



Research article

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EKKLĒSIO-ACADEMICS IN THE JOHANNINE COMMUNITY AS A PARADIGM IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

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This article develops a new way forward in interpreting the Fourth Gospel by taking into consideration the feelings and aspirations of all levels of people in the Johannine situation. A reader of John can perceive how the narrator facilitates academic thinking and ordinary feelings and aspirations in her or his master plan. With that view in mind, the article elaborates the introductory statements followed by describing the riddling language of the Fourth Gospel, understand the progressive category of people within the Johannine narrative framework, ordinary people within the Johannine context, people's level of knowledge in John's community, practice of ekklēsio-academics in John's community, and doing ekklēsio-academics in India. The article ends with a concluding section.

Keywords:

*Ekklēsio-academics;
Johannine community;
Fourth Gospel; Indian
context; paradigm;
church; academia*



Introduction

This article develops a new way forward in interpreting the Fourth Gospel by taking into consideration the feelings and aspirations of all levels of people in the Johannine situation. A reader of John can perceive how the narrator facilitates academic thinking and ordinary feelings and aspirations in her/his master plan. The Gospel is often compared to a pool in which a little child can wade and a huge elephant can swim.¹ This “in-between” narrative dynamism of John is a meeting point to the academicians and the believing community. A reader of the Gospel can conglomerate cognitive aspects and ordinary faith reactions of the people in the ‘there and then’ and ‘here and now’ contextual realities. The narrator aligns ordinariness of the community of God within the framework of an elegant literary style. As a voiceless and marginalized community expelled from the synagogue, the followers of Jesus perceived facts and figures from their own vantage point, reinterpreted their existential struggles, reflected upon their faith realities, and responded to the social and national issues with a new and a higher perspective. John’s literary artistry incorporates innovative knowledge emerged out of the community with a rhetorical punch.² The prism of John can be considered as a blueprint for the contemporary ekklēsia and the academia to orchestrate a praxis-oriented hermeneutic. A reader of John can identify the following aspects with renewed interest: first, understanding the ordinary ecclesiastical experiences and the sophisticated academic style to develop a new rhetoric; second, recognizing an ordinary hermeneutics that fits within the cognitive aspects of the community; and third, identifying people-oriented homilies, contextual liturgies, dialogical narratives, and defensive missiologies within the framework of the Gospel. Thus, the ultimate goal of the paper is to introduce an ekklēsia-academics that bridges the gap between the academia and the ekklēsia within the framework of the Fourth Gospel.

Riddling language of the Fourth Gospel

The language of the Fourth Gospel demonstrates several characteristics. Guthrie says, “The range of his [John’s] vocabulary is severely limited and yet the effect that he produces is

¹ Philipp F. Bartholomä, *The Johannine discourses and the teaching of Jesus in the Synoptics: A contribution to the discussion concerning the authenticity of Jesus’s words in the Fourth Gospel* (Tübingen: Francke Verlag, 2012), 1.

² For more details about the Synagogue and Ekklēsia conflict in John’s Gospel, see J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 1-50.



dignified and compelling.”³ The style of repetitions and variations of words and expressions creates a special impact upon the audience.⁴ John’s simple style does not make his Greek inaccurate. C. K. Barrett says, “It is neither bad Greek nor (according to classical standards) good Greek.”⁵ W. F. Howard considered that the author “was a man who, while cultured to the last degree, wrote Greek after the fashion of men of quite elementary attainment.”⁶ The author was more concerned of conveying the message than his stylistic niceties. The simplistic and idiosyncratic style of John makes it a unique narrative masterpiece that accommodates the ethos and pathos of both the think tanks of his/her time and the ordinary folks in the Johannine community. The style of John is rich with pre-Christian Gnostic ideas of a redeemer myth,⁷ other Hellenistic thoughts,⁸ and Palestinian Jewish ideas⁹ to name a few.¹⁰ John’s wisdom motifs through revelatory aspects, quasi-poetic styles, “I am” formulae, and the blend of oriental mysticism and mythology with Greek philosophy, Wisdom literature, Egyptian Gnosticism and Hermeticism demonstrate the unique mastery of her/his narrative framework.¹¹ John’s prose texts are often identified as quasi-poems. Brown says, “This would offer one more point of similarity between the Johannine Jesus and personified Wisdom, for wisdom speaks in poetry.”¹² The stylistic aspects such as *inclusion* (John 2:1-11

³ Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, Revised Edition (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1990), 335. Attributed both to Augustine and Pope Gregory the Great, who describe Scripture as “a stream in which the elephant may swim and the lamb may wade,” a recent application of this imagery to the Gospel of John is made by Paul F. Brackman, who said “Someone has described the remarkable character of this Gospel by saying that it is a book in which a child can wade and an elephant can swim.” See Paul N. Anderson, *The Riddles of the Fourth Gospel: An Introduction to John* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 1.

⁴ Gilbert van Belle, Michael Labahn, and Pieter Maritz, eds., *Repetitions and Variations in the Fourth Gospel: Style, Text, Interpretation*, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium CCXXIII (Leuven/Paris/Walpole: Uitgeverij Peeters, 2009).

⁵ See C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John: An Introduction with commentary and notes on the Greek text* (London: SPCK, 1978), 5-6.

⁶ J. H. Moulton and W. F. Howard, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, Vol. II (London: T&T Clark, 1963), 33.

⁷ Brown comments that, “As seen in later Gnostic documents, this myth supposes the existence of an *Urmensch*, an Original Man, a figure of light and goodness, who was torn apart and divided into small particles of light.” Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John i-xii*, The Anchor Bible 29 (New York: Doubleday, 1966), LIV.

⁸ Brown sees a lot of comparisons between John and Greek philosophical thought such as Platonism, Philonism, Hermetica, and others. Brown, *The Gospel according to John i-xii*, LVI-LIX.

⁹ There are several similarities we can find between John and the Old Testament, Rabbinic Judaism, and Qumran writings. Brown, *The Gospel according to John i-xii*, LIX-LXIV.

¹⁰ Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, Sacra Pagina 4 (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 18. Also see George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary 36 (Waco: Word Books, 1987), liii-ixvi.

¹¹ Brown, *The Gospel according to John i-xii*, CXXII-CXXVII.

¹² Brown, *The Gospel according to John i-xii*, CXXXII.



and 4:46-54), *chiasm* (1:1-18),¹³ *twofold* or *double meaning* (3:3-11), *misunderstanding* (2:19-22; 4:10-21; 6:32-35), *irony* (4:12; 7:35, 42; 8:22; 9:50), and *explanatory notes* (1:38, 42) show the profundity of John's portrayal.¹⁴ Though rich with ideological and stylistic aspects, the Fourth Gospel not only attracts the intellectuals but also the uneducated and mundane masses of the church and the society.

The Fourth Gospel functions as a literary masterpiece that facilitates a narrative beyond the time and space aspects. The Gospel's linguistic phenomena and stylistic aspects are peculiar as they attune the attention of the readers toward a dramatic and ideological world that facilitates myriad possibilities of interpretation.¹⁵ The connection between the narrator and the historical/implied/contemporary reader is established from an eternal vantage point as the narrator directs the reader toward atemporal and universal realities.¹⁶ The author as a classicist encompasses the socio-cultural and religio-political realities of the Greco-Roman world, incorporates the hope of the Jewish society, foregrounds the contextual realities and the struggles of the Johannine community, and fulfills the various demands and requirements of the future generations of the readers and the believers.¹⁷ The peculiar linguistic and idiosyncratic techniques of the narrator have the power to absorb the attention of the reader. In that sense, the Fourth Gospel functions as a gnomic and universalistic artistry.¹⁸ The gospel's profoundness needs to be addressed in the process of interpretation. The elegance of the gospel does not become a stumbling block for the ordinary ecclesia to grasp its semantic domains.

An ordinary member of the ecclesia can understand the Johannine themes as ideologies derived out of the *Sitz im Leben Kirche*.¹⁹ An educated Pharisee or a rabbinical scholar of the Johannine community can fathom deep into the waters of the Gospel as the

¹³ Charles H. Talbert, *Reading John: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Fourth Gospel and the Johannine Epistles* (London: SPCK, 1992), 66-79.

¹⁴ Brown, *The Gospel according to John i-xii*, CXXXV-CXXXVI.

¹⁵ Johnson Thomaskutty, "Universalistic Language and Literary Style of the Fourth Gospel," *Bangalore Theological Forum* LIII/1 (June 2021), 222, 222-233.

¹⁶ Johnson Thomaskutty, *The Gospel of John: A Universalistic Reading*, *Biblical Hermeneutics Rediscovered* 25 (New Delhi: Christian World Imprints, 2020), xi.

¹⁷ Thomaskutty, "Universalistic Language and Literary Style of the Fourth Gospel," 222.

¹⁸ Thomaskutty, *The Gospel of John*, xi.

¹⁹ Andreas J. Köstenberger, *A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 293.



arguments are grounded in philosophical and theological ideas and metaphorical networks.²⁰ John does not frustrate her/his common audience as s/he portrays the story within the local canvas. John is simple and at the same time profound, inclusive and exclusive,²¹ local and global,²² and hence it can attract both the scholarly and the parochial.²³ This inclusive and integrative character of John is riddling in nature. The ordinariness as well as the sophisticated natures of the Fourth Gospel captures attention from both the academic-minded and the ecclesiastical communities. The ecclesiastical aspects are narrated in sophisticated semiotics with a lot of accommodative and disruptive literary practices. The narrator maintains a proper balance between the ordinary experiences and feelings of the masses and scholarly and enigmatic literary aspects that attract the academic people. The purpose of the composition of the Gospel is *that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God* (20:31).²⁴ As the purpose statement is ecclesiastical and at the same time academic, the narrator aims at two things: first, generating faith in people through the reading of the Gospel; and second, faith is cognitive as it is based on certain Christological knowledge.²⁵ As history is inscribed within quasi-poetical style, both the contingent and the universal factors are embedded within John's narrative.²⁶ This style of John is beneficial for the common good of the pastors who are engaged in preach from the gospel and teachers who develop polemical and ideological hypotheses.²⁷

The enigma of John is difficult to brainstorm unless an interpreter evolves exclusive hermeneutical strategies that fit only to John. That means, the Fourth Gospel has to be treated in its own terms. The Johannine peculiarities may persuade a reader to adopt an inclusive

²⁰ Jan G. van der Watt, *Family of the King: Dynamics of Metaphor in the Gospel according to John*, BINS 47 (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2000), 394-440.

²¹ Though John is universalistic and eternal in its ideology, it has exclusive tendencies. Jesus's statement that "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (14:6) is often considered as exclusive in pluralistic contexts.

²² Thomaskutty, *The Gospel of John*, 3-14.

²³ Talbert, *Reading John*, 62-63.

²⁴ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, NICNT, Revised (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 30-34.

²⁵ Samuel M. Ngewa, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary for Pastors, Teachers and Preachers* (Nairobi: Evangel Publishing House, 2003), 5.

²⁶ As Kermode states, the Fourth Gospel as a whole has to be considered as a fusion of poetry and history, that means, a fusion of the universal and the particular. Frank Kermode, "John," *The Literary Guide to Bible* (Harvard: University Press, 1987), 3-16; Mark W. G. Stibbe, *John, Readings: A New Biblical Commentary* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 19.

²⁷ Ngewa, *The Gospel of John*, 4-6.



style that takes into consideration all levels of people for all the time. Paul N. Anderson states that,

Mystics, within Christianity and beyond, have cited . . . Johannine passages as descriptive of people who have been drawn into a relationship with the divine in life-changing ways. The Gospel of John is often given to new Christians at evangelistic crusades and is used for discipleship training around the world. John is often called the “Gospel of Belief,” the “Gospel of Life,” and the “Gospel of Love.” All of these are fitting titles to describe John’s purpose and operation.²⁸

For Anderson, on wading with children, the Gospel of John is an entrée to faith; on swimming with elephants, the Fourth Gospel is a puzzlement to scholars.²⁹ This unique characteristic of the gospel makes it a favorite gospel to the Sunday School children, differently abled,³⁰ poor and marginalized, women across the world,³¹ university students, philosophy professors, and theologians at different levels of life.

Progressive people in the Johannine context

The Gospel begins with philosophical overtones to capture the attention of the people. The concept *logos* was a widely used philosophical expression for the readers of the Gospel.³² The quasi-poetical style of the Gospel with universalistic tendencies makes it accommodative and inclusive in content, form, and function.³³ As the narrator introduces God’s incarnation in the world, a typical philosophical style was required with contextual effects. *Logos* was conceptually understood as the wisdom of God.³⁴ Through Jesus’s incarnation, wisdom descends from above and dwells among the people. As the ‘above’ and ‘below’ aspects of the divine movements are presented with a universal intention, the higher and lower ladders of the society are accommodated within the Johannine community and in the narrative

²⁸ Anderson, *The Riddles of the Fourth Gospel*, 1.

²⁹ Anderson, *The Riddles of the Fourth Gospel*, 3-5.

³⁰ Johnson Thomaskutty, “The Irony of Ability and Disability in John 9:1-41,” *HTS Theological Studies* 78/4 (2022), a7718. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i4.7718>.

³¹ Johnson Thomaskutty, “Johannine Women as Paradigms in the Indian Context,” *Acta Theologica* 2019, Supplement 27: 79-100, <http://dx.doi.org/10.18820/23099089/actat.Sup27.5>.

³² Beasley-Murray, *John*, 6-10.

³³ See Elizabeth Harris, *Prologue and Gospel: The Theology of the Fourth Evangelist* (London: T&T Clark, 1994).

³⁴ Thomaskutty, *The Gospel of John*, 37-52.



framework.³⁵ As the overall Gospel sustains a “U” shaped plot structure and Jesus the creator of the universe descends to the world,³⁶ the scholarly and the parochial are dynamically included within the narrative structure.³⁷

While Jesus is identified as the wisdom of God, Nathanael is identified as a reader of the Torah and a seeker of divine wisdom (1:45-51). He is presented as a character with certain intellectual capacities.³⁸ Jesus and Nathanael connect each other in a dynamic fashion. Jesus promises his interlocutor a vision of an open heaven and angelic appearances (1:51). Nathanael’s posture under the fig tree is not something ordinary, but rather a posture of a reader and a learner of Torah (1:48b).³⁹ Nathanael’s declaration is not merely out of his surprise but rather as a result of his witness to the fulfillment of the scriptures. He arrives at a unique learning and understanding that Jesus is “Rabbi, Son of God, and King of Israel.” Bennema states that, “Nathanael’s traits include being skeptical, inquiring and responsive . . . perceptive and genuine.”⁴⁰ When Jesus considers Nathanael as a true Israelite, Nathanael considers Jesus as the King of Israel.⁴¹ Nathanael, as a person who sits under the fig tree (1:48b) and is enlightened to recognize Jesus as the “Son of God” and the “King of Israel” (1:49), resembles in many ways Buddha, who sat under the Bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya and was enlightened.⁴² The narrator foregrounds an ideal kingdom in which Jesus is the king and Nathanael is found as an ideal citizen. Nathanael’s continuous presence with Jesus as a follower and his membership in the Johannine community are evidenced through his placement in 1:45-51 and 21:2.

After Nathanael, Nicodemus appears as the second person with a high profile. He comes to the foreground first as a Pharisee, by name as Nicodemus, and then as a member of

³⁵ Beasley-Murray, *John*, 13-15.

³⁶ James L. Resseguie, *The Strange Gospel: Narrative Design and Point of View in John*, BINS 56 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2001), 171.

³⁷ As “U” shaped plot demonstrate both the heightened and the lowered sides of the story, the elevated and the vulnerable are part of the narrative framework.

³⁸ Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, 143-150.

³⁹ Morris states that, “The fig tree was almost a symbol of home (cf. Isa 36:16; Mic 4:4; Zech 3:10). Its shade was certainly at a later time used as a place for prayer and meditation and study.” Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, 146.

⁴⁰ See Cornelis Bennema, *Encountering Jesus: Character Studies in the Gospel of John* (Bangalore: Primalogue, 2009), 68.

⁴¹ Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, 146-147.

⁴² Johnson Thomaskutty, “The Gospel of John,” *An Asian Introduction to the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022), 149.



the Jewish ruling council (3:1).⁴³ Jesus's conversation with him reveals that he was also a seeker of divine wisdom and a teacher of the scriptures (3:10).⁴⁴ Nicodemus's legal response favoring Jesus in the Sanhedrin is made obvious in 7:50-52.⁴⁵ His social influence is depicted as he is brought to the end of the story as one who comes to receive the body of Jesus (19:39-40).⁴⁶ Nicodemus's role as a teacher of the Law, a Pharisee, a member of Sanhedrin, and a person with socio-religious influences proves his status within the narrative. His visit to Jesus by night (3:1-10), legal defense in Jesus's favor (7:50-51), and activities after the death of Jesus (19:38-42) show his allegiance and connections with Jesus and the Johannine community.⁴⁷

A Royal official from the higher strata of the society believes in Jesus alongside of his entire family (4:46-54). He is considered as a certain royal official (*basilikos*); he travels all the way from Capernaum to Cana (must probably with the help of the royal accessories); and he had his own servants (v. 51).⁴⁸ Bennema comments, "He has multiple traits: his willingness to come to Jesus in person and submit to his authority illustrates humility; he is persistent, not deterred by Jesus's mild rebuke in 4:48; his inquiry and his deduction about the efficacy of Jesus's word shows that he is meticulous and analytical; and he is a persuasive witness to his household."⁴⁹ All these realities depict that he was from the higher strata of the society and was a person with education, influence, and intellect. His membership in the Johannine community and portrayal in the narrative framework reveal the increasing popularity of the *ekklēsia* of God.

Lazarus and his sisters Martha and Mary are seemingly from the higher ladder of the society.⁵⁰ Bethany was called "the village of Mary and her sister Martha"; Mary showed her devotion to Jesus with an expensive perfume worth 300 denarii; Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus; they had a home (11:20); and they were able to host a dinner party (12:1-

⁴³ Beasley-Murray, *John*, 47-48.

⁴⁴ Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, 94.

⁴⁵ Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, 258.

⁴⁶ Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, 729-730.

⁴⁷ Bennema, *Encountering Jesus*, 83-84; also see Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple: The Life, Loves, and Hates of an Individual Church in New Testament Times* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 71-73.

⁴⁸ Bennema, *Encountering Jesus*, 94-99.

⁴⁹ Bennema, *Encountering Jesus*, 97.

⁵⁰ Bennema, *Encountering Jesus*, 151-163.



8).⁵¹ Martha's conversation in chapter 11 with Jesus demonstrates her learning in the scriptures. The characterization within 11:1-45 and 12:1-8 and the situational aspects inform the reader the status quo of the family. Their membership in the Johannine community enables them to speak and behave in a special way.⁵² All of them demonstrate both exoteric and esoteric knowledge as members of the *ekklēsia*.⁵³ The presentation of characters within John's narrative framework reveals its maverick or independent style.⁵⁴ Within the Johannine community, there were people with higher social status and academic style and qualities. They expressed their views for the common good of the community.

Ordinary people in the Johannine context

People from the ordinary background spoke, interacted, and behaved theologically within the framework of John's Gospel. John the Baptist demonstrates his identity as a person with ordinary livelihood. He was sent from God and remains as a witness of the Word.⁵⁵ He continues to minister on the banks of the River Jordan and boldly states that "I am not" (1:19-28). He introduces Jesus as the "Lamb of God" and the "Son of God" (1:29-35). The Baptizer's recognition about Jesus as a superior one and Christ himself is a noticeable factor.⁵⁶ The disciples like Andrew, Peter, and Philip show ordinariness in their speech and actions; but they were able to identify the Messiah and started following him (1:35-46). Andrew declared that "we have found the Messiah" and brought Peter to Jesus. Later on, Peter declared that Jesus is "the Holy One of God" (1:41; 6:69).⁵⁷ Philip declared that "we have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph" (1:45).⁵⁸ Though Andrew, Peter and Philip were from the ordinary human situations, all of them were seekers of the truth of God, readers of the Scripture with a hope about the coming Messiah, and witnesses to identify

⁵¹ Beasley-Murray, *John*, 184.

⁵² Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, 473-515.

⁵³ *Esoteric* most commonly means obscure and only understood or intended to be understood by a small number of people with special (and perhaps secret) knowledge. But, *exoteric* means intended for or likely to be understood by the general public.

⁵⁴ Robert Kysar, *John the Maverick Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1976), 1-21.

⁵⁵ Bennema, *Encountering Jesus*, 22-30.

⁵⁶ Bennema, *Encountering Jesus*, 22-30.

⁵⁷ Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, 54-57.

⁵⁸ Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, 57.



Jesus's divine qualities. People from the grassroots were part of the Johannine community and also they were able to think theologically.

The sign at Cana reveals people's faith reactions at the ordinary life situations: Mary puts her faith in Jesus (2:3, 5); the servants obey Jesus's commandment (2:7); the master of the ceremony eulogizes the event (2:9-10); the disciples believe in Jesus (2:11);⁵⁹ and the readers are brought to an understanding that the sign created a lot of waves around the places (4:46).⁶⁰ As the glory of God/Jesus takes a lead throughout the Gospel, the sign of Jesus reflects his praxis-oriented theological engagement in the ordinary human situations (2:11). A reader can understand that theology is not simple oral or written discourses but also engagement in the flesh and blood realities in the world.

An ordinary market situation around the temple is yet another example to be foregrounded (2:13-25). While the women and gentile courts of the temple were occupied by businessmen for profit, the downtrodden communities were denied justice and a space for divine interaction.⁶¹ This is the context in which theological expressions such as "Father's house" and "raising the temple again" are brought to the Johannine theological agenda. With a new temple motif in mind, Jesus chases all those who were selling and buying in the temple premises. Jesus's preferential option for the poor is at the heart of this passage and he actualizes it through a liberative and symbolical action.⁶² Here, theology is not simply delineated as an oral rhetoric or a written discourse, but as practical engagement in the situations of human struggles. The Johannine community members emphasized both the oral/written rhetoric and the practical rhetoric in their theological engagements. The text idealizes 'from above' aspects over against 'from below' and makes an appeal to the universal humanity.⁶³ Universality of God's presence, divine virtues such as righteousness

⁵⁹ Beasley-Murray, *John*, 33-37.

⁶⁰ Beasley-Murray, *John*, 73.

⁶¹ Lundquist comments that, "Jewish men were allowed in the Court of Women, and that there were special quarters within that Court for Women to worship separately . . . The Court of Women was therefore not so named because it was exclusive to and for women, but because it was the only court to which (Jewish) women had access." John M. Lundquist, *The Temple of Jerusalem: Past, Present and Future* (London: Praeger, 2008), 112. Also see indications about the gentile court: Philip Francis Esler, *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts: The Social and Political Motivations of Lucan Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 154-155.

⁶² Ranjit Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), vii, 1-7.

⁶³ Stephen C. Barton, "Johannine Dualism and Contemporary Pluralism," *The Gospel of John and Christian Theology*, eds. Richard Bauckham and Carl Mosser (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 3-18.



and salvation, inclusiveness and emancipation, and liberation and transformation are some of the overarching aspects of the event of temple cleansing.⁶⁴ Johannine narrative foregrounds the fact that theology is not simply academic deliberations within closed circles, but practical engagements at the grass root levels.

Though the woman at the well in Samaria was from a village background, she was showing her progressive understanding of the Messiah. She understands Jesus as a Jew (v. 9), Sir/Lord (vv. 11, 15, 19), prophet (v. 19), Messiah (v. 25), and alongside of her co-villagers recognizes him as “truly the savior of the world” (v. 42).⁶⁵ She engages with Jesus in a dialogue and there develops a back-and-forth conversation.⁶⁶ The woman’s religious and social knowledge is brought to the foreground through her speech units. She typically behaves and speaks beyond the level of a village woman.⁶⁷ Though she was an ordinary village woman, she was able to dialogue with her interlocutor on the basis of her theological convictions.⁶⁸ In 6:1-15, the ordinary people gathered around Jesus reveal their faith reactions. They learn spiritual truths from Jesus and many among them follow Jesus to hear him in the synagogue at Capernaum. By the end, they develop a view concerning Jesus by stating that “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world” (6:14).⁶⁹ People kept certain theological kernels and models in their minds as they were rooted in the scriptures and they found majority of them fulfill in Jesus.

The man born blind progresses from disability to ability and comes out as a transformed personality (9:1-41). He receives physical sight and spiritual foresight and progresses as a thinker in terms of Jesus. He perceives Jesus as the man they call Jesus (v. 11), a prophet (v. 17), one from God (v. 33), Lord (v. 38), and finally on the basis of all the

⁶⁴ Mary L. Coloe, *God Dwells with us: Temple Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2001), 65-84, 213-222.

⁶⁵ A global and universalistic worldview of the woman is obvious in the narrative. See Thomaskutty, *The Gospel of John*, 145-151.

⁶⁶ The dialogue in 4:7-26 has 13 speech units, seven of which are of Jesus (vv. 7b, 10, 13-14, 16, 17b-18, 21-24, and 26) and six are of the Samaritan woman (vv. 9, 11-12, 15, 17a, 19-20, and 25). See Johnson Thomaskutty, *Dialogue in the Book of Signs: A Polyvalent Analysis of John 1:19-12:50*, BINS 136 (Leiden/Boston: E. J. Brill, 2015), 138.

⁶⁷ Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, 113-150.

⁶⁸ See Thomaskutty, *The Gospel of John*, 145-151.

⁶⁹ Brown comments that, “Most likely this is a reference to the expectation of the Prophet-like-Moses, for in v. 31 these people draw a connection between the food supplied by Jesus and the manna given by Moses.” See Brown, *The Gospel according to John I-XI*, 234.



above he worships him (v. 38).⁷⁰ Though hailed from the lower strata of the society, the man was able to grow in his theological convictions. In John chapters 13-17, the disciples show their devotion to Jesus and continue to remain in the learning phase.⁷¹ Ordinary people and situations are significant narrative elements in the passion and resurrection narratives. In chapter 21, ordinary situations are further delineated as Jesus shows himself to the seven disciples (vv. 1-2) and Peter and the Beloved Disciple are in the process of new learning (vv. 15-23).⁷² The appearance of Mary Magdalene as ‘apostle to the apostles’ and her declaration (i.e., *I have seen the Lord*) persuade the apostles to confess *we have seen the Lord* (20:18, 25).⁷³ Thomas as a profound seeker of the truth of God reaches into a unique understanding of Jesus as he declares *my Lord and my God* (20:28).⁷⁴ The ordinary people in the Johannine community were speaking theology based on their personal experiences and convictions. Both the progressive people and the ordinary folks spoke and reflected based on the Johannine community ethos. The community accommodated and sustained both the academicians and the ordinary believers without discrepancies. All the community members were expected to come to the community standards. As Christology is at the heart of John’s story, the *ekklēsia* and the academia are brought into a dynamic alignment to facilitate and stabilize theological thinking and theo-praxis for community development.⁷⁵

People’s level of knowledge in John’s community

The rhetoric of John facilitates *ekklēsia*-academics with a unique literary punch. John navigates its waters to the benefit of *wading children* and *swimming elephants*.⁷⁶ The narrator dynamically incorporates the aspirations and passions of people both at the grass root realities and at the theological/philosophical levels.⁷⁷ John conglomerates the *ekklēsia* and the academia in her/his community as follows: first, the people-friendly language of the gospel accommodates both the ordinary and the academic-minded for multiple levels of semiotics; second, the multi-layered semantics of the Gospel is feasible to all levels of people; third, the

⁷⁰ Thomaskutty, “The Irony of Ability and Disability in John 9:1-41.”

⁷¹ Beasley-Murray, *John*, 222-307.

⁷² Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, 545-566.

⁷³ Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, 731-754.

⁷⁴ Bennema, *Encountering Jesus*, 164-170.

⁷⁵ Paul N. Anderson, *From Crisis to Christ: A Contextual Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2014), 156-161.

⁷⁶ Bartholomä, *The Johannine discourses and the teaching of Jesus in the Synoptics*, 1.

⁷⁷ For more details about the Johannine church, see Anderson, *From Crisis to Christ*, 162-166.



inclusive characterization of the gospel accommodates both the academia and the ekklēsia, both the progressive and the ordinary human beings; fourth, the repetition and the variation of themes in the Fourth Gospel are persuasive and hermeneutically significant to all levels of people; and fifth, life-centered and family-oriented hermeneutic of the Gospel attract multiple levels of people.⁷⁸ The Johannine academicians and the ordinary ecclesiastical members are brought to the same platform through the means of a unique community ethos and narrative dynamics.⁷⁹ In John, the community of God is democratically treated irrespective of their lower and higher social identities.⁸⁰

The Johannine community exercised faith and knowledge as key elements in their living together.⁸¹ Even when the members were from ordinary human circumstances, they were able to demonstrate certain levels of knowledge about their traditions, customs, religious aspirations, and theological thought-patterns. The woman at the well is a significant example to this very fact (4:1-26).⁸² Though the characters are hailed from ordinary human circumstances, a reader of the Fourth Gospel can observe mature wisdom in their speech and other involvements. In their speech patterns, deep wisdom and knowledge aligned to the socio-religious and politico-cultural aspects are embedded.⁸³ Several conceptual, ideological, psychological, and cognitive aspects are brought to the foreground through people's ordinary speech and existential life situations.⁸⁴ John's symbolical, metaphorical, and figurative language is dynamically interwoven in the ordinary human circumstances.⁸⁵

Faith and knowledge are integrally connected in John. Knowledge sometimes precedes faith (16:30; 18:8), which makes it impossible to differentiate knowledge and faith as the initial and final stages of Christian experiences. As George Eldon Ladd perceives,

⁷⁸ Anderson, *From Crisis to Christ*, 162-166.

⁷⁹ See R. Alan Culpepper, *The Johannine School: An Evaluation of the Johannine-School, Hypothesis based on an Investigation of the Nature of Ancient Schools* (Durham: Duke University, 1982).

⁸⁰ Jey J. Kanagaraj, *John*, New Covenant Commentary Series (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2013), 1-8.

⁸¹ Jaime Clark-Soles, *Scripture cannot be Broken: The Social Function of the Use of Scripture in the Fourth Gospel* (Boston/Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2003), 207-315.

⁸² See Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 136-137.

⁸³ Thomaskutty, *Dialogue in the Book of Signs*, 136-168.

⁸⁴ More details in John Sanford, *Mystical Christianity: A Psychological Commentary on the Gospel of John* (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 1-12.

⁸⁵ Van der Watt, *Family of the King*, 1-50.



knowledge can be considered as a constitutive element in genuine faith.⁸⁶ When faith in Jesus guarantees someone's salvation, it entails a certain level of knowledge. As Dieter Lührmann elaborates, "Salvation is accomplished in the sending of Jesus; faith, the acceptance of this salvation, means salvation, so that the believer already possesses eternal life (3:15-17, 36; 5:24; 6:40, 47; 11:25-27) and no longer comes into judgment (3:16, 18)."⁸⁷ In that sense, believing plays a central role in the whole system of John's theology of salvation. It is a response to revelation, and it enhances knowledge about the truth and results, further, in eternal life.⁸⁸ People's knowledge about the revelation and their positive response to it in faith lead them to the experience of eternal life.⁸⁹ Thus John's community emphasized systematization of knowledge as a significant step in its spiritual mandate.

The Johannine community's life- and family-centered interpretations attract all levels of people.⁹⁰ As struggles of life in the world and hope about the eternal life experience take center stage in the Fourth Gospel, readers irrespective of their lower and higher identity can accommodate the theological content of the Gospel.⁹¹ As the wisdom of God incarnates and makes her/his dwelling among the people, the Johannine community ethos underscores mutual respect and societal harmony. On the one hand, the academic people are seemingly expected to attune their theological content as per the requirements of the *ekklēsia*; on the other hand, the ordinary members of the *ekklēsia* are expected to facilitate their spiritual engagements with theological reflections and praxes. While Nathanael and Nicodemus represent people with certain levels of knowledge, the woman at the well (4:1-26) and the man born blind (9:1-41) progress unto the level of academic thinkers. Being open-minded in their views, inclusive in their approaches, and standardized in their words and deeds are identified as some of the characteristic features of John's community ethos and rhetoric. This dynamism of the Johannine *ekklēsia* was significant as they were implementing a new

⁸⁶ G. E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: 1974), 277.

⁸⁷ D. Lührmann, "Faith," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 755.

⁸⁸ R. T. France, "Faith," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 225.

⁸⁹ Johnson Thomaskutty, "Faith and Theology in the Johannine Community and in the Reformation," *Faith and Theology: Basic Insights of the Reformation in Ecumenical Debate*, eds. Wolfram Kinzig and Julia Winnebeck (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2019), 75-96.

⁹⁰ The Gospel uses a network of family metaphors throughout. See Van der Watt, *Family of the King*, 1-50.

⁹¹ See Craig R. Koester, *The Word of Life: A Theology of John's Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 55-56.



rhetoric over against the antagonistic attitudes of the synagogue community.⁹² By incorporating unique features into its community ethos and rhetoric, the Johannine community developed a ‘third space’ in its theological articulation and theo-praxis.⁹³

Practice of Ekklēsia-Academics in John

As the community of John was formed out of those who were expelled from the synagogue, John develops the academic aspects in conglomeration with the ecclesiastical concerns. John’s polemic is rich with philosophical and theological contents. When a conflict developed between the synagogue and the ekklēsia and when the synagogue authorities were equipped in their religious scriptures, the ekklēsia was in a dire need of developing its rhetoric for polemical and apologetical purposes.⁹⁴ The community would have delved interest in equipping the body of believers in a peculiar way by placing dialogue at the center of its theological deliberations.⁹⁵ In that sense, theology in John’s community is developed out of people’s day-by-day life realities and their constant confrontations with the world outside. In the Gospel, the narrator presents those who encountered Christ and exercised their spiritual gifts rather than a mass of people flocking unto Jesus.⁹⁶

In John, the narrator develops a higher Christology by placing the ordinary situations of human life at the center.⁹⁷ The life situations of the fisher folk (1:35-47),⁹⁸ the occasion of the marriage at Cana (2:1-11),⁹⁹ challenging circumstances around the temple (2:13-22),¹⁰⁰ the woman at the well (4:1-41),¹⁰¹ invalid by the pool (5:1-8), hungry people on a mountainside (6:1-15),¹⁰² man born blind (9:1-41), household of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus (11:1-45),¹⁰³ perplexed disciples (chapters 13-17),¹⁰⁴ people under the cross (chapters 18-19),

⁹² Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, 1-50.

⁹³ Cf. Edward W. Soja, *Third Space: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Malden: Wiley, 1996).

⁹⁴ See Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*.

⁹⁵ See Thomaskutty, *Dialogue in the Book of Signs*.

⁹⁶ The characters and their Christ encounter are described by Bennema, *Encountering Jesus*.

⁹⁷ Anderson, *From Crisis to Christ*, 156-161.

⁹⁸ Beasley-Murray, *John*, 26-28.

⁹⁹ Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, 66-74.

¹⁰⁰ Beasley-Murray, *John*, 38-42.

¹⁰¹ Brown, *The Gospel according to John I-XII*, 166-185.

¹⁰² Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, 193-201.

¹⁰³ Brown, *The Gospel according to John I-XII*, 422-454.

¹⁰⁴ Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, 542-653.



people around the tomb (chapter 20), and people who lost their hope (chapter 21)¹⁰⁵ represent the challenging circumstances in the Johannine context.¹⁰⁶ The characters in John demonstrate their faith development not simply as passive followers but rather as believers with certain level of knowledge. The interactions develop within the terrain of ordinary, geographical, topographical, archaeological, and temporal human settings.¹⁰⁷ The dualism between the world “from above” and the world “from below” captures the attention of the readers with special interest on an inclusive theological master plan.¹⁰⁸ The speeches and activities of the people reflect profound truths from their existential struggles as they represent ordinary human situations.

As John’s community was in constant confrontation with the synagogue community, the characters in the macro-narrative framework reflect their apologetical and polemical understanding of the gospel message.¹⁰⁹ The utterances of the characters, symbolical nature of the gospel, the metaphorical and figurative language, typical presentation of the signs, *paroimia* (figure of speech) language, pre-existent perspective of the story, profound speeches in the farewell discourses, and other aspects of the gospel are not merely ordinary aspects but rather as academic rhetoric attuned to the realities of the common people.¹¹⁰ The Johannine narrative with its poetic and universalistic language and style cannot be understood without having certain levels of knowledge.¹¹¹ While knowledge was a requisite for Johannine faith, the *ekklesiā* of John was emphasizing both exoteric and esoteric wisdom as part of its faith and theo-praxis.¹¹² In that sense, John’s readers can perceive the fact that the community encouraged its members to achieve the expected level of knowledge.

¹⁰⁵ Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, 757-777.

¹⁰⁶ Majority of John’s narratives develop out of flesh and blood realities of the people.

¹⁰⁷ For more details about narrative settings of the events, see Thomaskutty, *Dialogue in the Book of Signs*.

¹⁰⁸ Richard Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory: Major Themes in Johannine Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 109-130.

¹⁰⁹ Beasley-Murray, *John*, 151-162.

¹¹⁰ Van der Watt, *Family of the King*, 1-40.

¹¹¹ Thomaskutty, *The Gospel of John*, 1-20.

¹¹² While *exoteric wisdom* is intended for or likely to be understood by the general public, *esoteric wisdom* is intended for or likely to be understood by only a small number of people with a specialized knowledge or interest.



The Johannine *ekklēsia* was theological in its thought-patterns, creative in its approach to themes and issues,¹¹³ and practical in its day-to-day engagements. Its academic and educated views were influential and knitted together with the grass root realities of the people. Johannine Christians were cognitive in their approach rather than merely remaining dull within the community. On the one hand, the community aligned the *ekklēsia* within the framework of academia thought processing and, on the other hand, they integrated academic concerns within the day-to-day affairs of the *ekklēsia*.¹¹⁴ This dynamic interlocking of *ekklēsia* and academia enabled the Johannine community members to practice *ekklēσιο*-academics in their living together and approach to others. The Johannine Christians developed a new rhetoric and ethos by emphasizing the following aspects: walking in the light (8:12), washing one another's feet (13:12), and abiding in the vine (15:1-17).¹¹⁵ While the discipleship in the community was spiritually-oriented, the members were expected to be academic in their various involvements.

Doing *Ekklēσιο*-Academics in India

In the contemporary Indian context, the academicians of the theological seminaries, colleges and universities stand at the higher ladder of the *ekklēsia*, whereas the non-academicians, ordinary pastors and lay people remain at the lower strata. The commonality is that all are involved in Biblical interpretation. The academicians often do not recognize the ecclesiastical or lay level interpretations of the text. On the contrary, the church bodies and lay level people hardly understand the academic interpretations. Intentionally or unintentionally, we build at least two or sometimes more levels of citizens within the body of Christ. The Johannine model of *ekklēσιο*-academics can be considered as a paradigm in such a context. Craig Koester says,

Jesus calls people out of the world and into the faith community, then sends them back into the world. This interplay between separation from the world and engagement with the world stems from the work of Jesus himself. John speaks of a

¹¹³ John's community conceptualized things more constructively and symbolically. For example, eternal life for kingdom of God, signs for miracles, *paroimia* for parables, *paraklētos* for Holy Spirit, and others.

¹¹⁴ For more details about Johannine understanding of *Ekklesia*, see Anderson, *From Crisis to Christ*, 162-166.

¹¹⁵ Koester, *The Word of Life*, 188-208.



world that is hostile to its Creator and of God sending his Son into the world to bear witness to the truth.¹¹⁶

As the Johannine community developed a dynamic interplay between *separation from the world* and *association with the world* as its existential and missional rhetoric, the church in India can implement such a method in her mission and ministry. This is the sort of a missional and ministerial method that can potentially transform the Indian church. The Indian church can achieve such a goal through the means of adopting the principles of ekklēsiio-academics in her witness, mission and evangelism. The church can take up a challenge in accepting the academic views to develop her missional and ministerial aspects as per the demands of the twenty-first century, equip the ethnic and contextual interpretations and theo-praxes, employ inter-denominational and inter-religious initiatives, and teach multiple hermeneutical methods to address various situations. At the same time, the academic community can facilitate people-friendly ecclesiastical involvements and delve new methods for ekklēsiio-academics.

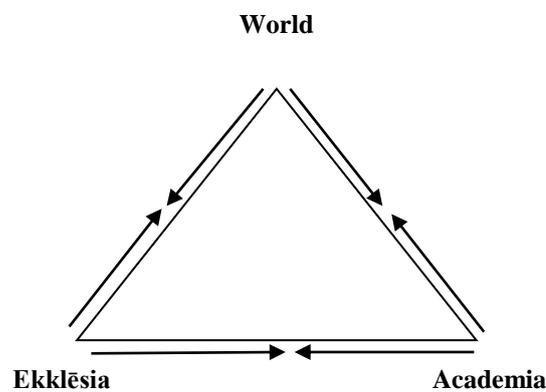
The ekklēsia and the academia together should brainstorm and develop the fundamentals of theological education as well as the strategic configuration of the modes of operation in a rapidly changing world. As the Johannine community implemented a method of ekklēsiio-academics for her ministerial, missional, polemic, and apologetical purposes, the Indian church should recognize the significance of academic voice to sharpen and shape a 'new missional strategy' for the church. Similarly, the Indian Christian theological academia should recognize the worth of the church and her significance in the public square and change the mode of rhetoric to support the requirements of the church and her witnessing in the world.

As the Johannine community was progressing in a pluralistic context, the Indian church strives hard to exist in a pluralistic culture. The following things are important to consider in the process of developing an ekklēsiio-academics in India: first, the church and the academia together can delve plans for witnessing Christ in the multi-religious, multi-lingual, and multi-cultural world so that the public engagements shall be enriching experiences; second, the ecclesia can remain open to the views developed out of the academic settings and

¹¹⁶ Koester, *The Word of Life*, 209.



adopt them as per requirements of witnessing Christ in the world; third, the academia can coexist alongside of the *ekklēsia* to integrate the scholarly inputs within the church setup for transformative results; fourth, there should be closer associations developed among the *ekklēsia*, the academia, and the world so that mutual engagement and trust shall be facilitated (see the diagram below); and fifth, *ekklēsia* and academia can work in integration on several grounds and at the same there should be space for both to remain independently in relation to the world outside.



In the diagram above, three levels of integration and association are conceived: first, between academia and *ekklēsia*: this connectivity is significant to make creative impact in a pluralistic context like India; second, between *ekklēsia* and the world: the church has certain levels of inherent potential to address the issues in the world, but she should be theologically equipped to make wider impacts; and third, between academia and the world: academia can do various things in the world apart from the church, but the academic circles can create greater impact alongside of the church. In the contemporary Indian context, the connectivity between the *ekklēsia* and the academia is not strongly established due to various reasons. The model developed in the Johannine community that facilitates *ekklēsia*-academics is significant to implement for wider impacts. The Johannine community aspects are reflected through the narrative framework of the Fourth Gospel. A reader of the Gospel can understand the way insider (dialogue between academia and *ekklēsia*) and outsider (*ekklēsia*-academics in the global scenario) interplay develops in a dynamic association among the *ekklēsia*, the academia, and the world. Indian church can develop such an integrative methodology; but, *ekklēsia*-academics is a key factor to be considered in that process.



Concluding Remarks

The Johannine community approached academia ecclesiastically and ekklēsia academically. This dynamic integration between the ekklēsia and the academia within the community facilitated a new rhetoric and hermeneutical style called ekklēσιο-academics for her missional, ministerial, polemical, and apologetical purposes. The riddling language of the Fourth Gospel encourages readings at the extreme edges of ‘wading children’ and ‘swimming elephants.’ The incorporation of both the progressive and the ordinary people within John’s narrative framework and their democratic involvements within the community life demonstrate the way people understand things and the way they assimilate themselves to the ethos of the community. The narrator introduces integration between the ekklēsia and the academia in a dynamic interplay in order to facilitate a rhetorical strategy that stems in *separation from the world* and *association with the world*. As John facilitated an open-minded, inclusive, and standardized lifestyle, both the educated and the uneducated were expected to come to the set patterns of the community and her ethos. All of these characteristic features of the community are reflected through the words and deeds of Jesus the protagonist, the interferences of the antagonists, various involvements of the characters within the macro-narrative, and the narrative voice of the narrator. In the Johannine community, the concept of faith and the practice of believing in Jesus were connected to the aspect of knowledge. John’s creative master plan with accommodative and disruptive tendencies can be considered as a paradigm in the pluralistic Indian context. The integration among the academia, the ekklēsia, and the world can be strengthened by facilitating an ekklēσιο-academics in the contemporary scenario. Such an attempt shall foster Christian witness, mission, and evangelism in a dynamic and inclusive way. Hence, we should brainstorm, facilitate, and implement an ekklēσιο-academics in India for wider hermeneutical and missional purposes.

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