

The Gospel of John and Liberation

By an ancient and widespread habit, we are accustomed to think of the gospel of John as the "spiritual gospel." In contrast to the Synoptics, John is held to present a more inward or theologically profound side of the early church's interpretation of Jesus, or even of the teaching of Jesus himself. Hence this gospel is regarded by many as either the best introduction to or the most sublime meditation on what Christians believe about Jesus. As such its role is often seen to be that of leading individuals to faith in Christ, or deepening their understanding of Christ's significance or their communion with him. What it may have to say about social relations among individuals, much less among classes of people, will be relegated to a rather remote subsection of a late chapter of one's thinking about John, under the rubric "Love one another."

Recent developments in the study of the Fourth Gospel have the potential of bringing about a revolutionary change in this situation. By exposing as never before the concrete historical setting in which this gospel was written, they have opened up possibilities in the interpretation of John some of which have not been available in practically the entire 1900 years since the book first appeared. They offer us the opportunity to reach behind the time when John came to be understood as the "spiritual gospel," and to see in it more nearly the whole range of meanings that would have been apparent to its first generation of readers.

In part these developments are related to broader tendencies in New Testament study generally. The epistles of Paul, for instance, are being subjected to an analysis that is deliberately and self-consciously sociological, even if the methods and results are of necessity not always those that professional sociologists might expect. In Paul's case, however, the situations of conflict in which his letters were written are self-evident and have long been exploited in theological interpretation, even if the sociological approach to them has not appeared until quite recently. With John, the actual conflicts are below the surface of the text, as we shall

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see, and it is only now becoming possible to hope that knowledge of them will bear fruit for the study of Johannine theology comparable to that in the Pauline field. But the beginning of a sociological approach to the New Testament is also connected to the advance of pressing social concerns to the forefront of theological discussion in many areas of the church today. The examination of the teaching and life of Jesus and the letters of Paul to see what bearing they may have on the liberation struggles of black people, women, and the oppressed of many nations, and on the search for reconciliation and peace among the world's peoples, provides us a stimulus to put similar questions to the gospel of John within the context of the new understanding of that gospel that is now emerging.

My plan in these lectures is to elaborate first of all the recent developments in Johannine studies that enable us to pose this new set of questions. I shall then turn to two broad areas of Johannine thought, namely Christology and the ethic of love, and consider them in the light of the new knowledge of John and of their significance for liberation. Finally I shall take up exegeses of two specific segments of Johannine material, the figure of Nicodemus and the trial of Jesus, and treat them in similar fashion, followed by some concluding considerations on the whole study. I must say at the outset that this undertaking should be considered experimental and exploratory; and experiments can fail and explorations can lead nowhere. Even so, the enterprise should at least make clear to us what is possible in this area, and perhaps what is impossible as well. Obviously we will not be looking at all the possible liberation themes that could be considered in connection with John, nor do I claim that every theme of the Fourth Evangelist has a direct bearing on liberation. Above all I do not propose to set out in the last detail how black and Third World theologians ought to appropriate the findings about John that I will present. That I must leave to my colleagues here at ITC and elsewhere. I hope that they will regard this as an offering from the realm of critical biblical studies of raw material only partially shaped, suggestions that may fertilize and give direction to their own further work.

The Present Position in Johannine Studies

In setting out the present position in Johannine studies, I must in this context give only a survey, not a detailed history of research, and I intend in the process to emphasize one particular trend that has relevance for our topic, and indeed has made our topic possible at all. There will be many significant areas of Johannine research that will receive only brief mention, if any, which does not imply that they do not also contribute to our contemporary understanding of the Fourth Gospel. After surveying the development in question, I will proceed to lay out the central features

of Johannine Christianity that have appeared as a result of this development, and to indicate its potential relevance to the theology of liberation.

The conception of John as the "spiritual gospel" began very early in Christian history. It is first attested around 200 A.D. by Clement of Alexandria, who, as quoted by the church historian Eusebius,¹ reported it as tradition that John wrote a "spiritual gospel" in the knowledge that the "physical" data were already contained in the other gospels. Earlier still, we find the gnostic Heracleon giving a highly allegorical and symbolic interpretation of the Fourth Gospel, treating it very much as a "spiritual" document. It seems likely, in fact, that by the middle of the second century the actual circumstances and controversies that gave birth to the individual writings of the New Testament had been forgotten. The books were being interpreted in the light of the new needs and rapidly developing theologies of the various Christian communions, while the impulses that originally called them forth were quickly fading into an already distant past. Even in the case of Paul it is rare to meet a Christian writer in the second century who interprets the epistles out of anything resembling their author's own frame of reference.² As for the gospels, both their form and their content worked to direct interest even more strongly away from the circumstances of their composition, which, apart from brief traditional notices mainly regarding their authorship, received scant attention until the rise of modern critical scholarship.

In these circumstances it is not surprising that John, out of the four ultimately accepted as canonical, came to be regarded as the "spiritual" gospel. The book itself insists that the spirit is what gives life, while the flesh is of no avail, and that the words of Jesus it presents are spirit and life (6:63); and that God, who is spirit, desires only worship that is "in spirit and in truth" (4:24). The haunting profundity of its opening words and the elusive character of its language, whose meaning always seems to be finally in one's grasp the moment before it slips irretrievably away, combine to make this gospel seem itself like the Spirit, which "blows where it will . . . but you do not know where it comes from or whither it is going" (3:8). It thus lay ready to hand to explain its manifest differences from the other three canonical gospels, and particularly its preference for recondite theological discourse over narrative, by conceiving of it as the "spiritual" or "theological" gospel, the gospel of *Logos* rather than *sarx*, of Word rather than flesh.

The effect of this conception has been to focus the interpretation of

¹ Eusebius Pamphili, Bp. of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, Loeb Classical Library edition, vol. II (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953-1957), p. 14.

² Cf. David Rensberger, "As the Apostle Teaches: The Development of the Use of Paul's Letters in Second-Century Christianity" (Ph.D. diss. Yale University, 1981); cf. Andreas Lindemann, *Paulus im Atesten Christentum* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1979).

John, even more than that of other biblical books, on its *ideas*. The significance of John is felt almost as a matter of course to lie in its system of thought, its theology. The abstract language of the Fourth Gospel easily leads the interpreter to deal with it as an exercise in abstraction, and to attempt to locate the basic principles around which the system of abstractions behind it might be organized. This is certainly appropriate, and, no doubt, inevitable; but it does tend to obscure and delay the recognition that other realities, of a more concrete social and historical nature, may be at least equally as important as ideology in explaining the Fourth Gospel.

In the modern period, of course, historical questions of a number of kinds have been raised about John. Indeed, it is precisely the historicity of John, its historical reliability, that has been the most frequently and thoroughly debated issue in critical Johannine scholarship. Through the first half of the twentieth century, it was generally assumed that John had made use of Mark, and perhaps Luke as well, as source material for his work.³ To the extent that his account differed from theirs, it became necessary to regard it as, if the more spiritual, *ipso facto* the less historical. John's historical accuracy has always had many defenders, but such an obvious discrepancy as its placing of the cleansing of the Temple at the beginning of Jesus' work rather than at the end, as Mark does, can really only be accounted for by saying that one of them is historically right and the other is wrong; and on this matter, the decision for most scholars has gone in favor of Mark.⁴ But differences in chronology are not the core of the problem. It is the Johannine presentation of Jesus himself that is the really insuperable difficulty. The variances from the Synoptics—the long, repetitious harangues instead of parables and short sayings, the focus on Jesus' relation to God rather than on the coming of the Kingdom and on ethics—are too well known to detail here. Estimates of the extent to which a historical nucleus might lie behind this or that saying or incident varied considerably, but again by the middle of the century it had long since been concluded that John could not be used as a source for historical knowledge of Jesus in the same way as the Synoptics.⁵ Equally disputed in this connection was the gospel's authorship. In general, the more remote it seemed from the historical Jesus, the less likely it seemed that the apostle John the son of Zebedee could have written it.

Literary questions formed a significant part of the inquiry concerning John during this period. Numerous studies attempted to discover an ear-

³ Wilbert Francis Howard, *The Fourth Gospel in Recent Criticism and Interpretation*, 4th rev. ed. (London: Epworth Press, 1955), pp. 130-131.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 141-142; cf. the relevant commentaries.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 213-227.

lier book behind the Fourth Gospel as we now have it, one that was subjected to rewritings, interpolations and supplementations, and rearrangement, variously deduced by different scholars on the basis of discontinuities observed in language and style or narrative sequence.⁶ Investigations of John's sources were also made, leading, as already mentioned, to the conclusion that they included Mark and perhaps Luke. But other sources were also invoked to help explain the gospel's peculiarities.⁷ This applies to the passion narrative on the one hand; and on the other, Rudolf Bultmann forcefully advanced the idea of a "signs" source that contained the miracles of Jesus that John relates, and a gnostic "discourse" source that furnished the basis of the distinctive speeches of Jesus in John.

Both John's historicity and its literary development, however, were long studied in close connection with the background of its language and thought. For it seemed quite clear that the *Logos* conception, the strong dualism, and much else could not be explained on the basis of the Palestinian Judaism of the time of Jesus. It was just this that seemed most unhistorical about John, and which therefore was thought to have entered into its presentation of Jesus as the result of influences outside the gospel tradition. Moreover, as I have observed, it was the *ideas* of the "spiritual gospel" that always formed the primary object of its interpretation. Therefore its historical investigation as well inevitably gravitated toward the history of its ideas, whose origins were sought in a variety of directions. The thinking of Paul was often regarded as one influence, despite the absence of really Pauline language: to some, Paul seemed the natural bridge from Jesus to John.⁸ Other influences have seemed even more obvious.⁹ The first of these was always Greek philosophy in general, and the highly Hellenized Jewish philosophy of Philo of Alexandria in particular. Early in this century, the effort was made to trace mystical elements in the thought of John to the Hellenistic mystery religions. At the same time, gnosticism was also being exploited for its contributions to interpreting the Fourth Gospel. Primarily it has been the Hermetic literature that has been seen as the most promising in this regard; but Bultmann and others pointed to Mandaean gnostic texts as offering the clue to understanding John. All these influences came from outside the realm of Palestinian Judaism. Yet there were those who sought to show that John's peculiarities could be explained from within that realm, by pointing to parallels in rabbinic literature or in Jewish mystical writings.

In all this, we see how strongly the perception that in John it was the

⁶ Ibid., pp. 95-102, 166-169.

⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 133-137, 166-167.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 5, 36-37, 226.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 144-159, 170-172.

ideas that mattered determined the direction of critical study. By the early 1950s it was widely conceded that John was late in date and historically unreliable in comparison to the Synoptics. But the primary basis for this conclusion remained the fact that John represented a theological development that went well beyond theirs. Literary criticism played a strong role of its own, but essentially to explain John meant to explain his thought and its origin. The study of the Fourth Gospel focussed on theology in the abstract, and so remained an undertaking in the history of ideas. C. H. Dodd's classic *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* is the enduring and indispensable monument to this endeavor.¹⁰ Likewise, on the deepest level Bultmann's commentary,¹¹ with its Protestant-existentialist interpretation, stands as the modern climax of the tradition that looks on John as the "spiritual gospel," for no other contemporary commentator has succeeded in drawing the reader so powerfully away from the "physical" data of history toward inward encounter with God.

In the last thirty years, advances have been made that challenge not only this or that critical conclusion, but the dominance of this tradition as a whole. The first of these has to do with the background of the Fourth Gospel. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls revealed a Hebrew and Aramaic speaking Jewish sect in first-century Palestine that expressed itself in much of the same dualistic, exclusivistic, and "inward" terminology as John. Thus at one stroke the necessity of locating John's background entirely outside Jewish Palestine fell away. Already in 1929, Hugo Odeberg had begun to draw on Jewish mystical texts in interpreting John,¹² and in more recent times the importance for Johannine interpretation of these and other forms of "heterodox Judaism" (however vaguely this term may often be understood) has rightly come to the fore. It is not that John can now be claimed as "Jewish" and not "Hellenistic"; rather, we now know how deeply Judaism and Hellenism had interpenetrated, even in Palestine. Clearly also there remains much in John that cannot be explained solely in Palestinian terms. But the need for a generations-long period of reflection in a non-Jewish environment of Hellenistic philosophy, mystery religions, and gnosticism to account for the Fourth Gospel now seems far less pressing. We are still in the realm of the history of ideas here; but the effect of these discoveries was to suggest that conclusions long regarded as assured were in fact open to ques-

¹⁰ Charles H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge, England: University Press, 1953).

¹¹ Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971).

¹² Hugo Odeberg, *The Fourth Gospel Interpreted in its Relation to Contemporaneous Religious Currents*, cited in Howard, *The Fourth Gospel*, pp. 49, 158-159, 206.

tion.¹³ At the same time, attention was drawn to the need for further investigation of Johannine *origins*.

The second area of significant advance had to do with the relation of John to the Synoptic gospels. Already in 1938, P. Gardner-Smith had argued that John was not dependent on Mark or any of the Synoptics, but that he and they drew independently on related traditions.¹⁴ The real turning point, however, came in 1963, with C. H. Dodd's *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel*.¹⁵ It was Dodd's fundamental methodological insight in this study that the methods of form criticism applied by Bultmann and others to the Synoptics could equally well be applied to John. By doing so he was able to make a convincing demonstration that the materials in John belong to a tradition of their own, not dependent on the Synoptics. Though radically reshaped by the author of the Fourth Gospel, this special tradition goes back ultimately to the same type of oral transmission as the traditions behind the Synoptics. This result leads to various further conclusions. For Dodd, it meant that the material in John could once again be considered valuable in seeking the historical facts about Jesus. Most scholars have felt that Dodd pressed this point too far, not recognizing that the mere fact that something in John goes back to a tradition does not make it "historical." More significantly, Dodd opened up the possibility of investigating the form history of the Johannine material and comparing this history with that of the Synoptic materials; much work in this area still waits to be done. Above all, Dodd liberated Johannine studies from the need to focus on literary sources, whether the Synoptic gospels or Bultmann's hypothetical "signs" and "discourse" documents. A Johannine tradition had now been posited whose origin and life setting could be investigated as an independent entity.¹⁶

This new possibility was to be exploited in various ways by numerous scholars, two of whom in particular may be mentioned at this point. Raymond E. Brown combined a literary analysis of the continuities and discontinuities in the gospel with the notion of an independent Johannine stream of tradition. He thus envisioned a lengthy and complex development from oral tradition about Jesus; through its shaping within a particular Christian community, giving it its peculiarly Johannine character

¹³ Cf. John Arthur Thomas Robinson, "The New Look on the Fourth Gospel," *Twelve New Testament Studies* (Naperville, Illinois: Allenson Press, 1962), pp. 94-106, esp. pp. 98-102.

¹⁴ P. Gardner-Smith, *Saint John and the Synoptic Gospels* (Cambridge, England: University Press, 1938); cited in Howard, *The Fourth Gospel*, pp. 169; also cited by Robinson, "The New Look," pp. 96-98.

¹⁵ Charles H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge, England: University Press, 1963).

¹⁶ Cf. Robinson, "The New Look," pp. 104-106.

and content; to the writing of the gospel and its subsequent re-editing to include material from the tradition that had previously been left out.¹⁷ Somewhat similarly, Barnabas Lindars proposed that the origins of the Fourth Gospel lay in a diverse body of traditions and short collections of material about Jesus, which served as the basis for homilies in the Johannine style and character, these homilies being then reworked by their author to form the gospel itself, in a first and an expanded second edition, which was later subjected to a variety of small additions.¹⁸ Both Brown and Lindars thus see John as the outcome of a complicated process of composition and redaction, in a way reminiscent of earlier literary theories, but both regard the main features of the gospel as the product of a single author's reflection on a tradition essentially independent of the Synoptics. Lindars allows for more diversity at the start of the process, including more contact with Synoptic tradition and less likelihood of a unified apostolic eyewitness at the ultimate origin. Nevertheless both scholars clearly envision the Johannine tradition and its development into a written gospel as an independent process within the history of early Christianity, running parallel to that which produced the Synoptic gospels.

The significance of this perception can hardly be overestimated. Theories of extensive pre-Johannine written sources continue to be relevant; in particular the work of R. T. Fortna on the "signs" source has been influential,¹⁹ and there are those who still defend the dependence of John upon Mark.²⁰ But Dodd, Brown, Lindars, and others have decisively shown that it is possible to interpret the Fourth Gospel without reference to such sources, and that such interpretation leads to fruitful new ways of considering the origin and setting of John. For, though the complex theories of Brown and Lindars can perhaps not be proven in detail, the emphasis upon an independent body of traditions nurtured within a particular early Christian community has opened the way to developments in the study of John that must be seen as truly epoch-making.

The form-critical approach to the gospels carries with it the implication that the Christian community in which the traditional materials were shaped had a decisive impact on the formation and transformation of those materials. Form criticism draws attention to the *Sitz im Leben*

¹⁷ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, Anchor Bible, vol. 29 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966), pp. xxxiv-xxxix.

¹⁸ Barnabas Lindars, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1972), pp. 46-54; see also Lindars, *Behind the Fourth Gospel* (London: SPCK, 1971). The latter citation was not seen by the writer.

¹⁹ R. T. Fortna, *The Gospel of Signs: A Reconstruction of the Narrative Source Underlying the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge, England: University Press, 1970).

²⁰ See C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978), pp. 42-45.

of the materials, that is, to their setting in the life of the early Christian community, and so to the *function* served by the gospel traditions in the community's living encounter with its own needs and with the world around it. In applying the form-critical method to the Fourth Gospel in a consistent way for the first time, C. H. Dodd made it inevitable that the character and situation of the Johannine community would become an object of interest and investigation by those who sought to understand this gospel. The scholar who then made the crucial step forward in this area was J. Louis Martyn.

In his book, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, Martyn set out to discover whether the gospel of John is in any way a "response to contemporary events and issues" in the daily life of the Christian community in which its author lived.²¹ His investigation led him to the conclusion that John was written late in the first century in a community of Jewish Christians who were in the process of being marked off and expelled from the Jewish community by means of the Benediction against Heretics that had recently been introduced into the synagogue service in their city. It was a traumatic time of decision for Christians who had maintained their allegiance to both the Jewish religion with its synagogue fellowship, and the Messiahship of Jesus and the new Christian group. John's gospel was written for those who were faced with this decision, explicating its communal and theological dimensions by means of a "two-level drama" in which the stories about Jesus reflect also the experience and convictions of the author and his church.²² Such a situation of conflict had occasionally been posited by others before Martyn.²³ But by his detailed presentation of the hypothesis and his powerful linking of it to the exegesis of the gospel, Martyn succeeded in drawing attention to this situation as *the* setting within which the distinctive Johannine tradition about Jesus took form as the Fourth Gospel.

Subsequent studies have fully confirmed the rightness of this basis perception. While few have followed Martyn's delineation of the action behind the Fourth Gospel in all its detail, his fundamental conception of the situation has been elaborated in a variety of directions, becoming the cornerstone of much current Johannine research. Raymond Brown, in dialogue with Martyn, has worked out a complete, if highly speculative, history of the Johannine community from its beginnings to its dissipation

²¹ J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979), p. 18.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 37-41, 60-62, and passim. Cf. also J. Louis Martyn, "Glimpses into the History of the Johannine Community," in *The Gospel of John in Christian History*, J. Louis Martyn, ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), pp. 90-121.

²³ Cf. Howard, *The Fourth Gospel*, p. 59; see also Robert Kysar, *The Fourth Evangelist and His Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1975), pp. 150-156 passim.

in the second century.²⁴ Wayne A. Meeks explored the significance of John's communal setting for the understanding of the pattern of Johannine Christological language,²⁵ and Marinus de Jonge went on to make a wide-ranging series of theological and historical probes into the Fourth Gospel on this basis.²⁶ A host of other studies has also appeared taking this proposed community situation of John as their essential presupposition.²⁷

What may we say about the present position in Johannine studies as a result of these developments? So far as the historicity of John is concerned, the recognition of Dodd and others that John derives from a stream of tradition parallel to that of the Synoptics puts it on a more nearly equal footing with them.²⁸ We may now be more willing to see behind some incident or saying found only in John a datum of tradition going back ultimately to the historical Jesus. However, this realization should not obscure the enormous distance that still must be traveled from John backward to Jesus. The new clarity regarding John's milieu and its influence on the gospel afforded by Martyn and others makes us aware again of this distance, and however much light the Dead Sea Scrolls may have shed on the possibility of "mystical" teaching in Jewish Palestine, the Jesus of John still differs from the Jesus of the Synoptics, so that the question of historicity still must be decided on other grounds than mere parallel-gathering. Our primary object in studying this gospel must remain the intention of John, not the intention of Jesus.

It is the recovery of the precise historical circumstances of the Johannine gospel and its tradition that is the truly pivotal advance now being made. Robert Kysar calls this "the lasting contribution of the last quarter of the twentieth century to Johannine scholarship."²⁹ I would agree, and would emphasize the historic nature of this contribution. The crucible of controversy in which the Johannine materials were forged was virtually lost to sight from the second century on, when John came to be regarded as the "spiritual gospel." Its rediscovery and promotion to a dominant place in research at a time when, as I hope to demonstrate, biblical studies and theology are peculiarly able to respond to it could

²⁴ Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979); cf. also Martyn, "Glimpses into the History."

²⁵ Wayne A. Meeks, "The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91 (1972): 44-72.

²⁶ Marinus de Jonge, *Jesus: Stranger from Heaven and Son of God* (Missoula, Montana; Scholars Press, 1977).

²⁷ Cf. D. Moody Smith, Jr., "Johannine Christianity: Some Reflections on Its Character and Delineation," *New Testament Studies* 21 (1975): 222-248; Robert Kysar, "The Gospel of John in Current Research," *Religious Studies Review* 9 (1983): 314-323.

²⁸ Cf. Robinson, "The New Look," pp. 100-101.

²⁹ Kysar, "The Gospel of John in Current Research," 318.

prove to be of extraordinary significance in the history of the interpretation of the Fourth Gospel. Obviously not all the details of John's historical situation have been worked out in any agreed-upon way; perhaps all the details never will be. Yet enough has been done to enable further exploration to proceed with confidence.

For the full implications of this new position largely remain to be worked out. To date most studies have concentrated on delineating the Johannine community and its situation, and on locating the traces of it in the text. We have barely begun to realize what the awareness of this communal setting may mean for our understanding and appropriation of John's theology and for our conception of early Christianity and John's place in it. We may hope that knowledge of the conflicts that stimulated the writing of the Fourth Gospel will enrich our theological understanding of it in a manner similar to what has long been true of Paul. We may look for a transfer in the locus of interpretation of theological issues from the realm of the abstract and "eternal" to that of the emergence of theology from the actual life of a particular community in a particular situation. Something like this transfer has been underway for some time in various areas of biblical studies,³⁰ but the dialectic between theology and community experience now seems so pronounced in John that Johannine studies may yet outstrip the rest in this process. I do not mean to imply that the time to pursue the classical lines of Johannine interpretation, with their focus on the theology of John, is ended. Yet we are now in a position to ask about the social implications of Johannine thought, and in the case of the "spiritual gospel" this, I believe, is revolutionary.

It remains now to describe in more detail the situation and character of the Johannine community as it is coming to be understood, and to indicate some basic areas of relevance of this description to the problem of liberation.

As I have indicated, 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. It is possible that the affiliations of some members of this group were with more dissident or sectarian tendencies within ancient Judaism than with mainstream piety.³¹ The group also possessed traditions about Jesus that were used 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, even though a few Christians were actually among those authorities. As the position of the

³⁰ Cf. the essays collected by Norman K. Gottwald, ed., *The Bible and Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1983).

³¹ Cf. Oscar Cullmann, *Der johanneische Kreis* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1975), pp. 30-40; Smith, "Johannine Christianity," pp. 240-243; Brown, *Community*, pp. 30, 34-40.

Pharisees grew more dominant in ruling circles following the disasters of the First Revolt in 70 A.D., an effort was made to enforce greater conformity within the Jewish community. In this process, Christian Jews especially were subject to pressure. We can see similar tensions at work in the gospel of Matthew. For the Johannine group, however, the result was expulsion from the synagogue community altogether, whatever mechanism may have been employed in this.³² Perhaps something particular in the makeup of Johannine Christianity at this point—the nature of its Christological confession, the presence of “heterodox” Jewish elements, its relation to Samaritans or Gentiles—may have brought about the rupture. In any case, the group was now faced with a crisis, as those who openly acknowledged their faith were expelled, while others strove through secrecy to maintain their status within the Jewish community.

It is important to realize both the dimensions and the results of this crisis. The Christians who were expelled were cut off from much that had given them identity and structured their lives. It meant social disconnection, the loss of communion with family and friends. It also meant religious dislocation. The synagogue meetings, the public liturgy, festivals, and observances, were all now denied them, and the authoritative interpretation of the sacred scripture itself was in the hands of their opponents. The threat was thus also to their sacred cosmos, the universe of shared perceptions, assumptions, beliefs, ideals, and hopes that had given meaning to their world within Judaism. As a result, the group seems to have turned in upon itself. Its own Christian traditions and beliefs, its own fellowship, became the source of a new sacred cosmos and a new social context. 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 group, representative of “the world” at large. This alienation from Judaism and perhaps from society in generally, the Johannine hostility to “the world,” leads some scholars to describe the community as a “sect” in the technical sense. Within this context a dualism perhaps already latent in the group’s thinking came strongly to the fore. Their Christology also was involved: if it was their confession of Jesus that caused them to be expelled from the synagogue, their expulsion drove them to an ever more radical confession of him. Jesus became for them the locus of all things, not only the messianic

³² Martyn’s explicit appeal to the Benediction against Heretics (see his *History and Theology*, pp. 37-62) has not gone unchallenged; cf. Steven T. Katz, “Issues in the Separation of Judaism and Christianity after 70 C.E.: A Reconsideration,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 103 (1984): 63-76, and the literature cited there. Even if the Benediction proves not to have been the specific occasion of it, the expulsion of Johannine Christians from the synagogue seems incontrovertible from John 9:22; 12:42; 16:2, whether this was a widespread or only a local phenomenon.

fulfillment of scripture, but also judgement and eternal life, the religious observances now closed to them, and Deity itself. His rejection by the world symbolized their own alienation, and the correct confession of Jesus became the touchstone of truth for them. Brown argues that the insistence on right confession even led them into conflict with other Christian groups.³³

It was within this situation of conflict, crisis, and alienation that the Fourth Gospel was written, and against this background it must be understood. The community's Jesus-traditions were powerfully recast in this milieu, reflecting the influence both of forces outside mainstream Jewish piety and of the crisis with the synagogue. This reshaping of an originally independent stream of Jesus-tradition is what gave John its peculiar character, and drew its presentation ever further from the historical Jesus into a deeper understanding perceived by the community as the work of the Spirit of Truth (John 14:25-26; 16:12-15).

The remoteness from the historical Jesus is one of several factors that have seemed to make John the least promising of all the gospels for the theology of liberation. We find here none of Jesus' radical social and economic pronouncements, little of his solidarity with the poor and the outcast. The focus instead is on Christology, with an almost tedious insistence. The inwardness of the "spiritual gospel," too, seems bound to an individualism that offers little light on social issues.

The new understanding of John outlined above changes this, and this it part of its revolutionary import. For my contention is that it is now possible and necessary to view the gospel of John as the product of an oppressed community, and to draw the consequences therefrom. It is important, though, to be very careful and very clear in understanding exactly what is meant by "oppression" here. The Johannine community was probably not economically or politically oppressed, at least not in ways different from the experience of other Jews and religious fringe groups in the Roman Empire. That is to say, they will have been, like other Christians, subject to only sporadic persecution by government officials, as a nonconforming religion cut off from the protection Rome gave to the tolerated nonconformity of Judaism. And they bore within themselves still the remnants of the Jewish anti-Roman messianism that was by no means restricted to Palestinian Judaism. More significant was the group's sense of deracination, of a disenfranchisement and alienation imposed on them forcibly by those who had been their own people. There is no question that the group *saw itself* as oppressed. They heard Jesus saying to them, "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before you. . . . If they persecuted me, they will persecute you,

³³ Brown, *Community*, pp. 71-88.

too. . . . Indeed, a time is coming when everyone who kills you will think that he is offering service to God" (John 15:18, 20b; 16:2b). We have here then a situation of oppression that is partially, although only partially, analogous to contemporary conditions; and my claim is that the analogous elements in that situation may and must be evaluated.

We are thus enabled to ask how the response of the Johannine Christian community to oppression may be relevant to oppressed communities seeking a Christian response today. Let me say clearly again that I do not claim that everything in John is relevant in this way or must be interpreted only in this light. But the possibility and the demand to interpret some things in this way seem inescapable. We are not looking here only for prescription, for authoritative guidance from John. We are also looking for simple description, for the patterns of the Johannine response to oppression, patterns whose significance for us would then remain to be determined. It is quite possible that some of these patterns may turn out to give negative guidance, for there are dangers inherent in the Johannine way.

Ours is not the first effort that has been made along these lines. A dozen years ago Frederick Herzog published *Liberation Theology*, a study of "liberation in the light of the Fourth Gospel." The premise is at first exciting; but the book proves to be a disappointment. It turns out that it is "an attempt to develop an outline of Christian theology" in which "the Fourth Gospel text merely stakes out the area in which I am attempting to identify present theological priorities."³⁴ Sometimes the text seems not even to be that prominent, and the neglect of exegesis means that we don't get to hear what *John* has to say about liberation, only what Herzog believes *must* be said about it, connected somehow to the Johannine text. This is not to say that Herzog never hits the mark, only that his exegetical weakness and too-rapid transposition of John's message into terms of "selfhood," "unconcealment," and the like leave us unable to say what exactly John's contribution to the subject is.

It is a far different matter with José P. Miranda's *Being and the Messiah*. Miranda is that rare sort of scholar who seems able to make significant original contributions to technical discussions in fields as diverse as Marxist-existentialist philosophy and biblical criticism. Miranda asserts that the absolute imperative—that is to say, God—exists only in the outcry of the other, the neighbor in need; and that time is real, i.e., that reality consists not in the unchanging, timeless truths of Platonist philosophy, but in the contingency of changefulness of passing time.³⁵ On this

³⁴ Frederick Herzog, *Liberation Theology: Liberation in the Light of the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Seabury Press, 1972), p. 22.

³⁵ José Porfirio Miranda, *Being and the Messiah: The Message of St. John* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1977), pp. 27-70.

basis, he insists that biblical eschatology be taken seriously, i.e., that the Kingdom of God is a real, perceivable change in the circumstances of this world, that it is a change in favor of justice for the needy—and that it *has come* in Jesus the Messiah.³⁶ That John makes *this* claim about Jesus is what makes its message a liberative one, the more so since it relates the acceptance or rejection of this claim to the doing of “good works,” a term that Miranda discovers to mean “the doing of good to the needy.”³⁷ John’s message is that God is revealed in Jesus precisely in his doing of these “good works,” so that God is known only in the keeping of the word, the commandment, of love for the neighbor.³⁸

We will have cause to refer to Miranda’s work again later on. Here let me say that he is absolutely correct in his assertion that for John the messianic event, that which overthrows the world, has broken into the world as *fact*, and unleashed the world’s hostility.³⁹ This is John’s well-known “realized eschatology.” Usually, however, this is discussed in terms of individual faith and “eternal life.” Miranda suggests that John’s concern is with eschatological *community*, and that this is what must be addressed. Writing in 1973, Miranda did not yet seem aware of the new communal understanding of John outlined above, and so was missing what I hope to show is a powerful exegetical tool in this connection. Moreover, Miranda may overestimate the extent to which John spells out in precise social terms the threat felt by the world in Jesus’ Messiahship; and underestimate the extent to which the Fourth Gospel is a closed system, so that even the Johannine epistles are of limited comparative usefulness (let alone the Synoptics), and the parallels used to define “good works” are not absolutely demonstrative. Nevertheless, Miranda’s book is one of the most exciting and challenging works on John in recent times, and even exegetes who may not agree with him will be unwise not to respond to him.

Johannine Christology and a Jesus for the Oppressed

Liberation Christology has in general appealed strongly to the Jesus of history, or at any rate to the Synoptic Jesus, for its subject matter. It speaks of the Jesus who ministered to the oppressed and proclaimed God’s Kingdom in their favor, and who died as one of them as the result of his clash with the established structures of power.⁴⁰ But, as I have

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 56-68, 81-90, 156-202.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 96-100.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 135-153.

³⁹ On the latter, cf. Miranda, *Being and the Messiah*, pp. 127-129.

⁴⁰ See James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), pp. 34-38; Alfredo Fierro, *The Militant Gospel* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1977), pp. 152-171; Leonardo Boff, “Christ’s Liberation via Oppression: An Attempt at

said, this Jesus, apart perhaps from the conflict with power, is not the Johannine Jesus, so that the Christology of John in all its distinctiveness has had relatively little impact on the discussion of Jesus the Liberator. For John seems to present us with an otherworldly Christ, a divine figure of small relevance to the social and political struggles of the oppressed. What we have to demonstrate, then, is that this Johannine Jesus is not after all out of touch with the oppressed. By examining the relationship between Jesus and the oppressed in John, I hope to discover some suggestive features that may then be fruitfully compared with the way Christology has functioned particularly within black Christianity.

In what may now be regarded as a seminal work, Wayne A. Meeks in 1972 proposed to seek the meaning of Johannine Christological symbolism not "as a chapter in the history of ideas," but in its functioning within the Johannine community.⁴¹ He explored the way in which John typically portrays Jesus as an alien, a stranger, John's stress that Jesus is "from above," "from heaven," "not of this world." As a result he is incomprehensible to the world, which refuses to hear what he has to say. In symbolic language, Jesus "comes down" from heaven and "goes up" again there; but those who are "of this world" understand nothing about him. Thus the Johannine insistence on Jesus' descent from above expresses not the union of heaven and earth but their estrangement.⁴² But as Meeks points out, the estrangement represents also the alienation of the Johannine community. In the course of the gospel, John depicts Jesus' progressive alienation from "the Jews." At the same time, he depicts also the disciples' growing detachment from "the Jews" and attachment to Jesus. Thus in John the history of the disciples, and the history of Jesus himself, in their ever-increasing alienation from Judaism and "the world," expresses the history of the Johannine community. Their rejection and deracination is figured in that of Jesus.⁴³ John's high Christology thus reinforces the community's social identity, that is to say, its deprivation of identity and formation of a new identity. As part of this process, we may posit and partly discern a dialectic between the growth of high Christology and the community's disenfranchisement. It was, after all, their Christological confession that apparently led to their expulsion from the synagogue. As this alienation grew, the development of a higher Christology both expressed and compensated for their sense of loss; but the higher their Christology, the greater grew the rift between

Theological Construction from the Standpoint of Latin America," in *Frontiers of Theology in Latin America*, ed. Rosino Gibellini (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979), pp. 100-132.

⁴¹ Meeks, "The Man from Heaven," p. 68.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 57-60, 60-67.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 69-70.

them and synagogue Judaism.⁴⁴ The otherworldly, exalted Christ of the Fourth Gospel is thus directly related to the communal experience of the Christians behind it.

Another aspect of John's Christology may also be noted here. This is the way in which all religious resources, functions, and symbols tend to be concentrated in Jesus in the Fourth Gospel. In common with early Christianity in general, John holds that the Jewish scriptures bear witness to Jesus (5:39). It is a step beyond this when the gospel apparently sees in Jesus the fulfillment and in some sense the transcendent replacement of the feasts and observances of Judaism, such as Passover: Jesus is killed at the same time as the Passover lambs, and like them no bone of his is broken (19:14, 36); likewise he transcends the manna of the Exodus (6:32-35), 48-51). Other symbols, found in the scriptures but also common in Jewish (and non-Jewish) religion of John's day, also find their fulfillment in the Johannine Jesus: he is the Bread, the Water, the Light, the Shepherd. Beyond this, specifically Jewish eschatological hopes are entirely "localized" in Jesus: he is Messiah, Prophet, King; but he is also the Resurrection itself, and Life (11:25). The list could be extended further; ultimately Jesus is the way through which all must come to the Father (14:6), and Thomas must finally confess him as both Lord and God (20:28). Concretely for the Johannine community, this means that they, cut off forcibly from their religious heritage, have concentrated that heritage, its observances, and its hopes in the figure of Jesus himself. Thus the Fourth Evangelist that they will come not to fear their disenfranchisement, confident that in Jesus they have all that their enemies mean to deny them, and more.⁴⁵

Let us summarize and elaborate a bit further on these findings. The essential point is that the Johannine community projected the alienation and oppression that they experienced onto the figure of Jesus. Their Jesus-tradition was thus interpreted in the light of this experience. Their worship of Jesus as divine both contributed to their estrangement from Judaism, and became the vehicle for expressing that estrangement. In the rejection of Jesus by the world that could not know him, they portrayed their own rejection. In Jesus who was before all things they concentrated their lost religious heritage.

An inevitable concomitant of this process is the solidarity between Jesus and the oppressed Christians that is expressed in such a variety of ways in the Fourth Gospel. Jesus and the Christians share the world's rejection and hostility: this is sometimes explicitly stated, as in the words of John 15:18 already quoted ("If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before you"), or in the reference to Jesus' death in John 12:26

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

⁴⁵ Cf. Brown, *Gospel According to John*, vol. 29, p. lxxv.

("If any serve me, they will follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also"); sometimes Jesus simply speaks in the plural, as in John 3:11 ("We say what we know and testify to what we have seen, and you do not accept our testimony"). One in their rejection by the world, Jesus and the community are also one in their otherworldly origin; for the Christians too are born "not of the will of man, but of God" (1:13) and are "not of this world" (17:14,16). Thus the seemingly arrogant Johannine claim that Jesus came down from heaven (6:42) applies in effect to the Johannine Christians themselves, though Marinus de Jonge points out that they are God's children only in dependence on Jesus; they are not "sons" as he is "the Son."⁴⁶ Like Jesus also, they are sent into the world and bear witness in it (15:27; 17:18; 20:21); and their hope is like their danger, that where he is, there they will be also (14:3; 17:24).

Jesus thus becomes the matrix for the community's life and self-awareness. It defines itself and its relation to the world of its oppressors in terms of him—i.e., on its own terms, not the world's. Its relation to the holy, to the sacred world and to God, is likewise expressed in terms of Jesus; so is its desire for internal unity: they wish to be one, as Jesus and the Father are one (17:21-23). The ultimate grounding of the assurance that enables them to persevere in the face of the world's hostility is also in Jesus: "In the world you have trouble; but courage! I have overcome the world!" (16:33).

How may we relate this functional understanding of John's Christology to the Christology of oppressed peoples, and particularly to black Christology? The Johannine community differed from contemporary situations in that it was oppressed originally precisely *because* of its Christology. Nevertheless it is possible to make some suggestions; and I hope that others will be able to take the hints given here and develop them much further.

The late Benjamin E. Mays in his book *The Negro's God* distinguished two basic patterns of talk about God in black religious writing. One of these, the compensatory, presents God as offering comfort in the troubles of this unjust world and appropriate compensation to oppressed and oppressor in the next, without much thought of a change of circumstances here and now. The other pattern draws on traditional ideas of God's love, justice, and impartiality to urge blacks to struggle against oppressive conditions and work to establish social righteousness.⁴⁷ Similar patterns could no doubt be observed, *mutatis mutandis*, in black thought about Jesus. Obviously it is the second of these two patterns to

⁴⁶ Marinus De Jonge, "The Son of God and the Children of God," in *Jesus: Stranger from Heaven*, pp. 151-153.

⁴⁷ Benjamin E. Mays, *The Negro's God as Reflected in His Literature* (Boston: Chapman & Grimes, 1938), pp. 14-15; 23-26; 59 passim.

which black theology has largely appealed in its presentation of Jesus as Liberator. James Cone, however, in his *God of the Oppressed*, seems to move toward a coalescence of the two motifs, in the sense that he finds liberative value in the first, "compensatory" pattern as well. For Cone, the comforting presence of Jesus experienced by black Christians under oppression enabled not only endurance and hope for another world, but validation and struggle in this world. In the experience of Jesus' presence, Cone writes, "they realized that he bestowed a meaning upon their lives that could not be taken away by white folks."⁴⁸ This presence affirmed black humanity and human value, in contravention of the dehumanizing experience of white oppression.⁴⁹ In Cone's words, Jesus "was their truth, enabling them to know that white definitions of black humanity were lies. . . . Jesus Christ was that reality who invaded their history from beyond and bestowed upon them a definition of humanity that could not be destroyed by the whip and the pistol."⁵⁰ Jesus thus became the basis for a new way of looking at reality, enabling a struggle against oppression.⁵¹ This *presence* of Jesus forms an indispensable part of black Christological understanding, according to Cone, a present activity to be related to the past activity of the "historical Jesus."⁵² This "contemporization" of Jesus, if we may call it that, is similarly seen in the identification of the suffering of Jesus with that of black people.⁵³

Can we not see in this parallels to the functioning of Christology in John? The "contemporization" of Jesus, the re-experiencing of his past in the present of an oppressed community, is the very warp on which the "seamless robe" of John is woven. More than any other of the gospels, John offers an understanding of Jesus produced by reflection on his past in the light of his present activity.⁵⁴ And the result of this understanding is to provide location and validation to a community disenfranchised by the world and its authorities. For John's community as for black Christians, the world is wrong because Jesus is right. They are not what the world says they are; their true self-definition is found in the presence of Jesus. Their alienation from the oppressor's world does not mean what the oppressor thinks it means, because Jesus himself experienced that same alienation. In a profoundly true sense, for John to say, "They are

⁴⁸ James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), p. 13.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 32-33.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 33; cf. pp. 114, 140-141.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 124-125.

⁵³ Cf. Theological Commission of the National Conference of Black Churchmen, "Black Theology in 1976," in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979*, eds. Gayraud S. Wilmore and James H. Cone (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979), pp. 342-343.

⁵⁴ This is the reality reflected in J. Louis Martyn's conception of a "two-level drama" in John. Cf. Martyn, *History and Theology*, pp. 37-41.

not of the world just as I am not of the world," means the same thing as for James Cone to say that Jesus is black. In both cases, a community's worth is affirmed against the denial of it by an oppressor through the group's knowledge of Jesus, both past and present. Likewise, the oppressed are assured that God stands with them, despite the strength and self-assurance of the world, and so they are enabled to withstand the world and resist its oppression. The presence of the Father and the Son in John enables both endurance and witness against the world;⁵⁵ that is to say, it enables struggle, in whatever way is possible at a given time and is consistent with the word of Jesus, in a manner analogous to what Cone affirms about the black community. When Cone also says that "Jesus Christ is . . . the content of the hopes and dreams of black people,"⁵⁶ he opens up a fruitful avenue for exploration regarding the similar way in which the Johannine Jesus focusses all the sacred hopes and symbols of the community.

From this comparison I hope we may have gained new insights into both the Fourth Gospel itself and some ways in which it can be fruitful, and perhaps even constitutive, for black liberation theology and preaching. Here is presented a biblical model of an oppressed community's claiming of its validity, courage, and hope through Jesus Christ. Yet the Johannine affirmation of Jesus is not without its dangers, and these too must be given at least some brief treatment here. For in the famous phrase of Ernst Käsemann, there is every indication of a "naive docetism" inherent in John's Christology, with its Jesus who is not of this world and seems far more divine than human.⁵⁷ In John's case this is because it is precisely the divinity of Jesus which it is the gospel's main purpose to affirm in the context of the struggle with the synagogue. But is there not a similar danger in the Christology of the God-Man, the superhuman King Jesus, that sometimes comes to expression in black Christianity?

There is a positive factor for the community in such a Christology. The eternity and power of a Jesus so conceived are able to fortify the community and its members against the precariousness and uncertainty of their own continued existence: he, at least, will always be there. The triumph of this Jesus over pain and suffering, his invulnerability, can furnish a vision that enables the people, in their turn, to endure. The Jesus of the song "I'll Rise Again," who is so unconcerned at having nails driven into his hands, is very Johannine (cf. 10:17-18; 19:25-30)—and very docetic. But the point of the docetic conception is the

⁵⁵ This is the whole tenor of the Farewell Discourses in John 14-17.

⁵⁶ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, p. 32.

⁵⁷ This is Käsemann's thesis in his *Testament of Jesus: A Study of the Gospel of John in the Light of Chapter 17* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968).

singer's identification with Jesus and his triumph over rejection and oppression.

The danger in this, however, is that it leads all too easily to an otherworldliness that is merely escapist. The world and its history, including its pain, become simply unreal, and the believer is encouraged to avoid dealing with them rather than to turn to God for their transformation. Something similar apparently happened in the Johannine community, for the First Epistle of John seems to have been written to condemn such a docetic interpretation of Johannine Christology, one which turned away both from the physicality of Jesus and from the concrete deeds of love which alone can realize his Messiahship.⁵⁸ Even where overt doctrinal docetism is not present, the church must always beware of any ultra-Johannine conception of Jesus that removes him from the human world of pains and joys and doubts and makes of him a superman who—paradoxically enough—is subject to our bidding and confirms our self-centeredness. When John's overwhelming emphasis on the divinity of Jesus and his supremacy over the world remain linked to the validation of the oppressed over against the contempt of their oppressors, it serves a significant part of its original purpose. When it is used to present the oppressed with a means of giving up on the world and so absconding from it, then it is misused. A worse misuse yet is when the oppressors themselves take up this all-powerful Jesus and claim to rule in his name, justifying their power as an extension of his, allowing Jesus to rule in the other world so long as they can rule in this one, and leaving the oppressed only the hope that—if they are good—they may visit him there.

The Love Ethic in John and Liberation

There is an ancient legend according to which the apostle John in extreme old age said nothing more except to murmur over and over again, "My little children, love one another."⁵⁹ And so most Christians today, if asked to characterize the ethics of the Fourth Gospel, would no doubt call it the gospel of love.

The theme of love that pervades the last discourses of Jesus exemplifies in a peculiar way the relation of John to the historical Jesus, both the faithfulness and profundity of its insight into him and the vast difference that separates it from him. With a purity of focus unmatched in any of the Synoptics, John has seen the essence of Jesus' ethical intention in the single commandment, "Love," and yet in a reduction of the

⁵⁸ Brown, *Community*, pp. 109-44; see also Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, Anchor Bible, vol. 30 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1982), pp. 69-86. Cf. Miranda, *Being and the Messiah*, pp. 156-170.

⁵⁹ St. Jerome, *Commentary on Galatians* to Galatians 6.10 in *Patrologiae Latinae*, ed. J. P. Migne, vol. 26 (Paris: Migne, 1866), col. 462.

scope of this commandment that all but undermines the intention of the historical Jesus, he has made it read: "Love *one another*." Not "your enemies"; not even "your neighbor and yourself"; but only "one another." The commandment is directed to Jesus' followers; the love is to be something that is among themselves, and precisely as such is to be a sign that they *are* his followers (13:34-35). Here then is the sublimity of Johannine Christianity, and here also is its perilous flaw. For however beautiful such a restricted love may appear from within the Christian community, it may not seem nearly so attractive from the outside. It is the implications of this love and its restriction that I want to explore here, in the light of liberation.

For the Synoptic Jesus (and the same is probably true of the historical Jesus), the injunction to love is occasioned by the love of God for all, even the unrighteous (Luke 6:35f; Matt. 5:44f). In John, it is based on the love of Jesus for the disciples (13:34; 15:12), and ultimately on the love of God for Jesus (17:26). Thus the limitation of the love commandment corresponds to a characteristic Johannine limitation of the scope of God's concern: it is for the disciples, but not the world (cf. 14:22-24; 17:9).⁶⁰ This raises the issue of the sectarianism of the Fourth gospel.

The question whether the Johannine Christian community ought to be regarded as a "sect" is coming to be a rather widely debated one. Some, like Wayne Meeks, find the term appropriate;⁶¹ others, like Raymond Brown, find it unacceptable.⁶² To a considerable extent this is a matter of definition; Brown, for instance, confines the problem of sectarianism to that of breaking communion with other Christians.⁶³ But in fact it is the attitude toward Judaism and the outside world as a whole that seems most sectarian in the Johannine literature. Without wishing to enter fully into sociological debates about what constitutes a sect, let me point here to the seven features identified by Robin Scroggs as generally agreed-upon identifying characteristics of a religious sect.⁶⁴ Scroggs was working with the Christianity of the Synoptic gospels, but it seems clear that of the seven, at least four are strikingly prominent in the Johannine community.⁶⁵ These are: the rejection of the assumptions that form the basis of the establishment's world, and creation of a new world with dif-

⁶⁰ Cf. Fernando F. Segovia, "The Love and Hatred of Jesus and Johannine Sectarianism," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 43 (1981): 258-272.

⁶¹ Meeks, "Man from Heaven": 70; Segovia, "The Love and Hatred of Jesus": 258-272; D. Moody Smith, "Johannine Christianity": 223-224.

⁶² Brown, *Community*, pp. 14-17, 88-91; cf. C. K. Barrett, *Gospel According to St. John*, pp. 135, 139.

⁶³ Brown, *Community*, pp. 15, 89.

⁶⁴ Robin Scroggs, "The Sociological Interpretation of the New Testament: The Present State of Research," in Gottwald, *Bible and Liberation*, p. 344.

⁶⁵ Brown, *Community*, pp. 14-15, sees John as answering to fewer of these traits.

ferent assumptions; the vitality of love and mutual acceptance within the group; the voluntary nature of the group; and the demand of total commitment to the sect's new reality. Two other features also seem applicable to John, namely the origin of the group as protest, even if unconscious, and egalitarianism within the group. Given this configuration of sectarian traits, it seems unavoidable that we regard the Johannine community as a sect, as least in relation to Judaism, if not also in relation to other Christians. The point here is that such a group may have attitudes toward outsiders that sort very ill with the usual conception of the Johannine "love ethic."

At this point it would be well to clarify a statement made earlier. I said that in John, God's concern is for the disciples but not the world. Stated thus baldly, this is obviously an exaggeration, for of course John 3:16 declares that it was God's love for the world that caused the sending of the only Son. Marinus de Jonge points out that in fact in the first twelve chapters of John references to the world are mostly positive, while in chapters 13-20 and in the First Epistle of John they are mostly negative. The positive references relate largely to God's intention to save the world in the mission of the Son, the negative ones to the situation of the community in the world after Jesus' departure.⁶⁶ Thus, considered in relation to God's will the world can be redeemed and is the object of God's love; but considered concretely, in its presence to God's Son and to those who have become God's children through him, the world seems irredeemably hostile. John does nothing to explain or to mitigate this paradox, and the paradox itself suggests the condition of a group whose increasing sectarianism is in conflict precisely with the ethic of love that it had inherited.

Could Johannine Christianity include a love of enemies? That is a question we cannot answer. The gospel and the epistles simply *do* not speak of such a love, and we can hardly go beyond them to ask what their author (or authors) *might* have spoken of. The First Epistle, indeed, says that God loved us when we did not love God (4:10), but it does not go on to say that we should love those who do not love us. "Let us love one another," it says, but "Do not love the world" (4:7; 2:15). The gospel, if its attitude toward the world is at least more paradoxical, still does not draw any more positive ethical conclusion. The Johannine attitude toward outsiders, while not explicitly hateful, is nevertheless much more one of mistrust and even bitterness than love.

This attitude is clearly seen for example in John 8:31-47, though the precise group of outsiders in view here is rather uncertain: they may be non-Christian Jews, or more likely Christian Jews who nevertheless re-

⁶⁶ De Jonge, "The Son of God and the Children of God," in *Jesus: Stranger from Heaven*, pp. 154-157.

ject the Johannine claim of divinity for Jesus and perhaps even collaborate in violent measures taken against the Johannine group.⁶⁷ In this passage Jesus argues with "Jews who had believed in him" but who do not think they need *his* word to make them free. He claims that they seek to kill him, and denounces them bitterly as children, not of Abraham nor of God, but of the devil. Ultimately they pick up stones to throw at him.

One can appreciate the situation of oppression that lies behind this presentation. The threat to Jesus' life very likely stands for a threat to the Johannine Christians' lives. Yet the historical Jesus never called any person the devil's child, and never denied that any Israelite was a child of Abraham—or of God. The dehumanization of the enemy, characterizing him as in his essence something other than oneself, as inherently inferior or demonic, is a danger implicit in the distinction between the group and the world that runs throughout John's gospel, and we see here that it is a danger John does not wholly avoid. And it is this dehumanization that allows systematic and systemic violence against the enemy to be carried out, including some types of revolutionary violence. Once again, John does not explicitly contemplate such violence. But a groundwork for violence is laid, such that, given the opportunity, the oppressed may simply exchange places with their oppressors and continue the pattern of oppression in reverse against their ancient enemies. Nor is this mere pacifist theorizing; it is what actually happened in the fourth and fifth centuries, when Christianity allied itself with the power of the world and began a long and evil history of persecution against the Jews—basing itself in part precisely on such dehumanizing Johannine texts as this one. Johannine sectarianism and its ultimate outcome, then, must be taken into consideration when relating this gospel and its love ethic to the themes of liberation.

The love ethic of John does have positive meaning for liberation, however, and this meaning has been forcefully expounded by José P. Miranda in his book *Being and the Messiah*. Miranda points to the connection in John between knowing and loving Jesus and keeping his word or commandment. The commandment, of course, is the commandment of love; it is those who keep it who love Jesus, and it is to them that he makes himself known. But for John it is in Jesus, and only in him, that God also is known. Thus, according to Miranda, John declares that God is known only in the keeping of the commandment to love one's neighbor. This is the "word that was God," for the biblical God is known only as the absolute imperative of love to others. Jesus revealed God because his good works were the works of God.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Cf. Brown, *Community*, pp. 76-78; Martyn, "Glimpses into the History," pp. 109-115; Miranda, *Being the Messiah*, pp. 162-163.

⁶⁸ Miranda, *Being and the Messiah*, pp. 112-125, and esp. pp. 126-155.

But this revelation of God aroused the world's hostility, according to Miranda, precisely because it consisted of love to others and the commandment to love others. Crucial here is the concept of "good works." Miranda holds on the basis of New Testament and Jewish evidence that "good works" is not a general expression but a precise technical term referring to helping those who are in need.⁶⁹ It is Jesus' "good works," in this sense, that reveal God for John, and it is these good works that cause the world to hate Jesus. Because these are the messianic good works, the signal of the eschaton, they are an attack on the oppressive world as it is, and the world responds with violence.⁷⁰

The world rejects Jesus because of his "good works"; conversely, according to John 3:19-20, it rejects Jesus because its own works are evil, so that by the same token it is those who are disposed to do the "good works" of love and justice who accept him, and so become children of God (John 1:12-13).⁷¹ Hence it is not surprising that the Christian community in John is known as such by its love for one another, and is said to do Jesus' "works," and greater still.⁷² It is adherence to the commandment of love that sets the community apart from the world, and as with Jesus, so also for the community, the love of neighbor arouses the world's hatred. It does so, Miranda says, because their "good works" proclaim the eschatological transformation of the world and its social systems on the basis of love and justice.⁷³

I cannot begin here to lay out the exegetical basis for these conclusions of Miranda's. Certainly it is not flawless. Whether the Jewish conception of "good works" can be transferred wholesale into the Fourth Gospel, for instance, will be doubted by many. It is also definitely a misinterpretation, as I have said, to equate Johannine love for one another with Jesus' love for the neighbor. But at certain points Miranda's radicalism interprets this most radical of the gospels with daunting accuracy.

That, as Miranda claims, the definitive eschatological act of God has already entered the world for John is absolutely certain on the basis of all modern study of the Fourth Gospel. Only an individualist and "spiritualizing" tradition makes it seem inconceivable to us *a priori* that John could have meant this in a social sense. To be sure, what is given in this eschatological act is called in John "life," and life is an individual possession and may, in John, be entirely "spiritual." But what conclusion ought to be drawn from the fact that the signal manifestation of the eschatological reality in John is not an individual trait (e.g., "knowl-

⁶⁹ Ibid., pp. 97-98.

⁷⁰ Ibid., pp. 102-109.

⁷¹ Ibid., pp. 93-96.

⁷² Ibid., pp. 206, 209-210.

⁷³ Ibid., pp. 108-109, 127-129, 212-214.

edge"), but a social one, love? I cannot see that Miranda errs in claiming that for John keeping the word of Jesus, the commandment of love, is prior or at least intimately related to the knowledge of God, and therefore to eternal life. Correct knowledge and acknowledgement of Jesus, so indispensable for John, is inseparable from the keeping of this commandment. Eternal life is thus not a private acquisition that carries with it as an incidental consequence an attitude of charity toward one's fellow-believers. Rather, eternal life itself is socially constituted, in that it comes only to those who acknowledge Jesus in keeping his word, the word of love. Eternal life presupposes not only the believer and Jesus in whom he believes, but also the social context within which alone this word can be kept. Likewise the eschatological act of God that has been carried out encounters the world not only in individual acts of decision, but as a historical, social fact, the community where love is practiced.

Is this love concrete? Is it correct to speak of a community where love is practiced rather than one where love is talked about? Clearly we have but little access to actual relations within the Johannine community. But in John 15:12-13, the highest potentiality of the disciples' love is given, based on the love of Jesus for them, as laying down one's life for one's friends. In the threatened situation of the Johannine community, this need not have been merely rhetorical (cf. 16:2). The First Epistle, perhaps in a changed situation, interprets precisely this understanding of love to mean that within the brotherhood those who have a living must not shut out their hearts against those in need (1 John 3:16-17). This is surely not a purely hypothetical problem, nor is it likely that the epistle here misrepresents the intention of the original Johannine tradition. Miranda is correct, then, in drawing from this text the conclusion that Johannine love is not an abstract or theoretical virtue but was to be realized concretely in the situation of the oppressed.⁷⁴

Miranda is also clearly correct in relating the love within the community to the world's hatred for the community. The sequence in John 15 of love commandment and the world's hatred, along with Miranda's other evidence, seems adequate textual proof of this.⁷⁵ What concrete reality lay behind this can only be conjectured. It may be that the special solidarity within the Johannine community, extending across ethnic, gender,⁷⁶ and perhaps class boundaries, and attributed by the group to its adherence to Jesus, served as a further and especial irritant to the synagogue authorities. Certainly from the Johannine point of view "the

⁷⁴ Ibid., pp. 94-95.

⁷⁵ Ibid., pp. 127-129.

⁷⁶ On the positions of women in the Johannine community, see Sandra M. Schneiders, "Women in the Fourth Gospel and the Role of Women in the Contemporary Church," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 12 (1982): 35-45; Brown, *Community*, pp. 183-198.

world" saw in the community the continuation of Jesus' testimony that its own works were evil (John 3:19f; 7:7; 15:18-27). Once again, we must allow Miranda to prod us away from conceiving these "evil works" in only the vaguest sort of way.⁷⁷ Something precise may equally well lie behind them. Since the only ethical contrast spoken of in John is love and hate, it seems permissible to identify the world's "evil works," as the Johannine community saw them, with acts of hate, that is, not unreasonably, with acts of violence and oppression, directed against the community, but perhaps also characterizing the conduct of "the world" in general. The community of love stands, in its own view, as witness against the hatred in the world, and so draws that hatred down upon itself.

What conclusions can we now draw regarding liberation and John's ethic of love? First, the existence of the community of love itself has emerged as a significant factor in understanding John. For this gospel, the life that is God's gift belongs to those who take their part in this society where love and action for the sake of others are to replace the world's oppression and self-interest. Within the community, relationships are established not on the basis of rank or class, but on the basis of the love that exists among those who are all alike children of God through their faith in God's Son. The existence of this community in its mutual love is itself the indication of their adherence to the one whom God has sent. Thus the absence of oppression is what signifies that *here* God's eschatological act has been recognized and affirmed. Even if such love is directed only inward toward one another and not outward toward the neighbor in the world, what are its implications for a church that includes both rich and poor, both powerful and powerless? In what is it known that God is acknowledged as God here, that a decision of faith has been made here? How will all know that we are his disciples?

But what will happen when they find this out? In John, those who are known as disciples of Jesus, such as the blind man in chapter 9, suffer an unwelcome fate (cf. esp. 9:22, 27f, 34). Inevitably it is those who show the world the possibility, and therefore the necessity, of living in love, living for others, without violence and without oppression, whom the world hates most passionately and exterminates most vigorously. This is even more true when they attempt to form countercultural movements or societies, as with the martyrs of the second and third centuries and the Anabaptists, with Martin Luther King and Clarence Jordan—and with the Johannine community. John is aware of this, that the world will not be converted by love or to love as long as the world has anything to say about it. But John also proclaims the biblical faith that the world does

⁷⁷ Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, pp. 293-294, 551, was correct that the world's evil works and its sin are its rejection of Jesus and therefore of God; but this also involves an inseparable rejection of the word of love.

not have the *last* say, which belongs to God. God has acted to save the world; since the world refuses salvation, God's act becomes its overthrow and defeat (John 16:33). There is a genuinely subversive consciousness at work in John, however "spiritualized" it may seem to be, which sees the community of love perpetually endangered by the world's hostility precisely because it is the community of God's children.

But John's subversive sectarianism has its unhealthy side, too, insofar as its love is only for one another and not for the neighbor in Jesus' sense, much less for the enemy. If the community's love does not reach beyond its borders, its witness may be rejected by the world for that very reason, and the world hardened in its oppression. Intolerable as it may seem, if love is not extended to the oppressor he may never know of any other possible way of existence, and even if it frightens him into violence it is the only hope for his conversion. Worst of all, a merely sectarian love runs the risk of creating a new oppressor class that lives by its own violence against the newly powerless. "Love one another" is a word that must be kept; but the word that liberates the world is "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Solidarity with the Oppressed: Nicodemus

The figure of Nicodemus presents us with some unusual opportunities for insight into the Johannine community's struggle with the authorities of the synagogue, opportunities that are only beginning to be explored. Nicodemus, who comes to Jesus by night in John 3 and is told that he must be "born again," has generally been seen as a man who was at first interested in Jesus but did not understand him, and only later came to something like faith in him. In the dialogue in John 3, Nicodemus remains uncomprehending of his need for the spiritual rebirth that comes from God. So Rudolf Bultmann, for example, saw in him "man as he is," in need of an entirely new origin for his salvation and yet unable to see the possibility of it.⁷⁸

In this view, Nicodemus' need, and the transformation that is offered to him, is essentially an inner and individual one. Recent advances in Johannine studies, however, have opened the possibility of a deeper penetration into the reality symbolized by Nicodemus. This comes about in understanding Nicodemus, and Jesus, too, in his dialogue with him, as *communal* symbolic figures.

At the end of John 2, Jesus is said not to have trusted himself to those in Jerusalem who believed in him when they saw the signs that he did, because he knew what was in a man. When Nicodemus is then immediately introduced as "a man," who moreover regards Jesus as a teacher

⁷⁸ Ibid., pp. 133-143.

came from God because of the signs he does, it seems clear that he is intended to represent one of these untrustworthy believers.⁷⁹ Thus it is significant that he tells Jesus, not, "I know that you are a teacher come from God," but, "*We* know, etc." (3:2). He does not speak for himself alone, but for a group. Nicodemus is identified as a Pharisee and a "ruler of the Jews." Moreover, in verse 10 Jesus ironically calls *him* "the teacher of Israel," and derides his ignorance of the Spirit. Preliminarily, then, Nicodemus appears to represent Pharisees in positions of authority who acknowledge the miracles of Jesus, but cannot reach real faith in him while they retain their own claim to be Israel's teachers.

This impression is confirmed in John 7:45-52. Here the Pharisees rebuke their own officers' awe of Jesus by asking rhetorically whether any of the rulers or Pharisees has believed in him. At this point Nicodemus speaks up, Nicodemus the Pharisee and ruler, who is pointedly identified again as "one of them." Here would be his chance to prove the other Pharisees wrong, and to defend the ignorant rabble they have scorned, by confessing his own faith. But does he do so? Many would hold that his words ("Does our law condemn a man unless it first hears from him and finds out what he does?") do contain an indirect defense of Jesus, and therefore an implicit testimony to Nicodemus' faith.⁸⁰ But this timid legal quibble hardly constitutes a confession of faith remotely satisfactory to the Fourth Evangelist. On the contrary, though it properly disputes the legality of Jesus' condemnation, it remains confined to the realm of Pharisaic legal debate.⁸¹ Significantly, Nicodemus speaks of "our law," and in John the law is always the law of the Jews or of Moses, never of Jesus' disciples.⁸² Nicodemus thus remains the would-be "teacher of Israel" who cannot bring himself to confess real faith in Jesus. His case is exactly that of the "rulers" mentioned in John 12:42f, who believed but would not confess, for fear that the Pharisees would put them out of synagogue. Nicodemus, too, prefers the glory that comes from human beings to that which comes from God.

Nicodemus' last appearance is in John 19:38-42, where he accompanies Joseph of Arimathea in the burial of Jesus. John characterizes Joseph as a disciple who concealed his discipleship for fear of the Jews, thus bending the tradition about Joseph so as to align him, too, with the fearful believing rulers of 12:42f. Nicodemus' contribution here is to

⁷⁹ Against Bultmann, *ibid.*, p. 133.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 311; Brown, *Gospel According to John*, vol. 29, p. 330.

⁸¹ Cf. de Jonge, "Nicodemus and Jesus: Some Observations on Misunderstanding and Understanding in the Fourth Gospel," in *Jesus: Stranger from Heaven*, pp. 34-36.

⁸² The law of Moses, of course, bears witness to Jesus (John 5:39-40, 45-47), and Jesus can appeal to "your law" to make a point (7:19-24; 8:17; 10:34); yet it always remains "their law" (15:25; cf. 18:31; 19:7), in contrast to the grace and truth imparted to believers through Christ (1:14, 17).

bring no less than seventy-five pounds of burial spices, a gesture not of true devotion but of unbelief.⁸³ Nicodemus is only capable of burying Jesus, ponderously and with a kind of absurd finality, as if so to load him down with burial as to make it clear that Nicodemus expects no resurrection, any more than he expects a second birth.

Let me conclude these observations about Nicodemus by returning to Chapter 3. Not only does Nicodemus speak in the plural there, but Jesus does as well. If I may overtranslate for the sake of clarity, Jesus' words to Nicodemus in 3:7 are "*You people* must be born again"—not an individual considered by himself, but a group. Likewise in verses 11 and 12, Jesus says, "*We* speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen, and *you people* do not accept our testimony," and refers to his speaking to "you people" of earthly and heavenly things, which "you people" fail to believe.⁸⁴ Since the interview is presented as taking place alone at night, this plural language is most surprising and significant. Again it is clear that Nicodemus represents some group of people; but it seems from his "we" that Jesus must do so, too. Obviously he speaks in solidarity with the Johannine Christians, and stands for them here over against the group represented by Nicodemus. I have spoken earlier of this solidarity between Jesus and the community that is such a significant factor in the Christology, and the ecclesiology, of John. Here we see how it can affect the narrative itself, so that the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus almost overtly portrays that between the Johannine community and the synagogue.⁸⁵

Nicodemus appears to represent a group of people present in the environment of the Johannine community, identified by J. Louis Martyn and Raymond Brown as secret Christian Jews, or "Crypto-Christians."⁸⁶ They had faith, of a sort, in Jesus, but not the full, exalted Christology of John, and apparently hoped to be disciples of Jesus but also remain within the framework of synagogue Judaism. In the Johannine situation, this could only be done by concealing their discipleship from public knowledge, avoiding an open confession. Marinus de Jonge stresses that their inadequate Christology, as when Nicodemus sees in Jesus only a

⁸³ Cf. Meeks, "Man from Heaven": 55; de Jonge, "Nicodemus and Jesus," in *Jesus: Stranger from Heaven*, pp. 33-34; see the opposite opinion in Brown, *Gospel According to John*, vol. 29, pp. 939, 959-960.

⁸⁴ The RSV misses this nuance; it is caught by the New International Version, and partly by the New English Bible and Jerusalem Bible—and, of course, by the King James.

⁸⁵ In agreement with Barrett, *Gospel According to St. John*, p. 211.

⁸⁶ Martyn, "Glimpses into the History," pp. 109-115; Brown, *Community*, pp. 71-73. Martyn makes no explicit reference to Nicodemus (but cf. his *History and Theology*, pp. 87-88), and Brown denies that Nicodemus is a Crypto-Christian (see his *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*, p. 72) but the evidence discussed above strongly supports such a conclusion.

teacher, meant that for John they were outside the true believing community.⁸⁷ The particular characteristic of these secret disciples portrayed in Nicodemus is that at least some of them were to be found among the Pharisaic synagogue rulers themselves.

To understand this portrayal better, let us examine further some of the implications of the saying in John 3 that these secret believers need to be "born again." Our first observation must be that this demand is made of people with at least some faith in Jesus, not of nonbelievers in the strict sense, although it implies that in fact such half-belief is no better than unbelief. The second point is that "born again" is not an adequate translation of the phrase in question. Usage elsewhere in John shows that its real meaning is "born from above," i.e., from God (cf. 3:31; 19:11).⁸⁸ Hence it can be parallel to being "born of the Spirit (3:5-8). This immediately reminds us of the prologue to the Fourth Gospel, which contrasts those who received the *Logos*, who believed in his name, with those who did not, and speaks of the former as children of God, whose birth was not human but from God (1:12, 13). To be "born from above," then, or from God, requires belief in Jesus, in the full Johannine sense. This is what Nicodemus lacks. But it also means to belong to the *community* of such believers—we must keep in mind the plural verbs and pronouns in chapter 3. It is Nicodemus' *group* that must be "born from above" (v. 7). The reason given for this in v. 6 is that flesh gives birth to flesh, and spirit to spirit. In communal terms, this is parallel to the declaration in 8:31-47 that physical descent from Abraham is not enough to make the Christian Jews "children of Abraham," or of God. Their birth in the natural course of life has not enabled them to comprehend the one sent by God—they must be born of the Spirit, as children of God, and so also become part of the community of believers.

According to John 3:5, though, they must be born of *water* and spirit. Bultmann and others have sought to eliminate the word "water," since a reference to the sacrament of baptism seems inimical to Johannine theology.⁸⁹ I believe the water belongs,⁹⁰ but its significance is to be found at least as much in the realm of the communal as that of the sacramental. For baptism was the initiation rite into the Christian community, and possession of the Spirit, too, was a claim distinctive of that community. Thus to be born of water and spirit is to adhere to the group of those who fully acknowledge Jesus, and to begin a new life, having a new birth, with them. Just this adherence is what the secret disciples represented by Nicodemus seek to avoid in any open way. The new birth de-

⁸⁷ De Jonge, "Nicodemus and Jesus," in *Jesus: Stranger from Heaven*, pp. 30-32, 37-42.

⁸⁸ Again differing with Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, p. 135.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 138 n.3.

⁹⁰ Note, among other things, that Jesus baptizes people in John 3:22; 4:1.

manded of them thus implies not only personal faith and sacramental initiation, but a change of social location as well.⁹¹ They must not only accept Jesus but declare their acceptance by openly joining the community of his disciples.

Thus what the gospel of John calls for on the part of the secret Christians is a public transfer of allegiance. Nicodemus is shown successfully avoiding just this in the council of the Pharisees and rulers in John 7, as we saw, and it is this avoidance that is criticized so sharply in John 12:42f. In these passages, and especially in chapter 3, John seems to appeal to secret Christians in high places to make an open confession and take their stand with the persecuted community. We must not underestimate the risk he is calling on them to take. They are being asked to jeopardize their position as rulers and their standing as Pharisees, to align themselves with the accursed "rabble who knows not the law" (7:49). They are being asked to switch from persecutor to persecuted. The group they are being asked to join has no status, no power, no place in the world. They are being asked to dislocate and displace themselves socially, to undertake an act of deliberate downward mobility, in fact to risk their lives. That is what John wants of them, concretely, when he says to them, "You must be born again."

Frederick Herzog, in his book, *Liberation Theology*, translates this expression, "You must *become black*." In so doing, and in speaking of "Being enabled to identify with . . . the people on the borders of society," ceasing to "go into hiding" but joining the "new corporateness [in which] the new life is experienced," he has very accurately seen the essence of John 3.⁹² Nicodemus—i.e., the group of people in the late first century whom he symbolizes—is being called on to leave a secure, if ambivalent, situation by making known his solidarity with a small and oppressed minority. He is bidden to *decide*, and is told that on one side, and only one side, lies the eternal life of God. He must come out of hiding.

This is not what the comfortable person in any society prefers. Particularly in the West, ambivalence and ambiguity have very nearly been canonized as the inevitable state, if not indeed the aspiration, of modern humanity, in ethics, esthetics, politics, and religion. We are constantly being reminded that there are no absolutes, no easy choices. I would feel more comfortable about sharing this perception if it were clear that we who promote it are entirely disinterested; but we are not, for it is what enables us to hide. John would agree that there are no *easy* choices. His

⁹¹ Cf. Meeks, "Man from Heaven," p. 69.

⁹² Herzog, *Liberation Theology*, pp. 61-67. Unfortunately, the weakness of Herzog's exegetical base leads quickly to overabstraction about the "private self" and "corporate selfhood."

point, though, is that there are choices.

Where is Nicodemus to be found today? This we would especially like to leave ambiguous. Let me try, however, to name some names. Christians in power, to begin most generally, in relation to powerless Christians. This is true whether power is derived from money, class, race, education, heredity, political connections, or otherwise. It applies to white Christians in relation to blacks in this country and South Africa. It applies to bishops in relation to peasants in Latin America. It applies to men in relation to women in most societies. It applies to the educated in relation to the ignorant, the well fed in relation to the hungry, the healthy in relation to the sick. Some would say it applies to the born in relation to unborn generations. We might see Nicodemus elsewhere, too: in the artist or intellectual who is a Christian but unwilling to be one publicly; in the black politician or professional who now identifies with the interests of the middle class and the upwardly mobile and not the oppressed; in the military chaplain who hears the gospel's call to peace but doesn't want to be known as an activist.

In essence, Nicodemus is found wherever one whose life is secure must face those whose life is insecure, or who struggle in the cause of God, and decide to say, "I am like them. I, too, am one of them." Nicodemus came to Jesus because he thought that God was with him. If there is any reason to think that God is with the church, Nicodemus will come to it as well. He may come only in the dead of night. That is no reason to turn him away. But he must always hear—we must hear, when we find that it is we who are Nicodemus—that a transformation is involved, one that comes from God and makes a new identity, both spiritual and social: "You must be born from above."

Jesus and Caesar

In setting out what John has to say about politics and political allegiance, I will forgo a detailed exegetical analysis, since my work along these lines has recently been published.⁹³ Let me merely summarize the results of that study, and move on to reflect on their significance for liberation.

John's politics must be set within the Jewish political situation following the First Revolt and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. The Pharisees, with whom the Johannine community was in such bitter conflict, seem to have consolidated their authority within Judaism at least in part by an accommodation to Rome and the kingship of Caesar. On the other hand, powerful anti-Roman messianic hopes continued to be felt

⁹³ David Rensberger, "The Politics of John: The Trial of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 103 (1984): 395-411.

among Jews in Palestine and in the Disapora, including rabbinic circles as well, culminating in the Bar Kokhba revolt in 132 A.D. Christians during this time were beginning to suffer more frequent persecution and martyrdom themselves, and Jewish Christians in particular must often have been affected by Israel's lingering political hopes and anti-Romanism (cf. the book of Revelation).

Writing in such a context, John does not disguise the Roman role in Jesus' arrest and condemnation, and emphasizes the title "King of the Jews" in Jesus' trial. By presenting Pilate as brutally indifferent to Jesus' innocence and to truth itself, and as contemptuous of Israel's sovereignty and its political aspirations, John makes it clear that Pilate, and the Caesar he represents, is aligned with the world against the claims of God and God's Son. Pilate the Roman governor is a distinctly hostile figure in John. "The Jews" at first prefer the rebel Barabbas to Jesus, but are finally driven by Pilate's sarcastic proclamation of the beaten and humiliated Jesus as "King of the Jews" to deny their own hopes and the sovereignty of God by crying out, "We have no king but Caesar." Jesus is presented as a king indeed, but one whose kingship is not defended by the world's violent methods, but consists in his testimony to the truth—a testimony rejected by the Roman Pilate. Pilate's authority over Jesus is said to be "from above," i.e., from God. But this means that it does not come from Caesar, or from the world" in general. It does not really belong to Pilate at all, who in his ignorance would have no authority over Jesus at all if God had not thus allowed the world to work out its hatred.

We may thus define John's political stance as allegiance to the kingship of Jesus, which he presents as a third alternative to the claims of both Caesar and the Zealots. Rome is seen as hostile to the hope of oppressed Israel, but Rome's authority is undermined and relativized by the assertion of God's sovereignty in the kingship of Jesus. Israel's true allegiance must be to God, not Caesar, and for John this allegiance is now fittingly expressed in adherence to Jesus the King. The authority of Rome over those who adhere to him is dissolved, for now they, like him, are "from above," and Rome's only power over them, as over him, is what God, their Father, may choose to grant. Jewish acceptance of the claims of Caesar is therefore also condemned. On the other hand, if Jesus is the King by whom God's sovereignty is asserted, then Israel may look for no other, and John likewise rejects the desire for a violent revolutionary like Barabbas. Jesus' kingship will inevitably come into conflict with the kingships of this world, but precisely because it is "not of this world," the conflict is not carried out by the world's means or on its terms. Jesus' followers do not fight, and his enthronement is on the cross. The sovereignty that Jesus asserts against Caesar is that of Israel's God, but precisely as *God's* sovereignty and not the world's it is not won by violence.

For John, Jesus is king as the witness to truth who confronts the world with the claim of God and the love of God.⁹⁴ He asserts his sovereignty of God against the world's sovereignties, but also against the claims of those who would overthrow them with violence. His kingship, moreover, is for the oppressed community with whom he is one, and whose allegiance now belongs no longer to the world's kingships. Just this alienation of allegiance is seen by the world as subversive, and draws down its hatred in response.

What is the significance of this stance of John? In my view it offers hope to those oppressed by the sovereignties of the world by offering them instead the sovereignty of God. What is involved first of all is a revolution of consciousness, an alienation of allegiance from the idolatrous and oppressive orders of the world toward the truth of God, the truth that makes free. For John, God the Creator is by no means the sustainer of the world's religions, states, and economies. Rather, when God the *Logos*, through whom the world was made, enters the world, the world "knows him not" and refuses the light, precisely because its works are evil (John 1:10-11; 3:16-21).⁹⁵ The victims of these evil works, of the world's whole machinery of avarice and harm, may welcome the light for the very reason that the world abhors it. It is those who "do the truth" who come to the light, and it is by knowing the truth that the world itself would be set free from its sin. Jesus liberates by speaking his word, which is true and is truth, just as his kingship means his testimony to the truth (8:31-47; 17:17; 18:37). The truth is the reality of God and of God's claim upon the world, expressed and acknowledged in love for one another against the oppressive hatred in the world. Allegiance to God's sovereignty through Jesus the King and Liberator subverts the orders of the world, and only this subverts them truly.

John thus calls for a questioning and even a withdrawal of allegiance from the world's orders, not because order is wrong, but because the *world's* orders have forgotten God, however much they may claim to know God.⁹⁶ Jesus and Caesar cannot both be king; those who choose the sovereignty of God cannot, as far as John is concerned, give allegiance to the world as well. Because they are under God's sovereignty, moreover, the world's power over them is broken, and the hold it may still think it has on them is an illusion (19:11). But by the same token, no new order erected and maintained by the world's means represent Jesus' kingship either. John sets us free to question and to criticize revolutionary orders as well, if they also become one of the world's allegiances and so carry on the world's oppression rather than ending it.

⁹⁴ Cf. Bultmann, *Gospel of John*, pp. 654-655.

⁹⁵ Cf. Miranda, *Being and the Messiah*, pp. 94-102.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 137-148.

The community of King Jesus will, like him, bear witness in the world to the truth and offer the world the sovereignty of God against its oppression. In so doing they will draw this oppression down upon themselves; for John the inscription "King of the Jews" could hang only on the cross. But it is in this community, where the word of love is kept, that the sovereignty of God is truly known and made known.

Conclusions

What I have said here by no means exhausts the possibilities of relating John to the themes of liberation. I have scarcely spoken of the Spirit, which John calls "Paraclete," who represents the presence of Jesus to the community, uniting them with him and so alienating them from the world, against which it bears witness even as it strengthens them. I have said nothing at all about the position of women, whose exercise of independent and unconventional roles in John raises significant questions about their status in the Johannine community.⁹⁷ The apparent egalitarianism of the Fourth Gospel and its lack of a hierarchy to mediate between Christ and Christians is also significant. Clearly there is much more that could be said, but now it is time to pull together the threads of the foregoing study and survey the patterns that have emerged.

If nothing else, I hope it has been made plain that John is relevant to social and political issues, and in particular to the situation of the oppressed. We have seen that he presents a Jesus whose alienation from the world is continuous with that of his disenfranchised and oppressed disciples, and who concentrates in his person their entire universe of meaning and of hope. Through his solidarity with them, he validates their worth against the contempt of their oppressors, enabling them to persevere and assuring them in the face of all the world's evidence to the contrary that they belong to God and their way leads to God. This solidarity of the community with Jesus against the worlds is enacted in their love for one another, keeping his commandment. We have seen the risk involved in a love that is directed so strongly inward toward the group's own members in the context of a dualistic sectarianism. Yet even so it remains true that it is love, and so the reordering of relationships based on love, that signifies the community's adherence to the eschatological act of God, and so constitutes it both the locus God's eternal life here and now, and a witness of God against the hatred that is in the world. As the symbolic story of Nicodemus shows, this adherence is not something that can be privately given so as to avoid the world's hostility. Those who know the truth, whatever their standing, must openly side with those who attest it

⁹⁷ Cf. Schneiders, "Women in the Fourth Gospel": pp. 35-45 and Brown, *Community*, pp. 183-198.

and suffer for its sake. Otherwise they will find themselves co-conspirators with the world, their halfway measures unable either to halt the world's oppression or to share that reorientation toward God that John calls a rebirth from God; nor will they even understand either their complicity or the possibility that is open to them. That possibility and the risk that it entails are given by the coming of God's Son into the world, undermining the structures of power and authority by which the world attempts to defend itself against him. Pilate can neither grasp nor undo the sovereignty of God that confronts him, and Barabbas cannot be the one to assert it. The "King of the Jews" is he who is not of this world, who bears the truth of God into the world and so creates the community of those who hear his voice, and draws their allegiance away from the world, its authorities, and its violence, toward God. It is this community, in its oppression, its love, and its exclusive allegiance to God in God's Son, that the Church is—or is not.

I must register some cautions about these results at this point, and no doubt others will register many more. As I have said before, the situation of oppression lying behind the Fourth Gospel is not of the same origin or character as all oppressions in the world today, so that fruitful comparisons cannot be drawn in every case. Many will find John's vivid and intransigent dualism uncongenial to the task of liberation, or of theology in general. I must also state candidly that there is little or no direct evidence in John of what we would regard as concrete political strategies, nor have I made any attempt to outline a Johannine praxis for liberation today. Nevertheless, I maintain that it is not the case that the Fourth Gospel is "apolitical," that it simply withdraws from social and political questions. John is not "spiritual" in that sense.

And yet it remains true that John presents a solution greater than the problems with which it was confronted. Written from a situation of conflict and oppression, and with all the limitations imposed by adherence to one party in a hard-fought and many-sided struggle, the gospel of John refuses to restrict that struggle to its own terms of time, place, and society, but connects it instead to the deepest issues of God's relation to the world and the human race, and of the human response to God and to one another.⁹⁸ At issue was the Messiahship of Jesus. For John this becomes an issue of reality itself, "truth," as he calls it, and of faith, and of love. John goes far beyond midrash and proof texting to argue, if that is the right word, from the Christians' own experience of God, in a dense and original symbolic language. If this language serves to make the text all

⁹⁸ Cf. De Jonge, "Jewish Expectations about the 'Messiah' according to the Fourth Gospel," in *Jesus: Stranger from Heaven*, p. 100: John presents theological reflections on the issues arising from early Christian and Christian-Jewish debate, in a way that goes beyond the particular situation itself.

but opaque to the newcomer or the outsider who does not know or admit its central secret, it also attracts and draws in by its very mysteriousness and its convoluted self-containment.⁹⁹ The language of John is a kind of enchanting barrier, an irresistible obstacle that advertises a treasure within and yet seems designed to make the treasure inaccessible. Understanding comes, not when the barrier has been surmounted and the obstacle defeated, but in the very process of trying to penetrate it. It is precisely in the midst of John's hall of mirrors that one looks and sees every surface reflect the face of Christ. The situation of oppression, too, does not simply interpret itself, but is interpreted in light of the good and evil that are exposed when humanity confronts the God confronting it. In one sense the Johannine struggle becomes a paradigm for the whole struggle that results when God's will to redeem the world engages the world's unwillingness to be redeemed. In another sense it is a metaphor for that great struggle, implying the whole of it in its own small compass. We see the *Logos* of God's redemption here in the flesh of a Jewish Christian community's struggle with the synagogue in the late first century. It is the *Logos* that has made the Fourth Gospel the object of the church's concentrated attention for all these centuries. And yet that struggle remains itself, too, and retains its own significance, as I hope I have shown, for understanding John and for understanding liberation.

If this study has accomplished anything, it has begun a work whose full implications remain to be unfolded. John, too, must be allowed to bear fruit for the liberation of people from injustice, and I hope that the lines laid down here may prove suggestive, within their limitations, for the theologians of liberation and their work. Johannine Christianity bears many of the marks of a sect, of a movement that looks within itself for truth and sets itself against the orders of the world. May we bear in mind that the church is never more true to itself than when it remembers its origin as a sect, as a minority opinion, countercultural and anti-establishment. Questioning the rightness of things as they are has again and again been the spark of the church's renewal and the hallmark of its faithfulness to the gospel.

That there is something radical about the gospel of John is not difficult to see. It was a mistake to think that this radicalism could be content with things as they are, could offer only a "spiritual" or inward message that would allow the orders of the world to go about their business unopposed. John presents us a Jesus whose coming into the world is strictly for this, to testify to the truth. This truth is God's reality, the reality that God comes into the world of God's making to redeem it; but its works are evil. They keep it from remaining in the word of Jesus, yet if it

⁹⁹ On the function of Johannine language, cf. Meeks, "Man from Heaven," 68-71.

remained in his word it would know the truth. John does not say that knowing the truth will make us wise, or happy, or even good. Rather he says, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

Chapter 1: The History of the Book

The history of the book is a long and varied one, spanning centuries and continents. From the earliest papyrus scrolls to the modern printed page, the book has evolved in form and function. The invention of the printing press in the 15th century revolutionized the way books were produced, making them more widely available and affordable. This led to the rise of the public library and the democratization of knowledge.

In the 19th century, the book became a central part of the educational system. The rise of the novel and the non-fiction book reflected the changing social and cultural landscape. The book became a primary source of information and entertainment for the masses. The invention of the typewriter and the printing press further transformed the book, making it easier to produce and more accessible.

The 20th century saw the book's role in society continue to evolve. The rise of mass media and the internet challenged the book's dominance as a source of information. However, the book remained a vital part of the cultural and intellectual landscape. The invention of the computer and the digital revolution led to the rise of the e-book, which has transformed the way books are consumed and distributed.

The future of the book is uncertain, but it remains a powerful tool for communication and learning. The book's ability to preserve knowledge and provide a structured way of presenting information makes it an essential part of our lives. As technology continues to advance, the book will continue to evolve and adapt to the needs of a changing world.

The book is a unique and enduring form of communication. It has the power to educate, entertain, and inspire. It is a testament to the human desire for knowledge and the power of the written word. The book will continue to be a central part of our lives for many years to come.

The book is a reflection of the human condition. It is a record of our thoughts, feelings, and experiences. It is a way of sharing our lives with others and leaving a legacy for the future. The book is a gift that keeps on giving, and it is one that we should all treasure.

The book is a source of comfort and solace. It is a place where we can find answers to our questions and escape from our problems. It is a way of connecting with others and feeling part of something larger than ourselves. The book is a friend that is always there for us, and it is one that we should all cherish.

The book is a source of inspiration and motivation. It is a way of seeing the world from a new perspective and finding the courage to pursue our dreams. It is a way of learning from the experiences of others and gaining the wisdom to navigate our own lives. The book is a source of strength and resilience, and it is one that we should all turn to in times of need.