R. H. Lightfoot, *St. John's Gospel: A Commentary*, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 154–71; Edwyn Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel*, ed. Francis Noel Davey, 2nd edn. (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1947), 292–307; C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, 2nd edn. (London: SPCK, 1978), 82–84; and Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, AB 29, 29A (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), cxi–cxiv. Alf Corell even claimed that John's Gospel is arranged around a liturgical structure. See Alf Corell, *Consummatum Est: Eschatology and Church in the Gospel of St. John* (London: SPCK, 1958), 44–78.

<sup>9</sup> Käsemann, *Testament*, 27.

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allusions reinforced his view that the Johannine community was aberrant and anomalous in early Christianity.

With the search for institutional ecclesiology frustrated by the Gospel's ambiguity and silence on these formal dimensions of church life, it has become axiomatic to envision Johannine Christianity as anti-institutional and, to a certain degree, akin to modern 'free church' polities in which the individual members of local communities share equally in leadership and decision-making. Corroboration for this view is found in the evangelist's emphasis on the Paraclete's sufficiency for guiding the community (lessening the need for human governance), the alleged minimization of 'the Twelve', and the 'anti-Petrinism' in which Peter's ecclesiastical authority is subordinated beneath the less official leadership status of the Beloved Disciple.<sup>10</sup> It appears that this anti-institutional egalitarianism contributed to the idea that 'the Fourth Gospel is one of the most strongly individualistic of all the New Testament writings'.<sup>11</sup> Again from Käsemann: 'Just as the concept "Church" is absent [from the Gospel] ... the disciples seem to come into focus only as individuals,

<sup>10</sup> On the issue of church offices, see Schweizer, 'Church'; Hans-Josef Klauck, 'Gemeinde ohne Amt: Erfahrungen mit der Kirche in den johanneischen Schriften', *BZ* 29, no. 2 (1985): 193–220; and Robert Kysar, *John, The Maverick Gospel* (3rd edn.; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 132–42. For the tension between Peter and the Beloved Disciple, see the overview in Harold W. Attridge, 'Johannine Christianity', in Attridge, *Essays on John and Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 3–19, here at 11. For a more extreme position on Peter's subordination, see Graydon F. Snyder, 'John 13:16 and the Anti-Petrinism of the Johannine Tradition', *BR* 16 (1971): 5–15. A more expansive list of sources espousing anti-Petrinism will be provided in Chapter 10, pp. 213–20.

<sup>11</sup> From C. F. D. Moule, 'Individualism of the Fourth Gospel', *NovT* 5, no. 2–3 (1962): 171–90, here at 172. Moule's discussion on Johannine individualism centres on eschatology. See also Raymond E. Brown, *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 84–85, 95; John F. O'Grady, 'Individualism and Johannine Ecclesiology', *BTB* 5, no. 3 (1975): 227–61; and Schweizer, 'Church', 235–37. More recent interpretations supporting the idea of Johannine individualism are found in Udo Schnelle, 'Johanneische Ekklesiologie', *NTS* 37 (1991): 37–50, here at 49 (though his critiques of Käsemann and Bultmann are strong and significant); Stephen S. Smalley, *John: Evangelist and Interpreter* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1978), 233–34 (though he allows for a balance between the individual and corporate); John P. Meier, 'The Absence and Presence of the Church in John's Gospel', *Mid-Stream* 41, no. 4 (2002): 27–34; and in Urban C. von Wahlde, *The Gospels and Letters of John*, *ECC* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 1:541. Wahlde writes, 'The second edition of the Gospel evidences a lack of concern for any sense of community organization other than the individual believer's relation to God' – *ibid.* A contrary voice dismissing this trend of Johannine individualism is provided by Rudolf Schnackenburg in *The Church in the New Testament*, trans. W. J. O'Hara (London: Burns & Oates, 1974), 103.

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and all the titles which we miss with reference to the church organization are applied to them as individuals'.<sup>12</sup> Martin Hengel made a similar observation: 'Unlike Matthew, [the fourth evangelist] knows as yet no definite ecclesiology or church office, but rather the free fellowship of disciples led by the Spirit-Paraclete.'<sup>13</sup> The void within the text of allusions to ecclesiastical hierarchies has been filled in with the idea of Johannine individualism.<sup>14</sup>

Though there are grounds for doubting the supposed absence of an organized leadership structure in the historical community behind the Gospel,<sup>15</sup> there is no way to know definitively how this ecclesial group or network of groups was organized in terms of governance (even if vague clues may be glimpsed by lateral readings of the Gospel alongside the Johannine Epistles). The quest for formal structures and practices underlying the Fourth Gospel's concept of 'church' expects too much from its literary genre.<sup>16</sup> In contrast to this particular approach to Johannine ecclesiology, I contend that the sort of ecclesiology a Gospel narrative can provide is a fundamental and overarching vision of the church as a social reality. As will become clear, the evangelist is invested in a social vision that is explicitly communal, not individualistic. He certainly depicts interrelations between Jesus and specific disciples or would-be disciples; these interactions demonstrate that Johannine ecclesiology is *personal*, but they are certainly not part of an agenda promoting individualism. The Shepherd knows his individual sheep by name, but he leads them in and out *as a flock*.

<sup>12</sup> Käsemann, *Testament*, 28.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Hengel, 'The Old Testament in the Fourth Gospel', in *The Gospels and the Scriptures of Israel*, ed. W. Richard Stegner and Craig A. Evans, *JSNTSup* 104 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 380–95, here at 384–85.

<sup>14</sup> But see the carefully nuanced approach by Richard Bauckham in his recent collection of essays, Richard Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory: Major Themes in Johannine Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 1–29.

<sup>15</sup> For instance, though Ignatius of Antioch advocated an ecclesiastical leadership model based on a strong episcopacy, his comments about a bishop's authority seem largely premised on the theme of reciprocity so thematically important for the Gospel of John (see Chapter 9 in this book). It does not necessarily follow, of course, that Johannine communal life was organized within the more rigid hierarchies in place during Ignatius' ministry; but it can certainly be said that, from a particular angle, Ignatius' idea of the ecclesiastical bishop is 'Johannine'. See Ignatius, *Eph.* 3–6 (esp. 3.2) and *Magn.* 2–4; 6–7 (esp. 7.1–2).

<sup>16</sup> Johann Ferreira has sought to show that 'previous studies on Johannine ecclesiology have suffered under the influence of the categories of Pauline or "orthodox" ecclesiology. Scholars have approached John with theological categories that are alien to the Gospel itself' (Ferreira, *Johannine Ecclesiology*, 15). See also Brown, *John*, cvi.

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**Ecclesiology as Aetiology: Historical Reconstructions of the Johannine Community**

The publication in 1968 of J. Louis Martyn's *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* significantly altered scholarly approaches to the study of John's conceptuality of 'church'.<sup>17</sup> The Fourth Gospel is now widely understood as a 'two-level drama',<sup>18</sup> that 'collapses temporal horizons, inscribing the life of the community into the story of Jesus'.<sup>19</sup> Though Clement of Alexandria dubbed John the 'spiritual gospel', Martyn pointed out that this narrative did not just 'drop from heaven' as if unencumbered by an historical, earthly setting.<sup>20</sup> Unlocking the secrets of that milieu holds enormous potential for the study of John's ecclesiology – the evangelist's ecclesial vision would surely be more accessible with an awareness of the contingencies he was attempting to address. A new trend therefore emerged in which queries concerning Johannine ecclesiology could be answered by scholarly reconstructions of the historical Johannine community. The Gospel's theological vision of the people of God became indissolubly bound to scholarly construals of actual events in the evangelist's socioreligious context.

The scholarship of Raymond Brown illustrates how this approach affected the study of Johannine ecclesiology.<sup>21</sup> Brown had adopted a cautious yet favourable stance in identifying possible ecclesial themes in his 1966 commentary.<sup>22</sup> In an article published over a decade later, he retrospectively deemed that prior search for ecclesiology within John's

<sup>17</sup> J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, 3rd edn., NTL (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003). See the brief discussion on this work's impact on Johannine ecclesiology in Culpepper, 'Quest for the Church', 344–46.

<sup>18</sup> Martyn, *History and Theology*, 46–66.

<sup>19</sup> Attridge, 'Johannine Christianity', 6. To a certain degree, these developments reflected the idea already entrenched in form criticism that the Gospels are more reliable sources for understanding their ancient social contexts than they are for accessing the life of the historical Jesus. In this perspective, the Gospels are more community histories than histories of Jesus. See Francis Watson's discussion of this trend in 'Toward a Literal Reading of the Gospels', in *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*, ed. Richard Bauckham (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 195–217.

<sup>20</sup> Martyn, *History and Theology*, 28. Clement's well-known comment is found in Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, vi.14, 7.

<sup>21</sup> For a sustained and very recent critique of the Johannine Community hypothesis, largely targetting Brown's work, see David A. Lamb, *Text, Context, and the Johannine Community: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of the Johannine Writings* (LNTS 477; London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2014).

<sup>22</sup> Brown, *John*, cv–cxiv.

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Gospel was an exercise in following ‘an argument from silence’.<sup>23</sup> Having exhausted that line of research, he reset his exegetical sights onto a new trajectory: ‘A more fruitful approach has been opened up in Johannine scholarship of the last ten years by attempts to reconstruct the history of the church of the Fourth Gospel.’<sup>24</sup> Utilizing this new methodological venture, Brown’s previously frustrated quest within the text for a Johannine concept of the people of God gave way to an elaborate, multi-phase history of the community behind the text.<sup>25</sup>

The approach epitomized in Brown’s *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* has indeed been fruitful, yielding significant contributions that shed light on my own research on John’s ecclesiology. It has not, however, come without a number of hermeneutical risks.<sup>26</sup> Attempts to understand the Johannine vision of community have not been simply informed by the *einmalige* experiences made available through the (hypothetical) historical reconstructions;<sup>27</sup> in some respects, a possible communal vision has been all but replaced by accounts of the community’s possible origins. In many respects, *this approach tends to equate ecclesiology with aetiology*. The following is from Wayne Meeks: ‘Despite the absence of ecclesiology from the Fourth Gospel, this book

<sup>23</sup> Raymond E. Brown, ‘Johannine Ecclesiology: The Community’s Origins’, *Int* 31, no. 4 (1977): 379–93, here at 379.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple: The Life, Loves, and Hates of an Individual Church in New Testament Times* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979).

<sup>26</sup> Critiques of Martyn’s proposals and alternative readings are numerous. See the various works cited in Adele Reinhartz’s study, ‘The Johannine Community and Its Jewish Neighbors: A Reappraisal’, in ‘*What Is John?*’ *Volume II: Literary and Social Readings of the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia, *SBLSymS* 7 (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 1998), 111–38. For a more recent critique, see Raimo Hakola, *Identity Matters: John, the Jews and Jewishness*, *NovTSup* 118 (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 41–55 and, from a literary-rhetorical perspective, William M. Wright IV, *Rhetoric and Theology: Figural Reading of John 9*, *BZNW* 165 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009).

<sup>27</sup> Other influential reconstruction hypotheses have been offered by Wayne A. Meeks, ‘The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism’, *JBL* 91, no. 1 (1972): 44–72; Oscar Cullmann, *The Johannine Circle: Its Place in Judaism, Among the Disciples of Jesus and in Early Christianity*, trans. John Bowden, NTL (London: SCM Press, 1976); Martin Hengel, *The Johannine Question*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1989); and Martinus C. de Boer, *Johannine Perspectives on the Death of Jesus*, *CBET* 17 (Kampen: Kok-Pharos, 1996), 43–82. See the extensive overview of the quest for the Johannine community’s *Sitz im Leben* in the opening chapter of Edward W. Klink III, *The Sheep of the Fold: The Audience and Origin of the Gospel of John*, *SNTSMS* 141 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).



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could be called an etiology of the Johannine group.<sup>28</sup> The potential for this interpretative move of reducing ecclesiology to aetiology is evident in the title of the article in which Brown first detailed this ‘more fruitful approach’: ‘Johannine Ecclesiology: The Community’s Origins’. If ecclesiology is treated as no more than the construction of a social group’s aetiology, it can become an exercise of historical description rather than a theological discipline, thus creating an unnecessary dichotomy between the ‘history and theology of the Fourth Gospel’ that Martyn intended to hold together.<sup>29</sup>

A more obvious interpretative risk is the conscious or even unconscious prioritization of unconfirmed and ultimately hypothetical details (however reasonable) over the content and literary aims of the existing Gospel text. The recreated scenarios can become hermeneutical frames wielding inordinate influence over the actual narrative. Because the aporias within Gospel texts are valued as windows affording glimpses into the origins of Gospel communities, John’s ecclesiology has been regularly sought not in the coherent, sequential trajectories of the narrative, but in the disjunctive points of narrative departure.<sup>30</sup> The hermeneutical move operative in this line of inquiry is a temporary suspension of attention to the narrative in order to fashion a *Sitz im Leben* that can then be used as a lens for rereading the narrative on a more contextually grounded footing (as the logic goes). I am not denying John’s ostensible thematic breaks, apparent geographical disruptions, and seemingly anachronistic temporal markers;<sup>31</sup> but if the fourth

<sup>28</sup> Meeks, ‘Man from Heaven’, 69.

<sup>29</sup> Brown went on to produce two essays on Johannine theology that were robustly theological, even if heavily dependent on his reconstructed history. See Brown, ‘The Heritage of the Beloved Disciple in the Fourth Gospel: People Personally Attached to Jesus’, in Brown, *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind*, 84–101; and ‘The Heritage of the Beloved Disciple and the Epistles: Individuals Guided by the Spirit-Paraclete’, in *ibid.* 102–23.

<sup>30</sup> In response to the enthusiasm over narrative criticism, John Ashton makes the valid point that historical critics initially approach the extant text of the Gospel but are often compelled into diachronic directions by the unavoidable aporias – John Ashton, ‘Second Thoughts on the Fourth Gospel’, in *What We Have Heard From the Beginning: The Past, Present, and Future of Johannine Studies*, ed. Tom Thatcher (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 1–18, here at 3.

<sup>31</sup> Wayne Meeks acknowledged that the majority of the aporias ‘evidently were acceptable to the evangelist, despite his ability to produce large, impressively unified literary compositions’ (citing the trial and passion narrative as the prime example) – see Meeks, ‘Man from Heaven’, 48. Similarly, Barnabas Lindars suggested that these aporias exist with the Fourth Evangelist’s editorial permission as he crafted source material in the interest of his more expansive project of producing a Gospel – Barnabas Lindars, *Behind the Fourth*



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evangelist has embedded a vision for the people of God in his narrative (as I am contending), an approach that focuses primarily on those points in the Gospel where the narrative appears to break will fall short in the exegetical task.<sup>32</sup>

I have no interest in dichotomizing methodological approaches, pitting the historical-critical enterprise of reconstructing the Fourth Gospel's *Sitz im Leben* against literary-narrative readings.<sup>33</sup> My understanding of ecclesiology as a vision for the community of God's people reconceived through Jesus presupposes the importance of historical details as well as the conceptual processes of how a social group thinks of itself theologically – the two are clearly intertwined. What I find problematic is the influential tendency to allow hypothetical reconstructions to exert such hermeneutical force in scholarly exegesis that the vision of community set forth within the narrative is suppressed or ignored. In other words, *the Johannine vision of community can easily become confused with a scholar's vision of the Johannine community*. Though the subject of ecclesiology is informed by the details behind a Gospel's composition, little information of those details is truly available, in spite of access to three epistles that circulated within the Johannine community's social networks.<sup>34</sup> What the Gospel does make available is a storied vision of

*Gospel: Studies in Creative Criticism* (London: SPCK, 1971), 15. So in spite of the diachronic markers long recognized in the text, the overall narrative structure can be heeded as an authoritative source for Johannine thought. As the conceptualization of the church, ecclesiology does not necessarily require the conjectural reconstruction of a particularized community or collection of communities.

<sup>32</sup> Stephen Barton provides several other related critiques of the use of historical reconstructions in discerning John's vision of community. One worth mentioning here is the 'privileging of the original text in its (reconstructed) historical context over readings of the text in its canonical context and in the light of its history of reception in the Church'. From Stephen C. Barton, 'Christian Community in the Gospel of John', in *Christology, Controversy and Community: New Testament Essays in Honour of David R. Catchpole*, ed. David G. Horrell and Christopher M. Tuckett, NovTSup 99 (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 279–301, here at 284.

<sup>33</sup> For the possible contributions of literary criticism to historical research, see Adele Reinhartz, 'Building Skyscrapers on Toothpicks: The Literary-Critical Challenge to Historical Criticism', in *Anatomies of Narrative Criticism: The Past, Present, and Futures of the Fourth Gospel as Literature*, ed. Tom Thatcher and Stephen D. Moore, SBLRBS 55 (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 55–76. On the unfortunate dichotomization of narrative and history in Gospels scholarship, see Francis Watson's 'The Gospels as Narrated History' in Francis Watson, *Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 33–69.

<sup>34</sup> In the Johannine Epistles there is a small cache of historical material serviceable for a limited degree of community reconstruction (though scarcely enough, in my view, for the formulation of a community's history spanning half a century). For a representation of how

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the divine–human society of ‘church’. The hermeneutical circle oscillating between the community’s history and the community’s text is certainly helpful and even necessary in Gospel studies; it is the ambiguities and gaps in the latter that press interpreters into the task of conjecturing about the former. The general scholarly consensus that John’s Gospel evidences some form of intra-Jewish conflict in its elusive background is assumed and affirmed throughout this study.<sup>35</sup> But it is the Gospel narrative that bears primary hermeneutical weight in all that follows.

### ‘Christocentricity’: The Eclipse of Ecclesiology by Christology

At the heart of the most prominent reconstruction theories, it is an uncompromising devotion to a caustic high christology that precipitates the expulsion of Johannine Christians from their Jewish socioreligious context, a traumatic social event to be sure.<sup>36</sup> In contemporary biblical scholarship the Fourth Gospel’s distinctive portrayal of that christology is therefore accentuated to such an extent that other themes or concerns within the text can become inadvertently relegated to ancillary status. Responding to Nils Dahl’s criticism that God is the ‘neglected factor in New Testament theology’,<sup>37</sup> Marianne Meye Thompson has argued that an ‘inadequate and imprecise’ christocentricity has been applied to John’s Gospel.<sup>38</sup> In her view, the evangelist’s presentation of Jesus has overwhelmed the Gospel’s vision of God in biblical scholarship – theology proper (in its narrower sense as a discipline in understanding God) has been eclipsed by a disproportionate focus on christology.

scholars frequently read the Johannine narrative through the lens of the Epistles see Stephen S. Smalley, ‘The Johannine Community and the Letters of John’, in *A Vision for the Church: Studies in Early Christian Ecclesiology*, ed. Markus Bockmuehl and Michael B. Thompson (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), 95–104.

<sup>35</sup> I side with Adele Reinhartz who believes that ‘the Gospel reflects the complex social situation of the Johannine community but not the specific historical circumstances which gave rise to that situation’ – Reinhartz, ‘Johannine Community’, 137.

<sup>36</sup> The operative term in John’s Gospel, of course, is ἀποσυνάγωγος, appearing in 9:22, 12:42, and 16:2.

<sup>37</sup> Nils A. Dahl, ‘The Neglected Factor in New Testament Theology’, in *Jesus the Christ: The Historical Origins of Christological Doctrine*, ed. Donald H. Juel (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1991), 153–63.

<sup>38</sup> Marianne Meye Thompson, *The God of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 13–14.