

More on the Gospel of John! In previous posts I explained how it can be studied following a variety of methods that I had introduced earlier in relation to Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In my textbook I go on to introduce a different method altogether, which is concerned with a *completely* different set of questions and issues. It will take me a couple of posts to explain the method, and a couple to apply it to the Gospel of John. Let me stress that I did not come up with these methods. I'm simply explaining methods that scholars tend to use when approaching these books. I should emphasize this point in part because I want to stress that interpreting an ancient text is not simply a matter of reading it and summarizing what it says. Hard-core interpretation requires self-reflective and rigorous methods, and a patient (verse-by-verse, word-by-word) application of these methods. When a bona fide scholar makes a pronouncement about the meaning of this or that passage of the NT, it is not simply a matter of his or her saying something that just came to mind. Usually it is the result of systematic application of rigorous methods to texts over the course of years.

In any event, here is a new method with a very different set of questions and interests.

The Socio-Historical Method

Now that we have examined the Fourth Gospel in light of all of the other methods of analysis that we have learned, we are in a position to explore yet another approach that scholars have taken to studying the New Testament narratives. The socio-historical method asks an entirely different set of questions from those we have already addressed; but as I have indicated, it bases these questions, and the answers it gives, on the kinds of information that we have just now uncovered in our study. We have seen that the author of the Fourth Gospel created a Greco-Roman biography of Jesus, based on a number of written and oral sources that were available to him. We have examined some of the important themes of his final product, and have seen how these themes differ from those found in other early Gospels.

I have hinted, though, that the themes found in the Fourth Gospel are not always internally consistent, that is to say, that there appear to be several different perspectives embodied here, rather than only one. This should come as no surprise, given what we have seen about the sources of this book. The author utilized earlier accounts written by other authors, and no doubt each author had his or her own perspective on Jesus and the meaning of what he said and did. By adopting a variety of sources, the author necessarily incorporated a range of views about Jesus.

Different people have different ways of looking at the world and of interpreting important events, and not only because they have different personalities and different brains. People also look at the world differently because they have experienced it differently. The average New Yorker and the average Muscovite had very different perceptions about the Cold War, in no small measure because their experiences of it were so different; accounts of World War II written by three soldiers, an American, a German, and a Russian, will perhaps have many of the same pieces of information, but each will be slanted differently, depending on the perspective of the author, as derived from personal experiences.

The socio-historical approach to a text is interested in knowing how the historical experiences of an author and his or her social group (e.g., a family, a church, army, nation, or any other group of persons who are united together under some conditions) have affected the presentation of the material. That is to say, it is interested in learning the relationship

between a literary text and the social history of its author and his or her community.

The theory lying behind the method can be stated rather simply: the social history of a community will affect the way it preserves its traditions. Let me try to illustrate the theory with a modern example, before applying it to the traditions about Jesus preserved in the Fourth Gospel. On any given Sunday, thanks to the use of a standardized lectionary in many Christian denominations, churches around the globe read the same passage of Scripture and hear sermons based on these passages. Even within the same city, different churches hear different kinds of sermons, despite the fact that the Scriptural passages are the same; these differences relate not only to the personality and training of the preachers, but also to the life experiences of the communities that they are addressing. To take an obvious example: someone in a black church in Soweto South Africa in the 1980s, when apartheid was in full swing, would have heard a very different kind of sermon from someone in a white upper-class church in suburban America. For preachers attempt to relate the text to the experiences of their communities and to show how it continues to speak to them in their struggles, whatever these might be.

Now theoretically, it would be possible to listen to a set of sermons from an unknown church, and reconstruct aspects of the congregation's social context on the basis of what was heard. For instance, if a sermon offers divine solace to those who suffer under the oppressive policies of a powerful minority, one might reasonably assume that the congregation has experienced such policies and requires such solace. If a sermon on the same text challenges the complacency of those who feel secure and who have no care for the downtrodden, one might conclude, depending on what else is said, that it was delivered to a relatively affluent congregation as a call for them to heed their Christian duties.

The point is that there is a close interrelationship between an author's social experiences and the text (in this case, the sermon) that he or she produces. What if we do not have direct access to these social experiences, but only to the text? Then if we want to learn something about the underlying social history we have no recourse but to use the text itself, reasoning backwards from what it says to the social experiences that it appears to presuppose.

This is obviously a tricky business, but it can yield some interesting results if done carefully. As with all of the other methods we have examined, however, it is much easier to show how the method works in practice than to explain it in the abstract. When applied to the Fourth Gospel, the method works like this: we have reason to think that there were several sources lying behind this author's account. These sources must have come from different periods in the community's history, since all the authors would presumably not be writing at precisely the same moment. Moreover, in some important aspects these sources have different ways of understanding their subject matter. It is at least possible that the social experiences of the authors who produced these sources contributed to their distinctive understandings. If so, then it is also possible, in theory, for us to analyze the sources of the Fourth Gospel in order to trace the social history of the community of the authors who produced them.

I will pick up at this point in my next post.



[John from a Socio-Historical Perspective](#)
[Sources of the Fourth Gospel](#)