Now that I have explained what the socio-historical method is in general terms (in my previous post) I can go on to show how it can be applied to a particular Gospel, in this case, the Gospel of John. Again, none of this is new and fresh scholarship that I myself came up with; two of the real pioneers of this method were two of the greats of New Testament interpretation in the latter part of the twentieth century, both of whom, remarkably, taught at Union Theological Seminary in New York (taught, in fact, some of my good friends!), the Protestant scholar J. Louis Martyn, and the Roman Catholic scholar, Raymond Brown. Their views ended up being a more or less consensus position for many years, and continues to be prominent among teachers of the NT still today.

The Gospel of John from a Socio-Historical Perspective

The place to begin is by examining the different thematic emphases evident in different stories, which ultimately may derive from different sources, and to consider the kinds of social worlds that they appear to presuppose. I might start by reminding you of one of the distinctive features of this Gospel, namely, the exalted view of Jesus that is emphasized in so many of its narratives. But you may have noticed in your own reading of the Gospel that not every story shares this exalted perspective. In fact, a number of John’s stories portray Jesus not as an elevated divine being come from heaven, but as a very human character. To use the jargon employed by historians of Christian doctrine, portions of this narrative evidence a “high” christology, in which Jesus is portrayed as fully divine, and others evidence a “low” christology, in which he is portrayed as human, and nothing more.

In the modern world, many Christians subscribe to both a high and a low christology, in which Jesus is thought to be both fully divine and fully human. Did both of these perspectives develop simultaneously, so that the earliest Christians already thought of Jesus as God and man? In point of fact, as we saw in the Synoptic Gospels, even though Jesus is portrayed somewhat as a Hellenistic divine man — like Apollonius of Tyana, for example — there was no sense there that he had existed in eternity past, that he was the creator of the universe, or that he was equal to the one true God. Scholars have long recognized that the notion of Jesus’ divinity may have developed over a period of time, that as Christians began to reflect more and more on who Jesus was, they began to ascribe greater and greater honors to him. Indeed, in the Fourth Gospel we are able to trace the development of christology within one particular community, from its early reflections of Jesus as a human chosen by God to fulfill the task of salvation to its later conclusions that Jesus was himself divine, a full equal with God. This development appears to have been intimately related to the social experiences of the community that told the stories. The socio-historical method provides us with the tools that we need to draw these conclusions. How exactly does it work?

Divergent Christologies in the Johannine Community

An interesting example of an account that embodies a low christology comes in the story of the first disciples in 1:35-42. We are probably justified in supposing that the story was in circulation prior to the writing of the Fourth Gospel, and that the author of this Gospel heard it (or read it) and incorporated it into his narrative after the Prologue, which he derived from a different source. In what social context would the story have been told originally?

You will notice that Jesus is called three different things in this account: John the Baptist
calls him “the lamb of God” (v. 36), the disciples who follow him call him “rabbi” (v. 38), and one of them, Andrew, calls him the “messiah” (v. 41). Each of these terms makes sense as an identification of Jesus within a Jewish context. As we have seen, the “lamb of God” refers to the Passover lamb that was sacrificed in commemoration of the exodus from Egypt; for John, Jesus is the lamb because his death brings about the salvation celebrated in the Passover meal (see Chapter 3, above). The term “rabbi” was a common designation for a Jewish teacher. And the term “messiah” referred to the future deliverer of the people of Israel.

None of these terms suggests that the author of this story understood Jesus to be divine in any way: neither passover lambs nor rabbis were divine, and the messiah was to be a human chosen by God, not God himself. Moreover, these are terms that would make sense to a Jewish, rather than to a Gentile, audience. What might this tell us about the social context within which a story like this was told? Here is an account of two Jews who come to Jesus and discover that he is the one they have been waiting for, the messiah. It appears to be the kind of story that would have originally been told by Jews to other Jews, to show them that Jesus is to be recognized as the Jewish messiah (and a rabbi, and the lamb of God).

One other feature of this story should be observed. On three occasions the author interprets the terms that he uses: rabbi, which means “teacher” (v. 38), messiah, which means “Christ” (v. 41), and Cephas, which means “Peter” (v. 42). These interpretations are necessary because the three terms are not Greek, the language of the Fourth Gospel, but Aramaic. But why would some of the key terms of the story be in Aramaic, and why would the author have to translate them? Perhaps the easiest explanation is that the story was originally told in Aramaic; when it was eventually translated into Greek, several of its important terms left in the original language, as sometimes happens with a punchline, for example, when an anecdote is told to a bilingual audience. The author of the Fourth Gospel, who incorporated the story into his account, realized that his readers (or at least some of them) did not know Aramaic, and so he translated the terms for them.

If this reconstruction of events is correct, then the story would be very old by the time it came to the author of the Fourth Gospel. It would have originally been told among Aramaic-speaking Christians converted from Judaism — that is, presumably those living in Palestine — perhaps not too distant in time from Jesus himself. This is a story then about how Jesus fulfills the expectations of Jews, and it is designed to show how Jews might come to believe in him as the messiah. There is nothing in this story, however, to suggest that he is divine.

There are other stories, however, in which Jesus is portrayed as divine, in which this is the single most important thing to know about him. His divinity, for example, is one of the leading points of the Prologue. In addition, the Prologue, along with many other stories in the Gospel, gives no indication of being originally composed in Aramaic. This might suggest that it is not as old as the story of the call of the first disciples. Moreover, the Prologue, and other stories like it, do not have the kind of friendly disposition to Jews that we find here in this account of the call of the disciples (see, e.g., 1:11).

How does one explain these thematic differences among the stories of John? Social historians would argue that the history of the community affected the ways that it told its stories about Jesus and that critical events in this history led to changes in the community’s understanding of Jesus and his relationship to the people to whom he came. Scholars who have developed this idea have traced the community’s history through three stages.
AND THAT’S where I’ll pick up in my next post.

How Jesus Became God!!
The Socio-Historical Method