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Chapter One

The Spectrum of Johannine Readers

CRAIG R. KOESTER

Identifying the readers of the Fourth Gospel is not a new question. Scholars have long understood that knowing something about the readers of the text was integral to appreciating the message of the text. The persistent interest in the readers of the Gospel stems, in part, from the recognition that the material presented in the narrative was selected and recounted with readers in mind. The evangelist addressed them directly at the conclusion of chap. 20, saying “These things have been written in order that *you* may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing, *you* may have life in his name” (20:31). When the pronoun “you” is taken seriously, it becomes clear that the Fourth Gospel is an exercise in communication; it is a dynamic expression of a message intended to shape the stance of its readers.

But to whom does the “you” at the end of chap. 20 refer? At one end of the reading spectrum are the contemporary readers, that eclectic group comprised of all who read the Gospel today. Those who belong to this group usually turn to the Fourth Gospel in the hope of discovering something significant in its pages, and the perennial popularity of John’s Gospel indicates that many readers do find it to be an engaging and meaningful text. The problem is that contemporary readers do not necessarily understand John’s Gospel in the same way. The vigorous and extended discussions of the Gospel at both the scholarly and popular levels suggest that there are about as many *readings* as there are *readers*. Few, however, would want to say that the text simply means whatever a reader wants it to mean, that all readers are equally competent, or that all readings of the text are equally valid. Most contemporary readers recognize the need to distinguish readings that are more or less adequate from those that are simply mistaken.

Historical and Implied Readers

Scholars have attempted to establish some interpretive parameters by pursuing “the quest for the historical reader,” that is, by attempting to

reconstruct the historical context of the readers to whom the Gospel was first addressed. Special attention has been given to evidence within the text that could be compared with material from other sources that might provide glimpses into the events and intellectual currents affecting early Johannine Christianity. Attempts also have been made to delineate levels of sources and redaction within the text, in order to discern connections between particular passages and the changing circumstances of a community of faith. Behind this quest lies the conviction that the Fourth Gospel was intended to speak to the issues confronting a discrete group of readers, to shape *their* views, and to influence *their* commitments. The hope is that if we, as modern readers, can temporarily enter into the circle of those who read the Gospel in the first century, and if we can read the Gospel with their eyes and listen to it with their ears, we will better be able to understand the evangelist in his own terms, rather than "in words which we moderns merely want to hear from his mouth," as Louis Martyn has put it.¹

Attention to the differences between our own situation and outlook and those of the Gospel's first-century readers has helped discipline many to read the text carefully. Historical research is an invaluable means of self-criticism that cautions readers against absolutizing their own perspectives, and it must continue to play a key role in our attempts to assess whether or not a way of reading John's Gospel is viable. Yet it also can or should make us profoundly aware of the limits of our ability to reconstruct and enter into the life of first-century Johannine Christianity. Martyn prefaced one of his own valuable studies of the Johannine community by suggesting that when getting up each morning, a historian would do well to say three times slowly and with emphasis, "I do not know."² We cannot produce a portrait of the historical reader that is so complete that it guarantees the meaning of the text, and even as we gain some clarity about the first-century context we are still confronted with questions about how the text can speak to its twentieth-century readers in a compelling way.

Studies of the "implied reader" have provided a helpful means of approaching

¹ J. L. Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (2nd ed. rev. and enl.; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979) 18.

² J. L. Martyn, *The Gospel of John in Christian History: Essays for Interpreters* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979) 92.

this problem. Wolfgang Iser, for example, has stressed that when considering a literary work one must take into account “not only the actual text, but also, and in equal measure, the actions involved in responding to that text.”³ If a text imparts information, it also presupposes information; if it gives something to readers, it also demands something from readers—not just the original readers, but all readers. The text informs the reader selectively, stimulating the reader to supply what is not stated.⁴ The expression “implied reader” designates one who possesses what is necessary for the text to exercise its effect. The implied reader is a literary construct, not a historical one, and a portrait of such a reader is not formulated by considering realities outside the text, but by looking at the network of structures within the text that invite a response from the reader. At a basic level, we can identify the kind of reader implied by a text by observing what the text assumes the reader knows and what it takes the trouble to explain.⁵ Further refinement might entail distinguishing the implied reader from that shadowy figure known as the “narratee,” that is, the reader who is addressed by the narrator at selected points in the Gospel story.⁶

The original “historical” readers of John’s Gospel died centuries ago and were buried under the rubble of a culture that remains quite distant for most people who read the Gospel today. The implied reader is, to some extent, more immediate, since it is a literary construct and therefore can “only ‘die’ when the texts in which they exist are destroyed,” as Jeffrey Staley has pointed out.⁷ Nevertheless, at a fundamental level the implied reader of John’s Gospel is also a stranger to contemporary readers, because the most essential thing that the implied reader knows is Koine Greek. Those who glance at the Greek text of the Gospel will see a sequence of curved lines on the page, an enigmatic sequence

³ W. Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974) 274.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 282.

⁵ R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983) 212.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 221. Jeffrey L. Staley (*The Print’s First Kiss: A Rhetorical Investigation of the Implied Reader in the Fourth Gospel* [SBLDS 82; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988] 47) attempts to maintain a careful distinction between the implied reader and the narratee, but recognizes that there is considerable overlap between the two in John’s Gospel.

⁷ Staley, *The Print’s First Kiss*, 30.

of squiggles that fall into patterns too regular to be accidental, yet too foreign to be understood. Similarly, those who listen to the Greek text will hear a rushing babble of noise, something full of sound and fury, yet—to the uninitiated—signifying nothing.⁸

For the text to make sense, readers must be able to connect the sounds or the lines with known realities, and those realities are, in a fundamental way, first-century Mediterranean realities. Readers must learn, for example, that the word *artos* refers to a baked mixture of flour and water, something usually called "bread" in English. The text can be translated of course, but translations are at best approximations. For many Americans, the word "bread" refers to the airy white plastic-wrapped loaves that crowd the supermarket shelves, bread that only vaguely resembles the coarse barley loaves baked over charcoal fires in eastern Mediterranean villages. Bread also has a different function in different cultures, and this too influences the way its significance is understood. In the Greco-Roman world, bread was a staple food, but in many parts of tropical Asia rice is the staple and bread is a luxury, a substance often associated with immigrants from Europe. Jesus' claim to be "the bread of life" must be understood in the appropriate cultural context: he was not claiming to be an imported luxury item but something essential for life.

Literary and historical approaches to the question of the Gospel's readers should be used in tandem. Studies of the implied reader drive us to consider again the context in which the Gospel was composed. Although we may want to say that the implied reader lives solely within the text, it is a text that was composed in a particular social and cultural context. At the same time, we must acknowledge the Fourth Gospel's striking ability to evoke responses from readers who know virtually nothing about the Greco-Roman world, readers who live in cultures as different from each other as they are from the culture of John's earliest readers. We must also keep in mind that the scholars who pursue historical questions presumably do so because they have *already* read the text and found it to be significant and engaging.

⁸ On this point, see Bruce J. Malina, "Reading Theory Perspective: Reading Luke-Acts," in *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models For Interpretation* (ed. Jerome H. Neyrey; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991) 3–23.

Spectrum of Readers and Readings

Although it is common to speak of “the reader” of the text, literary and historical studies suggest that it may be better to envision a spectrum of readers when considering John’s Gospel. There are important indications that the Gospel was written for readers who did not all share the same perspective. Consider again the question of the implied reader. In his pioneering literary study of the Gospel, Alan Culpepper observed that the discourses in the Gospel would have made most sense for readers familiar with the major Jewish festivals. For example, the Bread of Life discourse in John 6 is set during the Passover season and develops Jesus’ identity in light of traditions concerning the manna eaten by Israel’s ancestors in the wilderness. Similarly, the messianic debates at the feast of Booths in chaps. 7 and 8 invoke images of water and light that were integral to the festival celebration. The comments made by the narrator, however, assume that readers have little knowledge of these festivals. The tension between the highly informed reader presupposed by the discourses and the more uninformed reader reflected in the narrator’s comments suggests that the final form of the Gospel envisions a heterogeneous readership.⁹ We do well, therefore, to think of a spectrum of implied readers, rather than a single, monochrome implied reader.

Recent attempts to sketch a profile of the early readers of the Gospel also suggest that the Johannine community encompassed various sorts of people by the time the Gospel was completed. It seems clear that the Gospel and the community developed over a period of time, although neither the literary history of the text nor the social history of the community can be reconstructed with certainty at each juncture. The final form of the Gospel probably addressed a community of Christians from different backgrounds.¹⁰ A number of studies have suggested, first, that the nucleus of the community consisted of Christians of Jewish background, including some who had apparently been expelled from the synagogue, like the blind beggar of chap. 9 (cf. 16:2). The use of the Old Testament and Jewish traditions to demonstrate that Jesus was a rabbi, prophet, Messiah, and Son of God would have been especially important for such

⁹ Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 221, 225.

¹⁰ See generally Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979).

readers. Second, the community probably came to include some Samaritan Christians. Unlike the other Gospels, John 4 says that a Samaritan village came to believe in Jesus, and the text intimates that the episode presaged the future missionary successes of Jesus' disciples. The Gospel's attention to Samaritan topography and traditions, especially traditions concerning Moses, suggests that the Johannine communities did include at least some Samaritan members. Third, there were probably some Gentile Greeks among the Johannine Christians. Just before the passion, a group of Greeks came to see Jesus, and their arrival signaled the coming of the hour when Jesus would be lifted up in death to draw all people to himself (12:20-22, 32). The Greeks did not see Jesus during his lifetime, but the universal significance of his death, proclaimed in the trilingual sign above the cross, was eventually made known to the Greeks by Jesus' disciples, and it seems likely that some of these Greeks were among the readers envisioned by the final form of the Gospel text.

If this scenario is correct, we cannot assume that all members of the Johannine community read the Gospel from the same perspective. A common Christian faith would have helped to foster a strong sense of solidarity within Johannine Christianity, but we cannot assume that it expunged all the variations in outlook that people of Jewish, Samaritan, and Greek background would have brought with them into the community of faith. The likelihood of such diversity increases when we recognize that there were almost certainly a number of Johannine congregations rather than a single community with all members residing in the same place. The Gospel itself is manifestly concerned about the children of God who were scattered abroad (11:52) and the Johannine Epistles reveal a situation in which Johannine congregations were geographically separated from each other and were comprised of Christians who did not necessarily know the members of their sister congregations.¹¹

As the Johannine community came to include an increasingly diverse spectrum of readers, the Gospel could continue to be an important vehicle for its tradition because it conveyed a message that could be grasped at different levels. The text offered something for the maximally informed reader and

¹¹ Note especially the emphasis on welcoming fellow Christians who were strangers in 3 John 5-6. On the context generally, see Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John* (AB 30; Garden City: Doubleday, 1982) 100-103.

something for the minimally informed reader. Readers did not need to comprehend the text fully in order to understand it in part. Some have argued, to be sure, that the meaning of the Gospel would be clear to insiders but opaque to the uninitiated and that the sharp distinctions between truth and falsehood, light and darkness, what is “from above” and what is “from below,” correspond to the distinction between the two types of readers.¹² Yet the Gospel also contains passages suggesting that truth is multidimensional and can be appropriated in stages.

Consider, for example, the story of the Samaritan woman. When she first encountered Jesus, she said, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (4:9). Clearly the woman did not fully realize with whom she was speaking, but her perception of Jesus was true up to a point. Jesus was in fact a Jew, and in the course of their conversation he would speak as a Jew, by charging that the Samaritans worshipped what they did not know and by affirming that salvation would come from the Jews (4:22). Later, the woman rightly recognized that Jesus was more than an ordinary Jew, that he was a prophet, who knew her life story and prophesied the coming of worship in Spirit and in truth. Finally, the woman even wondered if Jesus might be the Messiah, and with that question she brought her townspeople to Jesus. They soon recognized that he was not only the deliverer of their nation but also the Savior of the world. At each stage, a new facet of Jesus’ identity was recognized, without negating the aspects that had been previously identified: Jesus was simultaneously a Jew, a prophet, Messiah, and Savior of the world.

There is a similar progression in the story of the blind beggar. Jesus placed mud on the man’s eyes and commanded him to wash in the pool of Siloam. The man did so and regained his sight. Afterward, he returned to his usual haunts where the neighbors asked him what had happened. The beggar replied, “The man called Jesus made clay and anointed my eyes and said to me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash’; so I went and washed and received my sight” (9:11). What the man said was accurate as far as it went, though it scarcely exhausted the meaning of his healing. Later, the depth of his perceptions increased, so that he told the Pharisees that Jesus must be a prophet (9:17) who had come from God (9:33)

¹² See, e.g., Wayne A. Meeks, “The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism,” *JBL* 91 (1972) 44-72, esp. 68.

and finally worshiped Jesus as the divine Son of man (9:35-38). Everything the beggar said was true and no single statement captured the full meaning of what had happened. Jesus was a man, but not only a man; Jesus was divine, but not only divine. Each of the beggar’s statements revealed a new facet of meaning without negating what had been said before.

The story of the blind beggar also shows that the healing can be understood in ways that are not true. As the man born blind progressively unpacked the meaning of his healing and the identity of his healer, the Jewish authorities voiced their own erroneous understandings of the event. Jesus had healed the man on the sabbath by making clay and using it to anoint the man’s eyes, actions that violated Jewish sabbath regulations. The Jewish law did make exceptions when an illness was life-threatening, but this was not the case with congenital blindness. Therefore, within this frame of reference, some of the authorities maintained that Jesus was not from God, since he did not keep the sabbath (9:16), and they concluded that the sign proved Jesus was a sinner (9:24). The literary context makes clear that these interpretations of the sign are patently false and stem from ignorance, not insight.

Reading the Good Shepherd Discourse

The way the man born blind “read” his own experience of healing is, in important ways, analogous to the way people read the text of the Gospel. At the level of the text, we find that a reader, like the beggar, has to reject certain false perceptions, while gradually moving toward a more complete understanding of the episode. The Gospel narrative contains much that is as ambiguous as the experience of healing, but it also guides readers toward a more complete understanding of its message by focusing attention on images that can be appreciated at various levels. Those who slowly wind their way through the Gospel’s discourses may find themselves in a thick haze, engulfed by peculiar thought patterns, subtle allusions to the Old Testament and Jewish traditions, and apparent breaks in the logical sequence. Yet, through the bewildering mist certain key images recur, like flashes of a beacon helping readers to maintain their bearings as they make their way forward.¹³

¹³ Meeks (*ibid.*, 48), developing the insights of Edmund Leach, has noted how the Gospel communicates a basic message in different ways. On the dynamics of the Good Shepherd

An interesting example is the Good Shepherd discourse in John 10, which begins after the Jewish authorities cast out the blind beggar, when Jesus abruptly begins speaking about a sheepfold and sheep, a doorkeeper, shepherd, thieves, robbers, and strangers. Like the bystanders depicted in the narrative itself, modern interpreters have sometimes been confused about the identity of these figures, but Jesus if anything exacerbates the problem by adding a hireling, a wolf, and the mysterious “other sheep” to complicate the picture. Nevertheless, by repeating “I am the door”/“I am the door” (10:7, 9) and “I am the good shepherd”/“I am the good shepherd” (10:11, 14) Jesus establishes himself as the center of this swirling array of images and enables readers to begin making sense of the passage in terms of these leading ideas. Readers may not know the precise identity of the doorkeeper or the hireling, but they do know that Jesus is the door and the shepherd and that they must focus their attention on him. The text also helps readers by pointing to certain key functions of each image. The door is identified as the sole legitimate means of entry to the flock, and the shepherd as the one who enters the sheepfold by the door, calls the sheep by name, and leads them out to pasture. The text also adds that Jesus is the *good* shepherd, who knows the sheep intimately and lays down his life for them, so that the shepherd is sharply distinguished from the thieves, robbers, strangers, and hireling who do not care for the sheep.

The imagery remains evocative; there is much that is not defined and Johannine Christians may have understood the text somewhat differently depending on the kinds of associations they brought to the text. Therefore, we must now consider what sorts of associations people along the reading spectrum might have brought to the text. We begin by considering the minimal kinds of information early readers of the text would probably have had; then, we will turn to readers who were better informed.

At the broadest level, some of the associations would have come from the cultural milieu of the eastern Mediterranean. Those who knew Greek would have understood that the word *poimēn* referred to someone who tended sheep. A *poimēn* or shepherd was a common sight throughout the Greek-speaking

discourse, see also Robert Kysar, “Johannine Metaphor—Meaning and Function: A Literary Case Study of John 10:1–18,” in *The Fourth Gospel from a Literary Perspective* (Semeia 53; ed. R. Alan Culpepper and Fernando F. Segovia; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991) 81–111.

world in the first century, and most readers probably would have connected the word with a fellow who had a weather-beaten face and was dressed in coarse homespun clothing, with a wooden staff in one hand, as he led a flock of sheep out to pasture.

Moving a step further, a *good* shepherd was regularly understood to be one who led and provided for the flock and who considered the welfare of the sheep instead of abusing them. Because of this role, images of shepherding were used throughout the ancient world for kings and other leaders. According to the Jewish Scriptures, some of the leading figures in Israel's history actually had been shepherds at some point in their lives. God appeared to Moses while he was tending sheep (Exod 3:1–6) and David learned the arts of war by defending his flock against predators (1 Sam 17:34–35). In other passages, the term "shepherd" was extended to Israel's leaders generally, and the prophets Ezekiel and Jeremiah castigated those who governed Israel, calling them shepherds who fed themselves instead of feeding their flocks (Ezek 34:1–10; Jer 23:1–4). A similar connection between good shepherding and good leadership was common among Greeks. The Greek classics, which were the mainstay of education throughout the Greco-Roman world, used the term "shepherd" for leaders like Agamemnon the king (*Iliad* 2.243ff.). In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates discussed ruling in terms of shepherding, insisting that the ruler or shepherd must seek out what is best for the people or the flock. Later, the philosopher Epictetus compared kings who mourned the misfortunes of their subjects to shepherds who wailed when a wolf carried away a sheep (*Discourses* 3.22.35).

The discourse could appropriate all these connotations of good leadership by describing how the good shepherd leads the sheep out of the sheepfold and goes before them (John 10:3–4). The discourse also redefines what it means to be a good shepherd or an ideal leader in light of the cross. Within the brief span of eight verses, Jesus speaks of laying down his life no less than five times (10:11–18). This self-giving sacrifice is the premier trait of Jesus the shepherd. Jews and Greeks alike would have expected gracious leaders, like good shepherds, to seek what is best for the sheep and perhaps even to risk their lives for the flock, but Jesus, *the* good shepherd, laid down his life for the sheep. By his crucifixion, Jesus showed that he was willing to give himself completely for the sake of the flock. Readers who had even minimal familiarity with eastern Mediterranean cultural patterns would be able to interpret the text in this way.

Now we can move a step further. Readers with more extensive knowledge of the Old Testament would discern other dimensions of meaning within the text without negating what has been said thus far.¹⁴ In the Good Shepherd discourse, Jesus said, "I have other sheep that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice. So there shall be one flock, one shepherd" (10:16). The emphasis on "one flock, one shepherd" may well have prompted many readers to recall the extended discussion of shepherding in Ezekiel 34, where God castigated those who have failed to care for the flock of Israel and promised, "I will set up over them *one* shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd" (34:23). This text readily lends itself to messianic interpretation, and the connection between shepherding and messiahship is found implicitly or explicitly in other Jewish texts as well (cf. Jer 23:1–6; Ps. Sol. 17:40).

Readers who knew the Old Testament also may have detected divine overtones in Jesus' claim to be the good shepherd. The book of Ezekiel promised that David would shepherd Israel, but also said that the sheep would be gathered and tended by God himself. According to Ezekiel 34, God compared himself to a shepherd who gathers the sheep when they have been scattered, promising to provide good pasture for his flock, declaring, "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep" (Ezek 34:11–15). The connotations of divinity would have been reinforced by other Old Testament references to God as the shepherd of Israel and to Israel as God's flock (e.g., Pss 23:1; 95:7; 100:3).

The way the evangelist portrays the reactions of listeners to Jesus' claims helps readers identify the range of meanings found in the image of the shepherd. In the scene immediately following the Good Shepherd discourse, people surrounded Jesus in the portico of Solomon and demanded to know if he was the Christ. He responded, "I told you, and you do not believe" (10:25). Jesus had not actually called himself the Christ, but he had repeatedly called himself "the

¹⁴ On the Old Testament and other materials useful for comparison with John 10, see recently Johannes Beutler, "Der alttestamentlich-jüdische Hintergrund der Hirtenrede in Johannes 10," and J. D. Turner, "The history of religions background of John 10," in *The Shepherd Discourse of John 10 and its Context* (ed. Johannes Beutler and Robert T. Fortna; SNTSMS 67; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

good shepherd," which suggests that the shepherd imagery should be understood in messianic terms. But Jesus also went on to say, "I and the Father are one" (10:30), which suggests that the shepherd image should also be understood in terms of divinity.

The message of the text is multidimensional and can be approached at different levels by different types of readers. The more minimally informed readers would have been able to grasp that Jesus, as the good shepherd, realized, surpassed, and redefined the prevailing ideals of good shepherding and gracious leadership by giving himself up to death for the sake of the sheep. Readers who knew more could also see that he was claiming to be the messianic shepherd promised in the Scriptures, and finally that he was the one in whom God himself had come to gather and care for his people. What is significant is that all of these perceptions are true and no single dimension exhausts the meaning of the text.

The narrative also helps to rule out certain misreadings of the text. Returning to the broad level of cultural associations, we must ask how the text would speak to readers whose perceptions of shepherding varied in certain respects. For some people, the image of a shepherd may have evoked a sense of nostalgia for the idyllic life of those who "lie there at ease under the awning of a spreading beech and practise country songs on a light shepherd's pipe."¹⁵ For others, a reference to shepherding may have aroused a sense of suspicion, since shepherds were often perceived as rough, unscrupulous characters, who pastured their animals on other people's land and pilfered wool, milk, and kids from the flock.¹⁶ The text would mute the suspicion often leveled at shepherds by acknowledging that those who came before Jesus were indeed "thieves and robbers" (10:8), while stressing that Jesus was the *good* shepherd. The adjective "good" evokes the more positive attitudes toward shepherding, but the context tempers sentimentality by presenting a pastoral landscape that echoes with the

¹⁵ Virgil, *Eclogues* 1.1–5. See also the works in J. M. Edmonds, *The Greek Bucolic Poets* (LCL; London and New York: Heinemann and Putnam's sons, 1923).

¹⁶ Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus: An Investigation into Economic and Social Conditions during the New Testament Period* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969) 305; idem, "poimēn, kt.," *TDNT* 6:488–489; Ramsay MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations 50 B.C. to A.D.284* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974) 1–27.

cry of a wolf, not the gentle airs of a shepherd's flute.

At another level, most Jewish listeners would have considered messianic claims and divine claims to be mutually exclusive. Jewish people generally expected the Messiah to be a human being, and many assumed that he would be a king, a leader of Israel on the order of David or perhaps Moses.¹⁷ Within a Jewish frame of reference, however, the idea that a human being could be identified with God would have been considered blasphemous. This becomes clear in the crowds's attempt to stone Jesus after he declared, "I and the Father are one" (10:30–33). According to the Fourth Gospel, however, Jesus is both Messiah and God. Jesus was the Messiah, but he would not simply replicate the exploits of David or Moses. Jesus was also God, but he was not a blasphemous usurper of divine prerogatives. By using the image of the good shepherd, which could refer to the Messiah and to God simultaneously, the evangelist helps create a new frame of reference, in which the human and divine facets of Jesus' identity are brought together in a new unity.

Modern readers will come to the text with their own frames of reference. Some may know something about shepherds from their own experience, but many will not; some may be familiar with an image of shepherding like that found in Psalm 23, but many may not. The Johannine Good Shepherd discourse assumes that readers will accept the brief sketch of shepherding presented in the text and will be able to apply the traits of the good shepherd to Jesus. The imagery in the text offers enough for even minimally informed readers to gain some sense of Jesus' identity, but it remains evocative enough to stimulate the kind of further reflection that can lead to recognition of other dimensions of meaning.

The identity of the other figures in the text is left unspecified. The thieves and robbers, the stranger, and the wolf are never named. Their common feature is the threat they present to the flock. The discourse is set in a literary context that suggests that these figures should be identified with the Pharisees who opposed the man born blind in chap. 9 and who presented a threat to all who would confess that Jesus was the Christ. Recent research has shown that it is quite likely that the Johannine community included Christians who had experienced such threats from the Jewish authorities of their own time. Yet the imagery is

¹⁷ See, e.g., John 6:14–15; 12:13.

so supple that the adversaries mentioned could readily be identified with various figures who opposed Jesus and his followers or who could have been perceived as Jesus' competitors.¹⁸ The ambiguity invites engagement with the text. The Good Shepherd discourse is clear enough to allow readers with only a little background information to appreciate its message at a basic level, but the imagery is evocative enough to prompt readers to continue exploring its significance. The literary and historical contexts provide clues to additional dimensions of meaning and help to exclude certain misreadings of the text without unduly restricting the meaning.

Conclusion

Some years ago, Robert Kysar introduced a survey of Johannine research by observing that the Fourth Gospel "is a book in which a child can wade and an elephant can swim."¹⁹ What he meant was that those who first read the Gospel often find its meaning to be rather obvious and straightforward, while those who study it more carefully may wrestle with its nuances for a lifetime. Although scholars have sometimes suggested that the meaning of John's Gospel is clear to insiders but opaque to the uninitiated, the reverse is true in many cases: the Gospel's complexity and richness become increasingly apparent with re-reading. A text that was accessible at a basic level to less-informed readers, yet sophisticated enough to engage better-informed readers, would have been an important means of communication within the Johannine community as its membership became increasingly diverse. Some aspects of the text probably would have been most meaningful to the Jewish Christians who formed the nucleus of the Johannine community, but many of the Gospel's images and characters also would have been engaging to other types of Christians, including Samaritans and Greeks.

The Fourth Gospel was written in order that "you" might believe. In Greek,

¹⁸ Helpful on this is Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to John* (3 vols.; New York: Crossroad 1982) 2:287.

¹⁹ R. Kysar, *The Fourth Evangelist and His Gospel: An Examination of Contemporary Scholarship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1975) 6. He is quoting an anonymous source mentioned in Siegfried Schulz, *Die Stunde der vier Evangelisten* (Hamburg: Furche, 1967) 297.

the “you” is plural and we should keep this plurality in mind as we ask about the author’s communicative strategy. Both literary and historical approaches suggest that the final form of the Gospel was shaped for a spectrum of readers, some of whom were better informed than others. By keeping this spectrum of readers in mind, we can better appreciate how the Gospel can continue to engage attention and shape the perspectives of the most difficult and diverse audience of all: those who read the Fourth Gospel today.