

Finding Their Own Way in a Jewish Environment

The Letters (and Gospel) of John and the Parting of the Ways

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Abstract

The article asks whether in the Gospel of John and especially in the Epistles of John a separation of the Johannine communities from Judaism can already be discerned. It demonstrates on the basis of the relevant passages 1 John 2:18–25, 4:1–3 and 2 John 7 that the conflict with the competitors in the Epistles (which are set after the Gospel) is still fought out in the inner-Jewish sphere. While a separation from Judaism has not yet taken place, essential aspects concerning the formation of a distinctive identity are found in 1 John. This is evidenced by the conviction that Jesus is the Messiah of God, the forgiveness of sins, the group-specific application of the Torah, and the formation of a specific tradition. The last point recapitulates how 1 John undertakes a demarcation of its own group from the majority of Jews. We see the effort to find one's own way within being Jewish.

Keywords

Gospel of John; Epistles of John; competitors; intra-Jewish conflict; identity formation

1. Introduction

The term “parting of the ways”¹ is related to the fundamental issue of separation processes between followers of Christ and other Jews. It is important not to think of a division between two abstract entities, “Judaism” and “Christianity”, but concretely between local synagogues and their associated Christ groups. What is decisive today is the historical insight that no early, uniform separation of these entities can be assumed, but rather a continuous coexistence and

1 Landmark works are Dunn, *Partings*; Dunn, *Jews*. Cf. Lieu, *Parting*; Frey, *Paulus*, 257–278. On a recent evaluation, cf. the articles in Schröter/Edsall/Verheyden, *Parting*; and in *EvTh* 80 (2020) (thematic issue on the “Parting of the Ways”).

close relationship at least until the 2nd century (and in part much longer).² Thus, we have to assume multiple processes of demarcation between local Christ groups and Jewish synagogues that vary considerably in place and time. While separation has already taken place in one location, in another location close affiliation with the Jewish community is still a matter of course.

This paper looks for traces in the Johannine writings pointing to processes of demarcation and separation. In this context, separation can be understood as comprising a variety of processes of turning away and distancing, but also of breaking off contact and hostility. Therefore, it is important not to ask for a single point in time of separation, but for particular events, processes and phases of developments. In doing so, I assume the Letters and the Gospel of John are telling us something about the world and the situation in which they were written and read. In other words, I assume the referentiality of these writings: They refer to their historical context, to extra-textual realities, events, persons and social structures. In general, the text genre “letter” is characterized by direct situational references, which is especially true for everyday letters (documentary letters, like 2 and 3 John), but also for literary letters (like 1 John).³ The Gospel also provides insights into its historical situation at some points that clearly go beyond the narrated world.

2. Conflict with “the Jews” in the Gospel of John as a Starting Point

The starting point is the conflicts described in John’s Gospel, expressing processes of rejection. The narrative repeatedly presents Jesus in conflict with his Jewish contemporaries about his function as Messiah and revealer of God (e.g., John 7:26–27, 31, 41–43; also 5:18; 6:42; 10:33; 19:7). Johannine scholarship widely assumes that these narrated conflicts primarily reflect a confrontation of post-Easter Johannine communities with their Jewish environment. However, what is at stake is whether these conflicts are still going on at the time of the narrative, that is, at the time of the composition of the Gospel. In this context, three striking passages tell us about an impending exclusion from the synagogue of those Jews who profess Jesus as the Messiah. Within these passages John 9:22, 12:42 and 16:2 use the highly unusual expression ἀποσυναγωγος, meaning

² Cf. Nicklas, *Jews*.

³ On the discussion about the referentiality of the Johannine writings and the existence of a Johannine community cf. Klauck, *Community*.

something like “one who is excluded from the synagogue,” i.e. the local assembly as a public Jewish institution.⁴

In 9:22, the parents of the man born blind whom Jesus had healed do not make a confession for fear of ‘the Jews’ who had agreed, “If anyone confesses that this one (sc. Jesus) is the Christ, he will be made an ἀποσυνάγωγος.” This is a declaration of intent, but in the case of the healed man it is translated into action: “they threw him out” (ἐξέβαλον αὐτὸν ἔξω; 9:34), because he maintains that Jesus has shown himself to be “of God” by the healing (9:33). In the situation narrated, the *anxiety* about an imminent expulsion prevails. This concern is also reflected in the note in John 12:42 where Jews in leading positions who actually believed in Jesus are said not to confess him publicly lest they become ἀποσυνάγωγοι. In the milieu of the earthly Jesus in the villages and towns of Galilee and Judea, where mainly Jews were living, exclusion from the synagogue was not very realistic. (Although exclusion from the local public assembly of a village would be conceivable in principle, it presupposes already advanced dislocations.) Thus, the third passage, John 16:2, is instructive: In his great farewell discourse, Jesus takes a look at the time after his death and announces to his disciples that in the future other Jews “will make you ἀποσυνάγωγοι.” The text addresses the situation of the later community and articulates experiences from the time of John’s Gospel itself.⁵ In the situation of Diaspora Judaism, synagogue exclusion was conceivable – at least in theory – and could have serious consequences: The ones who were excluded risked losing the privileges of the synagogues in their cities, such as exemption from military service and worship of the gods, or observance of the Sabbath. And they risked losing essential social relationships. The passages considered reflect a process of mutual distancing and incipient demarcation.

However, for the majority of Johannine scholars, the conflict with ‘the Jews’ is already a matter of history at the time of John’s Gospel: The separation between the Johannine circle and the Jewish synagogues dates back to the past. This assessment is based primarily on literary-critical models, which assume that the Gospel of John was composed in three stages up to its final shape. For the final edition, a community situation is postulated different from the conflict with the synagogue. New, *inner-Christian* conflicts are suspected in the Johannine circle, ignited by Christological questions, e.g. about the corporality of Jesus. Thus, the (mostly unspoken) conclusion must be that the

4 On this understanding of synagogue cf. Cirafesi, John, 274–278, who stresses that whoever is excluded from the assembly was not ejected from “Judaism”.

5 Cf. the tensions in John 6:52–66. Joseph of Arimathea does not openly confess Jesus for “fear of the Jews” (John 19:38), and Nicodemus comes to him by night. (3:2)

“parting of the ways” is already well advanced or completed. I am critical of such stage models for methodological reasons concerning the difficulty of distinguishing different editing layers from each other according to clear criteria.⁶

An example of this is Jürgen Becker, who postulates in 2004 a far advanced separation of the Johannine communities from Judaism: Already in the Gospel of John a development of the community can be recognized, “which had already distanced itself a good deal organizationally and theologically from Judaism after the exclusion from the synagogue”.⁷ He claims that by the time of 1 John “the synagogal period of the Johannine community has long since been completed”; the communities live “as an independent association without significant contacts with Judaism”.⁸ Judaism, for Becker, is opposed by a clearly separated “Christianity”. (226)

Jörg Frey in 2013 assumes the shared history to be somewhat longer. Parts of the Johannine circle were connected with the local synagogue until clearly after the year 70 CE, and only after that a separation took place.⁹ At the time of both the Gospel and Letters of John, however, the circle was significantly dominated by Gentile Christians, and the separation from the synagogue had taken place some time before, the process of separation being evident in the ἀποσυνάγωγος statements (John 9:22; 12:42; 16:2). According to Frey, the *fiscus Judaicus* was an “essential factor for the further separation between the local synagogue and the followers of Jesus who were still associated with it until then”,¹⁰ because now a publicly visible decision was required concerning affiliation with Judaism.

Numerous other scholars assume that by the time (of the final editing) of John’s Gospel, the separation of the Johannine circle from the (local) synagogue had already occurred some time ago.¹¹ But does the text really reveal such a development? It seems more plausible to me, along with some scholars, to assume behind the narrated conflict an actual confrontation of the (Jewish)

6 A tendency towards the unity of the Gospel of John I have substantiated in: Schreiber, Vita.

7 Becker, Christentum, 225 (“das sich nach dem Synagogausschluss bereits ein gutes Stück organisatorisch und theologisch vom Judentum entfernt hatte”; ET: S. S.).

8 Becker, Christentum, 210 (dass “die synagogale Zeit der joh[hanneischen] Gemeinde längst abgeschlossen ist”; 225 (“als unabhängiger Verband ohne nennenswerte Kontakte zum Judentum”).

9 Frey, Paulus, 251–254, 257, 277. Cf. Frey, Juden.

10 Frey, Paulus, 271–275, citation 274 (“ein ganz wesentlicher Faktor für das weitere Auseintreten der lokalen Synagoge und der bis dato noch mit ihr verbundenen Jesusnachfolger”). On the *fiscus Judaicus* and the parting of the ways see Heemstra, *Fiscus*, esp. 190–211.

11 For many, cf. Schnelle, Einleitung, 558–561; Hengel, Frage, 300; Popkes, Polemik, 348–349.

Johannine circle with the local Jewish synagogues.¹² This is where the Letters of John come into play.

3. The Letters of John and the History of the Johannine Circle

I presume with the majority of current scholars that the Letters of John – at least 1 John – were written a short time, perhaps a year or two, after the Gospel and originate from the same group of authors as the Gospel.¹³ In my opinion, 1 John's use of Johannine tradition is better explained if this tradition was already available in the written form of John's Gospel.

In some passages of John's Letters there is a confrontation with competitors. If this conflict could be identified as *intra-Jewish*, it would also shed light on the circumstances of the Gospel. However, for a long time exegetes have understood the opponents of John's letters as schismatics within the communities. Thus, as in the final stage of the Gospel, an *inner-Christian* conflict was assumed. Yet, there is no agreement on defining the opponents in terms of the history-of-religions. The proposals range from Gnostics to Docetists and representatives of a separation Christology (partly connected with Kerinth) to Ultra-Johanneans.¹⁴ The model of a Johannine community that split due to a conflict about the correct understanding of the joint heritage, i.e., the Johannine tradition, is widespread.¹⁵ Assuming this split is usually connected – more or less clearly – with constructing a “history of the Johannine community”.¹⁶ While (a form of) the Gospel was still located in a conflict with the synagogue about the Messiahship of Jesus and allowed for different interpretations, 1 John reflects a later phase in which this conflict was overcome and a new front of opponents arose, located within the community and representing a

12 Fundamental are Martyn, *History*; Brown, *Community*; Wengst, *Gemeinde*; now Wengst, *Johannesevangelium*, 13–22. Most recently, Cirafesi, John, who underlines the continuing affiliation with “Judaism”.

13 Cf. Klauck, *Johannesbrief*, 46–47; Culpepper, *Relationship*. Anders Schnelle, *Johannesbriefe*, 15–19; cf. Schnelle, *Reihenfolge*.

14 Surveys of research are provided by Brown, *Epistles*, 47–68; Klauck, *Johannesbrief*, 34–42; more recently by Streett, *They*, 5–111; v. Heyden, *Doketismus*, 55–64; Müller, *Johannesbriefe*, 294–308.

15 Cf. the account in Kügler, *Johannesbrief*, 552–553.

16 A seminal concept was offered by Brown, *Epistles*; cf. Heckel, *Briefe*, 187–189. Overview: de Boer, *Story*. Against this, most recently Méndez, *Community*, with the unconvincing assumption that the Gospel and Letters of John are a series of forgeries.

Christological heresy (docetism, separation Christology).¹⁷ Rainer Metzner, for example, thinks that in 1 John it is no longer the Jews who stand for the “world”, as in John’s Gospel, but the dissidents (and thus seems to presuppose a separation from the synagogue);¹⁸ the conflict with the Docetic false teachers has replaced the conflict with the synagogue from John’s Gospel.¹⁹

More recently, however, a model widely held prior to the 20th century,²⁰ before being supplanted by the history of religions school, has regained importance, namely, locating 1 John within an *inner-Jewish* conflict. The competitors are determined as Jews or Jewish Christians who want to live their Jewishness consistently despite their orientation to Christ. This sheds a very different light on the history of the Johannine community than assuming an inner-Christian schism. Representatives of this model are Terry Griffith (2002), Ben Witherington (2006), Matthew Jensen (2012), Birger Olsson in his 2013 commentary, Wichard v. Heyden (2014), and, most extensively, Daniel Streett in 2011.²¹ As early as 1999, Kurt Erlemann located the conflict of 1 John in the separation process between Jews and Christians.²²

In 2012 Matthew Jensen saw 1 John situated in “an intra-Jewish disagreement over the identity of Jesus”.²³ However, Jensen used the category “True Israel”, which according to 1 John is only the Christ-followers: The turning away from “us” in 1 John 2:19 is a turning away from Israel – “the ‘us’ of 2:19 refers to Israel” (113), and for 2:18 it holds “that the antichrists could be identified as faithless Jews who were denying that Jesus is the Christ and so leaving the True Israel”. (115) “When Jewish people denied that Jesus was the Christ, they left true Judaism”.²⁴ With this the ways basically have already parted. Two observations speak against Jensen’s thesis: (1) Nowhere does 1 John use

17 Other studies completely disregard the historical context and understand the rivals only as an inner-textual construction: Neufeld, Texts; Schmid, Gegner; Lieu, Us or You; Witetschek, Pappkameraden; Hakola, Reception, 42–44.

18 Metzner, Verständnis, 306.

19 Metzner, Verständnis, 315–322.

20 Authors are cited in Streett, They, 93 note 373 and 101 note 417. One of the last authors was Wurm, Irrlehrer.

21 Griffith, Idols, esp. 1, 149–191; Witherington, Letters, 401–404, 407–409, 427–431, 493–495, 523–524; Jensen, Resurrection, 104–135; Olsson, Commentary, 251, 268–270, 332–337; v. Heyden, Doketismus, 97–181; Streett, They, 132–357, conclusion 358–360.

22 Erlemann, 1 Joh.

23 Jensen, Resurrection, 104–135, citation 109.

24 Jensen, Resurrection, 134. He supports his claim with contemporary Jewish or Christian texts that supposedly deny other Jews true Jewishness (e.g., the Sadducee, Pharisee, and Essene parties according to Josephus) (120–130), but he takes too undifferentiated an approach.

the categories of true or false Israel; its intention is not to deny Jewishness to other Jews, but to distinguish itself from other Jews in order to strengthen its own confession of Jesus as Christ. (2) Jensen overlooks the fact that there is a third group, the “Antichrist group,” which moves away from the Johannine circle back to common Jewishness. (I use the term “common Jewishness” as a linguistic device to indicate that the Johannine group differs from the Jewish groups in its social environment, without being able to define these groups more precisely.)

Which model is more appropriate for explanation – an inner-Christian or inner-Jewish conflict – is, of course, a matter of interpreting the relevant texts. For methodological reasons, I focus on 1 John 2:18–25 and 4:1–3 (along with 2 John 7), the two passages where competitors are explicitly mentioned and a concrete conflict is presented. This is to avoid that by an uncontrollable “mirror reading” slogans or positions of the opponents are discovered even in passages of the letters that are not marked as such.²⁵

4. Determining the Competitors: The Antichrist Group

4.1 *The Antichrist Group in 1 John 2:18–25*

1 John 2:18–25 provides the first clear reference to a group of competitors in the course of 1 John. In the context of an end-time scenario – it is “last hour” – 1 John 2:18 invokes the addressees’ knowledge about the coming of an ἀντίχριστος of whom they have heard. The figure of an end-time adversary of God, a powerful counter-ruler to God and his Christ, is known from early Jewish and Christian apocalyptic contexts.²⁶ The term Antichrist is not attested before and beside the Letters of John (1 John 2:18,22; 4:3; 2 John 7), so it is certainly a deliberate choice here. If we take its literal meaning (“Counter-christ”),²⁷ it not only represents a counter-figure to Christ as God’s eschatological co-ruler, but also shows a direct reference to the object at the heart of the conflict, the question whether Jesus is the Messiah who will powerfully prevail. With rhetorical skill, 2:18 applies the term to the competitors: As ἀντίχριστοι they are qualified

25 On this concentration, see also Lieu, *John*, 10–12,16; Streett, *They*, 118–131.

26 Cf. Klauck, *Johannesbrief*, 147–151; Schreiber, *Offenbarung*, 575–577; Schreiber, *Brief*, 153–169; Streett, *They*, 144–145.

27 The prefix ἀντι- here does not denote the substitution of the Messiah, but the opposition to him. Cf. Schnelle, *Johannesbriefe*, 102; Streett, *They*, 144.

negatively and at the same time determined in content – they reject (Jesus as) the Christ.²⁸ The following assertions will illustrate this.

1 John 2:19 says of the competitors: “They went out from us” (ἐξ ἡμῶν ἐξήλθον). Accordingly, they were once part of the Johannine circle, but then turned away from it on their own initiative. They can be recognized as a distinguishable group, which I call “Antichrist group”, using the keyword from 2:18. However, “going out” in 2:19 does not mean a lack of contact. On the contrary, the author must take great pains to show that the competitors never really belonged to the Johannine circle because otherwise they would have stayed. (2:19) Even after their departure, the parties maintained close contact.²⁹ For those who stay, the split meant a challenge to their own identity.

In 2:22, the real issue is revealed: “that Jesus is the Christ” (ὅτι Ἰησοῦς [...] ἔστιν ὁ Χριστός). The one who denies this is called a “liar” and equated with the “Antichrist” mentioned above. “The Christ,” ὁ Χριστός, is used as a title (Messiah), as it frequently is in the Johannine writings, and goes back to early Jewish ideas of a Messiah.³⁰ The term “Antichrist” expresses the opposition to confessing Jesus as this Messiah. Because the Messiah is the representative of God, the Antichrist is determined as the one “who denies the Father and the Son”. The Messianic Son embodies access to God, and it is only through the agency of the Son that God can be known as the Father, as 2:23 points out: “whoever confesses the Son also has the Father.” Accordingly, whoever denies the Son also denies the Father. The conflict, therefore, is ignited by the confession that Jesus is the Messiah and Son of God, the unique representative and revealer of the God of Israel. This confession also takes center stage in the Gospel of John (John 1:20,41; 4:25–26; 20:31) and, in its Johannine climax (e.g. 10:30 “I and the Father are one”), leads to the conflict with other Jews (John 7:26–27, 31, 41–43). That some have left the group of disciples because of the high Christology is reminiscent of the situation in John 6:60–71 where quite a few disciples of Jesus leave the group because of Jesus’ Christological claims.³¹ All of this takes place in a Jewish environment.

28 Closest to the ἀντίχριστοι is the term ψευδόχριστοι (false messiahs) in Mark 13:22 // Matt 24:24 (along with ψευδοπροφήται, false prophets).

29 According to Wengst, *Häresie*, 12–13, no clear separation has yet taken place and no final clarification of the situation has yet been reached.

30 Cf. Schreiber, *Anfänge*, 12–31, 66–68, 102–103. “Son” in this context is to be understood as a royal (Ps 2:6–7; 2 Sam 7:12–16), a Messianic (4Q174 III 10–13) title.

31 Cf. also Jesus’ dispute with Jews who had originally joined him about his role as the unique representative of God in John 8:31–59. – On the background of John 6:60–71 cf. Theobald, *Häresie*.

Confessing Jesus as the unique Messiah or Son of God is central in 1 John (5:1,5; 4:15). 1 John 2:24 defines this confession as “what you have heard from the beginning”; this echoes the opening of the letter in 1:1 and defines the confession as the central content of the Johannine tradition. The competitors who do not share the confession (any longer) place themselves out of this tradition. Even more: According to 1 John 2:26, the Antichrist group “deceives” or “leads astray” the addressees, who are thus unsettled in their conviction of Jesus as the Messiah. This points once again to former members of the Johannine circle, Jews (or sympathizers) who do not want to change their traditional Jewishness fundamentally by believing that in Jesus as Messiah a new access is opened to the God of Israel.

4.2 *The Antichrist Group in 1 John 4:1–3 (and 2 John 7)*

The second reference to the Antichrist group is not until 1 John 4:1–3. 4:1 calls for the testing of the spirits and warns, “Many false prophets have gone out into the world.” The “spirit of the Antichrist” mentioned in 4:3 indicates that the competitors in view are the same as in 1 John 2.³² 4:2 renders the criterion for identifying the “spirit of God”: “Every spirit that confesses Jesus as Christ, who has come in the flesh (ὁμολογεῖ Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν ἐν σαρκὶ ἐληλυθότα), is of God”.³³ I have to justify this translation. As for syntax, the verb ὁμολογέω can be constructed with a double accusative (BDR § 157.2), which is also attested in Rom 10:9 (“confess Jesus as Lord”) and John 9:22 (“confess him [Jesus] as Christ”). In the confessional language of the first Christians, the predicative accusative is always a noun (and not an attributive participle). In χριστός the semantics of the title Messiah is still to be heard.³⁴ The participle “come” is then an addition to the predicative accusative “Christ”³⁵ and refers – in the perfect tense – to the earthly coming of Jesus.

1 John 4:2 takes up the confession to Jesus as Messiah from 2:22, but supplements it with “who has come in the flesh.” Thus 1 John reacts, probably in its own words, to the objection of the Antichrist group. The prepositional phrase

32 In contrast, Streett, *They*, 250–254 identifies the pseudoprophets as a group distinct from the competitors in 2:19: Jewish itinerant prophets who refuse to confess Jesus as the Messiah.

33 On this translation see also Menken, *Secessionists*, 126–127; Neufeld, *Texts*, 71; Schmid, *Gegner*, 167; Griffith, *Idols*, 187; Witherington, *Letters*, 524; Jensen, *Resurrection*, 149–152; Olsson, *Commentary*, 198–199, 335–336.

34 Cf. Streett, *They*, 241f.; Jensen, *Resurrection*, 151. – 1 John 2:22; 5:1 clearly emphasizes the confession “that Jesus is the Christ.”

35 Cf. BDR § 412 on the adjectival use of the participle, which corresponds to a relative clause (cf. Luke 6:48: “he is like a man who built a house [ἀνθρώπου οἰκοδομοῦντι οἰκίαν]).

ἐν σαρκί is to be understood modally and denotes the manner in which the Messiah Jesus exists.³⁶ In Israel's scriptures, "flesh" denotes the creaturely, threatened, and mortal existence of humans. "All flesh is like grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades [...]", one reads in Isa 40:6–7.³⁷ The Johannine circle is convinced that the Messiah Jesus shared in the weakness and threat of man; he "became flesh" (John 1:14). Included is his violent death, which is given a soteriological relevance by 1 John (1:7; 5:6–8; cf. John 6:51–58); God sent his Son as reconciliation for the sins (1 John 2:2; 4:9–10).

"He who has come in the flesh" reveals a conflict about different concepts of the Messiah. Up for discussion is the human side of the Messiah Jesus, because according to the known early Jewish concepts, the Messiah was to appear as a powerful (heavenly) figure who enforces God's good rule for the people of Israel in God's authority and with supernatural means of power.³⁸ "In the flesh" indicates the position of the competitors: Because Jesus appeared "in the flesh," as a weak man subject to death, and did not prevail against Israel's enemies, he cannot be the Messiah. Such a Messiah was rejected vigorously by Jewish contemporaries according to John 5:18; 6:42; 7:27,31; 10:33; 19:7. The Antichrist group may have left the Johannine circle influenced by such a rejection.

1 John 4:2, 5 assigns the competitors to the sphere of the "world", the remoteness from God (cf. 2:15–17). John 8:23 could say to "the Jews" who question Jesus: "You are of this world". The reproach is clear: whoever does not acknowledge Jesus as Christ loses God and belongs to the "world" – even if s/he is a Jew. The term "world" suggests social and economic factors in the background. Jewish synagogues usually were well integrated into the urban societies of the

36 Cf. Klauck, Johannesbrief, 233. Thus, the focus is not on the incarnation per se, which would be indicated by "into the flesh" (εἰς σάρκα).

37 The LXX offers many instances where πᾶσα σὰρξ (Hebrew *kol-basar*) refers to humans as transient creatures, e.g., Gen 6:12; Ps 65:3; 145:21; Isa 40:5; 49:26; Zech 2:17; Dan 2:11. Cf. Gal 2:16; Rom 3:20; John 1:13, 14; 3:6; 6:63; 8:15; 17:2; 1 John 2:16. – In the NT, "flesh" primarily refers to Jesus' humanity: Rom 1:3; 8:3; 9:5; 2 Cor 5:16; Col 1:22; Eph 3:14; 1 Tim 3:16; Heb 5:7; 10:20; 1 Pet 3:18; 4:1. At no point an anti-docetic thrust is apparent. – Jensen, Resurrection, 158–170, interprets the phrase "come in the flesh" differently as "a reference to the resurrection appearances of Jesus in the sphere of humanity" (169), using intertextual references to the appearance narratives in John 20:19–21:14 as his rationale. However, the verb ἔρχομαι ("to come") cannot carry the burden of proof given its general and varied semantics.

38 Cf. Schreiber, Anfänge, 30. This is also true of 4 Esr 7:28 where the Anointed One establishes a 400-year period of salvation, even though he then dies along with all creation (7:29) before God himself begins his eternal reign with the final judgment (7:30–38) (cf. Schreiber, Anfänge, 28).

Eastern Mediterranean. Did the competitors want to maintain this integration? Did they want to continue to share in the privileges often granted to the synagogues, such as exemption from sacrifice to the gods and emperors and from military service, or permission to keep the Sabbath and the purity commandments? Did they thus want to come to terms with their environment for the sake of economic advantages (cf. 1 John 2:16; 3:17)?³⁹ The Johannine circle, on the other hand, might be less well integrated into the urban world, once it has distanced itself from the synagogues.

2 John 7 takes up the Antichrist motif and repeats the reproach of 4:2 almost verbatim, except that the participle ἐρχόμενον (ἐν σαρκί) is here in the present tense: “the Christ, who *comes* in the flesh.” The present tense is probably used because the way Jesus lived *basically* shapes the image of the Messiah for 1 John. The dispute about this also determines the argument with the competitors here.⁴⁰ When 2 John 9 warns about “anyone who goes forth (ὁ προάγων) and does not abide in the teaching of Christ,”⁴¹ it becomes apparent once again that the competitors are former members of the Johannine circle who have turned away. 2 John 10 demands strict separation from the competitors: “do not receive him into your house and do not offer him greetings.” This shows the close personal contacts that Christ groups and Antichrist groups still have. Perhaps it is not so clear at first glance who still belongs to the Johannine circle and its teachings and who no longer does.

I can only note in passing that the much-discussed passage 1 John 5:6–8 (Jesus Christ “came by water and blood”) cannot be evaluated for the question of competitors, as if “water” and “blood” were directed against a docetic doctrine.⁴² The text gives no indication of polemically speaking about competitors at all, and its emphasis on the testimony of the three elements water, blood, and spirit shows the rhetorical function of strengthening the addressees in their conviction of Christ, the son of God.

39 1 John 2:16 criticizes the “boasting of possessions” on the part of those who “are in the world”; 3:17 denounces the hard-hearted behavior of those who have “the possessions of the world” but close their eyes to the needy brother and sister. Cf. Klauck, Johannesbrief, 33.

40 According to Jensen, Jesus, the phrases in the perfect and present tense respectively are largely synonymous. In contrast, Strecker, Johannesbriefe, 335–337 relates 2 John 7 to the future and interprets it as “die chiliastische Vorstellung eines messianischen Zwischenreiches”. (336)

41 Mostly προάγων is translated as “go beyond”, “progress”, “move forward” etc. What is meant, however, is not an “advanced” doctrine, but, as opposed to “staying,” a leaving behind one’s own tradition. On the problem of translation see Streett, They, 349–353, who translates as “going forth”.

42 An overview of research is given by Streett, They, 258–299.

4.3 *Some Results*

If the construction of the Antichrist group proposed above is valid, there is no inner-Christian conflict and no conflict of “Christians” with “Judaism”, but between two specific groups within the Jewish culture. The conflict arose about group identity, more precisely about the confession of Jesus as the Messiah, as the unique representative, revealer and messenger of God for the salvation of the world. Since individual groups (1 John pointedly calls them “antichrists”), which until then had been part of the (Jewish) Johannine circle, rejected this confession, a split occurred.

We can only guess why the Antichrist group turned away. Starting from the conflict with “the Jews” in John’s Gospel, we can assume a development within the circle increasingly distancing it from the local Jewish synagogues. The teaching about Jesus as Christ took on exclusive features (John 10:30: “I and the Father are one”), which may have caused rejection among the rest of the Jewish community. The Antichrist group could no longer support this development. Theologically, Israel’s notion of God is at stake if Jesus as Messiah represents the unique access to God. In order to overcome the distance to the Jewish community, the Antichrist group approached common Jewishness again.

In doing so, the group is unlikely to have lost interest in Jesus, but probably understood him in a more low-threshold way, perhaps as a Jewish wisdom teacher or prophet, for which there are hints in the Johannine tradition (e.g., John 3:1–21; 4:19; 4:46–54; 6:5–14). In this sense, one could speak of “Jesuan Jews” understanding Jesus not as the Messiah in all authority of God, but as an outstanding Jewish teacher and prophet. This allowed the group to continue living smoothly as part of the local Jewish communities.

5. Identity Formation in 1 John

If one classifies the Antichrist group as Jews who turned back from the Johannine circle to the synagogue, closeness and at the same time distance of the circle to its Jewish environment become apparent. In this final section, I will use four topics to illustrate how 1 John develops a distinct profile for his group within its Jewish horizon.

5.1 *Jesus as Messiah and the Image of God*

As we have seen from the conflict with the Antichrist group, the conviction that Jesus is the Messiah shaped the identity of the Johannine group. The Johannine tradition conceives Jesus, the Christ, as exclusive access to the God of Israel. Fellowship with the Father is tied to fellowship with the Son: “Everyone who

denies the Son also does not have the Father; he who confesses the Son also has the Father" (1 John 2:23). This distinctive Christology gives 1 John a profile of his own within his Jewish culture.⁴³ But this identity is a *Jewish* identity, which demarcates itself from other Jews without breaking off community. In this way, the letter stabilizes the identity of his addressees in the face of critical inquiries inevitably raised against it on the part of other Jews.

Being convinced that the vulnerable human Jesus is the Messiah ("in the flesh") leads to a new focus concerning the image of God. 1 John does not emphasize the powerful God surrounded by heavenly hosts, but the loving God. It is the specific character of Jesus the Messiah that allows to understand God as the embodiment of "love": "God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16). God's love is demonstrated in the mission of his Son in favor of human salvation (3:1; 4:7–9), specifically in his death (3:16; 4:10).

5.2 *Forgiveness of Sins*

Like other Jewish writings of its time, 1 John 1:5–2:2 addresses the forgiveness of sins by God. In Jewish tradition, only God forgives sins. God's patience, mercy and grace hold out the prospect of forgiveness to the people of Israel who cannot live without sin and guilt.⁴⁴ In this way, God proves faithful on the basis of his covenant with Israel (Ex 34:6–7; Deut 7:9; 32:4; Jer 42:5; Mic 7:18–20).

1 John 1:9 takes up this image of God by defining God as "faithful and just" (πιστὸς καὶ δίκαιος) and thus refers back to the theology of the covenant. Here, "just" does not refer to the legal judgment, but rather, as a complement to "faithful," means the saving care, the mercy of God.⁴⁵ However, 1 John integrates the mission of Christ into this image of God by giving it a specific accent. Forgiveness is now mediated by Christ: "the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin" (1:7); in the death of his Son, God himself grants forgiveness. According to 1 John 2:1, God forgives sins through the intercession of Jesus Christ. By the mission of his Son, God shows his love and gives "reconciliation" (ἰλασμός) for our sins (4:10; cf. 2:2). Accordingly, 3:1; 4:9–10 specify the basic theological idea of God's mercy as God's love.

43 Cf. John 5:23: "Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father", and John 8:19: "If you knew me, you would know my Father also".

44 On this see Doering, Gnade; cf. Barclay, Paul, 194–308.

45 On God's righteousness as saving care, cf. Ps 98:2–3; 1 Sam 12:7; Mic 6:5; Isa 56:1; CD XX 19–21; 1QH VI 15–16; 4 Esr 8:36; also Ps 40:11; 71:15; 1QS XI 2–3, 12–15; Isa 45:8; 46:13; 51:5; 59:16–18; 1 En. 53:7; Rom 3:24–25. Israel's covenant theology is emphasized by Olsson, Commentary, 307–313.

5.3 *Application of the Torah*

There is no explicit discussion of Torah application in John's letters. Yet, when 1 John 3:4 describes sinning as "unlawfulness" or "lawlessness" (*ἀνομία*), it presupposes the validity of the law, the Torah. 5:2–3 parallels love for God and keeping his commandments (*ἐντολαί*), steering toward a specific interpretation or application of the Torah.

Of special interest are the passages where 1 John mentions God's "commandments" (*ἐντολαί*) in the plural (that is, the Torah commandments which God gave to Moses at Sinai),⁴⁶ but then in the immediate context speaks of the commandment of brotherly and sisterly love in the singular (2:3–4, 7–8; 3:11–18, 23–24; 4:7–5:3). The "new commandment", the love command, so prominent in 1 John,⁴⁷ is part of the Jesus tradition in John 13:34–35 and 15:12 and suitable for summarizing the ethical commandments of the Torah. As a commandment, it contains the interpretation of God's will as revealed through Jesus. In John 13:34–35, the love command is established by Jesus, and at the same time Jesus is the motivating example for its fulfillment.⁴⁸ Jesus also functions as the model for the fulfillment of God's commandments in 1 John 2:6. The author now "writes" (2:8) what Jesus has given. In the context of contemporary Jewish Torah-interpretations, the love command sums up 1 John's own Torah application, its Torah hermeneutic. In concentrating the commandments of the Torah in brotherly love it provides a hermeneutical key: Interpersonal behavior within the group is strongly emphasized; other parts of the Torah become less important. The love command strengthens the identity of the group by holding the community together and delimiting it from the outside. Paul developed a comparable Torah hermeneutics in Rom 13:8–10 and Gal 5:14 as a summary of the Torah in the command to love one's neighbor from Lev 19:18.⁴⁹

The passage in 1 John 3:23 summarizes the Torah hermeneutics of 1 John in a double principle. The verse phrases God's "commandment" in terms of "trusting in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and loving one another". The devotion to the God of Israel, the trust in him, now comes to pass in his Messiah Jesus, and loving one another in the Johannine circle is the ethical demand. This combination in 3:23, the specific formulation, and the reference to Christ can be considered as an application of the OT commands to love God and one's neighbor given by God to Israel when he made the covenant with his people

46 Cf. Prov 4:5; Sir 1:26; 29:1; 35:2; 37:12; 1 Cor 7:19; Matt 19:17; Rev 12:17; 14:12; Josephus, *Ant.* 8.120.

47 1 John 2:7–10; 3:11, 23; 4:7, 11–12, 21.

48 On this, see Konradt, *Ethik*, 397.

49 For this see Schreiber, *Law*.

at mount Sinai (Deut 6:5 and Lev 19:18).⁵⁰ These commands are connected in Mark 12:30 (par.) as the so-called double love command. The application of the Torah in 1 John 3:23 consists in a double concentration: love for God is concentrated in trust in the Messiah Jesus, love for one's neighbor in the commandment to brotherly love. These two commandments serve as a double principle which guides the interpretation of the entire Torah within Johannine tradition.

Nowhere does 1 John assert an end to the validity of the Torah or a substitution of the Torah by Christ. In principle, the Torah remains the orientation for life and behavior. So what 1 John intends is a specific application of the Torah based on Christ's love command.

5.4 *Formation of a Specific Tradition*

1 John reveals a pronounced intent to form its own tradition. In 1:1–4, a “we” group identifies itself as a witness and proclaimer of the Johannine tradition and, in this capacity, makes contact with the addressees in the letter. As a bearer of tradition, it unfolds the joint identity from its own Johannine tradition. On the one hand, it draws on personal experience and witnessing, and on the other, it emphasizes the transmission of the message, testimony and proclamation.⁵¹ This shows the historical situation of the second or third generation of Christ followers, who must preserve and transmit tradition. It is still a *Jewish* tradition, even if it has its own profile. The conscious formation of a distinct tradition shows the autonomy of a movement. Being aware of this, 1 John emphasizes the continuing affiliation with Judaism by urging the addressees in the final sentence of the letter in 5:21 to beware of “idols” (εἰδωλα). As Jews, they should continue to clearly distinguish themselves from the pagan world.

Such a tradition does not necessarily have to be divisive, but (in retrospect) it probably was. At the time of 1 John, the Johannine circle is in the midst of a process of self-discovery, demanding a reassurance and substantiation of its own way.

6. Demarcation and Finding the Own Way: A Summary

(1) If the competitors in 1 John are defined as Christian heretics, like most scholars do until today, the parting of the ways between the Johannine circle

50 Olsson, Commentary, 116, also sees the connection to these OT passages without evaluating them for a Torah hermeneutic. – Regarding John's Gospel, Cirafesi, John, 182–184 emphasizes its *Jewish* interpretation of the Torah.

51 Cf. Heckel, Historisierung; Schnelle, Johannesbriefe, 62–63, 68.

and the Jewish community might be seen as terminated in 1 John. However, if we identify the competitors as Jews, former members of the Johannine circle having turned away, we realize that 1 John is a testimony of an inner-Jewish conversation. In this context, we encounter attributions of one's identity, group formations and demarcations.

(2) At the heart of the confrontation with the competitors, according to 1 John, is the conviction that access to God (the God of Israel!) is now centered on Jesus, the Messiah. The Johannine circle gains its profile from the question about the Messiah. However, this is connected with a distinctive image of God and a deviant behavior compared to common Jewishness. Such behavior results, for example, from believing that forgiveness of sins is now obtained in Christ, so that instead of performing rituals of forgiveness and purification such as ablutions, one prayed to Christ. Deviant behavior in particular has a high potential for conflict, possibly leading to exclusion from a group.⁵²

(3) Compared to John's Gospel, 1 John documents a more advanced stage in the process of distancing between the Johannine circle and the synagogues. While in the Gospel the polemic against "the Jews" and the danger of exclusion from the synagogue because of confessing Jesus as Messiah point to the *beginning* of a process of distancing,⁵³ 1 John does not talk about "Jews" anymore and focuses on its own identity. A discussion about Jewish identity markers no longer matters. The split of the Johannine circle, only hinted at in the Gospel (John 6:60–71), is a threatening reality in 1 John. The Johannine circle is already living at a greater distance from the local synagogues, without having left the wide area of Judaism. This distance is also evident in 1 John's contrasting his own group collectively with all other people, the "world", without differentiating between Jewish people and people from the nations.⁵⁴

(4) External factors may have increased the distance. A numerical growth of the circle may have provoked a reaction from the synagogues. The *fiscus Judaicus*, the tax that according to Josephus was to be paid by all Jews in the Roman Empire after the Jewish-Roman war was lost, may have forced decisions. The *fiscus* amounting to two drachmas replaced the former Jewish temple tax

52 John Kloppenborg has shown, on the basis of Jewish and pagan associations, that in the case of exclusions from an association "in virtually all instances disruptive or deviant behaviour was the grounds for exclusion, rather than holding to certain beliefs" (Kloppenborg, *Disaffiliation*, 8). According to de Boer, *Expulsion*, 367–391, the Sabbath problem in John 5:9–16; 7:22–24; 9:8–34 ultimately triggered the exclusion of Jesus' followers from the synagogue (and not the confession of Jesus as Messiah). However, the two cannot be separated: The confession forms the basis for a changed practice.

53 Cf. Frey, *Paulus*, 257, who thinks of the beginning of a separation.

54 1 John 2:2, 15–17; 3:1, 13, 17; 4:1, 3–5, 9, 14, 17; 5:4–5, 19; 2 John 7.

and was paid to the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus as a symbol of godly Roman rule.⁵⁵ By this tax, affiliation with an urban synagogue became a public matter and no longer rested solely in one's own discretion or (tacit) acceptance of the synagogue. In case of doubt, a decision had to be made, which either reinforced the distinction from the local synagogue or the affiliation with it. However, we do not find concrete indications of this in 1 John.

(5) 1 John illustrates how a Christ group struggles to find its identity and develop its own profile. The letter represents a position within Judaism that distinguishes the group from the majority and shows a strong tendency towards autonomy. This group finds itself in a process of demarcation, with the boundaries of the group still fluid and yet to be negotiated. Gray areas remain, demanding delimitations of identity – be it on the part of the Johannine circle, be it on the part of the synagogues.

Whether these developments *necessarily* led to the parting of the ways, I do not dare to decide. However, 1 John clearly moves into a direction that *in fact* reinforces the distinction. That this direction *has* led to the parting of the ways, was a matter of history.

55 Sources: Josephus, *BJ.* 7.218; Cassius Dio 65.7.2; term: Suetonius, *Dom.* 12.2. On the historical circumstances Heemstra, *Fiscus*, 1–104 (159–189 on John's Gospel). According to Frey, Paulus, 271–275, the *fiscus Judaicus* was an “essential factor for the further separation of the local synagogue and the followers of Jesus who were still connected to it” (274: “ganz wesentlicher Faktor für das weitere Auseinandertreten der lokalen Synagoge und der bis dato noch mit ihr verbundenen Jesuachfolger”).

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