

Households of Faith (Jn 4:46-54; 11:1-44): A Metaphor for the Johannine Community

Mary Coloe

Abstract: This article proposes that the image of "the household of God" provides the best metaphor of the Johannine community. Within the text itself we are able to see traces of this community in the issues confronting the households at Capernaum and Bethany. The article draws on a previous study of the Temple as the "House of God" and the transferral of this image to the community as the "Household" of God. Where the image of Temple is applied to Jesus in the Gospel narrative, the community is reflected in the different households of faith.

VARIOUS SCHOLARS HAVE ATTEMPTED to describe particular characteristics of the community behind the Fourth Gospel. In 1975 Oscar Cullmann wrote of a "Johannine Circle",¹ while in the same year Alan Culpepper published his doctoral thesis proposing that the community was modelled on the lines of ancient "schools".² This study proposes another model, arising from within the text itself, which may provide a glimpse of the self-conscious identity of the community, that is, how the Johannine community actually understood itself. I am not attempting here an analysis of the historical stages of the development of the community or the final text; other scholars have taken this approach.³ My aim is to see if the text reflects something of the actual self-identity of this community.

What we have in the Gospel is the theological reflection that emerged from a new living experience of God's Spirit - what Sandra Schneiders terms "a spirituality".⁴ This living spirituality wrestled with the christological and theological issues facing the early communities made up

1. O. Cullmann, *The Johannine Circle: Its Place in Judaism among the Disciples of Jesus and in Early Christianity: A Study in the Origin of the Gospel of John* (London: SCM, 1976).

2. R. A. Culpepper, *The Johannine School: An Evaluation of the Johannine School Hypothesis Based on an Investigation of the Nature of Ancient Schools* (SBL Dissertation Series 26; Missoula: Scholars Press, 1975).

3. R. E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist, 1979); J. L. Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*. 2nd ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979).

4. S. Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 1999) 48.

primarily of Jewish disciples. Their searching gave birth to the articulation of who Jesus is, of his relationship to Israel's God and of their own relationship with God now centred on Jesus. In time these articulations became the Gospel narratives of different communities. It is possible that within the Fourth Gospel we may find a mirror-image or self-portrait of the community that will enable us to gain greater insight into this particular early Christian church.

In my doctoral thesis,⁵ I argued that the Temple underwent a series of reinterpretations across the Gospel, in which the significance and function of the Temple as God's dwelling place was transferred from the building to the person of the historical Jesus (2:21) and ultimately to the community of disciples formed in "the hour" (19:25-30). What began as "the house of my Father" (οἶκος τοῦ πατρὸς μου) in 2:16 becomes the "household of my Father" (οἰκία τοῦ πατρὸς μου) in 14:2, where this household is constituted by a number of indwellings identified in chapter 14 as the "many dwellings" (μονὰ πολλάι, 14:2) of the Father (14:10, 23), Jesus (14:23, 25) and Spirit (14:17) within the community of believers. It was David Aune who noted that this term "household of my Father" may in fact be the self-designation of the Johannine community.⁶ The household of God, as the ongoing presence of God's dwelling in the world, perfects and fulfils the role and functions of Israel's Temple. The Gospel narrative, which of course refers to a time when the Temple still existed, presents the Temple as an appropriate symbol for describing the identity and mission of Jesus and the community of disciples. The Temple's destruction in 70 C. E. allowed the community to move beyond this image, with its sacrificial, cultic, exclusive and hierarchical associations, to find a better living metaphor for its post-70 existence. The slight shift in terminology from *House of God* to *Household of God* moves away from hierarchical associations to something more personal and familial. Given the relational and intimate language of the Fourth Gospel, I propose that the image of a household is the self-understanding of this community.

TEMPLE AND HOUSEHOLD SETTINGS

A glance across the Gospel reveals that there are in fact two primary locations for the Johannine Jesus' miracles and discourses: one consisting of the Temple and its environs, the other a household setting. Unlike the Synoptics, the Fourth Gospel does not present Jesus teaching along the road (Mark 11:32), from a boat (Mark 3:9) or in the mountains and hills of Galilee (Mark 3:13; 9:2-8). Only in John 6 is he found beside

5. M. Coloe, *God Dwells with Us: Temple Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel* (Collegeville: Michael Glazier/Liturgical Press, 2001) forthcoming.

6. D. E. Aune, *The Cultic Setting of Realized Eschatology in Early Christianity* (NovTSup 28; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1972) 130.

the Sea of Galilee, where so much of his teaching activity takes place in the Synoptics,⁷ and only one scene takes place in a synagogue (6:59).⁸ In this gospel, Jesus' healing and teaching activity is compressed into two primary settings, both of which show deliberate contrasts of faith.

| Temple context | Household/familial context |
|--|--|
| | 1:38-39 |
| | Wedding at Cana (2:1-11) |
| Critique of Temple (2:13-22) | Samaritan village (4:39-40) |
| | Household of Capernaum (4:46-54) |
| Conflict over Healing in Temple (Jn 5) | |
| Conflict continues (Jn 7-10). | Household of Lazarus at Bethany (11:1-44) |
| | Household of anointing at Bethany (12:1-8) |
| | Household of disciples (Jn 13-17) |

As this schema indicates, the Temple is where Jesus is consistently and relentlessly in conflict with the Jewish authorities. The final decision to seek Jesus' death is made by Caiaphas in order to protect the Temple (11:48-50). Ironically this decision leads to the destruction of the true Temple - Jesus' body - and the raising up of the new Temple of the household of believers (19:25-31).⁹ Where the Temple is a place of discord and ultimately leads to the rejection of Jesus, who is the new dwelling place of God (1:14), the various households are locations where Jesus finds faith. The first disciples see where Jesus dwells and they dwell with him (1:38-39). In the context of a wedding, Jesus, surrounded by his mother and his disciples, reveals himself as the bridegroom who can provide the good wine (2:10). He then goes down to Capernaum with his mother, his brothers and sisters (ἀδελφοί)¹⁰ and his disciples, to establish his own household of faith, one that goes beyond kinship ties (2:12). The Samaritans, led to Jesus by a woman's testimony, invite Jesus to dwell with them and they profess their faith in him as the "Saviour of the world" (4:42).

7. I share the view of many scholars that the original narrative concluded at 20:31 and that chapter 21, set beside the Sea of Tiberias, is a later addition. For a recent discussion of this issue and the purpose of John 21, see B. R. Gaventa, "The Archive of Excess: John 21 and the Problem of Narrative Closure", in R. Alan Culpepper and C. Clifton Black (ed.), *Exploring the Gospel of John: In Honor of D. Moody Smith* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996) 240-51.

8. The mention of the synagogue comes as an afterthought whereas in the Synoptics the synagogue and its officials feature in numerous healings (Mark 1:21; 3:1; Luke 4:33; 13:10).

9. See M. Coloe, "Raising the Johannine Temple (Jn 19:19-37)", *ABR* 48 (2000) forthcoming.

10. I read the term ἀδελφοί as an inclusive plural unless it is obvious from the text that it means only the male siblings. Chapter 20 shows a clear example of the plural term being used to include both genders when Mary Magdalene is told to go πρὸς τοὺς ἀδελφούς μου and tell them that Jesus is ascending "to my father and your Father, my God and your God" (20:17). Mary Magdalene is obviously one of the ἀδελφοί. On the manuscript tradition and the historicity of the brothers and sisters of Jesus, see R. E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*. 2 vols. (Anchor Bible 29-29a; New York: Doubleday, 1966, 1970) 1.112, n. ii.

While the term "house" or "household" is not mentioned in the above episodes, such a setting is implied by the context and also by the use of the term "dwell" (μένειν 1:38-39; 4:40).¹¹ The episodes where the terminology "house/household" is explicit reveal yet another dimension of the theological significance of this metaphor and its relevance for the Johannine community. I now turn to two of these episodes to explore them in greater detail.

THE HOUSEHOLDS OF CAPERNAUM AND BETHANY

The households of Bethany and Capernaum provide the setting for two miracles and for exploring a critical issue for the Johannine community, namely the presence/absence of Jesus. As miracle stories they exhibit similarities in structure,¹² and both have the additional Johannine feature of an initial refusal or rebuke to the request for healing.

The Official's Son at Capernaum
(4:46-54)¹³

Introduction: 46 And at Capernaum there was an official whose son was ill.

Request: 47 He begged him to come and heal his son, for he was about to die.

Refusal: 48 Jesus therefore said to him, "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe."

Raising Lazarus at Bethany
(11:1-54)¹⁴

Introduction 1-2 Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany.

Request: 3 So the sisters sent to him saying, "Lord he whom you love is ill".

Refusal: 4-6 He stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

[Insert - discourse, 7-16
"Let us go", 7
"Let us also go", 16]

11. The term μένειν is frequently translated as "remain". This misses the theological implications of the word, which suggests an intimate interpersonal relationship. I prefer to translate this word as "dwell" or "abide". For a recent discussion of the theological nuances of this term see D. A. Lee, "Abiding in the Fourth Gospel: A Case-study in Feminist Biblical Theology", *Pacifica* 10 (1997) 123-36.

12. Miracle stories have the following typical structure: (a) a problem described; (b) request made; (c) the miracle performed accompanied by a gesture, touch, word or mention of a name; (d) the successful accomplishment described; (e) a response of wonder on the part of onlookers. The recognition and naming of this five-fold pattern is based on the work of Bultmann; for the wording, see F. J. Moloney, *Belief in the Word: Reading John 1-4* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 90.

13. For a comparison of the structure of the two Cana miracles see F. J. Moloney, "From Cana to Cana (Jn 2:1-4:54) and the Fourth Evangelist's Concept of Correct (and Incorrect) Faith", *Salesianum* 40 (1978) 817-43. Michael Labahn discusses this structure and its significance across the two Cana miracles and the raising of Lazarus; see M. Labahn, "Between Tradition and Literary Art: The Miracle Tradition in the Fourth Gospel", *Biblica* 80 (1999) 178-203.

14. My reading of the Lazarus account has been greatly influenced by an article of Sandra Schneiders, "Death in the Community of Eternal Life: History, Theology and Spirituality in John 11", *Interpretation* 41 (1987) 44-56.

Response: 49 The official said to him, "Sir, come down before my child dies."

Life-given: 50 Jesus said to him, "Go, your son will live."

Reaction: 50b. The man believed the word that Jesus spoke and went his way.

Confirmation: 51 His servants met him and told him that his boy lives.

Response: 53 and he himself believed, and all his household.

Conclusion: 54 This was now the second sign that Jesus did when he had come from Judea to Galilee.

Narrative resumes, 17-20

Responses: 21-32 "Lord if you had been here my brother would not have died." (21 & 32).

Life-given: 39-44 "Take away the stone" (39). "Lazarus come out" (42).

Reaction: "Lord by this time there will be an odour" (39).

Confirmation: 44 The dead man came out.

Response: Many believed in him (45). Some went to Pharisees (46).

Conclusion: Jesus has to retire to the wilderness. There he dwelt with his disciples.

The household at Cana and the household of Bethany are faced with illness unto death, for although the boy is not dead, the language suggests this extremity.¹⁵ Following the pattern of a miracle story the request is made (explicitly by the royal official,¹⁶ implicitly by the sisters) that Jesus come so that healing can happen. In both cases Jesus initially refuses to make a positive response to the request. At Cana he rebukes the official for expecting "signs and wonders" (4:48), while in the case of Lazarus Jesus speaks to the disciples to explain the purpose of the delay: "so that the Son of God may be glorified" (11:4).¹⁷ Both households therefore experience the absence of Jesus and request his presence so that healing/life can be restored.

The response of the official to this rebuke is to repeat his request, now reported in the first person: "Sir, come down before my child dies" (4:49). He wants the physical presence of Jesus in order that his son might live. Usually miracle workers interact directly with the person to be healed: through touch (for example, Mark 1:41), spittle (Mark 7:33) or breath (Mark 7:34). In reply, Jesus gives his authoritative word, "Go. Your son lives" (4:50). The word of Jesus is sufficient to ensure life for this child. His actual physical presence is not necessary. The official places his trust in this word and returns home alone.

15. "He was about to die" (v 47); Jesus says, "Your son will live" rather than "your son is healed".

16. It is unclear whether this official is a Jew or Gentile in the service of Herod. Since the scene appears to be the Johannine version of the healing of the Centurion's servant (see Matt 8:5-13; Lk 7:1-10). Moloney, *Belief in the Word*, 183, suggests that this official may be a Gentile official stationed at the border town of Capernaum.

17. Jesus' words of explanation reiterate that his movements are directed by the divine purpose (see 4:4; 7:6-9). Similarly B. Byrne, *Lazarus: A Contemporary Reading of John 11:1-46* (Homebush: St Paul, 1991) 43; Schneiders, ("Death in the Community", 47) interpret the delay as an expression of Jesus' sovereign independence in relation to human initiative. Jesus' delay, however, does set up the condition of death in his absence

By contrast, both Martha and Mary express limited faith in Jesus in their identical statements, "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died" (vv 21, 32).¹⁸ Commentators vary in their interpretations of the faith implied in the statement in both instances. Schneiders sees in Martha's words, "I believe you are the Christ, the Son of God", the highest expression of Johannine faith, the equivalent of the Petrine confession in Matt 16:15-19.¹⁹ However, as Moloney points out, these titles have all been applied to Jesus before (see 1:41, 49), Martha's words do not directly reply to Jesus' question about belief in him as "the resurrection and the life" (11:25), and they are also stated in the perfect tense, which expresses a previously-held belief rather than a new-found faith in response to Jesus' immediate revelation.²⁰

For Moloney it is Mary not Martha who portrays full Johannine faith in her act of falling at Jesus' feet, which Moloney interprets as an act of worship similar to that of the Blind Man (9:38).²¹ But here also I must disagree. Mary's exact repetition of the words of her sister indicates no significant development or change in faith. Her act of falling at the feet of Jesus is not called an act of worship, as was the similar act of the Blind Man (9:38: προσεκύνησεν; 11:32: ἔπεσεν αὐτοῦ πρὸς τοὺς πόδας). The action, accompanied by weeping, suggests grief rather than worship.²² Mary's act of faith at the feet of Jesus must wait until chapter 12.

Even when Jesus gives his word, "I am the resurrection and the life" (11:25); "take away the stone" (11:39), the sisters remain within their previous conceptions of life after death and hesitate: "he has been dead four days" (39).²³ Jesus' words challenge them to leave their limited understanding of life - as something to be restored at the end of time in the resurrection from the dead - to believe in a gift of life prior to the "end time" resurrection. With Jesus' presence the *eschaton* has entered

18. In describing the repetition of Martha's words by Mary, Byrne (*Lazarus*, 69-70) writes, "Mary echoes her sister's word of remonstrance.... The repetition, with its implication that the two sisters had extensively shared their disappointment, powerfully draws attention once more to the (as we know, deliberate) absence of Jesus."

19. Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe*, 106. Similarly T. K. Seim, "Roles of Women in the Gospel of John", in Lars Hartman and Birger Olsson (eds.), *Aspects on the Johannine Literature* (Coniectanea Biblica, New Testament Series 18. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1987) 56-73, see p. 71; R. E. Brown, "Roles of Women in the Fourth Gospel", *Theological Studies* 36 (1975) 693.

20. F. J. Moloney, *Signs and Shadows: Reading John 5-12* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 162. Lee also reads Martha's confession as lacking full faith and sees the titles as ambiguous at this stage; see D. A. Lee, *The Symbolic Narratives of the Fourth Gospel: The Interplay of Form and Meaning* (JSNT Sup. 95. Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994) 206.

21. Moloney, *Signs and Shadows*, 166.

22. So Byrne, *Lazarus*, 59.

23. According to rabbinic thought the soul hovered around the body for three days. Beyond this time death was irreversible. "The whole intensity of the mourning begins at the third day. For three days the soul returns to the grave, meaning to return to the body; if it sees however, that the colour of the countenance has changed, then it goes" (Str-B 2:544 citing *Gen. Rab.* 100 [64a]).

history, with implications both for those who have died and those still alive.

Those who have died
Those who believe and yet die
will live (v. 25).

Those still alive
Whoever lives and believes in me
will not die forever (v. 26)

In these statements Jesus brings traditional end-time expectations into the present. The dead will not remain in death until some future time; they are promised life beyond death. For those who are alive and who will experience physical death, this death too will not be death forever. Time distinctions blur, as the narrative has already indicated in v. 2 with its proleptic description of Mary as the one "who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair" (11:2), an action that will be described in the following chapter (12:1-3). Future events impinge upon the present.

The official, acting in faith on the words of Jesus, "your son lives," is met on his return journey and given precisely that information (4:51). The words of Jesus are exactly confirmed and in response, even without seeing Jesus, the household becomes a household of faith. The experience of his healing word, even from a distance, is enough. Similarly, in response to Jesus' command, Lazarus emerges from the tomb wearing the trappings of death which have no power to bind him (11:43-43). But this miracle leads to schism, with some of "the Jews" believing while others go to plot with the Pharisees (11:45).²⁴

THE HOUSEHOLD AS AN IMAGE OF THE JOHANNINE COMMUNITY

In both households, that at Capernaum and that at Bethany, there is initially a concern that Jesus come to the household; only his presence, it seems, can guarantee life. In this respect both miracles speak to the experience of the post-Easter Christian community which no longer has the physical presence of Jesus; his absence poses a threat to faith. Like Thomas (20:25), the royal official and the sisters of Lazarus seek physical assurance. The sisters' heart-rending cry, "Lord if you had been here, ...", will find an echo in the cry of many disciples across the centuries. In the face of this anguish, the Cana miracle affirms the central message of these early chapters that the word of Jesus is trustworthy. The believer can rely on Jesus' word and there is no need to see signs and wonders – no need even to have his physical presence; the word given by Jesus is sufficient.

While we do not see the actual household at Capernaum, we do note that the royal official is changed through his encounter with Jesus. The

24. It has become customary to use the term "the Jews" in this manner (within quotation marks) to show that the term is not to be understood as a description of historical persons belonging to the religion of Second Temple Judaism in the first century C.E. Within the narrative of the Fourth Gospel the phrase denotes characters within the text who function as the opponents of Jesus for a polemical purpose.

reader is introduced to him in terms of his role as a courtier (βασιλικός, 4:46). Persons in such a position are used to having their wishes carried out; their word is usually effective. Jesus' rebuke, then, must come as a shock to one in such a position of authority. Jesus will not do the wondrous things normally expected of a miracle worker. There will be no incantations, no special potions, no obscure gestures. When, following the rebuke, the official speaks again with a polite form of address, "Sir" (v 49), he is shifting from his position as one with authority over another, to one recognising the authority of the other. Jesus responds with his word, "Go, your son lives" (v 50). The courtier is now simply called a human being, (ἄνθρωπος, v 50); he has been stripped of the trappings of royal status and now shares the experience of all humanity before the authoritative *logos*. When he returns to his household, the emphasis is now on his relationship with his child; he is called "father" (πατήρ, v 53). His identity within the household is now to be found in terms of relationships rather than his official status. In the household of faith such positions of authority have no weight since the only authoritative presence is the word of Jesus. A child in this household of faith has found life, and a father has found his humanity.

While there is no final expression of faith on the part of Martha and Mary in chapter 11, there are some characters whose faith undergoes change through this event. Among "the Jews" there is a division, with some believing in Jesus and others going to the Pharisees (11: 45-46). The ones who believe are "the Jews" who had gone to Mary and who are described as being with her in the house (ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ, 11:31). Like the household of the royal official at Capernaum, the ones associated with the household of Bethany also come to faith in response to Jesus' miraculous deed. Both miracles conclude with faith being found by those who share in the household. The story of the household of faith at Bethany will continue in the next chapter (12:1-8).²⁵

The miracle of the raising of Lazarus shows that death is not a "dead-end". It leads into the highly ironical statement of the High Priest Caiaphas that it was better that one man should die for the people in order to preserve the Temple (the holy place) from destruction (11:48-50). In these stark words the contrast established by the narrative between the Temple and the household comes to its ultimate and tragic conclusion. The Temple has been the place of Jesus' conflicts with the authorities. Now Caiaphas' words clearly show concern for the Temple to be the immediate cause of Jesus' death. Whereas in the household of faith there is a journey from death to life, in the Temple and through its priesthood, there is a journey towards death. The narrator's comment (v 51) transforms Caiaphas' words from a death warrant to a prophecy of

25. This article, with its focus on John 4 and 11, is part of a larger study of households across the Gospel. An analysis of John 12 (1-8) must await discussion as part of that project.

life. Although Jesus is about to die, the Lazarus story witnesses to the truth that life continues beyond death (see vv 25-26) and, through his death, Jesus passes into that time beyond death where he can gather into one the scattered children of God (11:52).

This is the first time in the narrative that the expression "children of God" appears. The Prologue promised that those who believed in Jesus would be given the power to become children of God (1:12), while "the Jews" have claimed to be "children of Abraham" (8:39).²⁶ The filiation that Jesus will offer through his death far surpasses the latter claim. Believers will be gathered as children of *God's* household. Jesus' death will be procreative, bearing children in a post-resurrection household of faith.

Lazarus' death thrusts the household of Bethany into a struggle towards full faith in Jesus. This household and "the Jews" who join with Mary need to experience Lazarus' return to life before they can truly believe. So it is with the household of disciples. They, like Martha, Mary and "the Jews" who share the household's grief, must experience the resurrection before faith is possible (see 20:8). In the post-Easter time of the Johannine community, although Jesus is absent to sight, he lives on and his work of gathering the scattered children into one will continue in the missionary work of the disciples. Trusting in the efficacious word of Jesus, the household of faith can believe that death, both the death of Jesus and death in the later community of believers, does not annul life.

CONCLUSION

I began by proposing that "household" provides the best living metaphor of the Johannine community. In their lived experience of Jesus' abiding presence with them, mediated through the Spirit, community members perceived themselves as the locus of God's dwelling. Where once the physical body of Jesus could be called the Temple or House of God because of his unique relationship with the Father (1:1, 18; 2:16, 19, 21), in the post-Easter period believers also experienced the indwelling presence of Father, Spirit and Jesus (14:10, 27, 23, 25). They came to understand themselves as the raised up Temple of Israel's eschatological hope. This new Temple, though, is conceived primarily in terms of relationship to God rather than a place of cultic sacrifice. In becoming part of Jesus' family at the cross (19:25-30) and so being drawn into his Father's household (see 20:17b), the community of believers becomes the dwelling place of God. Because such a self-understanding is a presupposition of the community, its "taken for granted" status means it is

26. For further treatment of the claim to be children of Abraham, see M. Coloe, "Like Father, Like Son: The Role of Abraham in Tabernacles - John 8:31-59", *Pacifica* 12 (1999) 1-11; see esp. pp. 5-7, 10.

not obvious to readers who have lost touch with the initial experience that was theirs. It is a transparent image that would only be obvious to those with insiders' knowledge and experience.

In selecting two "household" episodes I have offered an insider's reading of the text, making explicit the issues that reach behind the narrative into the spirituality of the Johannine community from which the Fourth Gospel emerged.²⁷ Though they now thought of themselves as making up the Household of God, members of the community also knew themselves to be not immune from the pain of illness and death. Characters in the narrative such as the royal official and the sisters Martha and Mary depict faith's vulnerability in moments of human anguish. They have faith, of a sort, but their faith, put to the test by the onset of death, falters. They long for the physical presence of Jesus. The miracles in each case affirm that Jesus' word is sufficient and trustworthy. At Cana the word alone brings healing; at Bethany it reaches into the dark tomb of death to call Lazarus to life. While no longer sharing the privileged experience of the first disciples, future households of Christians are invited to believe that even grave illness and death are open to the power of Jesus' word.

27. As well as offering an insight into the community's spirituality, appreciation of its perception of itself as the Household of God has major implications for the understanding of Johannine ecclesiology. Such an ecclesiology will draw on household practices rather than cult and will find new ways of relating with others and with God. A full development of the ecclesial implications of the Household image is well beyond the possibilities of a short article. I propose to pursue the theme further in a later publication.