

Hidden History of John's Church

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Bible Reading: John 9:18-34

SUMMARY: The *Acts of the Apostles* and Paul's epistles document the Apostle Paul's mission to establish churches, but there's no detailed record for John's churches. However, from his writings we construct the hidden history of John's communities. A key insight sees synagogue-expulsions in Jesus' lifetime (Jn. 9:22) referring also to the late 1st century exclusion of Christ-believers. They experienced three major traumas:

- After thriving in Jewish Judea, John's community was uprooted by the Jewish Revolt (66-70 AD) and fled to Ephesus in Asia Minor (today's Turkey) as refugees.
- Initially identifying as messianic Jews, they suffered *expulsion from the synagogues* in the 80s AD (as foreshadowed in John 9), forming the distinct Johannine church which grew and spread in Asia Minor.
- Church Split: About a decade later, John's egalitarian community was divided by deviant doctrines propagated by 'progressives.' John's Letters seek to stabilize the traumatized congregation.
- These crises had positive results: #1 brought John's community into the Gentile world. #2 was the catalyst for John's Gospel, #3 for John's Letters. This hidden history show a Christian journey marked by trauma. John's churches, operating outside the mainstream, demonstrate a different way of practicing the church-life. Johannine Christians bear scars from their trials, but win the approval of One who also bears scars.

John begins in Jerusalem/Judea (30 -66 AD)

John's Journey from Judea to Ephesus during the Jewish Revolt (66–70 AD)

- > "It's likely that *John lived in Palestine for quite some time & later travelled to Ephesus*. One suggestion... is that *he moved to Ephesus around the time of the Jewish War (66-70 AD) ... [There's] evidence for a 'Johannine movement' in & around the city, perhaps around 100 AD.*" –Paul Trebilco

The Enigma of Synagogue Expulsion (John 9:22)

A. The Puzzle of Synagogue Exclusion (Jn. 9:22)

- “A *strange feature of the* [4th] *Gospel* is the claim that during Jesus' lifetime, his followers feared being 'put out of the synagogues' by the Pharisees if they identified with [Jesus] (Jn. 9:22; 12:42) ...[Also] Jesus predicts...his disciples will not simply be cast out of the synagogues but they will also face death.” –Richard Cooke
- “*There's no indication of expulsions of believers-in-Jesus from synagogues in pre-70 Palestine.*” – J. Dunn

B. The References (Jn. 9:22; 12:42; 16:2) Key Term: *apodynamos*

C. Expulsion in Jesus' lifetime or late 1st-Century?

1. “Being *thrown out of the synagogue* was *not a reality during the life of Jesus*, [so,] why does John include... [it] as part of the Gospel? The most likely reason is... *John incorporates aspects of the later community's experience into the stories of Jesus.*” — Gail O'Day

Synagogue Expulsion: a 'two-level drama' in John's Gospel (Jn. 9)

A. “[60] years ago J. Louis Martyn found the magic key to open & unlock the door to historical, situational understanding of the 4th Gospel. He found the *key hidden in chapter 9, lying under the single Greek word apodynamos, 'out of the synagogue.'* This *one word... unlatched the portal of interpretation.*” –Robert Hill A. Reading the John 9 Episode on Two Levels

1. Jesus' 'absent' during ½ the Episode
2. Reflects the era of John's Community better than Jesus' lifetime

B. The Consensus View

- “References in... John about Jewish Christians being excluded from the synagogue ...are *now commonly taken by scholars* as actually reflecting... *the period after Jesus' execution... anywhere from a few years to a few decades [before] the composition of the Gospel of John... 85-90 CE.*” –Larry Hurtado
- “Although *this conflict appears...as...between 'the Jews' & Jesus... scholars today commonly see* John's Gospel as reflecting a bitter polemic between Jewish synagogues & Johannine Jewish Christians that led...to the expulsion of Johannine Jewish Christians from these synagogues.” –Larry Hurtado

C. Depicting the Johannine Community's History ~80s AD

D. Pressure from Rabbinic Judaism post-70 AD

- “It seems *incontrovertible* from...John 9 *that the Johannine community experienced such an expulsion*, &...the Pharisees were...behind it... This experience [plays] a central role in... the 4th Gospel.” –David Rensberger
- We should “acknowledge the testimony of John 9:22 that *some synagogue authorities... were...before the end of the 1st-century, acting to expel Jewish believers from the synagogues...* John 9:22... indicat[es]... the early pressures...*came primarily from...the Jewish/rabbinic authorities...*” –James Dunn
- “*By the time John's Gospel was written, those who confessed Jesus as Messiah were treated as... 'heretics' &... were expelled from the synagogue.*” –Veselin Kesich
- Jewish Christians 'put on trial' & condemned
- Other Jewish Christians became 'Secret Christ-Believers' (12:42)
- Ephesian Situation 'fits' the Depiction of 'the Jews' in John's Gospel
 - “*All that's said about 'the Jews' in John's Gospel does indeed 'fit' ...the actual Jewish community in Ephesus.*” Paul Trebilco
 - It's “likely...a city the size of Ephesus, with approx. 200,000 citizens, includ[ed] 500-2,000 Christ-believers [0.25% – 1.00% of pop.] at the end of the 1st-century.” –Mikael Tellbe
 - “The Jewish population in Asia Minor is generally estimated to...[be] 5-15% of the total population, which would mean that there were between 10,000 & 25,000 Jews in Ephesus in the 1st-century AD (based on an estimate of 200,000 citizens) ... This means... there was quite a substantial & significant Jewish community in Ephesus in the 1st-century AD.” — Mikael Tellbe H. Better than Alternative Theories

“The Significance of Synagogue Expulsion

- “The greatest puzzle...[is] the moment [when] a *group of practicing Jews, having been just expelled from the synagogue became from that moment no longer Jews...but Christians.*” –John Ashton

- A. John's Church's Emerges from Judaism's 'Womb'
 1. Thrust out of Judaism's 'Womb'
 2. Reflected in the 4th Gospel's Antagonism towards 'the Jews'
- B. "Johannine Church was *slow in coming out* of 'the womb' of Judaism!" –Robert Kysar
- C. The Trauma of Expulsion
 - "*The trauma of the ultimate rupture* from the synagogue...*left an indelible mark* [on]...the [Johannine] group's identity." – Wayne Meeks
- D. Social Trauma the interpretive key explaining John's harsh Polemic against 'the Jews'
 - "The real difficulty...is the 4th Evangelist's *antagonism towards* [*the Jews*] ...What needs to be explained is the *extraordinary polemical thrust of the Gospel* [*against the Jews*]." –John Ashton
 - "The community of *Christians from which John's Gospel came were victims of Jewish persecution, & ... the antagonism towards the Jews* in the [4th] Gospel... *is a howl of pain* against the spiritual homelessness which [the Johannine] community experienced at the end of the 1st century." –Richard Cooke

Trauma upon Trauma: Split within John's Church (1 John 2:19)

- A. Departure of a Dissident Group (1 Jn. 2:19)
 - "*They went out from us*, but they didn't belong to us; for if they had belonged to us, they would've remained with us. However, *they went out* so that it might be made clear that none of them belongs to us." (1 Jn. 2:19)
 - For Jesus' synagogue-expelled followers "the Johannine community was a new family... *Now... the new family is experiencing its own trauma & the split in the community* is...a struggle between brothers & sisters...1 Jn. 2:9-11 *this split is trauma in the family...*" –George Parsenios
- B. 1 John's Purpose: Address the trauma, reassure believers, & rebut the Schismatics
 - 1-3 John's author "writes to assure *the community, which... recently suffered the trauma of schism, that its members are in communion with God.*" –Frank Matera

Applications

- "We can and should *lay to rest the fantasy of a pristine, harmonious early Christianity.*" – Gary Burg
- "Far from being an age of pristine harmony, NT Christianity already shows an all-too-human face. 3 John is an early instance..." — David Rensberger
- At CIT, we shouldn't expect a "smooth ride" in following Jesus. Don't be discouraged by "turbulence" > Let's try to understand & support church-members who have experienced trauma in their life.