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The Johannine Community as a Constructed, Imagined Community

It has long been usual among New Testament scholars to think that different New Testament writings give voice to a wide variety of distinct early Christian groups by expressing their collective convictions and shared view of the world. Scholars have not refrained from presenting far-reaching histories of different early Christian communities even though there is rarely any external historical evidence for these detailed reconstructions. In the field of Johannine studies, the Gospel of John has been read as a two-level drama that tells not only of Jesus' life but also of the contemporary situation of the Johannine community. According to this reading, John reflects a bitter and violent conflict between the Johannine group and its opponents in the synagogue, identified as representatives of the post-70 emergent rabbinic Judaism.¹ However, it has become increasingly clear that external evidence for this kind of conflict is meager.²

The above mentioned developments have led some scholars to propose that it is irrelevant to speak about specific early Christian communities. Richard Bauckham has summarized this critical perspective in his bold manifesto that “the Matthean, Markan, Lukan and Johannine communities should disappear from the terminology of Gospels scholarship”.³ I agree with these criticisms in that many earlier studies have gone quite too far in their detailed

- 1 A classic presentation of this theory is J.L. Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (3rd Edition; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003 [originally 1968]).
- 2 Cf. R. Hakola *Identity Matters: John, the Jews and Jewishness* (Leiden: Brill, 2005) 41–86. For an update of my criticism of Martyn's theory, see R. Hakola, *Reconsidering Johannine Christianity: A Social Identity Approach* (New York and London: Routledge, 2015) 1–5. In the same vein, A. Reinhartz, *Befriending the Beloved Disciple: A Jewish Reading of the Gospel of John* (New York and London: Continuum, 2001) 37–53; T. Hägerland, “John's Gospel: A Two-Level Drama?”, *JSNT* 25 (2003), 309–22; W. Carter, *John and the Empire: Initial Explorations* (New York and London: T&T Clark, 2008) 19–51, 68–72; J.S. Kloppenborg, “Disaffiliation in Associations and the ἀποσυναγωγός of John”, *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 67 (2011) 1–16.
- 3 R. Bauckham, “Introduction”, in R. Bauckham (ed.), *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 4. Thus also E.W. Klink III, *The Sheep of the Fold: The Audience and Origin of the Gospel of John* (SNTSMS 141; Cambridge: University Press, 2007), 251. Since Bauckham originally formulated this provocative assertion, there has appeared a lively debate about it. For example, see the articles in E.W. Klink III (ed.), *The Audience of the Gospels: The Origins and Function of the Gospels in Early Christianity* (LNTS 353; London & New York: T&T Clark, 2010). I have reviewed this debate critically in Hakola, *Reconsidering*, 5–21. In the following pages, I summarize some main points of my criticism.

reconstructions of the history of various early Christian communities. However, I still think that it is useful to postulate particular and distinct early Christian communities to account for various differences and even contradictions between early Christian sources. As Adele Reinhartz has said, Bauckham's denial of the community hypothesis "implies a homogenization of that [the early Christian] movement into a unified entity and therefore requires us to ignore the substantial evidence for difference and diversity within that movement".⁴

I propose in this article that while our possibilities to make exact conclusions about the actual social and historical context of early Christian writings are limited, it is still advisable to analyse how these sources construct and imagine portraits of ideal communities. As Joseph Verheyden and Mark Grundeken have recently remarked, early Christian sources may give us only "some reliable information on daily-life concerns and on concrete situations", but they inform us more directly about the aspirations of local early Christian communities and about their "dreams and ideals".⁵ I suggest here that some theoretical concepts related to the symbolic construction of communities and imagined communities could be relevant in the study of early Christian portraits of ideal communities.⁶

No Johannine Community at all?

It has long been common to think that various differences and even tensions between the New Testament gospels suggest that these writings were addressed to particular early Christian communities. In his criticism of this view, Richard Bauckham tries to refute "a view of an early Christian community as a self-contained, self-sufficient, introverted group, having little contact with other Christian communities and little sense of participation in a worldwide

4 A. Reinhartz, "Gospel Audiences: Variations on a Theme", in E.W. Klink III (ed.), *The Audience of the Gospels: The Origin and Function of the Gospels in Early Christianity* (LNTS 353, London & New York: T&T Clark, 2010) 134–52, on p. 143. For the diversity of early Christianity, see H. Räisänen, *The Rise of Christian Beliefs: The Thought World of Early Christians* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 5–6, 315–19.

5 J. Verheyden/M. Grundeken, "Introduction", in M. Grundeken/J. Verheyden (ed.), *Early Christian Communities between Ideal and Reality* (WUNT 342; Mohr Siebeck, 2015) XII–XIII.

6 See A.B. Cohen, *Symbolic Construction of Community* (London & New York: Routledge, 1985); B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Revised Edition; London & New York: Verso, 2006 [originally 1983]). For earlier applications of these perspectives to the study of early Christianity, see J. Lieu, *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 12–13; T.-S.B. Liew, "Ambiguous Admittance: Consent and Descent in John's Community of 'Upward' Mobility", in M.W. Dube/J.L. Staley (ed.), *John and Postcolonialism: Travel, Space and Power* (London & New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 193–224.

Christian movement”.⁷ However, this view presents a caricature of the scholarship dealing with early Christian communities. Raymond Brown, one of the best-known advocates of the community hypothesis in the field of Johannine studies, has explicitly stated that “the Johannine attitude is just the opposite of the outlook of a sect” because Johannine Christians “had not followed their exclusivistic tendencies to the point of breaking communion (*koinōnia*) with these [Apostolic] Christians whose characteristics are found in many NT works of the late first century”.⁸ Brown’s conclusion shows that it is quite possible to support the idea that there was a distinct Johannine community that could have been in contact with other Christian movements in a variety of ways.

Bauckham frames the community hypothesis as a question of the alleged audiences of each of the gospels, when he claims that the New Testament gospels were not addressed to specific early Christian communities but to all Christians at the end of the first century. However, it is quite plausible that the evangelists may have had their initial communities and a larger audience in mind at the same time when they produced their gospels. The question of John’s original audience has not been a central concern in the community-hypothesis community but this theory has become widely applied in the Johannine studies because it has been regarded as a valid explanation for the distinctiveness of the Johannine writings in comparison to other early Christian sources on the one hand and the similarities and differences between the Gospel of John and the three Johannine Epistles on the other.⁹

The close comparison between the Gospel of John and the three Johannine Epistles reveals that the similarities and differences between these writings are best understood if we take the Gospel and the Epistles as independent witnesses of the shared tradition that is developed in different ways in different

7 R. Bauckham, “For Whom Were Gospels Written”, in R. Bauckham (ed.), *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1998) 9–48, on p. 31.

8 R.E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple: The Life, Loves, and Hates of an Individual Church in New Testament Times* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 90. Jonathan Bernier ignores Brown’s conclusion when he describes Brown’s study as the “best known articulation” of the isolation of the Johannine community. Cf. J. Bernier, *Aposynagōgos and the Historical Jesus in John: Rethinking the Historicity of the Johannine Expulsion Passages* (BibInt Series 122; Leiden: Brill, 2013), 20 n. 72. Jürgen Becker, one of the most prominent German advocates of the Johannine community hypothesis, says that the Johannine community can be described as a sect in relation to Judaism but not in relation to other forms of early Christianity. J. Becker, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes* (3rd edn; Ökumenischer Taschenbuchkommentar zum Neuen Testament 4. Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1991), 61–2.

9 C.L. Blomberg, “The Gospels for Specific Communities and All Christians”, in E.W. Klink III (ed.), *The Audience of the Gospels: The Origin and Function of the Gospels in Early Christianity* (LNTS 353, London & New York: T&T Clark, 2010) 111–33, on p. 117: “The clearest case for a specific initial community for a Gospel can be made with John, for the simple reason that the author or editors of the Fourth Gospel also produced the Johannine Epistles, clearly directed at a cluster of churches with an identifiable set of locally generated problems.”

contexts.¹⁰ The Gospel and the Epistles use a similar kind of language and share a common dualistic worldview that is distinctive among early Christian writings. Despite these similarities in the style and in theology, there are also subtle but significant variations that speak against the view that the Johannine writings were written by a single hand. Those who want to defend the common authorship of the Johannine writings often resort to idea that the writer behind these writings was a creative theologian who was capable of modifying his teaching in varying situations.¹¹ However, it could be asked whether theological reasons only explain satisfactorily the emergence of idiosyncratic Johannine view of the world and the tradition distinctive to the Fourth Gospel and the Johannine Epistles.¹² For the majority of New Testament scholars, the variations within the unity of the Johannine language and thought demonstrate that the Johannine writings were written in different sociohistorical contexts by at least two different hands using the common language belonging to a distinct early Christian circle or community.¹³

When it comes to the differences between the Gospel of John and the synoptic gospels, Bauckham has tried to explain these differences as a part of his claim that the gospels should be taken as based on eyewitness

10 For detailed analysis, see Hakola, *Reconsidering*, 67–95. My conclusion concurs with W.E. Sproston North, *The Lazarus Story within the Johannine Tradition* (JSNTSup 212; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 17–40; J. Lieu, *I, II and III John: A Commentary* (The New Testament Library; Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 17–18. For a review of recent studies on the topic, see R.A. Culpepper, “The Relationship between the Gospel of John and 1 John”, in R.A. Culpepper/P.N. Anderson (ed.), *Communities in Dispute: Current Scholarship on the Johannine Epistles* (SBLECL 13; Atlanta, Georgia: Society of Biblical Literature, 2014) 95–122.

11 M. Hengel, *The Johannine Question* (London: SCM Press, 1989), 65–6. Cf. Bauckham’s comments on the possibility of different redactional layers in John in R. Bauckham, *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple: Narrative, History, and Theology in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 118: “Perhaps we are dealing, not with the product of an idiosyncratic community and its history, but with the work of a creative theologian who, in his long experience of teaching and on the basis of his rather special access to traditions about Jesus, developed a distinctive interpretation of the history of Jesus.” For criticism of these views, see Hakola, *Reconsidering*, 77–8.

12 Cf. M. de Jonge, “The Gospel and the Epistles of John Read Against the Background of the History of the Johannine Communities”, in T. Thatcher (ed.), *What We Have Heard from the Beginning: The Past, Present, and Future of Johannine Studies* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2007) 127–44, on p. 143. De Jonge remarks that, although there is a certain uniformity in Johannine vocabulary and style, “one of the typical elements of Johannine style is repetition with variation and amplification.” In light of this, the hypothesis of a Johannine school has much to recommend it: “I remain hesitant with regard to the tendency to assign (again) a decisive role to a theologically gifted person of great authority, supposedly active during a long period of the Johannine community’s history and responsible for the Gospel in its final form. Even if such a person existed, he did not operate in a vacuum but had to respond to changes in the situation of the believers.”

13 For scholars supporting two or more Johannine authors, see Hakola, *Reconsidering*, 92. nn. 8 and 9.

testimonies.¹⁴ It seems that the only alternative to the community hypothesis for Bauckham and his supporters is a return – in some form or in another – to the traditional understanding of the gospels as eyewitness testimonies.¹⁵ However, Bauckham has been criticized for ignoring the advances that have been made in the understanding of the gospels as theological and literary interpretations of Jesus' life.¹⁶ Bauckham has argued that one of the faults of many gospel-community theories has been “a misplaced desire for historical specificity”. But it is easy to recognize the same mistake in his attempt to anchor divergent gospel traditions to eyewitness testimonies.¹⁷

In his study Bauckham joins scholars who have referred to memory studies to support their claim that the gospels are ultimately based on eyewitness memories. However, there is now a growing awareness among New Testament scholars that various psychological, cognitive and anthropological studies dealing with the transmission of memories have repeatedly exposed the fallibility and constructive nature of memory.¹⁸ As a matter of fact, the appeal

14 R. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, U.K.: Eerdmans, 2006).

15 Cf. W. Cirafesi, “The Johannine Community Hypothesis (1968–Present): Past and Present Approaches and a New Way Forward”, *Currents in Biblical Research* 12 (2014) 173–93, on p. 188. Cirafesi suggests that the paradigm shift proposed by Bauckham “is in essence a shift back to a scholarly setting that allows for the reconsideration of traditional perspectives on issues such as the authorship, audience and historical value of John's Gospel.” See also Klink (*Sheep*, 151), who advocates a return to pre-critical, literal readings of the gospel narratives instead of what he regards as modern and anachronistic critical readings. These efforts are a part of a growing scholarly tendency to defend the historical reliability of the Gospel of John. For a critical review of these efforts, see I. Dunderberg, *Gnostic Morality Revisited* (WUNT 247; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 191–208. Dunderberg justly remarks that some representatives of “the neo-historicizing approach” to John “have great difficulties in keeping themselves within the confines of academic historiography” (p. 208).

16 For a perceptive and detailed criticism of Bauckham's theory, see J. Schröter, “The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony? A Critical Examination of Richard Bauckham's *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*”, *JSNT* 31 (2008) 195–209. Bauckham's claim (*Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 8–11) that eyewitness testimony played a key role in the formation of the gospels, is based to a great extent on Samuel Byrskog's work on ancient history writing, see S. Byrskog, *Story as History – History as Story: The Gospel Tradition in the Context of Ancient Oral History* (WUNT 123; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000). However, Byrskog has later criticized Bauckham for assuming that “there was a rather straight road from the trusted testimony to history.” See S. Byrskog, “The Eyewitnesses as Interpreters of the Past: Reflections on Richard Bauckham's *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*”, *JSNT* 6 (2008) 157–68, on p. 161.

17 Bauckham, “For Whom”, 48. Cf. Byrskog, “The Eyewitnesses”, 161: “Bauckham, while often perceptively critical of form criticism, reveals a similar and yet different tendency in that the Gospels—at least Mark and John—are seen as more or less immediately transparent of the history behind them.”

18 See J.C.S. Redman, “How Accurate Are Eyewitnesses: Bauckham and the Eyewitnesses in the Light of Psychological Research”, *JBL* 129 (2010) 177–97; D.C. Allison, *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History* (London: SPCK, 2010), 1–30; “Response to Rafael Rodríguez, ‘Jesus as His Friends Remembered Him, A Review of Dale Allison's Constructing Jesus’”, *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 12 (2014), 245–54; J.S. Kloppenborg, “Me-

to memory does not negate but rather reinforces the possibility that differences among various early Christian writings were at least partly due to different sociohistorical and cultural settings where memories of Jesus were transmitted and reinterpreted. Paul Foster has aptly remarked that psychological memory studies have something in common with an older quest for the *Sitz im Leben* of various gospel traditions because “both approaches agree that the remembered event functions within communities to promote group values and that the connection between past events and the social remembrance is often quite slight”.¹⁹ This makes it plausible that attempts to actualize early Christian traditions in new historical and cultural contexts resulted in variations and tensions reflected in diverse gospel traditions. Therefore, the concepts of eyewitness testimony and memory cannot cancel the relevance of later contexts for the development of gospel traditions, as Dale Allison has convincingly argued.²⁰

The above discussion suggests that it is too early to throw away the hypothesis that takes some early Christian texts as representing distinct early Christian communities. I propose that we still can and should speak of different branches of early Christianity, not as localized and closed communities but as collective movements that developed and transmitted their own peculiar theological dialects and expressions to communicate their versions of the Christian faith. It may be impossible to reconstruct detailed histories of each early Christian community but I suggest that we can detect in the early Christian sources portraits of symbolic, imagined communities that construct social reality rather than reflect it.

memory, Performance and the Sayings of Jesus,” *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 10 (2012) 97–132; P. Foster, “Memory, Orality, and the Fourth Gospel: Three Dead-Ends in Historical Jesus Research,” *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 10 (2012) 191–227; Zeba A. Crook, “Collective Memory Distortion and the Quest for the Historical Jesus,” *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 11 (2013) 53–76. P. Luomanen, “How Religions Remember: Memory Theories In Biblical Studies and in the Study of Cognitive Study of Religion,” in I. Czachesz/R. Uro (ed.), *Mind, Morality and Magic: Cognitive Science Approaches in Biblical Studies* (Durham: Acumen, 2013) 24–42.

19 Foster, “Memory”, 202.

20 Cf. Allison, *Constructing Jesus*, 30: “Even if one grants, for the sake of discussion, that eyewitnesses initiated the tradition and repeated parts of it again and again to multiple audiences, their initial and later tellings cannot have been unsullied by selective recall and distortion. This is because nobody’s retrieval is immune to such. Retellings of the past are habitually shaped by (1) the mere prospect that there will be listeners; (2) a speaker’s aim; (3) expectations about the interests and attitudes of auditors; and (4) the behavior and reactions of the latter. Context affects what one deems possible, appropriate, or desirable to discuss, and speakers will add, subtract, and distort in order to please and entertain, as well as to forestall negative reactions.”

From Sociohistorical Relations to Communities as Imagined Constructions

The New Testament scholarship dealing with early Christian communities has focused almost completely on attempts to reconstruct the sociohistorical relations behind surviving written material. This is an understandable objective because any information related to the historical contexts of ancient literary works would be most valuable in their interpretation. An obvious problem in this line of enquiry is that we seldom have any firsthand evidence of the context of these sources, and, consequently, our historical conclusions are one-sidedly based only on the sources themselves.

Quite many of the surviving early Christian sources deal with various kinds of conflicts and we simply do not know how those who are the target of polemic perceived the alleged schism.²¹ In spite of these problems, I think that the quest for a plausible social and historical background of early Christian sources should remain a legitimate and relevant field of the study in its own right. However, I suggest here that the study of early Christian communities could benefit from some recent developments in the study of various kinds of communities.

In the field of anthropological and sociological studies, the conceptualizations of community have gone through a change from approaching communities as forms of actual social interaction to regarding them as expressions of ideal collective identities.²² Vered Amit has stated that, as a result of this development, community came to be seen as “much more than locality, for now it could be extended to virtually any form of collective cultural consciousness”.²³ An important impetus for this understanding was given by Fredrik Barth’s reformulation of ethnic groups. In many earlier studies, ethnicity and culture were seen as more or less the same thing and as relatively static categories, and ethnic groups were identified on the basis of shared cultural characteristics. Barth, however, emphasized the on-going negotiations of boundaries between different ethnic groups.²⁴ This perspective has

21 Cf. R. Hakola/N. Nikki/U. Tervahauta, “Introduction”, in R. Hakola/N. Nikki/U. Tervahauta (ed.), *Others and the Construction of Early Christian Identities* (PFES 106; Helsinki: Finnish Exegetical Society, 2013) 9–30.

22 Cf. V. Amit, “Reconceptualizing Community”, in V. Amit (ed.), *Realizing Community: Concepts, Social Relationships and Sentiments* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002) 1–20; R. Jenkins, *Social Identity* (4th Edition; London and New York: Routledge, 2014) 134–50.

23 Amit, “Reconceptualizing”, 6. Amit’s review of scholarship is a part of the introduction to a collection that tries to put the study of social relations and interaction back to the agenda of community studies. While this kind of emphasis is plausible in the study of various modern communities, it is often more difficult in case of ancient communities because of the lack of relevant source material.

24 F. Barth, “Introduction”, in F. Barth (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organi-*

opened a way to analyze ethnic identities as social constructions whose boundaries are “generated in transaction and interaction and are, at least potentially, *flexible, situational* and *negotiable*”.²⁵

A similar perspective appears in Anthony Cohen’s book *The Symbolic Construction of Community*. According to Cohen,

the community as experienced by its members does not consist in social structure or in “the doing” of social behaviour. It inheres, rather, in “the thinking” about it. It is in this sense that we can speak of the community as a symbolic, rather than a structural, construct.²⁶

Rather than speaking of communities as well-defined collectivities with inherent and stable attributes, this approach maintains that portraits of communities are ideological because they express not only how things are but how they should be.²⁷

In the field of the study of nationalism, Benedict Anderson has coined the term “imagined community”. According to Anderson, “all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contacts (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined”.²⁸ The discussion about Anderson’s notion has quite often led to confusion between imagined and imaginary communities, and for this reason some scholars prefer to speak about communities in anonymity, a term used also by Anderson himself.²⁹ Anderson already made clear that the concept of imagined community does

zation of Culture Difference (Bergen: Universitetsforlaget, 1969) 9–37; idem, “Enduring and Emerging Issues in the Analysis of Ethnicity”, in H. Vermeulen/C. Govers (ed.), *The Anthropology of Ethnicity: Beyond Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (Amsterdam: Spinhuis, 1994) 11–32.

25 Jenkins, *Social Identity*, 133 (italics original).

26 Cohen, *Symbolic Construction*, 98. Cohen later expressed some self-criticism of his original thesis and dissociated himself from some of its applications, see A. Cohen, “Epilogue”, in V. Amit (ed.), *Realizing Community: Concepts, Social Relationships and Sentiments* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002) 165–70. For a critical review of Cohen’s proposition and subsequent scholarly discussion, including Cohen’s self-criticism, see Jenkins, *Social Identity*, 136–43. Jenkins refers to some problems in Cohen’s proposal but insists that it has been a useful advance on Barth’s views. This has permitted the application of Cohen’s model to a wide variety of communities, including religious ones.

27 Cf. Jenkins, *Social Identity*, 138.

28 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6. For the impact of Anderson’s thesis on the study of nationalism, see J. Pakkasvirta, “Notes on the Theory of Nationalism”, in H. Haggren/J. Rainio-Niemi/J. Vauhkonen (ed.), *Multi-Layered Historicity of the Present Approaches to Social Science History* (Publications of the Department of Political and Economic Studies 8; Helsinki; University of Helsinki, 2013) 75–91. Pakkasvirta says that “Anderson’s work may not perfectly explain the nature of nationalism, but he is able to excellently describe the prerequisites of nationalism and nation state” which makes his work “a hotbed of ideas” and rewarding as “a methodological tool”.

29 Cf. Pakkasvirta, “Notes”, 86. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 36.

not in any way mean that national or other communities are described as untrue or fictional. As Richard Jenkins has remarked, a community can never be imaginary “even though it can never be anything other than imagined”.³⁰

Meredith McGuire has applied the notion of imagined community to various religious communities and she also notes that the use of this term does not suggest that such communities are “fake or pure fantasy”; rather, the term “highlights the ongoing conceptual work required to create an image of community, absent face-to-face experiences of group identity”.³¹ McGuire connects the idea of imagined community with her emphasis on lived religion, a theoretical perspective in the field of sociology of religion that challenges the image of religion as unitary and “relatively stable set of collective beliefs and practices” and that considers the boundaries of religions and religious identity “as contested, shifting and malleable”.³² This means that while various imagined religious communities struggle to present their group and its traditions as natural and authentic, “ongoing contestations over boundaries and meanings ... mean that people’s group identity and traditions are neither fixed nor unproblematic”.³³

The above mentioned theoretical perspectives have many points in common with social psychological social identity approach.³⁴ This approach has recently been increasingly applied to early Jewish and Christian sources.³⁵ According to the social identity approach, social categorization is a fundamental aspect of group behavior. The process of categorization helps groups and their members orientate themselves in variable social environments by making those environments more predictable and meaningful.

30 Jenkins, *Social Identity*, 141.

31 M. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 205.

32 McGuire, *Lived Religion*, 186–7.

33 McGuire, *Lived Religion*, 208. The concept of lived religion has mostly been applied to various modern forms of religious commitment and identity. However, McGuire aptly refers to recent scholarly trends that have tried to do justice to the diversity of early Christianity. In light of this diversity, many Christian communities, from their inception, “adaptively responded to the cultural meanings and practices of the diverse peoples who had become Christians”; furthermore, ancient Christian and Jewish “identities were threatened by extensive overlapping and religious blending” (p. 191). It can be argued that the tension between lived religion and attempts to authenticate a particular form of Christianity as the only true one has belonged to the construction of Christian identity from the beginning. Cf. J. Lieu, “From Us but Not of Us? Moving the Boundaries of the Community”, in M. Grundeken/J. Verheyden (ed.), *Early Christian Communities between Ideal and Reality* (WUNT 342; Mohr Siebeck, 2015) 161–75, on p. 175: “The obsessive concern with determining who ‘is not of us’, which characterizes Christianity throughout its history, is there from the start.”

34 For these connections, see Jenkins, *Social Identity*, 143–4.

35 For an introduction to social identity approach with relevant references, see Hakola, *Reconsidering*, 24–6. For various applications of the approach to early Christian literature, see J.B. Tucker/C.A. Baker, *T&T Clark Handbook to Social Identity in the New Testament* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

Social categories are not seen as inflexible and stable but always dependent on the specific social environment and those comparative relations that are present in that environment. It can be claimed that “people who are categorized and perceived as different in one context ... can be recategorized and perceived as similar in another context”.³⁶ Social categorization, however, quite often results in exaggeration and a polarization of perception because individuals belonging to different groups are viewed as being more different from each other than they really are, while individuals belonging to the same group are perceived as more similar.³⁷ Therefore, categorization has been described as “a cognitive grouping process that transforms differences into similarities, and vice versa”.³⁸ This point appears frequently in Cohen’s understanding of communities as symbolic constructions.³⁹

The idea that social categories can be seen as imagined constructions is inherent in the social identity approach. It is claimed that social categories “do not just reflect the existing organization of social reality” but are used “to invoke a vision of how social reality should be organized, and to mobilize people to realize that vision”.⁴⁰ In this sense, social categories not only imitate but, first and foremost, create social reality. In other words, social categories can be seen as projections of future social realities when they express what a group wants to become in the future.⁴¹

The above-mentioned theoretical perspectives regard various communities and their boundaries as social constructs rather than as well-defined and objective entities. It should be noted that this kind of approach has become all the more common in the study of early Christianity.⁴² Especially when it comes to such value-laden concepts as “heresy” or “orthodoxy”, scholars have abandoned the use of these terms as neutral descriptive categories and understood them as prescriptive instruments in the process of self-definition that is always achieved in relation to those experienced and excluded as

36 P.J. Oakes/S.A. Haslam/J.C. Turner, *Stereotyping and Social Reality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 98.

37 Oakes/Haslam/Turner, *Stereotyping*, 95–6; P.J. Oakes/S.A. Haslam/K.J. Reynolds, “Social Categorization and Social Context: Is Stereotype Change a Matter of Information or of Meaning?” in D.M. Abrams and M.A. Hogg (ed.), *Social Identity and Social Cognition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 55–79, on pp. 57–61.

38 Oakes/Haslam/Reynolds, “Social Categorization”, 62.

39 Cohen, *Symbolic Construction*, 21: “This relative similarity or difference [of a community] is not a matter for ‘objective’ assessment: it is a matter of feeling, a matter which resides in the minds of the members themselves. Thus, although they recognize important differences among themselves, they also suppose themselves to be more like each other than like the members of other communities.”

40 S.A. Haslam/S.D. Reicher/M.J. Platlow, *The New Psychology of Leadership: Identity, Influence and Power* (Hove and New York: Psychology Press, 2011), 65.

41 Haslam/Reicher/Platlow, *The New Psychology*, 72, 162, 188.

42 Cf. J. Lieu, *Christian Identity*, 11–17; M. Kahlos, “Introduction”, in M. Kahlos (ed.), *Faces of the Other: Religious Rivalry and Ethnic Encounters in the Later Roman* (Cursor Mundi 10; Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2011) 1–15, on pp. 5–7; Hakola, *Reconsidering*, 21–4.

others.⁴³ As Ismo Dunderberg has recently remarked, boundaries between groups of people, for example those between various early Christian groups, “do not simply exist, those boundaries are always drawn by someone”. Dunderberg continues that it has been all too usual, not only among various historical Christian groups but also in scholarly usage, to take such historically contingent and socially constructed categories as “heresy”, “orthodoxy”, or “gnosticism” as “naturalized”.⁴⁴

A theologian who played a pivotal role in “naturalizing” the portrait of a unified, distinctive and orthodox early Christian community as opposed to diverse heterodox groups is Irenaeus in his *Adversus Haereses*. However, Judith Lieu has recently traced various elements in earlier writings (the Epistles of Paul, John, and Ignatius) that already anticipated Irenaeus’ maneuver. Therefore, “Irenaeus is not to be held responsible for inventing ‘the idea of heresy’, with all its destructive after-effects”.⁴⁵ For example, the Johannine Epistles presuppose “a non-negotiable control of permitted membership”.⁴⁶ In another connection, Lieu has concluded that the First Epistle of John projects a community even though it does not use any distinctive vocabulary for this community. The community constructed in the Epistle appears “as a cohesive, undifferentiated body, which possesses no distinguishing characteristics of status, of ethnicity, of religious background, or of historically shaped self-consciousness that might connect its members with any other sets of structures in society”.⁴⁷ Earlier writers may not use later terminology related to orthodoxy and heresies but they already clearly try to set up strict boundaries and construct portraits of ideal followers of Jesus.

In the following, I examine how the portrait of an imagined community is constructed in the Gospel of John. Because I am interested in the portrait of the community envisioned in the Gospel, my analysis is not dependent on any detailed historical reconstruction of the Johannine community. I focus on how the following features of a symbolic, imagined community are constructed in the Gospel: (1) The origins of the community, (2), The boundaries of the community, (3) The symbols of belonging and the unity of the community, and (4) The community and the world.

43 K.L. King, *What is Gnosticism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap, 2003), 20–54; D. Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 22–7; Räisänen, *The Rise*, 4.

44 Dunderberg, *Gnostic Morality*, 3.

45 J. Lieu, “From Us”, 175.

46 Lieu, “From Us”, 171.

47 J. Lieu, “The Audience of the Johannine Epistles”, in R.A. Culpepper/P.N. Anderson (ed.), *Communities in Dispute: Current Scholarship on the Johannine Epistles* (SBLECL 13; Atlanta, Georgia: Society of Biblical Literature, 2014) 123–40, on pp. 139–40.

The Origins of the Community

All the varieties of early Christianity tried to relate themselves to Jesus' teachings and activity in one way or another. Among the four canonical gospels, John is the most explicit in its claim that the writing is based on the testimony of an eyewitness (John 19:35; 21:24).⁴⁸ In recent scholarship, there has appeared a renewed interest in defending the reliability of these mentions and reading the Gospel as an eyewitness account. However, scholars have surprisingly seldom analyzed the Gospel's references to Jesus' Beloved Disciple in detail and they quite often simply ignore the basic observation that the figure of the Beloved Disciple is absent from the synoptic parallels.⁴⁹ In light of this observation, the references to the Beloved Disciple "seem to be a secondary addition to earlier tradition. ... They tell us a great deal about the Johannine community's regard for the witness who stood behind their traditions, but they tell us little about events at the death and resurrection of Jesus".⁵⁰

The figure of the Beloved Disciple is exceptional among canonical writings, but Ismo Dunderberg has shown on the basis of the evidence from non-canonical early Christian texts how this figure is a part of a growing tendency to provide detailed accounts of how early Christian texts were produced.⁵¹ Dunderberg concludes that "the more aware early Christian writers became of the diversity within early Christian traditions, the more important it became to convince their audiences that the specific branch of tradition they were

48 A reference to eyewitnesses of Jesus' life appears most probably already in John 1:14 ("And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory), but it is not certain whether the opening of 1 John 1:1 ("We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes") refers to eyewitnesses; cf. Lieu, *I, II and III John*, 37–41.

49 Cf. Dunderberg *Gnostic Morality*, 204–5. Dunderberg has looked through how scholars claiming that the Beloved Disciple is an eyewitness have dealt with the problem that this disciple is not mentioned in the synoptic parallels. Dunderberg concludes that for scholars such as Martin Hengel, Richard Bauckham, Ben Witherington, Craig Bloomberg, or Craig Keener, this problem "simply does not exist ... or they deliberately ignore it". Dunderberg also shows how many arguments that have lately been presented to support John's historical reliability were already articulated by Brooke Foss Westcott at the end of the nineteenth century (pp. 199–201).

50 R.A. Culpepper, *John, the Son of Zebedee: The Life of a Legend* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1994), 72. Cf. also A.T. Lincoln, *The Gospel According to Saint John* (BNTC 4; London/Peabody, MA: Continuum/Hendrickson, 2005): "There is no corroborative evidence from the Synoptics for a disciple doing any of these things and indeed these incidents appear to have been added to the substratum for the evangelist's narrative found in the Synoptic tradition."

51 I. Dunderberg, *The Beloved Disciple in Conflict? Revisiting the Gospels of John and Thomas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 165–98. See also M. Meyer, "Whom Did Jesus Love Most? Beloved Disciples in John and Other Gospels", in T. Rasmussen (ed.), *The Legacy of John: Second Century Reception of the Fourth Gospel* (NovTSup 132; Leiden: Brill, 2010) 73–91. Cf. also Kari Syreeni's article in this collection.

representing was the most reliable”.⁵² The Beloved Disciple can be taken as part of the production of a distinct early Christian social identity rather than as a mirror image of some historical person – no matter whether we speculate that there is an actual, otherwise unknown and anonymous early Christian teacher behind this figure⁵³ or whether we are content to conclude that this figure is a literary device.⁵⁴

In a sense, the Gospel of John projects the origins of the community of believers further back in time. It is stated several times that the Scriptures, Moses and other foundational figures in Israel’s past have testified on Jesus’ behalf even though his opponents’ do not accept this testimony (John 5:39, 45–46; 8:56). However, I have argued elsewhere that it is not only continuity but also contrast that characterizes Jesus’ relationship to Moses and Abraham.⁵⁵ Moses and Abraham have positive functions in John as Jesus’ witnesses, but Jesus’ superiority over them is made clear and there is no room for any continuing independent role of these figures from the past.⁵⁶ John’s ambiguous references to representative scriptural figures can be taken as an example of the unresolved tension that characterizes his relationship to Jewishness.⁵⁷ On the ideological level, John emphasizes continuity with the

52 Dunderberg, *The Beloved Disciple*, 203.

53 Thus Culpepper, *John*, 84–5; Lincoln, *John*, 25.

54 J. Kügler, *Der Jünger den Jesus liebte. Literarische, theologische und historische Untersuchungen zu einer Schlüsselgestalt johanneischer Theologie und Geschichte. Mit einem Exkurs über die Brotrede in Joh 6* (SBB 16; Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1988); Dunderberg, *The Beloved Disciple*, 147–8.

55 John’s ambiguous references to Moses and his law may reflect a situation where the majority of John’s community no longer observed such basics of Jewish identity as the Sabbath or circumcision, see Hakola, *Identity Matters*, 215–21; idem, “The Johannine Community as Jewish Christians? Some Problems in Current Scholarly Consensus”, in M. Jackson-McCabe, *Reconsidering Jewish Christianity: Rethinking Ancient Groups and Texts* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007) 181–201. The question of John’s relationship to the law remains debated. For recent contributions to this discussion, see W.R.G. Loader, “The Law and Ethics in John”, in J.G. van der Watt/R. Zimmermann (ed.), *Rethinking the Ethics of John: “Implicit Ethics” in the Johannine Writings* (WUNT 291; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012) 144–58, on p. 144 n. 1. I concur with Loader, who concludes that “John no longer assumes Torah observance”.

56 Cf. M. Theobald, *Studien zum Corpus Johanneum* (WUNT 267; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 282–348. See also F. Moloney, *Signs and Shadows: Reading John 5–12* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 113: “Abraham, for all his greatness, belongs to the sequence of events that mark time. There was a time when he belonged to a narrative. His story is finished; he has come and gone. ‘The Jews’ are only able to call upon the memory of his story.” In a similar vein already N.A. Dahl, “The Johannine Church and History”, in J. Ashton (ed.), *The Interpretation of John* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press/London: SPCK, 1986, 122–40) on p. 137: “The question may remain as to whether the OT is not, factually, deprived of a historical meaning of its own when Moses and the prophets are simply made supporters of John’s own testimony to Christ.” (Originally in W. Klassen/G.F. Snyder (ed.), *Current Issues in New Testament Interpretation* [New York: Harper & Row/London: SCM Press, 1962], 124–42.)

57 Cf. Loader, “The Law and Ethics”, 155 n. 62: “The claim to continuity to Torah faithfulness clearly matters for the author, but it is substantiated by what in effect is in part a radical discontinuity: Torah’s cultic and related provisions which served to foreshadow Christ can now

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past but many features in his narrative suggest a growing social discontinuity between the followers of Jesus and their Jewish contemporaries.

John was, of course, not the only early Christian writer who struggled to emphasize continuity with the past in a situation where novel beliefs and practices moved many Christian communities away from other Jews. Heikki Räisänen has shown how “ambiguous continuity” characterizes what is said of Jews and Jewishness in various early Christian writings.⁵⁸ The claims for continuity with scriptural tradition in various early Christian writings are in agreement with how various kinds of communities claim to preserve genuine cultural, social, or religious heritage while they, at the same time, introduce new and innovative ways to express their distinctive identity. When the issues of leadership have been examined from a social identity perspective, it has become clear that, in periods of social change, successful group leaders are able to root their account of who they and their group are in common cultural and historical traditions. They know how to select and reshape collective symbols and use them in new combinations and in this way establish “a continuity over time within the context of the salient group membership” so that “the speaker’s version is no longer one version amongst many but rather the only valid version of identity”.⁵⁹

Abraham and other representative figures of the scriptural past are particularly convenient symbols who guaranteed the authenticity of the newly introduced faith in Jesus. In antiquity the old age of an ethnic group was held in high esteem, and many non-Jewish and Jewish writers frequently refer to Abraham, Moses or other patriarchs with admiration for their nobility and age-old wisdom.⁶⁰ Such symbolic figures are valuable in the construction of a community because – to use Anthony Cohen’s words – “symbolism ... does not carry meaning inherently” and is thus “highly responsive to change”. According to Cohen, communities often use various symbols to express their identity because “symbolic form has only a loose relation to its content” and, therefore, it “can persist while the content undergoes significant trans-

cease to be observed because what they promised has come.” According to Loader, this means that “the law on the Johannine reading predicts its own eclipse by Jesus.” Cf. also Lieu, *Christian Identity*, 41: “Even within the Jewishness of John, which is exemplified by its scriptural shaping, there is an unresolved ambivalence as to whether Scripture does still remain foundational for the readers’ (or for the ‘community’s’) identity, particularly in the face of the deliberate embrace of an otherness, a new identity, ‘born from above’ and ‘not of this world’ (3. 3; 17. 16).”

58 Räisänen, *The Rise*, 256–76.

59 Haslam/Reicher/Platlow, *The New Psychology*, 178. Cf. also McGuire, *Lived Religion*, 206: “Various (religious, ethnic, and national) imagined communities claim their cultural and historical tradition to be the uniquely authentic story out of which their people collectively live.” Lieu, *Christian Identity*, 15: “Claims about past history and continuity are constitutive of nearly all articulations of identity.”

60 For relevant ancient sources, see L. Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World: Attitudes and Interactions from Alexander to Justinian* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), 177–285.

formation. Frequently, the appearance of continuity is so compelling that it obscures people's recognition that the form itself has changed".⁶¹ It is clear that John was convinced that there was only continuity in his portrait of Jesus as the fulfilment of the Scriptures but it is equally understandable that other Jews would have recognized a significant break in his fusion of past and present. Colleen Conway has argued that John's "supplanting of Moses and of the ancestors" should be recognized as a "counterhistory in the making" that reads "against the grains of the adversaries' trusted sources" and in this way deprives them of their positive identity and replaces it with "a pejorative counter image".⁶² John's seizure of Israel's scriptural history anticipates later apologetic writers who tried to counter the claims that the faith in Jesus is a recent innovation by asserting the antiquity of Christian wisdom and by inventing a worthy past for Jesus' followers.⁶³ The inventors of Christian identity – including John – did what successful group leaders have always done; these pioneers "don't just repeat traditional stories of identity ... [but] weave familiar strands into novel patterns. They are careful not to violate what we know of ourselves. Their genius is to make the new out of elements of the old and thereby to present revolution as tradition."⁶⁴

John not only appropriates Israel's history but anchors his story of Jesus to mythical beginnings. It is generally accepted that the opening of the Gospel (John 1:1–4) with its reference to "the beginning" is a rereading of the creation myth in the book of Genesis (Gen 1–2).⁶⁵ John reclaims various Jewish wisdom traditions and describes Jesus as the eternal Word (λόγος) who was with God already before the creation of the world. The myth of the eternal Word effectively moves John's story of Jesus above the contingencies of time and contributes to the construction of a vision of the world that supplants all competing visions.⁶⁶ In the framework of a myth, constructed identities that

61 Cohen, *Symbolic Construction*, 91 (italics original). Cf. also p. 104: "It is the very imprecision of these references to the past – timelessness masquerading as history – which makes them so apt a device for symbolism and, in particular, for expressing symbolically the continuity of past and present, and for re-asserting the cultural integrity of the community in the face of its apparent subversion by the forces of change."

62 C. Conway, "New Historicism and the Historical Jesus in John: Friends or Foes?" in P.N. Anderson/F. Just/T. Thatcher (ed.), *John Jesus and History, Volume 1: Critical Appraisals of Critical Views* (SBLSymS 44; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007) 199–215, on p. 212. Conway cites here A. Funkenstein, "History, Counterhistory, and Narrative," in S. Freidlander (ed.), *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992) 66–81, on pp. 79–80.

63 For various appeals to the past as a part of early Christian self-definition, see Lieu, *Christian Identity*, 62–97; D.K. Buell, *Why This New Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 63–93.

64 Haslam/Reicher/Platlow, *The New Psychology*, 149.

65 Cf. J. Painter, "Earth Made Whole: John's Rereading of Genesis", in J. Painter/R.A. Culpepper/F.F. Segovia (ed.), *Word, Theology and Community in John* (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2002) 65–84.

66 Cf. F.F. Segovia, "John 1.1–18 as Entrée into Johannine Reality: Representation and Ramifica-

are subject to historical change and renegotiation appear as stable and beyond contestation.⁶⁷

The Boundaries of the Community

It is one of the basic observations in recent scholarship that the boundaries of various national, ethnic or religious communities are not naturally given with fixed and allegedly objective criteria but socially constructed.⁶⁸ This notion has important ramifications in Johannine studies because scholars have more often than not taken the boundaries set up in the Johannine writings as reflecting the actual boundaries between the Johannine community and its surroundings. In the Gospel a clear demarcation between Jesus' followers and the rest of world is accentuated with the use of such dualistic polarities as be from above vs. be from below, be from God vs. be from the devil, light vs. darkness. In earlier scholarship, the strict dualism has quite often been taken as evidence of the isolation of the Johannine Christians from their surrounding society and the sectarian nature of their community.⁶⁹

I have recently argued that John's dualistic worldview cannot be used as evidence for factual separation but is rather an attempt to turn a diverse social reality into controllable categories.⁷⁰ The boundaries between emerging early Christian communities and Jewish synagogue communities seem to have remained fluid and permeable for a long time.⁷¹ For example, there is evidence beginning from some New Testament writings for Christians who were

tions", in J. Painter/R.A. Culpepper/F.F. Segovia (ed.), *Word, Theology and Community in John* (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2002) 33–64, on p. 59: "John's vision of reality ... seeks to supplant all other visions at work with its own set of conceptions about the other-world, the this-world, and their correspondence."

67 Cf. Cohen, *Symbolic Construction*, 99: "Myth confers 'rightness' on a course of action by extending to it the sanctity which enshrouds tradition and lore. Mythological distance lends enchantment to an otherwise murky contemporary view. One reason which accounts for the particular efficacy of myth in this regard is its ahistorical character. ... It 'blocks off' the past, making it impervious to the rationalistic scrutiny." McGuire, *Lived Religion*, 207: "The myth legitimates group identity and solidarity, affirming: This is who we naturally – in our essence – are and always have been. And the myth legitimates oppositional boundaries toward the Other, whose identity is likewise constructed as historically fixed and essential."

68 Cf. Lieu, *Christian Identity*, 98: "It is part of the seduction of identity that the encircling boundary appears both given and immutable, when it is neither."

69 For a critical review of sectarian understandings of the Johannine community, see D.A. Lamb, *Text, Context and the Johannine Community: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of the Johannine Writings* (LNTS 477; London and New York: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2013), 103–44.

70 Hakola, *Reconsidering*, 1–5, 118–31.

71 Cf. J.M.G. Barclay, *Pauline Churches and Diaspora Jews* (WUNT 275; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 22: "Although the boundaries of the Jewish community did not coincide with those of the believer-assemblies, Jewish believers [in Jesus] could generally participate in both 'synagogue' and 'church' communities at the same time."

Gentiles and “combined a commitment to Christianity with adherence in varying degrees to Jewish practices without viewing such behavior as contradictory”.⁷² As Michele Murray has shown, from the perspective of certain Christian leaders, these community members dangerously blurred boundaries between Christian and Jewish communities which aroused their fierce denunciation in some sources. The same kind of boundary-crossing continued to haunt various Christian theologians as various sources stemming from the second to the early fifth century demonstrate.⁷³

The evidence for blurred boundaries between Christian and Jewish communities seems to be at odds with John’s references to the exclusion from the synagogue (John 9:22; 12:42; 16:2). These references have long been taken as a reflection of the measures that the rabbinic establishment took against the Johannine community but this kind of policy is unattested in other sources.⁷⁴ John’s passages mentioning the exclusion may not provide evidence for the formal and definite policy of the alleged opponents of his community but reflect a more prolonged and gradual process of separation among some Johannine Christians. As a result of this process, some members of the community may have become gradually alienated from their fellow Jews to the extent that they felt that they were excluded from synagogue gatherings. In this sense, the exclusion passages give a retrospective rationale for the separation and, at the same time, create a definite boundary between Jesus’ followers and local synagogue communities.⁷⁵

72 M. Murray, *Playing a Jewish Game: Gentile Christian Judaizing in the First and Second Century CE* (SCJ 13; Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2004), 2. Murray finds evidence for this phenomenon, for example, in Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians, the Epistles of Ignatius, *Epistle of Barnabas*, *The Didache*, Pseudo-Clementine Literature and Revelation.

73 For relevant evidence, see R. Hakola, “Galilean Jews and Christians in Context: Spaces Shared and Contested in the Eastern Galilee in Late Antiquity”, in J. Day/R. Hakola/M. Kahlos/U. Tervahauta (ed.), *Spaces in Late Antiquity: Cultural, Theological and Archaeological Perspectives* (New York & London: Routledge, 2016) 141–165.

74 Scholars have repeatedly tried to connect the Jewish prayer against heretics, *Birkat Ha-Minim*, with the Johannine situation, but this view is problematic. See Hakola, *Identity Matters*, 45–55; Kloppenborg, “Disaffiliation”, 1–5; R. Langer, *Cursing the Christians? A History of the Birkat haMinim* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 26–9.

75 Hakola, *Reconsidering*, 56–62. See also A. Reinhartz, *Befriending*, 50: “The exclusion passages may have provided the Johannine community not with a direct reflection of their historical experience but rather with a divinely ordained etiology in the time of Jesus for a situation of separation which was part of their own experience.” W. Carter, *John and the Empire*, 26: “[The expulsion passages] function as part of the Gospel’s rhetoric of distance to indicate that some conflict and division between the Jesus believers and the rest of the synagogue *ought* to exist as a consequence of allegiance to Jesus.” Kloppenborg, “Disaffiliation”, 13: “There is little doubt that the *result* of expulsion was the Fourth Gospel’s articulation of a complex retrospective rationale, based on the group’s claim to have seen in Jesus what their fellow synagogue members refused to see or were unable. But this interpretation, along with the corresponding demonizing of the *Ioudaioi* and *Pharisaioi*, should be seen as retrospective rather than a contemporary account of expulsion. Before they undertook to rationalise their expulsion in dogmatic terms, these par-

Despite John's inclination to set up dualistic polarities, there is evidence in the Gospel for a more diverse social reality. In John 8:31, there appear Jews who are said to believe in Jesus. These textual figures can be taken as a symbolic representation of those in John's environment who believed in Jesus as the Messiah but still continued to interact with local Jewish synagogue communities.⁷⁶ In the course of the dialogue in John 8:31–59, John connects Jews who had believed in Jesus with the devil (8:44), but the mere presence of these believing Jews in John's narrative suggests that the categories John wants to keep intact and separated were, as a matter of fact, overlapping and flexible. In a similar way, many scholars have recently observed how some Johannine characters, most notably Nicodemus, remain ambiguous in the narrative.⁷⁷ For example, Nicodemus has been taken as a narrative symbol of "Judaism ... in sympathetic dialogue with Johannine teaching" and of "the Jew who chooses to engage Jesus open-mindedly and ... does not fully believe in the Fourth Gospel's teachings".⁷⁸ Craig Koester has concluded that even if "dualistic statements create clear categories like light and darkness, the Gospel's approach to character portrayal recognizes that life is more complex".⁷⁹ I take this to mean that, even though John regularly portrays the world in black-and-white terms, diverse and unpredictable social reality has made its way into his narrative, especially through various loose ends in how its characters are presented.

I suggest that it is precisely the instability of the boundaries between the Johannine community and its environment that is a major motivational reason in the emergence of Johannine dualism. John's one-dimensional and polarized view of the world anticipates how various later Christian theologians tried to keep the symbolic boundaries of their communities intact even though there is ample evidence that the boundaries on the ground were unsettled and mutable.⁸⁰ These attempts can be seen as examples of the tension between

tisans of the Jesus movement began to assume behavioural practices which precipitated their exclusion and eventual expulsion."

76 Hakola, *Reconsidering*, 118–29.

77 C.M. Conway, "Speaking through Ambiguity: Minor Characters in the Fourth Gospel", *BibInt* 10 (2002) 324–41; S.E. Hulen, *Imperfect Believers: Ambiguous Characters in the Gospel of John* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2009); C.R. Koester, "Theological Complexity and the Characterization of Nicodemus in John's Gospel", in C.W. Skinner (ed.), *Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John* (LNTS 461; London and New York: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2013) 165–81; Hakola, *Reconsidering*, 132–46.

78 M. Kraus, "New Jewish Directions in the Study of the Fourth Gospel", in F. Lozada Jr./T. Thatcher (ed.), *New Currents through John: A Global Perspective* (SBLRBS 54; Atlanta, Georgia: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006) 141–66, on p. 165.

79 Koester, "Theological Complexity", 168.

80 Cf. Hakola, "Galilean Jews", 143–44. The use of various dualistic expressions was not, of course, a Christian innovation. It is commonly accepted that quite many of the dualistic images used in John have close parallels in some Qumran scrolls and other Second Temple Jewish sources. See Hakola, *Identity Matters*, 197–210. Not unlike in John, one may find a discrepancy between

religion-as-lived and the need to stabilize a particular form of religious identity as the only accepted alternative, a tendency that Meredith McGuire has seen to be a characteristic of various imagined communities. According to McGuire, the members of an imagined community customarily represent the boundaries between their community and others as natural rather than actively think their group as a social construction.⁸¹ However, if we demystify the in-house rhetoric used in various sources and approach their ideal portraits of communities as symbolic constructions, we realize that group boundaries are not “objectively apparent” and that “boundaries perceived by some may be utterly imperceptible to others”.⁸² For this reason, it is problematic to take theological myth-making as equivalent to social reality.⁸³

The Symbols of Belonging and the Unity of the Community

Boundaries contribute to the construction of communities as identifiable and distinct entities, but they also enhance the sense of unity and belonging among those who position themselves within the boundaries. The sense of belonging to a group of people is not necessarily based on the actual similarity of its members but it may be achieved through the “participation in a common symbolic domain” that allows individual group members to imagine themselves as a unified whole despite all their mutual differences.⁸⁴ According to the social identity approach, when persons recognize themselves as a member of a distinct group, they go through the process of self-stereotyping. As a result of this process they experience themselves and other members in the group not as differentiated individuals but as approximating common

overtly dualistic categories and a more diverse social reality in some of these sources. Cf. L.T. Stuckenbruck, “The Interiorization of Dualism within the Human Being in Second Temple Judaism: The Treatise of the Two Spirits (1QS III:13–IV:26) in its Tradition-Historical Context”, in A. Lange/E.M. Meyers/B.H. Reynolds III/R. Styers (ed.), *Light Against Darkness: Dualism in Ancient Mediterranean Religion and the Contemporary World* (JAJSup 2; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011) 145–68, on p. 168: “The Treatise [of the Two Spirits] provided its original community, and subsequently the Qumran community, with a theological framework that enabled these groups to come to terms with discrepancies between the ideology and identity they claimed for themselves on the one hand and realities of what they experienced on the other.”

81 McGuire, *Lived Religion*, 207. Cf. Haslam/Reicher/Platlow, *The New Psychology*, 179: “Those who have the imagination and skill to justify whichever claims they are making about identity through links to the natural order will be in a better position to authenticate their version of who we are.”

82 Cohen, *Symbolic Construction*, 13.

83 Cf. J.M. Lieu, *Neither Jew Nor Christian: Constructing Early Christianity* (London & New York: T & T Clark, 2002), 19. “Theological boundaries and social boundaries are not necessarily co-terminous.”

84 Cf. Jenkins, *Social Identity*, 138.

characteristics of their group.⁸⁵ This depersonalization does not mean that individuals lose their selves but rather that they redefine themselves and “all self-related terms, so that these relate to ‘we’ not ‘I’”.⁸⁶ Various empirical studies support the conclusion that depersonalization lays the foundation not only for the sense of sameness among group members but also enables an otherwise disparate collective of people to agree on their common goals and strive for these goals as a cohesive social force. According to this perspective, attraction to fellow group members and social cohesion are not so much a prerequisite for a shared social identity but rather its outcome.⁸⁷

In the Gospel of John, the unity of Jesus’ followers is a major theme, even though it was earlier claimed that John’s focus is completely on the fate of an individual and he does not show any interest in the construction of a community of believers.⁸⁸ The unity of John’s imagined community is addressed metaphorically in Jesus’ image of the sheep who will listen to only one shepherd and who will become one flock (John 10:16) or in the image of the true vine with many branches (John 15:1–5). Jesus’ reference to “other sheep that do not belong to this fold” is most often taken to mean that “Jesus, the one shepherd, will bring about the one flock of Jews and Gentiles”.⁸⁹ In a similar way, the words “Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God,” (John 11:51–52), most probably mean that John understood the inclusion of non-Jews in his community to fulfill the scriptural promises of the eschatological gathering of Jews and Gentiles on Mt. Zion.⁹⁰ Because John reinforces the unity of God’s people mostly through various symbolic expressions, we may never be able to determine the ethnic components in his community in any more detail.

Before the story of his passion starts, Jesus asks his Father to protect his disciples so that they may be one as he and the Father are one (John 17:11, 23). It is clear from these formulations that the unity between God, the Father, and

85 See S.A. Haslam, *Psychology in Organizations: The Social Identity Approach* (London: Sage Publications, 2001), 29–30; Haslam/Reicher/Platow, *The New Psychology*, 52–4.

86 Haslam/Reicher/Platow, *The New Psychology*, 54.

87 Haslam/Reicher/Platow, *The New Psychology*, 58–9.

88 Cf. R.E. Brown, *An Introduction to the Gospel of John* (ed. F.J. Moloney; ABRL; New York, Doubleday, 2003), 221–9. Scholars such as R. Bultmann, E. Schweizer, or E. Käsemann have claimed that there was no concept of church in John. However, Brown shows that, even though many ecclesial terms used elsewhere in early Christian literature do not appear in John, there is “no sharp distinction between community and personal union with Jesus. The foundation of community is the response of individuals to Jesus as the revealer of God and the unique way to God, but those individuals form a unity.”

89 Lincoln, *John*, 298.

90 Hakola, *Reconsidering*, 111. A scriptural passage is revised in John 6:45 with the inclusion of the Gentiles in mind. While Isa 54:13 reads, “All your children shall be taught by the Lord”, meaning the children of Israel, John has, “they shall all be taught by God”. This change is quite commonly understood to suggest that, for John, salvation exceeds the borders of Israel. See Hakola, *Identity Matters*, 234.

Jesus, the Son, is a model for the interdependence of Jesus' followers. In the Johannine parlance, the close relationship between God, his Son and the believers is expressed in terms of mutual indwelling (μένω), even though there is a notable difference in how this language is developed in the Gospel and in the Epistles. In the Gospel, it is exclusively Jesus who abides in the believers or the believers in Jesus (John 6:56; 15:4–7),⁹¹ while 1 John speaks of the direct mutual abiding between God and those who believe (1 John 3:24; 4:15). Furthermore, the Epistles lack the idea of the mutual indwelling of the Father and the Son that forms the foundation for the indwelling of the believers in God in the Gospel (John 14:10–11, 20; 17:21).⁹² In the Gospel, social relations among Jesus' followers are seen to mirror very closely what Jesus has revealed of his relationship with God. This corresponds to how the knowledge of God is transmitted exclusively through Jesus (John 14:7) whereas 1 John 4:6–8 allows that everyone who loves God knows God.

The knowledge of God communicated only by Jesus constructs a close-knit community between those who receive this revelation. As Jesus declares to his disciples: "I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father" (John 15:15). The revealed knowledge not only creates a close bond among the disciples but also an imagined boundary between them and those who have not received Jesus' revelation. As Jesus explicitly says, the disciples do not belong to the world that does not know Jesus or God who has sent Jesus (John 15:18–21). The notion that only Jesus has revealed God effectively rules out other ways of receiving information of the divine world, which means that the Johannine author establishes a "strict control over access to and knowledge of the other-world".⁹³

It has been a traditional crux of interpretation among Johannine scholars that regardless of the importance of Jesus' revelation of God, it is never told very clearly what Jesus actually reveals of God.⁹⁴ Since the appearance of Wayne Meeks' classic article drawing on the sociology of knowledge, Johannine scholars have become accustomed to thinking that there is a

91 However, cf. John 14:23: "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home (μονὴν ποιησόμεθα) with them." This verse probably presents a Johannine reinterpretation (cf. 14:2) of traditional apocalyptic imagery. See Lincoln, *John*, 389 and 396.

92 Cf. Lieu, *I, II and III John*, 73; Hakola, *Reconsidering*, 74–5.

93 Segovia, "John 1.1–18", 52.

94 Cf. C. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community* (2nd Edition; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 289: "What does Jesus reveal about God? In its statements about God, the Fourth Gospel is remarkably sparing ... and never spells out just what the Son has seen and heard. ... What is distinctive about the Fourth Gospel's presentation of God concerns the relationship of the Father to the Son." Lieu, *Christian Identity*, 139–40: "The characteristic emphasis on 'knowing' in the Johannine tradition correlates with its lack of explicit concern about distinctive behavioural or structural patterns (John 8:31–2; 17:3, 6–8; 14:5–9)."

close relationship between knowledge, language and the construction of the community in John.⁹⁵ The point is not so much what Jesus reveals of God but how John's portrait of Jesus and the Gospel as a whole provides "a reinforcement for the community's social identity". The portrait of Jesus who comes down from heaven and makes God known only to a few chosen ones "defines and vindicates the existence of the community" that has "totalistic and exclusivistic claims" and that "evidently sees itself as unique, alien from its world, under attack, misunderstood, but living in unity with Christ and through him with God".⁹⁶ Judith Lieu has remarked how claims to revelation or exclusive knowledge are "solipscist" because they "by definition conjure a self-legitimizing enclave". Lieu continues that the knowledge revealed as mystery is naturally "intangible" for outsiders and "hence its rhetorical evocation works rather for those inside, for whom it might also substitute for more tangible barriers".⁹⁷ The emphasis on knowing thus generates the sense of unity among the members of John's imagined community but also sets them apart from the surrounding world.

The emphasis on exclusive knowing shapes what John says about the relations among those who have received Jesus' revelation of God. In his farewell speech, Jesus says to his disciples: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34–35). A well-known characteristic of John's love commandment is that the Johannine Jesus commands the disciples to love one another whereas Jesus' commandment to love one's neighbor (Mark 12:29–31 par.) or the commandment to love one's enemies (Matt 5:43–44; Luke 6:27–28) do not appear in the Johannine writings. There has emerged a significant discussion about the limits and possibilities of John's concept of love and the ethics in the Johannine writings. This discussion has shown that some attempts to deny that there are ethical principles in these writings are one-sided.⁹⁸ However, the basic thrust in John's love language is undoubtedly directed to mutual relations among Jesus' disciples. John's formulation of the

95 Liew has seen how the interrelatedness of knowledge, language and community in John is in line with how these concepts are bound together in Cohen's notion of symbolic construction of communities and in Anderson's imagined communities, see Liew, "Ambiguous Admittance", 200.

96 W.A. Meeks, "The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism." *JBL* 91 (1972) 44–72, on pp. 71–2. I think that Meeks has understood well how John's portrait of Jesus may have reinforced a particular early Christian social identity even though I do not follow Meeks in describing the Johannine community as a sect.

97 Lieu, *Christian Identity*, 139.

98 Cf. M. Labahn, "It's Only Love" – Is That All? Limits and Potentials of Johannine 'Ethic' – a Critical Evaluation of Research", 3–43; R: Zimmerman, "Is There Ethics in the Gospel of John? Challenging an Outdated Consensus", 44–80. Both articles in J.G. van der Watt/R. Zimmermann (ed.), *Rethinking the Ethics of John: "Implicit Ethics" in the Johannine Writings* (WUNT 291; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012).

love commandment in terms of mutual love between Jesus' disciples is closely connected with the Gospel's dualism. For this reason, John's love commandment has been described as "particularistic in its formulation" and "sectarian".⁹⁹ Some scholars have seen this interpretation as too narrow but it is still difficult to avoid the conclusion that John's main aim is to "show that the only true love, the love of God, was focused in only one place: the family of God as it becomes evident in loving the followers of Jesus."¹⁰⁰ In John's formulation, love becomes a symbolic bond that helps to present the community of believers in Jesus as united and clearly separated from the world. The command of mutual love can thus be seen as an important instrument in the process of constructing an integrated social identity.¹⁰¹

The same identity building function can be seen in how John uses the image of friendship to express the intimate tie between Jesus and his followers (John 15:13–15). It has become increasingly evident that the theme of friendship in John is closely related to how various Greek and Roman philosophers or storytellers used friendship as a symbol of an ideal community or society. Jesus' words, "no one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13) fit to this recognizable pattern where noble death was seen as an ultimate act of friendship.¹⁰² Michael Labahn has noted how "the power of love and friendship was usually related to a certain ingroup in the ancient world".¹⁰³ In light of this, it is not surprising how John uses the

- 99 Cf. R. F. Collins, "'A New Commandment I Give To You, That You Love One Another' (John 13:34)", in R.F. Collins, *These Things Have Been Written: Studies on the Fourth Gospel* (Louvain/Grand Rapids, Michigan: Peeters/Eerdmans, 1990) 217–56, on p. 253.
- 100 J.G. van der Watt, "Ethics and Ethos in the Gospel according to John", *ZNW* 97 (2006) 147–76, on p. 176. Van der Watt echoes the consensus among Johannine scholars when he situates John's redefinition of the love commandment in "a context of hatred and opposition." As I have argued here and elsewhere, however, the incomplete external evidence for the conflict between the Johannine community and rabbinic Judaism should pave the way for understanding what John says about the world, not as a direct reflection of an actual, but otherwise unattested conflict, but as an attempt to construct and solidify the distinct social identity of a group of Jesus' early followers.
- 101 Cf. Labahn, "It's Only Love", 34: "The command of mutual love is part of the identity-formation of a certain group in a certain historical and sociological situation."
- 102 For relevant Greek and Roman material on friendship, see G. O'Day, "Jesus as Friend in the Gospel of John", *Int* 58 (2004) 144–57; R. Zimmerman, "Is There", 74–9.
- 103 Labahn, "It's Only Love", 35. Cf. also O'Day, "Jesus as Friend", 147: "The language of friendship provided language for talking about the construction of a community of like-minded people informed by a particular set of teachings." Zimmerman ("Is There", 78) agrees that the ancient ethics of friendship quite often may be "a partisan ethics." In the case of John, however, he argues that "Jesus' relentless openness to the world" (cf. John 18:20–21) shows that "John expands the ideal of friendship to take on a universal meaning." I doubt whether Jesus' words, "I have spoken openly to the world" really speak for "relentless openness to the world" and cancel out the force of dualism that determines the formulation of the love commandment in John. While the love commandment as it is presented in the Johannine writings is clearly related to the mutual love of Jesus' followers, I do not doubt that many past or contemporary real readers of these writings have been able to expand the scope of its application.

terminology related to love and friendship to promote the cohesive identity of his own group. If we approach the Johannine community as an imagined community, it is irrelevant to speculate how well individual members of the community were able to live according to the ideals established in the narrative but the point is how love and friendship function for the members as symbols of belonging.

While the Johannine Jesus describes the commandment of mutual love as a “new commandment”, scholars have quite generally realized that “in a real sense, the love commandment is not a new commandment at all” because it is deeply rooted in the commandments of the Torah (Lev 19:18) and has parallels in contemporary Jewish traditions (*m. Abot.* 1:12).¹⁰⁴ The emphasis on the newness of the love commandment should most likely be seen in light of the new revelation brought by Jesus; the love commandment is new because it is given by Jesus and is based on his example.¹⁰⁵ I have earlier discussed how various groups quite often have an ambivalent relationship to the past in that they rely on a common stock of cultural symbols but give conventional symbols new meanings. In the case of the love commandment and the theme of friendship, I suggest that John has used common and widely valued cultural symbols but presented the love and friendship among Jesus’ followers as an innovative and unique attribute that makes them distinguishable in the eyes of the rest of the world. In social identity terms, this could be seen as an attempt to accentuate the distinctiveness of John’s imagined community.

The preceding discussion has made evident that John’s love commandment is tightly connected with knowing what Jesus has revealed of God. This means that in John’s vision of reality there is no room for those who do not accept Jesus but still show love or share mutual friendship because love is exclusively used as a visible distinguishing mark of Jesus’ followers.¹⁰⁶ In the same way as mutual love symbolizes the community of Jesus’ followers, hatred is seen as a characteristic of the world outside (John 15:18–19). The contrast between love and hatred is but one example of various polarities used in the Gospel, and these kinds of general terms are quite common in the context of intergroup tensions.¹⁰⁷ The so-called linguistic intergroup bias means that behavioral patterns among the members of the ingroup tend to be described in quite abstract, morally uplifting terms (love, good, true) whereas the behavior of outgroup members is often summarized in quite general morally defamed

104 Collins, “A New Commandment”, 238. Thus also R.E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (2 Vols; AB 29; Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1966 and 1970), 613.

105 Brown, *John*, 614; Collins, “A New Commandment”, 239–42; Lincoln, *John*, 388.

106 Cf. van der Watt, “Ethics of/and the Opponents”, 187: “At this point soteriology and ethics overlap. The only way the opponents [of Jesus] can hope to become positively moral is to receive life and become children of God.” Van der Watt also sees how, according to the Gospel, hatred typifies those who do not accept Jesus (p. 190).

107 Cf. Hakola, *Reconsidering*, 89–90.

terms (hatred, evil, untrue).¹⁰⁸ When groups are described using this kind of general language, actions of individual group members are detached from specific situations. The characterizations of these actions as good vs. evil, true vs. untrue, or hate vs. love are too vague to be tested and, therefore, impossible to verify. The portrait of an imagined community whose members continue to embrace mutual love in the face of the world's hatred is thus particularly attractive as a way of strengthening a distinct social identity. Recent studies on various real-life intergroup conflicts can further clarify the relationship between John's imagined community and the world.

The Community and the World

One of the most distinctive features in John's story of Jesus is how the world (κόσμος) is presented as a cohesive and hostile force that opposes Jesus and his followers from the beginning. Already in the prologue of the Gospel, the world is described as the darkness that does not understand that Jesus is the true light (John 1:5, 9–10). In the course of the narrative, it is “the Jews” (Ἰουδαῖοι) who most closely represent the hostile world. I have argued elsewhere that the attempts at defining the meaning of the term Ἰουδαῖοι in John as referring only to some particular Jewish group, be it Judeans or the Jewish authorities are not totally satisfying in light of John's internal evidence.¹⁰⁹ As a matter of fact, John's tendency to present the Jews as a unified representative of the hostile world can be explained from a social identity perspective. One of the basic claims of Henri Tajfel, the originator of the social identity theory, was that human behavior varies along the “interpersonal and intergroup continuum”.¹¹⁰ Tajfel explains that the nearer a social situation is to the intergroup extreme, “the stronger the tendency will there be for members of the ingroup to treat members of the outgroup as undifferentiated items in a unified category, i.e. independently of the individual differences between them”. Furthermore, ingroup members attribute to outgroup members “traits

- 108 A. Maass/D. Salvi/L. Arcuri/G. Semin, “Language Use in Intergroup Contexts: The Linguistic Intergroup Bias”, *JPSP* 57 (1989) 981–93; K. Fiedler/J. Schmid, “How Language Contributes to Persistence of Stereotypes As Well As Other, More General, Intergroup Issues”, in R. Brown/S. Gaertner (ed.), *Blackwell Handbook of Social Psychology: Intergroup Processes* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001) 261–80, on p. 272; B.E. Whitley/M.E. Kite, *The Psychology of Prejudice and Discrimination* (2nd Edition; Belmont, California: Wadsworth/Cengage Learning, 2010), 109–10.
- 109 Hakola, *Identity Matters*, 10–16, 225–31; idem, *Reconsidering*, 26–9. In a similar vein, R. Sheridan, “Issues in the Translation of οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι in the Fourth Gospel.” *JBL* 132 (2013) 671–95, on pp. 688–92.
- 110 H. Tajfel, *Human Groups and Social Categories: Studies in Social Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 228–53.

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assumed to be common to the groups as a whole”.¹¹¹ In subsequent scholarship, this phenomenon has been called the outgroup homogeneity effect, which refers to the inclination of various communities to regard outsiders as homogenous.¹¹² I suggest that John contributed greatly to the invention of distinct early Christian identity by constructing the portrait of the Jews as united in their opposition to Jesus and his followers.¹¹³

According to John, there is a strong continuity between the fate of Jesus and that of his followers. Jesus’ opponents hated him without a cause (John 15:25) and just as they persecuted Jesus, they will persecute his disciples (John 15:22). It is indisputable that, after Jesus’ death, some early Christians were persecuted and even killed by some Jewish authorities even though it is difficult to estimate the scale and the exact motivation behind these early incidents.¹¹⁴ However, given the lack of evidence for a synagogue-organized

111 Tajfel, *Human Groups*, 243.

112 It has been emphasized that the outgroup homogeneity effect is not always automatic but such variables as group size, group status, ingroup identification and the context of intergroup relations quite often moderate this effect. See S.A. Haslam/P.J. Oakes/J.C. Turner/C. McGarty, “Social Identity, Self-Categorization, and the Perceived Homogeneity of Ingroups and Outgroups: The Interaction between Social Motivation and Cognition”, in R. Sorrentino and E. Higgins (ed.), *Handbook of Motivation and Cognition, Volume Three: The Interpersonal Context* (New York: Guilford Press, 1996) 182–222; M. Rubin/C. Badaea, “Why Do People Perceive Ingroup Homogeneity on Ingroup Traits and Outgroup Homogeneity on Outgroup Traits?” *PSPB* 33 (2007) 31–42.

113 The tendency to present such groups as the Pharisees, Herodians, chief priests, scribes, elders, and Sadducees as consistent in their opposition to Jesus is already visible in the Gospel of Mark. Cf. E.S. Malbon, “The Jewish Leaders in the Gospel of Mark: A Literary Study of Marcan Characterization”, *JBL* 108 (1989) 259–81, on pp. 270–72; D. Rhoads/J. Dewey/D. Michie *Mark as Story: Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (3rd Edition; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 117–18.

114 According to Acts 6:8–12, some Jews from the Diaspora started the events that led to Stephen’s martyrdom, but it is difficult to say what exactly happened because Luke has modelled the story of Stephen’s death on Jesus’ trial. The lynch mob aspect is more likely to be original in the story, while Luke has emphasized the parallels between this first Christian martyr and Jesus. See C. Setzer, *Jewish Responses to Early Christians: History and Polemics, 30–150 CE* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 171–3. As Luke describes the persecution that followed Stephen’s death (Acts 8:1–3), he admits that the apostles stayed in Jerusalem although others left the city as a result of the persecution (Acts 8:1). It is probable that this early persecution concerned only a more specific group that had presented far-reaching views related to the temple or circumcision but not all who believed in Jesus. Cf. Räisänen, *The Rise*, 59–60. Some early Christians later faced death at the hands of their Jewish opponents; Josephus states that James, the brother of Jesus, was executed by the high priest Ananus II (Ant. 20.199–203), and Luke relates how Herod Agrippa I killed James, the brother of John (Acts 12:1–3). However, each of these cases has its own distinctive features, and the reasons behind them may have varied. As E.P. Sanders has remarked, early Christian authors quite commonly saw every single martyrdom as a sign of general persecution and thought that Jesus’ followers were persecuted “for the sake of Christ” or “for his name’s sake”. The historical problem in these accounts, however, is “that we cannot be sure what it was that the *other* side, those inflicting the punishment, found offensive”. See E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (London: SCM Press, 1985), 284.

persecution of early Christians, especially in the years after the destruction of the temple, we should be cautious about overestimating the scale of Christian persecutions by other Jews. It is clear that the collective sense of being a martyr or victim quite soon became an inseparable part of early Christian self-understanding.¹¹⁵ In the following, I do not deny that some Christians understood they were persecuted because of their faith in Jesus. However, I suggest that some recent studies dealing with collective victimhood, recollections of historical victimization and experiences of collective guilt or blame can be helpful in explaining why the majority of early Christians saw not only Jesus but also themselves as hated without a cause even though only a few among them may have had any firsthand evidence of actual persecutions.

Daniel Bar-Tal and his colleagues have examined the sense of victimhood from a social identity perspective and introduced the concept of self-perceived collective victimhood. They define collective victimhood “as a group mindset resulting from the perceived intent of another group to inflict harm on the collective”.¹¹⁶ In the context of actual intergroup conflicts, many communities or societies “believe that their goals in conflict are well-justified, perceive their own group in a very positive light, and delegitimize the rival”. Therefore, collective victimhood often “constitutes an inseparable part of the shared narrative among society members as constructed in their collective memory of the conflict and ethos of conflict, and denotes that the rival group continuously inflicted unjust and immoral harm upon them throughout the conflict”.¹¹⁷ The sense of being a victim is appealing because a victim’s position is viewed as “morally superior, entitled to sympathy and consideration and protected from criticism. As a result, a collective may cultivate the image of being a victim and embed it in their culture”.¹¹⁸

115 Cf. E. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 34–5. Castelli examines “the cultural production of a narrative of martyrdom among early Christians” and concludes that “meaningful suffering is always already present in the Christian worldview as a fundamental interpretative category, and Christian theorists repeatedly connect it to earlier textual remnants of such suffering”. C. Moss, *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom* (New York: HarperOne, 2013). Moss speaks about the emergence of “the myth of persecution” and “the invention of persecuted church” among Christian theologians in the first centuries. According to Moss, the formation of this myth was strategic, and persecution and martyrdom became “polarizing rhetorical tools” because they were “used in order to exclude and suppress other groups, to identify them with demonic forces, and to legitimize rhetorical and perhaps also literal violence against them” (p. 246).

116 D. Bar-Tal/ S. Cehajic-Clancy, “From Collective Victimhood to Social Reconciliation: Outlining a Conceptual Framework”, In D. Spini/G. Elcheroth/D. Corkalo Biruski (ed.), *War, Community, and Social Change: Collective Experiences in the Former Yugoslavia* (New York: Springer, 2014) 125–36, on p. 127.

117 D. Bar-Tal/L. Chernyak-hai/N. Shori/A. Gundar, “A Sense of Self-Perceived Collective Victimhood in Intractable Conflicts”, *International Review of the Red Cross* 91 (2009) 229–58, on p. 230.

118 Bar-Tal *et al.*, “A Sense”, 237.

The results and examples presented by Bar-Tal and his colleagues are consistent with a number of studies dealing with recollections of historical victimization and experiences of collective guilt or blame.¹¹⁹ These studies have provided empirical proof that groups often ascribe guilt by association to contemporary members of an outgroup on the basis of events that have taken place in the distant past. Various communities may “encode important experiences, especially extensive suffering, in their collective memory, which can maintain a sense of woundedness and past injustice through generations”.¹²⁰ Accordingly, members of a collective may have a shared sense of victimhood that has resulted from events that only some – past and contemporary – members have themselves experienced.¹²¹

The previously mentioned studies cannot explain the details of an alleged conflict between Johannine Christians and their Jewish neighbors. However, these studies explain how the remembrance of Jesus as an innocent victim became an important building block in the innovation of collective Christian identity. The collective sense of victimhood contributed especially to the construction of symbolic boundaries between emerging early Christian communities and other Jews, which is already seen in the passion narratives of the gospels. Scholars have long been aware that there is a clear tendency in

119 B. Doosje/N.R. Branscombe, “Attributions for the Negative Historical Actions of a Group” *EJSP* 33 (2003) 235–48; M.J.A. Wohl/N.R. Branscombe, “Forgiveness and Collective Guilt Assignment to Historical Perpetrator Groups Depend on Level of Social Category Inclusiveness”, *JPSP* 88 (2005) 288–303; M.J.A. Wohl/N.R. Branscombe/Y. Klar, “Collective Guilt: Emotional Reactions When One’s Group Has Done Wrong or Been Wronged”, *ERSP* 17 (2006) 1–37; B. Lickel/N. Miller/D.M. Sternstrom/T.A. Denson/T. Schmader, “Vicarious Retribution: The Role of Collective Blame in Intergroup Aggression”, *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 10 (2006) 372–90.

120 Bar-Tal *et al.*, “A Sense”, 236. Cf. Wohl *et al.*, “Collective Guilt”, 24: “Group members frequently discuss historical harms as if they had occurred only yesterday. As a result, contemporary members of the perpetrator group may be linked to their ancestors who committed the wrongs through shared category membership.” Wohl/Branscombe, “Forgiveness,” 288: “Transgressions committed against members of the ingroup in the past can evoke emotional responses that are as intense as those for wrongdoing committed more recently. . . . people speak of atrocities committed against their group without necessarily differentiating between events that occurred yesterday, a decade ago, or hundreds of years ago. Emotional responses based on category membership can traverse generations, with the ancestors who committed the wrong and contemporary members of the perpetrator group being linked by a common category membership.”

121 Bar-Tal *et al.*, “A Sense”, 234: “Just as individuals experience a sense of victimhood because of personal experiences, collectives such as ethnic groups may also experience this sense. It may result from events that harm the members of the collective because of their membership, even if not all the group members experience the harm directly. Groups can suffer from collective victimization which, similarly to individual victimization, is not based only on an objective experience but also on the social construction of it.” Lickel *et al.*, “Vicarious Retribution”, 380: “Perceptions of ‘bad character’ . . . influence how people assign blame. We hypothesize that if one outgroup member attacks an ingroup member, people may perceive that other outgroup members share the same blameworthy qualities that define the provocateur.”

passion narratives to accentuate the involvement and responsibility of Jewish leaders or sometimes even Jews in general for Jesus' crucifixion, even though it is historically more probable that the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, jointly with the Jewish priestly establishment close to him, played a major part in the events leading to Jesus' death.¹²² For the members of John's imagined community too, the sense of collective victimhood provided a rationale for their perceived marginalization from the world represented in the Gospel by the Jews.

Conclusion

In this article, I have examined how an ideal portrait of the community of Jesus' followers is created in the Gospel of John. I have approached this portrait as a symbolic, imagined construction and left aside the question how closely – or if at all – this portrait reflects any real-life concerns in the community where the Gospel and the three Johannine Epistles emerged. As a matter of fact, John's vision of imagined community is intangible and unspecific, which frustrates our attempts to reconstruct the sociohistorical situation of the Johannine community in any more detail. John's portrait of the community is embedded in a mythical framework and language since he presents this community as founded by the eternal Word who brought the light into the darkness of the world, where his followers are known for holding fast to his commandment of mutual love in the face of the hostility of the surrounding world. However, it can be argued that it is precisely the elusiveness of John's symbolic community that has enabled its later applications to various new and unpredictable contexts. The capacity of symbols is exactly that they “encompass and condense a range of ... meanings” and in this way are

always multi-faceted and frequently implicit or taken for granted in their definition. As a consequence, people can to some degree bestow their own meanings on and in symbols: they can say and do the “same” things without saying or doing the same things at all.¹²³

The main features in John's symbolic and imagined community have become so self-evidently implanted in Christian self-understanding that it is probably impossible for many Christians to challenge them in any way. This can also be seen as a special accomplishment of the Johannine author, who has been able to essentialize a group identity that was actually blurred and in the making. For those of us who struggle with applying John's portrait of imagined

122 See R. Hakola, “Anti-Judaism, Anti-Semitism in the New Testament and Its Interpretation”, in Steven L. McKenzie (ed.), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 27–35.

123 Jenkins, *Social Identity*, 139.

community in our pluralistic and multicultural societies, John's achievement may appear as too exclusive and one-dimensional.¹²⁴ But the first step in the construction of new, and perhaps more open, Christian imagined communities, is to decode what John presents as fixed and timeless and understand it as socially constructed.

- 124 Cf. Segovia, "John 1.1–18", 59. "[John's vision], therefore, is a vision of oppression for humanity, a classic example of 'othering,' whereby all those who disagree with the vision and opt for a different path are regarded as misguided and antagonistic." D.M. Smith, "The Epistles of John: What's New Since Brooke's ICC in 1912?" *ExpTim* 120 (2009) 373–83, on p. 381: "In our age of the conflict of competing claims within and among religions, the Johannine posture appears to be less than helpful. Ironically, the Gospel that compresses Jesus' teaching into the command to love one another (13:34) and the Epistle that characterizes God himself as love (1 John 4:8, 16) seem to approve the most extreme dismissal of those who are deemed to reject the right confession or doctrine. The sympathetic commentator, whether or not Christian, tends to side with the ancient author. But should the modern commentator, least of all a Christian commentator, do so without reservation?"